



*Mondays with*  
**DAVID ALLAN**



*The Boy's Grave. (Mode Images / Alamy Stock Photo)*

## The Boy's Grave near Newmarket

I am never quite sure about political correctness when it comes to the word "gypsy". I used the word while growing up, being used to encampments appearing as if from nowhere of trains of brightly coloured caravans drawn by multi-coloured horses, immediately followed by the appearance of those itinerant folk selling all sorts of goods and trinkets. I suppose, like many adjectives describing a group of people, if used pejoratively it's nasty. If not, that's fine.

British gypsies are Romany people, called Roma elsewhere, originating – well, not actually originating but having migrated from Eastern Europe. They truly originated in what is now Northern India, first moving in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. The Romany language is unlike anything derived in Europe, being a version of Sanskrit, the liturgical language of several religions in the sub-continent.

Irish Travellers follow a similar lifestyle in the UK. The TV Series *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, focussing mostly on Irish travellers, shone some light on the whole confusing and fascinating set of tribes.

These days, most gypsies/travellers are less itinerant, pay taxes, go to school or home educate under local government supervision. But in the tradition of the old saying "Give a dog a bad name...." there is a history of prejudice and persecution that is difficult to shake off.

In 19<sup>th</sup> century England, hanging was still a common punishment for various offences, although reformers such as Sir Robert Peel, "father" of the police force and a founder of the modern Conservative Party, reduced that list and pushed on, slowly, with more humane methods and the elimination of the public spectacle.

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*Gypsy Rose Lee Fortune Teller at Epsom on Derby Day. (Network Photographer / Alamy Stock Photo).*

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Nevertheless, if you were a little gypsy boy employed by a brutal man to tend a flock of sheep and you lost a sheep or, worse, stood accused of your family having stolen it, you could expect no mercy. And so the legend goes...

Near the village of Kentford just outside Newmarket, supposedly in 1841, such a boy guarded a flock. The lad is said to have fallen asleep and, on waking, counted that one sheep was missing. Terrified of the consequences, he hanged himself. His body was soon found as was a sheep, calmly bedded down in the bushes, which made up the numbers to the correct figure.

The boy could not be buried in consecrated ground – which would probably have been at St Mary the Virgin, a mostly 14<sup>th</sup> century church just up the road as it is now. So he was buried at a crossroads on the Newmarket to Kentford Road.

The grave is a landmark to which eyes are always drawn because it is almost invariably decorated with fresh flowers, sometimes in vases. The grass around it is trimmed, and a little low link fence surrounds, replacing an earlier cane version. Nobody knows who tends the grave. Well somebody must, but isn't telling.

Traditionally, it is said to be the gypsy community looking after their own, although a non-Romany lady is also believed to have kept an eye in the 70s onwards and to have named the boy Joseph, as appeared on a relatively recent little cross.

However much of this is true and however much is apocryphal, the flowers and the fence are real. Add to that the local extra-legend that the grave has some sort of power to make cyclists dismount as they approach. Of course, if the cyclist knows it is there, he or she will hop off to stop and have a look...

Many, many people do know that [The Boy's Grave](#) – as it is known – is there. Some visit it on [Newmarket race days](#) for luck. Others as tourists, and yet more to [check the colour of the flowers on Derby Day](#).

Dark flowers mean that a horse carrying dark colours will win or light flowers, light colours. Another version states that the flowers will be in the colours of the winner and I do know of one year when they were (the hot favourite's, mind you), but the first version has lasted long enough.

I see the grave – flowers and all – every time I drive out of Newmarket to visit a particular stud farm, and I pulled up alongside it at the cross roads a few mornings ago on a different mission. In the extraordinary February weather – a high of 18 degrees on Saturday – the very early mornings are still chilly. For something different we had gone with a string of middle distance horses, still a couple of months off running, to a rarely used canter named Waterhall - a mile and a half round. The beautiful sight of nearly a dozen horses steady cantering on turf in an otherwise deserted spot contrasts with the heavy traffic at other Newmarket sites.

The Boy's Grave is very near Waterhall. In the [\(to p3\)](#)

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car on the way to see the cantering group across the road to the long horsewalk back to town, I – in the passenger seat - stopped within touching distance of Joseph’s resting place, complete with a blaze of fresh flowers inside its little fence.

Gypsy and Traveller associations with horse racing are close in many senses, but especially on Epsom Downs where people of those communities have lived or visited since the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century.

A trial was organised for Eclipse before his debut (at the age of 5 in 1769) at Epsom, although another version puts it a few miles away. Bookmakers rushed to get there but missed the trial. They met an elderly lady of the gypsy community who was the only member of the public to have seen the trial. She said that nothing could catch Eclipse if pursuing him to the end of the world. Eclipse started 1/4 favourite for his maiden – which consisted of

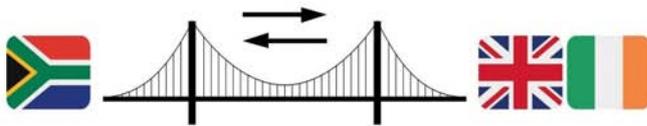
three heats of four miles each. He won.

Fast forward to when half a million people were routinely on course and on the Hill for The Derby, a de facto London and Gypsy Holiday. In the 1970s, a thousand gypsy and traveller families are said to have arrived on the Downs, not without controversy, resulting eventually in their own enclosure; then on to the current decade in which the racecourse authorities set up a space exhibiting modern and traditional gypsy and traveller culture.

Tipping, fortune telling, selling lucky heather – all part of the scene on Derby Day. And of course, if you phone a Newmarket friend to check the flowers at The Boy’s Grave, the winner can be selected from a smaller number of runners. - **tt**.



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*Hintlesham Racing shareholders enjoy their 100 rated runner on an amazing February morning. (D Allan).*



*St Mary.*



*Waterhall on a fine February morning, not far from The Boy’s Grave*