TRAVELLING HOME

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for coming here today. For those who don't know me, my name is Terry Doe, I was born and raised in Horton, and I am a Romani, which is what many people refer to as a Gypsy. I don't refer to myself as a Gypsy, and the reason for that is one of the many things I hope will become apparent by the time we've finished here today.

That's what this service is all about, really – learning new things about neighbours we've had for years, and about ourselves. In the process, we can replace supposition and myth, with fact, first-hand accounts, and ultimately the understanding and acceptance that comes with truth.

Today is also about discovery, and I think this will apply as much to the Romani people here today, as the non-Romanis. You see, generally, we Romanis don't know that much about our own history, and how we travelled half-way around the world to get where we are today.

Some of that is down to our ancient ancestors and their reluctance to produce travelogues, or to write down anything at all, much, but clever people have done their best to piece together the Romani journey, and I have shamelessly plundered their archives, and I hope you'll appreciate their hard work as much as I do.

Finally, today is about the timeless tradition of breaking bread together. Eating is a big deal to my people. We Romanis are, in today's terminology, feeders. If we like you, we feed you, often to a degree where previous notions, diet plans, and all hopes of a beach body, go out of the window.

A fine example of this took place one day, with my own dear mum as the main feeder, and an unsuspecting friend of mine as the victim of her generosity. My friend and I had called in on my mum on our way to a walk around the lakes behind us. We'd arrived unannounced and we didn't intend to have dinner, but when a Romani woman invites you to eat, it's not so much an invitation, as a summons.

So my mate and I went on our walk and returned within the hour, to find my mum loading the plates. My friend's plate, a huge oval platter, contained two enormous pork chops, a hearty steak and kidney pie, four jumbo sausages and a knobbly pyramid of mashed potato at least six inches high. Green vegetables did their best to cling on to the plate where space allowed, and the whole heap of food weighed at least four pounds.

My friend then asked, 'Erm … do I serve?'
I said, 'No mate. That's yours. That's your dinner.'

I'll never forget the tiny flicker of fear that danced across his eyes, and he obviously didn't want to offend my mum by running away, so he got stuck in and, apart from a piece of pie

crust, he ate the lot. Then my mum brought him half a Black Forest gateaux and a pint of cream … and he finished that, too. It was a magnificent thing to see.

We were supposed to be walking round some more lakes that day, but after thanking my mum for the dinner, my friend begged me to drop him off home so he could sleep. He later told me it was the first time in his life he'd had a food hangover.

We Romani men don't get to be as big as we are due to some genetic glandular condition, you know. It's the women! They're all feeders, and we are their all-too-willing victims.

In my own travels, I've seen a similar feeding culture among Jewish, Italian, Irish, Spanish, Polish and American people, and I'm sure it exists throughout the world. This brings me to the ultimate message in today's service.

We are all different, yet we are often so alike, and once we understand this, and each other, then so much good can come of that.

Right, that's the basic outline, let's get into the history element, and find out where the Romani people came from, and what they had to deal with along the way.

First there are around 12 million Romani people scattered throughout the world, and the collective name for them is 'Roma'. There is no way to obtain an exact number because my lot are traditionally rubbish at admin, especially when it comes to mundane tasks such as filling in census forms and registering babies.

My own father is a victim of this very trait, and throughout his life he has had to suffer having two birthdays – one on the day he was actually born, and a second birthday to signify the date when his parents got around to registering him. Can you imagine the trauma involved in my poor dad having to celebrate TWO birthdays with his mates down the Five Bells? It's a good job those old school Romanis are made of strong stuff.

Our culture is built around family, especially the youngest and the oldest members. We tend to spoil our children rotten, and we are usually extremely respectful of our parents and grandparents. We look after our own in times of need, and as many here today will have seen, we make a big thing out of funerals and respect for our deceased.

What many will not have seen, is the pre-funeral custom of what we call 'sitting up'. This amounts to spending time with the family of the deceased at their home, prior to the day of the funeral, the men around a fire, the women indoors, or in cabins and tents brought in for the duration, sometimes sitting there right through the night.

This custom is now purely about showing respect for the deceased and their family, but its origins stem from our ancient ancestors' desire to guard their loved ones through the hours of darkness, so that evil spirits could not steal their souls. See? I told you we'd learn stuff.

Through researching this, I learned over and over again how so many of the Romani traits, and not just our obsession with feeding people, apply to so many non-Romani cultures. The message kept coming back – yes, of course we're different, but we're all so alike when it comes to what really matters.

