

Gypsy Mary Smith (and her predecessor 'Old Nancy the gypsy') Ewelme News, Oct -Nov 2013

A request to the Ewelme Society came from Lyn Atkins relating to her great aunt, gypsy Mary Smith regarding her connection to Ewelme. We were able to obtain almost a full picture of the Romany lady's years living in the lanes around the village. The feedback revealed how some villagers showed extraordinary kindness to Mary when she could no longer live rough.

As is common in research, when answering one question another is posed. Lyn Atkins always thought (correctly) Mary was also known as Black Polly, but we were informed she was another of the four travelling Smith/Lewis sisters being Renee or Annie (Lyn's grandmother), Alice or Adie, Margaret and Mary.

Lyn Atkins is the granddaughter of Romany gypsy Renee Smith also known as Lewis, whose family travelled and regularly camped in this area from the 1920's to the mid-1970's. Renee, (also known as Irene, Annie or Jane), had four sisters – also confusingly known as Lewis or Smith and all with multiple forenames.

In the mid-1970's one of the sisters, Mary Lewis Smith (also known 'Black Polly') being Lyn's great aunt, lived rough under a shelter of rags and sacks in the spinney behind Hampden Way and also in Grindon Lane. Lyn provided an Oxford Mail newspaper cutting with a photo of Mary in her camp, containing a plea from the Pyke family, who lived at No 1 Hampden Way, for the Council to provide the old woman with a site for a caravan that had been kindly donated, as '*a storm had left her sodden*.' The Mail report continued – '*Mrs [Winifred] Pyke, who has regularly provided Mary with water and other needs says she has had an offer from a man who is willing to paint and renovate the caravan and many people have offered to give clothes. "Will some kind, generous person provide a bit of ground for the caravan," Mrs Pyke asks, adding that she would be prepared to supervise it if the caravan is sited in the village.*'

A caravan was provided by the local Rotary Society and found a permanent site in the paddock at Wineglass Corner owned by Freda Young. Mary could remain there for the rest of her days and when Freda Young died; her house was sold in 1978 with Mary as a sitting tenant in her caravan! Provisions were brought up weekly from Crowmarsh Post Office with her pension when Mary would repair to the London Road Inn! It seems the local community tried to help Mary stay around Ewelme in safety and in more comfort, but Mary clung to her Romany lifestyle despite them. (Mary allegedly threw out the butter provided for her, and when she asked at a house for bread but was offered biscuits or cake as the bread had run out, she went off in a huff - as she didn't want fancy stuff!)

In the early 1980's she became too frail to manage on her own and she was moved to an old people's bungalow at Park View in Crowmarsh. Even in the bungalow, Mary preferred to remain a stranger to modern appliances and sanitation! In July 2013 Lyn visited Ewelme and we also managed to find the bungalow in Crowmarsh where Mary last lived in the 1980's. The very helpful occupant provided Lyn with a contact to pursue for the last memories of the old Romany lady in this area. This proved to be a lady who was a visiting carer, and although she had no information on the Smith/Lewis family, she revealed that Mary always insisted on her guests dancing with her!

For the last 3 years of her life she was in a Nursing Home near Banbury dying there circa 1988. (Renee died in her caravan at Wheatley in 1977. Another sister, Alice, (or Addie) had a daughter named Mary Merchant, last heard of at Sutton Courtney Post Office).

Smith is a common name adopted by travellers and the Church records show baptisms of eight gypsy girls named Smith from 1756 to 1886. Gypsy Job Smith fathered four girls baptised between 1876 and 1886 by three separate women. Miss Prister Cruttwell's original history of *Ewelme: A Romantic Village* has a whole chapter on "*Old Nancy the Gypsy*" who lived on the Common in the early 1900's. Her surname was Smith, and she could have been related to the later sisters. There is no Nancy in the baptism register, but knowing the penchant for multiple forenames she could have been one of the baptised girls. Nancy sold clothes pegs and fashioned 'flowers' from pith bent back from the stems which were then brightly coloured – a useful addition to greenery in winter vases. She would visit the houses at the times of Church festivals for her 'silver collection', usually more than once, as she conveniently 'forgot' she had called earlier for her 6d. Nancy too aroused the empathy of Miss Cruttwell, for she ends her chapter – "*Poor old Nancy Smith, living in those remote days in her painted caravan on the lonely Common, I never knew what was your end. But it is sad to think that the Romanies of today are no longer allowed to follow their tribal nomadic way of life, for something free and elemental will be lost if the true Romany breed is allowed to die.*"

Ewelme Village Archive