



# The Gypsy Queen and the Baronet

by Rob Reeve and Sue Styche

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*A photograph of the Gypsy Queen Delilah Boswell taken by David Trevor (1828-1916), probably in the 1870s in his studio at 1 & 2 Cattle Market, Ashby de la Zouch, Derbyshire.  
Courtesy of Dave Trevor, the 2xgreat-grandson of the photographer.*

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## Introduction

From first becoming volunteer room guides at Calke Abbey we heard the story of the Gypsy Queen and the baronet. We heard about Delilah Boswell who had a connection with Sir John Harpur Crewe and was buried at the age of 85 in Ticknall churchyard in 1885. There is a studio photo of an elegant elderly lady but her inscrutable expression reveals nothing.<sup>1</sup> What nobody could tell us was what would a Gypsy and a member of the Derbyshire aristocracy have in common? This was where our quest began to learn the story.

We found the Celtic iron cross, see below, that marks Delilah's grave in the churchyard which is tended to this day by the descendant of one of the best loved estate workers of Calke abbey.<sup>2</sup> A plaque has been added which gives her name, nickname and dates of birth and death. Through the internet we found a museum in Spalding devoted to the Romani history and culture and founded and run by the Boswell family, one of the elite Romani families in this country. Then we discovered that a leading historian and published cultural expert of the Romani history lives in Derbyshire.<sup>3</sup> What these people shared with us from their own knowledge along with other published sources, forms the basis of our story.



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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britainexpress.com/2015/05/01/delilah-boswell-the-gypsy-queen.html>

## The Story

The Romanies, wrongly called gypsies a corruption of Egyptians, were driven from their home in North West India by an Islamic Afghan general Mahmud of Ghazni in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and were dispersed throughout Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa. They came to Britain in the late 1400s and were welcomed by the monarchy of the day.<sup>4</sup> A Romani woman became a courtier to Good Queen Bess and was given a dress by her. This garment was later cut into pieces and prized like a relic amongst the Romani family. There is still a piece in existence today. Other members of the aristocracy also welcomed the Romani and gave them employment on their estates. The Romani brought with them skills in horse husbandry, metal smithing, fortune telling and in natural remedies for animals and humans. They became accepted and employed as seasonal workers on the land. Romanis didn't use names as we would know them when they came to England but adopted the names of people who assisted them. Romanies not only use a variety of familial names which is why Delilah is recorded as Dellie and Deloraifi and the family name appears as Boswell or Boss.

The name Boswell seems to have been borrowed from one of the three Captain Boswells known to have been living in Hull from 1500. Hull was an important port of entry for those arriving from the Netherlands.

Delilah and her partner/cousin Uriah Boswell would have travelled from their home base in Northamptonshire to Calke on a seasonal basis until, in her later years we believe that Delilah remained permanently living in Calke /Ticknall. The 1881 Census<sup>5</sup> shows her as living in a cottage that belonged to the Calke estate on Stanton Hill and her occupation as "close peg hawker" sic. Romanis were makers of a wide variety of things from linen pegs, baskets and umbrellas to all kinds of metalware. These were generally made by the men and sold door to door by the women of the family.

Their journey from Northamptonshire would have been on foot and by donkeys, just like Romanies in general, with panniers on the side which not only carried their belongings but also accommodated small children unable to walk the distance. Contrary to popular belief Romanies did not live in heavily carved and brightly painted vans or vardos as these did not come into use until the 1870s which was the later part of Dellie's life. They would have pitched their bender or rod tent, a frame made of bent ash or hazel branches with a canvas of red, army serge which would have become brown and 'kippered' as it was exposed to smoke from their cooking fire. Delilah was likely to be skilled in healing using natural remedies and may have been welcomed in the Physic garden at Calke whilst Uriah, probably sporting the broad shouldered, strong armed physique of the typical Romani may have helped gathering the harvest or maybe in the saw pit on the estate. Perhaps Delilah was able to tell the fortune of the lady of the House or perhaps the influential Housekeeper or Cook. The studio portrait of her indicates a slim, dignified and gracious lady not unlike Mrs Margaret Boswell who we met in Spalding<sup>6</sup>.

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*Photograph of basket maker outside his bender tent from The Traditional Crafts hawked by Romanies and other Traditional Travellers Robert Dawson, Blackwell Derbyshire 2022. Reproduced by courtesy and with full permission of Bob Dawson*

For us a very significant research finding was an undated letter addressed to Sir John and Lady Harper Crewe which exists in the Calke Collection of the Derbyshire Record Office at Matlock. The wording of this letter, written in an educated hand is as follows:

*I am taking the liberty of writing this note to you which I think I am in need of so doing for my licence is out of date. I dare not call anywhere on account of getting into trouble for the Hawkers tell me I cannot get a licence without a charictor and I am in hopes that you will grant one and also please excuse the liberties I have taken in writing to you as I am in necessity of it for getting my bread by it. Your Obedient Servant. M. Boswell.<sup>7</sup>*

This clearly indicates a relationship of trust between both M, Boswell the writer of the letter and both Sir John and Lady Georgiana Harper Crewe, who has no hesitation in expecting that they will provide a character reference.