LANGUAGE

Romanis have their own language. It's of Indo-Aryan origin and has many spoken dialects, but the root language is ancient *Punjabi*, or *Hindi*, which reflects our Indian origins. The spoken Romani language is varied, but all dialects contain some common words in use by all Roma. Based on language, Roma are divided into three main populations.

They are the Domari of the Middle East and Eastern Europe (the *Dom*), the Lomarvren of Central Europe (the *Lom*), and the Romani of Western Europe (the *Rom*). There is no universal written Romani language in use by all Roma. However, the compilation of a constructed, standardized dialect has been in progress for several years by members of the Linguistic Commission of the International Romani Union. Go us with our International Union, eh?

Here's a thing. Today, I'm going to teach you all to count to ten in Romani. Ready? Good. Please repeat after me - • *yek* [1], *duy* [2], *trin* [3], *shtar* [4], *panj* [5], *shov* [6], *efta* [7], *oxto* [8], *en'a* [9], and *desh* [10]. Brilliant!

As usual, my lot can never do things the easy way, and from eleven to sixteen, numbers are formed with the word for ten (*desh*), followed by *-u-* and the unit digit: *desh-u-yek* [11], *desh-u-duy* [12], *desh-u-trin* [13], *desh-u-shtar* [14], and so on.
Yet, for the numbers 17, 18 and 19, for reasons no one seems to have worked out, we drop the 'U'. Thus, we have – desh-efta, desh-oxto and desh-en'a.

Happily, the number 20 is a beautifully simple 'Bish', and 30 is 'triyanda'. … then it all goes a bit bonkers again, as the Romani word for 'times' – 'var' becomes the signifier, linked to 'desh' the number ten. Thus:

- 40 becomes – shtar-var-desh
- 50 – panj-var-desh
- 60 – shov-var-desh
- 70 – efta-var-desh
- 80 – oxto-var-desh
- 90 – en'a-var-desh
- And back to blessed simplicity when we reach 100, and the word – 'shel'.

Multiple hundreds are easy - *duy shel* [200], *trin shel* [300], *shtar shel* [400]… and so on.

I HATED maths at school, and Romani maths would have been an absolute nightmare. Imagine doing long division in Romani!

Trust me, no one is more proud of their heritage than I am, but I'm so glad we adopted the standard numeric system when we rocked up in England.

So, why did the Roma leave India. The fact is, we don't know for sure. We know that there have been three, so-called great migrations, and the first began around 1000 to 1500 years ago, but the reason for it has yet to be verified.

A 2012 study, published in the journal 'Cell Biology', analyzed data from 13 Romani communities across Europe. The researchers concluded that the Roma people left northern India about 1500 years ago; those Roma now in Europe migrated through the Balkans, starting about 900 years ago. These data confirm written reports of Roma groups arriving in medieval Europe in the 1100s.

The second great migration was from south-west Asia into Europe in the 14th century. The third migration was from Europe to the Americas in the 19th and early 20th centuries, after the abolition of Romani slavery in Europe in 1856-1864.

Some scholars contend there is a great migration occurring today since the fall of the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe. The first European descriptions of the Roma upon their entering Europe emphasized their dark skin and black hair. Through integration with Europeans over the centuries, Roma today can also be found with light skin and hair. Ladies and gentlemen, we've become a rainbow nation. How VERY fashionable.

In an uncertain history, what we know is that the Romani migration had reached English shores by 1514. What we also know, is that, just 15 years later, we were declared a prohibited species, and an expulsion order was issued.

Now, I'm not one to make excuses for our lot, but there was a big, fat problem at the root of all this, namely the fact that the King of England at this time was Henry the Eighth. Yes, him.

Let's be honest, here. Henry had issues. He had a unique take on marriage, a conveniently flexible approach to the church, and he certainly had the right hump with Romani people. That attitude was maintained for quite a few centuries. Let's have a quick look at the timeline and a selection of the most significant events.

I'll warn you, that this bit isn't the most jolly account you'll hear today, but please stick with it and we'll soon get back to the positive stuff, I promise.

Timeline of British Romani/Gypsy History

1514 England – First mention of a 'Gypsy' in the country. The name 'Gypsy' is a contraction of 'Egyptian', which is where the Romani people were mistakenly believed to have originated. This name, now considered to be a pejorative term, has been used to refer to Romani people until very recent times.

