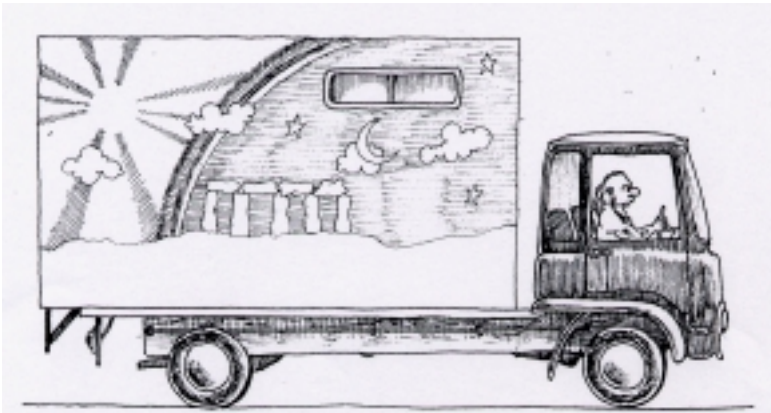


1975-1986: The birth of a culture and the death of Stonehenge Free

This was the decade in the UK when 'travelling' took on a meaning borrowed and amended from the social and economic nomadism of the Gypsy peoples of the world. It gradually dawned on a growing number of festival goers that the glimpses of an 'alternative lifestyle'



which the festivals of the late sixties and first half of the seventies had offered, could be turned into a full-time reality. A bus, bender, tipi or truck were cheaper to obtain than the sedentary life and so-called 'security' offered by a house or flat. And these new homes allowed their occupants to move relatively easily from venue to venue. The first wave of

these 'new Travellers' had grown up with a loosely defined hippy lifestyle of marijuana, Hawkwind and indigenous third world clothing. They were the traders, stage builders and sometime performers of the festies. And, shock, horror – some may even have traded in drugs! Add to them a 'new wave' of anti-Thatcher, town and city kids nurtured on 1976-78 anarcho-punk, and you have some idea of the melting pot that brewed up the Traveller culture that was to become the most despised scapegoat of successive Conservative governments.

Wicked!



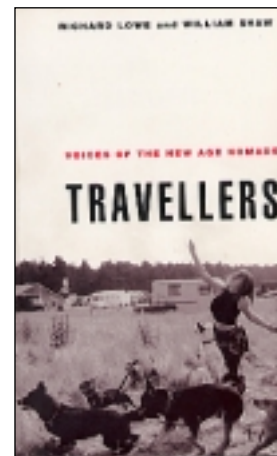
Richie Cotterill was a member of the travelling community from 1983 onwards with his wife Celia, and the Skool Bus and what became the Travellers' School Charity were very much his brainchildren. In 1985 in *Green Anarchist* magazine, Richie wrote: "A viable economy was created and some were able to make their way as stall-holders, site workers and performers. Some were unemployed, and most were disillusioned with the world whose social and moral fabric

seemed to crumbling...as the numbers have grown, the 'Convoy' has organically split into smaller and more chosen travelling groups. Some now travel abroad in the winter; many are now young families with children...a new culture?"

Richard Lowe and William Shaw gathered together a number of new Travellers' tales in their 1993 book, *Travellers: Voices of the New Age Nomads*. One of them, Scott, is fairly typical of the earlier generation of new Travellers, commenting:

"When I first went on the road, going to Stonehenge and all the festivals, I didn't think to myself, 'This is great – I'm going to get a lorry and go into the iron business', but that's how it turned out, really. It's one of the only ways of earning money like this and it's traditional for travellers to do it – gypsies have been doing it for years."

I also produced one of the earlier books about the new Travellers: *A time to travel? an introduction to Britain's newer Travellers* (1994), which I wrote and published together with Traveller friends, Fiona Earle, Helen Whittle, Gubby and Roddy Glasse. In it, Andy recalled the early days and the links with both the peace movement solstice celebrations:



"The 'Peace Convoy' really began in '81 when we went from 'Henge to Greenham Common to support the women camping there." In that first year at Greenham it wasn't women only. Indeed Don Aitken from Festival Welfare Services later claimed that they had shown the women how to build benders. Again quoting from that account, Andy:



"A group went beforehand to check out the site, then everyone painted up their vehicles, and a core of 120 snaked away from Wiltshire." Andy continued:

"It was all peaceful. When we met a roadblock, we'd stop, get out, and just lift the cars out the way, with the police inside..."

