GYPSY PARADISE LOST

The Residents of Dale Farm Get the Boot

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY SPIKE JOHNSON
A Gypsy holds a cross in the air as caravans burn and activists throw stones.
Richard Sheridan’s battered white Ford van pulls up outside the train station in Wickford, a suburb of London. With newspapers and empty potato chip bags covering its dash, it looks out of place against the ranks of shiny cabs and rows of identical homes. Richard is 37 but looks older, his barrel chest squeezed into a striped blue t-shirt and his stained blue jeans hanging well below his waistline. He stoops into the drizzle and shuffles to open the back doors, muttering something in a thick Irish accent. It’s gibberish to me, but I understand when he motions for me to get in the van. I close the doors and lose my footing as he pulls away, falling onto some broken furniture, squinting to recognize the faces of the other crouched figures who surround me in the dark.

We’re told to keep silent and out of sight as we pass a series of police roadblocks. I sneak a look between the headrests of the front seats as we approach Dale Farm near Basildon, Essex, the largest illegal Gypsy residence in Europe, and soon to be the site of a chaotic and unmanageable mass eviction. The long-standing tenants of Dale Farm, Gypsies of Irish descent, are considered a racial minority in the UK. They live in modern caravans towed behind cars and trucks, camping wherever they can—at the sides of roads, other people’s fields, or on common land. Each time they decide to settle down somewhere and set up camp, local townspeople and police immediately start pressuring them to leave. Some say the shy and guarded community is used as a convenient scapegoat for petty societal ills. Others view them as freeloaders and pickpockets who need to get haircuts and real jobs. But one thing that is certain is the communities’ unwavering commitment to one another.

About ten years ago, a group of Gypsies abandoned their portable caravans and established semi-permanent dwellings at Dale Farm (it had already been established as a popular nomad rest stop decades earlier). Buying land and burrowing deep into the English countryside, they left their nomadic life behind, withdrawing from a society intolerant of their heritage and escaping unwelcome glances and police visits.

In the council buildings of Basildon, there was concern that the development of the farm was carried out without official approval. In the UK, local councils must grant planning permission before any new structure is erected, mostly as a measure to guard against overcrowding and unsafe living conditions. If the owner defies the council by building a structure without permission, the authorities will seize and demolish it. Despite humanitarian concerns and legal and labor costs, Basildon Council argues that the long-standing refusal to abide by this law makes all residents of Dale Farm candidates for eviction. By the end, the operation could cost approximately $28.5 million of taxpayers’ money. Tony Ball, leader of Basildon Council, argues that there must be consistency within the law, and everyone must abide by the same rules. Of course, the Gypsies disagree.

“When we bought this place, the government was encouraging Traveler families to buy land and settle,” says Patrick James Joyce, an Irish Traveler who moved his family to Dale Farm a decade ago. Without planning permission, the Travelers are only permitted to live 28 days a year per site in their caravans, whether or not they own the land. The council has attempted to create alternative living arrangements for the 86 families threatened by eviction—often in cramped apartment blocks, in cities and isolated from the rest of their community—but these have been refused by the Travelers as culturally unacceptable.

More than a decade of complicated and convoluted legal proceedings came to a head in September, when local authorities began eviction proceedings. The Gypsies were able to delay expulsion via legal maneuvering, but by late September, when I arrive, Dale Farm is threatening to erupt in violence.
Our van bounces and jolts over the potholed tarmac of a single lane. News reporters and television vans are lined up on the sidewalk. The normally quiet fields surrounding the farm are now sprawling fenced enclosures housing bailiffs poised to enter family homes by force. Heavy-duty metal sheets laid over pasture support bulldozers and diggers. Portable toilets stand in rows, and men in hard hats and high-visibility jackets check the perimeter, itching for action. The end of the lane is blocked by a giant wooden gate set underneath soaring ramparts made of metal poles, tarpaulin, old tires, and razor wire. These utilitarian extensions clash against the decorative domestic walls of Dale Farm. Scaffold poles are piled over patterned terra-cotta brick, a cross between a construction site, medieval castle, and Mad Max stronghold.

Photographs of children who will undoubtedly become homeless if evicted are fastened to the outside of the battlements, their faces appealing to the outside world. Above, on the ramparts, figures wait, their identities obscured by masks and scarves. Someone taunts onlookers: “We’ve got rocks up here. I hope you bought a hat.” When we pull up, Richard Sheridan, in his white van, is recognized as the president of the Gypsy Council, and the gates swing open.