Egypt was considered to be the cradle of mysticism and particularly astrology, and the fictitious Romani association with Egypt is believed to have fostered the belief that we had all sorts of mystical powers. In fact, no less a thinker than Voltaire declared that the Romani people were direct descendants of the priests and priestess from the temple of the ancient Egyptian goddess, Isis.

To be honest, most Romani people don't find the term 'Gypsy' to be overly offensive, although pretty much every Romani I know loathes the 'P' word, and in 2007 a man was convicted of using the 'P' word as a race hate term.

So, in 1530 the expulsion of Gypsies was ordered and Henry VIII forbids the transportation of Gypsies into England.

The main 'crime' the Romani people of this era found themselves accused of, was, believe it or not, harbouring emissaries from Rome. Now, those who know their history will be aware that Henry VIII had a bit of a spat with the Pope, and the fact is, my lot were somehow caught up in the middle of it.

Even after Henry died in 1547, the Papal paranoia continued, the Romani people and many others of course, were severely persecuted, and by 1554 – the death penalty was imposed for any Gypsy not leaving the country within a month. But things were to become even more extreme in merry olde England.

In 1562 – under the provision of previous Acts, the range of offences was widened to include anyone who 'acted in the manner of an Egyptian'. So basically, even if you looked, lived, or seemed to be a bit like a Romani – you could be lawfully executed. This was not a good time for anyone to take a caravan holiday, believe me.

It also became a capital offence for any Gypsy not to hand themselves in to the authorities. So, if you didn't volunteer for hanging … you'd REALLY be in trouble.

By 1611 the paranoia had spread to Scotland – where records show that three Gypsies were hanged under the 1554 law, and this terrifying state of affairs remained for at least a hundred years, until 1714, when – British planters and merchants had a bright idea.

Instead of wasting such a handy supply of free labour, the merchants applied to the Privy Council for Gypsies to be forcibly shipped to the Caribbean to work on the plantations there. This business initiative was extended the very next year and Romani men, women and children were deported to Virginia in the Americas.

Just in case anyone has missed the real deal, here, we're talking about slavery.

Meanwhile moving on to 1822, in the United Kingdom – the Turnpike Act was introduced and it became an offence for Romanis to camp on the roadside and in 1835 the Highways Act strengthened the provisions of the Turnpike Act, and in 1885 there were several unsuccessful attempts to introduce the Moveable Dwellings Bills to further regulate and restrict the Romani way of life.

In 1908, The Children's Act made education compulsory for travelling Romani children, but only for half a year, until 1944, when full year education for children became compulsory under the Education Act.

Of course, it was during this era that the atrocities of the Second World War were taking place and between 1.5 and two million Romani people were exterminated in what Romanis called the Porrajmos, and the rest of the world knows as the Holocaust.

At this time, right here in Horton, there was a full-on apartheid system in place in our local school. Apartheid means 'being apart', and that's how it was for the Romani and non-Romani children of St Michael's school.

There are at least two former pupils in the congregation today, and from their accounts and by consulting a source provided by the late, and undeniably great, Dr Christie Willatt, the extent of the segregation in our village school became apparent.

The Romani children had separate starting and finishing times, separate breaks, and total segregation during lessons. The Romani and non-Romani children were not even allowed to hang their coats in the same place, there were no school excursions for Romani pupils, and when the Second World War broke out and evacuee children arrived in Horton from London, the Romani children were taken out of their school altogether.

According to my sources, this system was put in place to allay fears of the Romani children having a detrimental effect on the overall education of their non-Romani schoolmates, and it remained for over a decade, with no discernable benefit in terms of academic standards.

Quite what this system did to that generation's sense of community can only be imagined, but I've always believed that, the fact that the children who endured that regime eventually sent their own children to that same school, speaks volumes about what can be overcome by forgiveness, understanding, faith and trust.

The significance of my parents' generation entrusting their children to the same education system that failed them so badly in the past, needs to be appreciated. It was a huge statement of faith, and it was the right thing to do. The Horton village school that my cousins and I attended was a wonderful place, where an inspirational Headmaster taught us so much that remains with us all to this day. That Headmaster deserves his own tribute, and maybe we'll do that one day.