Brig Oubridge suggests that the convoys first appeared earlier in 1976 as "an enjoyably sociable means of travel" between festivals, particularly Stonehenge, which was pivotal in the festival calendar. So, it was probably from the Stones, that the soon-to-become-infamous Convoy has its deepest roots. Receiving increasing media attention in the early 1980s, it became synonymous in the public eye with the annual solstice celebrations and the folk-devil image of outlaw Travellers – a thorn in the side of Thatcherite Britain.

And as I've already tried to stress, it was Stonehenge far more than Glastonbury or Windsor, that was their birthing place. The Stones were their party, their shrine, their emblem (literally emblazoned on the side of many trucks and rainbow coloured buses) and in a real way – 'home' – the annual meeting place of the tribes and Traveller 'families'. One overview of this



ever-evolving 'culture' which stretched from hippydom to rave, was presented in *Squall* magazine (issue 14, Autumn 1996), written by Jim Carey, under the banner question: *A Criminal Culture?* Looking back twelve years to the 1984 Stonehenge Solstice Celebration, Jim described it as,

"...the apex of the burgeoning festival scene attracting an estimated 30,000 people, with many more visiting the site during its month long celebration. Entirely unlicensed, unpoliced and free from the profit motivation that drives modern day commercial festivals, it was one of the great people-led social experiments of modern times. The festival existed in sharp contrast to the vacuous modern political rhetoric about 'community', for despite its many foibles, it was a genuine example of people working through the realities of the word."

However, by 1984 it was no longer the never ending months of Sun-Days that Phil Russell and the Wallies had attempted to establish in 1974 and 1975. Kristof in *Festival Eye* (1989) commented on the need for a 'new beginning' since the festival had moved on from providing the "community's home, rather than playground (for)...many tens of thousands of people made



homeless...whereas a few thousand people can communicate successfully enough to create and maintain a community, groups of fifty thousand and more require a proportionate amount of activists to keep them together."

He continues, echoing one of Bruce's key themes:

"In a way, the festival can be thought of in two ways: as an actual physical event, the gathering of people in one place at one time, and also as a spiritual event, in other words as a state of mind...History show the price of ignoring this other aspect. The spiritual side does not have to involve ritualistic mumbo-jumbo or far fetched cultism – care, respect for others and the environment, and sharing, would guarantee a real celebration of life and a happy time for everyone."

George McKay claims in his *Glastonbury* book that the motto of Stonehenge festivals (1974-84) was: *fuck all for sale*, but the reality was sadly different. Serious heavy drug dealers and unscrupulous traders moved in on the scene as with Glastonbury, and as the event grew in size the old hands who'd helped build the stages, put up rigging and so on, were pushed out by new crews, or in the case of Glasto, by some pretty heavy 'security'.

With hindsight, 1985 was a huge, bleak watershed of a year. It was a year typified by a massive show of strength by just about any and all sections of the British authorities, determined to stamp out the embers of the new alternative culture. The year began in February with Michael Heseltine (they called him 'Tarzan' a the time!) leading the attack on the Rainbow Fields Peace Camp at the Cruise missile base known as USAF Molesworth, with 1,500 Royal Engineers, 600 civilian police and 100 military police (*"The fencing of RAF Molesworth, by men under the command of Brigadier John Wilks, was the largest single Royal Engineer operation since the Rhine crossing in 1944,"* Brigadier General Edward Fursdon); and the Wiltshire police together with a specially trained 'A' team took part in a nationally co-ordinated action with the MoD and the Home Office when they moved in to close down the Stonehenge festival. The outcome was the massacre of the Travellers at the Beanfield.

However, it could be argued that the Stonehenge event had actually ceased to be what many people had liked about the event in the first place. Even those like the Green Collective who asserted the right of people to attend the 1985 event knew that they were effectively drawing up 'battle plans'. In the face of the National Trust threatening injunctions against organisations like Festival Welfare Services and the St John's Ambulance Brigade if they showed up at Stonehenge, Bruce Garrard actually wrote in January/February 1985 (*Green Collective* mailing No 6):

"After years of talking about it, this year it seems the authorities will be making a concerted effort to stop the next midsummer festival...but they won't succeed; what they'll probably do is to politicise the 50,000+ free festival goers who will arrive there anyway...Thousands of people will be on the move this summer. We'll all look back and remember the Spirit of '85."