Meanwhile at the other end of the county it seems that the Duke of Devonshire had welcomed Romanies for many years, providing them with sanctuary when they were being persecuted, employing them as security at the game fairs during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and there are Romani wayside graves also on the Chatsworth estate. We were told that the Duke of

Edinburgh also employed Romanies for their skill with horses, during his carriage driving days and Margaret Boswell told us of wayside Romani graves at Sandringham.

In the summer of 1855 an announcement in the Times of a marriage between The Earl of Stamford and Warrington and Catherine Cox was an acknowledgement of the union between the British aristocracy and a Romani. Catherine 's mother Jemima Fletcher was a Romani from the long established and well respected Romani family of Stanleys. Catherine, Lady Stamford became well known in Leicestershire where she lived at Bradgate House, for her benevolence and graciousness<sup>8</sup>.

The regulation and persecution of the Romanis started in 1530 but it seems that in the English Midlands they were accepted at all levels in society.

Throughout Western Europe the Romanis were initially welcomed no doubt as refugees from oppression but this generally declined through overall increases in population, poor harvests and subsequently food shortages, acute poverty and unusual amounts of migration. People were moving about in search of work and families and groups took to living on the roads picking up work as they went. This led to the expansion of cities and social disruption in the countryside and towns and fears of chaos and violent unrest. And in many cases the Romanis were seen as the cause of problems that were actually social and economic. The Egyptians Act of 1530 aimed predominantly at vagrants (anyone who travelled around looking for work) and 'masterless men' had penalties of branding and two years imprisonment for a first offence and execution for any subsequent offence although many local magistrates balked at using the latter punishment<sup>9</sup>.

### **The basis of the relationship between Delilah and Sir John and Lady Georgiana**

It would seem that Delilah or Deloraifi or Dellie as she was variously known, was trusted and respected by Sir John and the family at Calke for the skills, abilities and hard work she brought. As she began to age it seems that Sir John felt she should leave her perhaps damp and draughty bender tent for an estate cottage on Stanton Lane where she appears on the 1881 census and where she ended her days. Her bender would have been burned and her possessions destroyed on her death as is the Romani way.

Romanies have always been known as poachers and gamekeepers and we learned that young men were taught to poach responsibly! Never taking all the eggs from a nest and endeavouring not to kill the female of the species whether it be deer or rabbits. Sir Vauncey's account in The Natural History of Calke and Warslow tells us of the rabbit problem at Calke which kept the keepers very busy and quite possibly the Romani workers as well<sup>10</sup>. One of their skills was the ability to render a pig into a state of possibly suspended animation which made them appear to be dead. The Romani would then offer to the pig's owner to dispose of the carcass and take it away and apparently revive and eat it.

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## Conclusion

Delilah was not a Gypsy queen which seems to be a bit of later romanticising, but a respected and valued individual. Neither was she a Gypsy but a member of a large and dispersed but elite and respected, Romani family who have preserved their genetic heritage throughout the centuries and can trace their line directly back to North west India. Their standing, and the reputation of Romanies in general in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, seems to have been diminished in later Victorian times when their propensity to welcome all into their families and lives, including the unwanted children of unmarried young women shunned by Victorian society, led to accusations that they were baby snatchers or that they ate babies. The actions of both landowners and Local authorities after the First World War, led to Romanies being moved on from their usual camping places on common land and green lanes and forced many to give up the road and become settled. Today we would see such actions as overt prejudice or discrimination. However, the behaviour of other groups of travellers without the same moral values and cleanliness as the Romani has also sullied the public view of them.

## References

1. Image of Delilah Boswell, courtesy Harold Soar, photograph taken by David Trevor 1828-1916 photographer and picture frame maker at 1&2 Cattle Market Ashby and reproduced in an article by Annette Soar in Ticknall Life 18 July 2018.
2. Memorial cross, original photograph taken by Sue Styche 2022
3. Dawson, Bob, [www.robertdawson.co.uk](http://www.robertdawson.co.uk). Interviewed November 2022 and April 2023
4. [www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/romani-gypsies-in-16th-century-britain](http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/romani-gypsies-in-16th-century-britain)
5. 1881 Census of Ticknall. Ancestry.com
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7. DRO Calke Archive D2375/F/K/1/2/11
8. Ford, Anne Marie The Gypsy Countess. Pub R&TFHS ISBN978-1-900660-50-1
9. Op cit. 4 above
10. Derbyshire Record Office Calke Archive D2375/F/L/1/5/1

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