Let's maintain the positive theme and crank forward in time to 1971, when the Romani people got their own flag. Here it is, it was designed in 1933, and basically, it depicts the green of the earth on which they travel and live, the blue of the sky under which they live and sleep, and at the centre is what looks like a wagon wheel, but is actually a 16-spoke shakra, which is the Sanskrit word for wheel, and represents the body's inner spirit.

Romani people also have an anthem, although it's not entirely official, it's been pretty much accepted worldwide. 'Opre Roma' is the title, and it means 'Rise Roma – stand up'. I'll read you an extract if I may.

'Come with me, Roma from all the world
For the Roma, roads have opened
Now is the time, rise up Roma now,
We will rise high if we act together

O Roma, O Romani youth!

Open, God, White doors
So I can see where are my people.
Come back to tour the roads
And walk with happy Roma'

As anthems go, that's not too dreary, is it? While I'm waxing lyrical, here's my favourite Romani proverb.

"There are no bones in the tongue, yet it can speak the hardest of words"

I'll nod wisely at this point to pretend that I've somehow inherited a bit of that type of wisdom, OK?

Let's now shift right to the present and an overdue pleasure for every Romani person here present. I've tried to present a sort of potted history of the Romani people and believe me I've done everything I can to verify and cross-reference the information. I'm sure the world's proper Romani scholars would dispute a point or two, but I'm absolutely certain that what you'll hear, see and experience today will represent the real Romani people a million times more faithfully than anything you'll ever see that has 'BIG, FAT GYPSY …' in its title.

Please, if you take nothing else from this day, understand that Big Fat Gypsy Wedding and its many spin-offs, are largely works of fiction, and that the content of them is every bit as much of a shock to us … as it is to anyone else.

I won't dignify the utter nonsense of it by going into too much detail, but let's just say, that if the young Romani women of this parish were subjected to the supposed tradition of 'Grabbing' – there would be a 'robust reaction' from those girls' fathers and brothers. Please, please don't regard such Big, Fat Gypsy rubbish as a documentary about the Romani people of this parish. Quite simply, we don't do that stuff, OK?

Our real culture was mainly formed through necessity, lifestyle, and the need to look after each other – because throughout so much of our history, no one else would take care of us. As an example, the Romani mania for food hygiene is well known, and even today what is deemed normal and acceptable by most of society, will often not be allowed in a Romani home.

For instance, any bowl, bucket or similar vessel used for laundry, can never be used for the preparation of food. The slightest hairline crack in a cup or plate consigns it to the bin, and many Romani people will not allow pets inside their homes. There's a serious reason for this, too.

Years ago, many Romanis could not get doctors to treat them. So, infection often meant serious illness, or worse. Avoiding infection really was a matter of life and death. That's where the mania for hygiene came from, and it's the same for the ancient tradition of burning the wagons of the deceased.
We were not acting like some land-locked Vikings and sending our dear departed of to a Romani Valhalla. We were taking no chances and sterilising those wagons with fire.

One personal observation, is that most Romanis, and certainly those of my parents' generation, seem to live in mortal dread of being judged and found wanting by … 'the people'. My mum was terrible for it.

'What EVER will the people say!' she'd exclaim, if some imagined scandal loomed large on the family horizon. 'Well, God only knows what the people will think of us!'

I have never found out who these 'people' are or were, but they had a fearsome reputation, if someone who lived as blameless a life as my mum was scared of them. If anyone knows who 'the people' are, please let me know, OK?

And now to the main business of the day – the meeting, greeting, and most of all, the eating.

The food we have for you today doesn't represent the current pinnacle of Romani cuisine. It's what our people ate back in the day, before we had posh cookers … or any cookers at all, actually, and all food was prepared outdoors in a big black pot that hung over a fire.

Thus, you'll not find much in the way of soufflés or choux pastry on the menu today. This is simple food, designed to be cooked in a single pot, often wrapped in a cloth and boiled. This food had to be nourishing, cheap, filling, and tasty – and believe me it is.

What is particularly heartening to me, is that so much of today's food was prepared by our younger generation of feeders, and once you taste it, you'll see why it has to continue to be part of what we do and who we are. Thanks so much to everyone who has helped put this service together, Romani and non-Romani alike – you're all fantastic examples of what we're trying to do here today.

Finally, welcome to our lovely church. It means the world to us and we think of it as part of our family. Wherever we roam, and however we got here, this church will always be our spiritual home.

Thanks for listening, everyone, and please, mingle, ask any questions you like and above all, please join us in celebrating who we all are, in this wonderful church.