The farm has changed significantly in the last decade. “The whole place was a wasteland [when we moved here]. It was being used as a scrapyard for old cars,” Patrick says. The land was bought by ten families, including Patrick’s, who were searching for a permanent home and respite from the constant pressure to vacate campsites. It was a place where they could grow vegetables and preserve their cultural heritage. Over time they laid roads, built dwellings, and enrolled their children in local schools. Dale Farm thrived, its population surpassing 400 by 2007.

Since 1994, the Gypsy way of life has been complicated by a law allowing authorities to displace Travelers on a whim without offering an alternative site—previously, municipalities were required to provide campsites. The revised law was officially designed to encourage Gypsies to settle down and establish permanent homes, but in practice officials rarely granted Travelers the necessary permits to stay in one place. “Even when we apply for planning permission, we’re refused,” complains Steve, an elderly resident. “It’s because of our heritage; they’re racists, bigots.”

We sit on tree stumps and old car seats just inside the front gate, watching sympathetic non-Gypsy activists climb scaffolding like monkeys, extending and strengthening structures. Steve’s bushy eyebrows hang heavy over sad blue eyes, the skin on his kind face rough from a life outdoors, shadowed under a navy sun hat. “It didn’t always look like this. We’re proud people,” he says. He describes Dale Farm as it used to be, with smooth tarmac and well-tended gardens—a place where families joyfully gathered and played.

Some of the pitches are already vacant, their owners choosing to take caravans away early and escape the risk of losing everything to the bailiffs’ demolition machines. Other homes remain, their inhabitants vowing “to see it through until the end.”

Battered religious icons are scattered around: A fiberglass Jesus Christ has had his arm reattached with duct tape, and a print of the Virgin Mary stares at a toilet cubicle from behind broken glass. Travelers are deeply Catholic, conforming strictly to the rules of their faith: no premarital sex and no divorce. As night falls, rain turns front yards to mud under hundreds of trampling feet. No one will sleep tonight. The rumor is eviction tomorrow. Gypsies drink and sing folk music at the top of their voices, and activists take to their tree houses and perimeter lookouts.
The next morning I awake suffocating in my collapsed tent. It’s 6 AM. During the night anonymous feet have tripped over rocks that were holding down its edges. More barricades have been built, this time inside the farm’s perimeter. Callum, a bioengineering student, works on one that blocks roads leading to the site. He wears scuffed black boots and dark army-surplus gear, looking anemic and thin in the dawn light. He lashes the wall of a child’s playhouse to scaffolding with rope and barbed wire, reaching through one of the pink heart-shaped cutouts to tie a knot. “This should slow the bailiff’s machines, giving us time to climb onto roofs and chain ourselves on,” he says.

Farther down the road, rows of tires bound with barbed wire and studded with nails are threaded onto more scaffolding. Across them the words OUR HOMES confront anyone who passes.

I stuff my tent into a bag. A Gypsy approaches. He wears suit trousers, smart shoes that have seen some wear, and a V-neck woolen sweater. His graying hair is combed back, 1960s-style. “Leave it there,” he says, pointing to my tent with his cigarette. “You can stay there as long as you like.” I follow him into his caravan to watch the news, beamed from TV cameras just the other side of the fence. The BBC is explaining the situation, showing footage of Gypsies making a last-minute court appearance to plead their case.

Updates are scarce inside Dale Farm. People rely on satellite-TV news and van radios. Most information comes via whispered rumors filtered down from firsthand reports phoned through by Gypsies present in court. The latest gossip is that eviction is coming at noon.

At the front gate I squeeze past a burned-out car filled with concrete. Activists in blue hooded jumpsuits and face masks lie on the floor, their limbs chained inside the vehicles. A young resident, perhaps five years old, pulls her possessions behind her in a Tinkerbell suitcase. Fences topped with football-size spirals of razor wire create a claustrophobic corridor, the only entrance to the site. Another van blocks the way, its flat tires and activists chained to it makes it impossible to move. NO PLACE LIKE HOME is painted on its hood in blue capital letters.