What Bruce nor anybody else knew was how well armed and hostile the enemy would be. However, I think that the proverbial writing was already on the wall. And the sub-text to that 1985 summer of mayhem was that like Kristof, in their heart of hearts, most knew that in the future, celebrations at Stonehenge needed to be organised differently. In fact, not until 2000, was a mass legal event to again take place at the Stones.

Memories of the Free Festival at the Stones

Perhaps inevitably, more seems to have been written about the solstice celebrations since they were banned after 1984 than the events that took place before. However, I have unearthed some interesting observations – what people actually did think of the Stonehenge experience. I think they capture a bit of the special magic of both the place and the event.

At www.keirle.freeseerve.co.uk/pages8.htm, the writer, Keirle presumably, reminisces: *"I know I was very privileged to have experienced the wonder of the Stonehenge festival before all the barbed wire and bloodshed. I am so lucky!...The first time I went to the Stonehenge festival was in 1981. I was 18 years young, still living with my folks in a small Somerset village. Five of my friends from the village and I went with four others who were at university with one of my mates...We were Stonehenge 'virgins' and had no idea what to expect."*

"When we got there it was glorious sunny weather, a few days before the Solstice and already there were probably four or five thousand people there, amassed in a huge field the other side of the road from the stones. It was weird seeing how life was going on as normal at the stones, tourists paying English Heritage for the privilege of looking at them. WEIRD. The party began! I'd never had a better time in my life! This was what it was all about! thousands of people, no one in charge, FREE fun in the sun! I took more hallucinogens in a few days than I ever had in my entire life. Very soon I was on another level. Times spent sat on the grass in front of the stage, watching Roy Harper, Solstice (the band), Hawkwind and many others. Talking to complete strangers, sharing whatever we had to smoke, eat and drink, it was amazing!"



"Occasionally someone would walk around with a bucket into which you put what money you could afford towards the fund to pay for the stage and PA etc. It took a couple of days before I realised that I didn't need to be paranoid about people ripping me off, beating me up or busting me like I did in my hometown... We stayed for about three weeks in all, until we were out of food and money. I did not want to leave. The Solstice sunrise peaking on psilocybin has to be experienced! No description is sufficient. People played guitars and



drums, sung and danced, screwed and spewed, smoked and joked. I knew I would be back again next year. I'd found somewhere I felt alive!"

An un-named new Traveller quoted by Kevin Hetherington in *New Age Travellers* commented:
"It (Stonehenge) was the space that allowed people to get a community going (it) created a kind of space in which people could do things that they couldn't do anywhere else... You could do what you wanted at Stonehenge and no one would bat an eyelid."

My own memory of those earlier solstice celebrations was that they provided a space and place in which

you could experiment, become another person, and try on new identities. Many of my new Traveller friends learned through this process to become the people they wanted to be, and the Stones along with their nomadic homes helped with that creation of a shared cultural identity.

Fiona Earle: *"I arrived on June 3rd on the back of a trials bike with one bag of possessions, and saw the*



'Henge for the first time – a magnificent monument with a few hundred people on the grass across the road, setting up along the drags. It evolved really quickly, and the month is a haze of images...swimming in the river at Amesbury...Hawkwind and the Enid on stage...siphoning petrol to blag bike rides...nights by the fire, days lying in the sun...Pete's sagging bender leaking in the rain...a sense of total freedom, timeless energy...and solstice morning; the chill of pre-dawn darkness, walking to the stones, chanting, dancing – the sun rising majestically above the Heel stone while the music echoed around.'

Gary, who formed the business Rainbow Marquees, was another of the early Travellers who re-invented himself on the road. He remembers: *"I bought myself a tepee and a van and learned how to do leather craftwork. I started making moccasins, made to measure, street moccasins with hard soles. I was ready for my first Stonehenge proper. Stonehenge was about freedom. The freedom to actually blossom, to do what you wanted to do as long as it didn't harm anybody else. It was far out."*

"New age travellers of the seventies and early eighties were driven by visions, ideals, inspiration. The influx of what I would call economic refugees has changed it completely...It's what went wrong with Stonehenge as well. The breadheads came in and it was all about how much they could make selling drugs."



However, although the festival at the stones was becoming 'soured' for the old hands, up until the 1984 event, generations of new people arrived each year. Symphony, from my home village in Dorset told me:

"I didn't know what to expect and it was all a great shock to me. That was 1984 and my first visit to the stones. I remember being so embarrassed when I went to the toilets and there were all these women stark naked washing themselves. I'd never seen anything like it. But the festival

was a great eye-opener and it was great fun."