Towering 20 or 30 feet above me, sharp metal barricades puncture the sky. The typically introverted residents of Dale Farm are now climbing the ramparts all around to heckle bailiffs and give interviews to countless press people outside. Mothers lean on fences, shouting encouragement to activists. Girls pull younger siblings up to join them. Leaning into a camera’s lens, one shouts, “We’re not going anywhere! This is home! Some of us were born here!” Now people are saying that the cops are flanking them by coming around through a less-fortified side entrance.

Activists hurry away to strengthen other fences and to check tarpaulins that block the view of television cameras on hydraulic lifts filming over the fence. I move closer to the gate, where a girl is slumped awkwardly under a blanket, a chain tied around her neck. A sign warns that if the gate is opened, the chain will break her neck. As I lift my camera to take a shot, I’m pushed away. “Don’t photograph now,” an activist tells me. “She’s having a pee under that blanket.”

An injunction against the eviction is awarded, earning the residents five more days of freedom. Music coming from within the farm grows louder, and members of the press are allowed in for interviews. Gypsies and activists stand shoulder to shoulder, congratulating one another, triumphant in their temporary victory. People make beer runs by means of a secret entrance—behind a shed, through a fence, over a wall, behind a house, and over a barbed-wire gate.

Perhaps the crisis will be averted, and this will become one of the numerous milestones for the farm. Many births, deaths, and marriages have happened on this soil. It is
hallowed ground. “My brother and sister-in-law burned to death when their caravan caught fire up there,” says Patrick, pointing to a vacant pitch 150 feet away. “My father died here too, it was probably old age. But we couldn’t get him to hospital in time.” As he speaks, his voice softens and he breaks eye contact, staring at the damp tarmac. His wife and children have left, buckling under the stress. Now he prefers to stay on friends’ couches.

The legal process grinds on for weeks. Life at Dale Farm slows again. Activists use this lapse in pressure as an excuse to leave—most never return—and more Gypsies decide to move their caravans off-site, fearing the worst. But a dedicated core remain. Judges award more temporary court injunctions, granting the Gypsies time and prolonging the agony. Decisions are adjourned for days as repercussions are considered. An atmosphere of suspicion grows: Gypsies toward activists, activists toward journalists. “Our chances are slim to none,” Patrick sighs.

Dale Farm seemed like the perfect place to Patrick. It was private, remote, and undesirable to anyone else. “If we can’t settle on a scrapyard, then where?” he says. Now private removal companies demolish brick foundations with sledgehammers and pull apart plumbing. Sewage spills across roads as the companies tow away homes of families who have cut their losses.

“I’m not going anywhere. This is my home,” says Patrick. Despite appeals, press conferences, protests, and demonstrations, Dale Farm has reached the end. Judges are refusing the residents’ right to appeal, and bailiffs are issuing 48-hour notice of their entrance. A giant crane waits menacingly in an adjacent field, and police riot vans materialize. Flocks of activists arrive back at the site, once again chaining their limbs to gates and trucks. Rocks are thrown at scouting bailiffs in the woods. “We’re breaking the law if we stay, we’re breaking the law if we travel,” says Patrick. Adopting a cowboy stance, he uses an electric drill to mime shooting at the bailiff compound. “I’m going to break it and stay.”

It’s October 19, and the black sky reveals the first hints of blue as I crawl out of my sleeping bag. I’m two sips into my coffee when the alarm sounds—long high-pitched whistles. Shouts ring out from perimeter lookouts. I peer out of the kitchen window and see the moon glinting off the clear shields and blue helmets of riot police. They march across the long grass. Activists dressed from head to toe in black, nearly invisible, rush to meet them, pushing back on the barricades made of corrugated iron, wood, and barbed wire. Police Tasers fire. Screaming, the front line of activists falls. Lines of coppers spill through the fence.

Beneath a hail of bricks and bottles, police force activists to retreat toward the front gate. Patrick weaves through the seething crowd, filming the action. Streams of acrid smoke are billowing into the clear autumn sky. A caravan has been torched as an extra line of defense. Activists and Gypsies work together to throw tires, sofas, and old sheds into the blaze, turning the air a thick black. The site’s power is cut. A gas bottle explodes. Now the only light comes from bailiff floodlights as they cut through the concrete and steel of the front gate. Police stand guard behind a wall of clear shields as an activist approaches. He has discarded his mask and black overalls, revealing his face. Stopping a meter away, he points and spits as he shouts, “Are you happy? Do you sleep well at night?”

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