

### **Dale Farm Travellers Retain Their Dignity Amid Sewage And Rats**

*Fifteen months after they were evicted from their property in southeast England, the Dale Farm Travellers are still living next to their former homes. Iain Guest from The Advocacy Project (AP) assesses the crisis and looks back on AP's involvement.*



**Evicted, but still alive as a community: Traveller caravans at the Dale Farm access road, near their former homes**

Dale Farm, UK: If readers of this bulletin are looking for a good cause they might want to donate a toilet to Dale Farm, the Traveller site in Essex that triggered an epic legal battle in the UK.

The site was supposed to close down when 86 Traveller families were evicted on October 19, 2011 - only the Travellers never left. Most moved their caravans to the nearby access road (left), or crowded into adjacent housing plots (known as pitches) owned by other Travellers. The 2011 eviction has done little except cost

English taxpayers a lot of money (\$7.2 million), cause misery, and make the Basildon Council (which ordered the eviction) look heartless.

AP's interest in Dale Farm dates back to June 2005, when we telephoned Malcolm Buckley, then leader of the Council, to protest the Council's decision to evict the 86 families. He explained that the Travellers had built on protected Green Belt land without planning permission. It did not seem to matter that they owned the land, or that other Travellers had been given permission to build nearby by a previous Council.

Fairness alone suggested that the 86 families be given the same chance. But to the Council the environment trumped basic human rights such as property, membership of a recognized minority, and integrity of the family. It is worth bearing this in mind when visiting the waste land that Dale Farm has become today.

Mr. Buckley was surprised that an American group could be interested in Dale Farm. Over the next few years AP did what we could to help the Travellers. We recruited [Peace Fellows](#) for the Dale Farm Housing Association to tell the Traveller story through blogs and [videos](#). We helped to buy an Internet connection, computers, and a small community center, all of which disappeared or were bulldozed in 2011. We put the

Travellers in touch with international advocates, including the UN in Geneva and Council of Europe.

This was appreciated by the Travellers, but not by their neighbors. Our Fellows were the subject of sneering reports in the local newspaper, the [Basildon Echo](#), which attracted snarling comments ("Another stupid Yank"....."Leave us alone and bog off back to America"). But the Travellers were of little interest to human rights giants like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, and the standard response from international agencies was that "national legal remedies had to be exhausted." No one was prepared to confront Britain over the issue in Europe or at the UN.



**Dale Farm resident Jean O'Brian during the 2011 eviction**



**Dale Farm children at play**

To the extent that a flame still flickers, it has been kept alight by committed individuals like Lord Avebury, Grattan, Ann, Stuart, Candy, lawyer Keith Lomax and our [current Fellow, Susan](#). How right they have been. In spite of lacking any formal education, the Travellers mounted a model campaign. They took their case to the British High Court and [changed the law \(on homelessness\)](#). In the process, they showed that the best advocates for human rights are usually those with most to lose.

Given this, it is deeply upsetting to see the Travellers reduced to their current straits, particularly as the rationale for their eviction has always been about protecting the environment. When the bailiffs evicted the Travellers on October 19, 2011, they erected ramparts of earth around the pitches to prevent owners from repossessing their land. I visited one pitch recently with an owner who returns at night to use it as a toilet. We picked our way through the piles of human waste and debris and tried to avoid the rats. The place is foul.

Yet, through it all, the Travellers have retained their dignity. Their caravans are clean and neat. They wash down the road with bleach every day. They persevere in sending their children to the local primary school at Cray's Hill. (Sadly, the British media has mainly focused on the school's poor academic record instead of its heroic attempts to save

Traveller children from illiteracy.)

Meanwhile, the war of nerves between the Basildon Council and the Travellers continues. The Council's overriding goal from the start has been eviction and NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard). The Council sidestepped English law on homelessness by offering temporary housing to individual families, probably knowing that this would be rejected. The Council also failed to follow through on a deal with the regional authority to find 62 pitches for Travellers. Basildon has not provided a single pitch for Travellers, in spite of the pressing need.



**The legacy of eviction**

This appeared to change on December 12, when the Council approved planning permission for 15 pitches under prodding from the [Irish Traveller Movement](#). This offer is now the subject of anxious discussion at Dale Farm because the location (Gardeners Way) would only accommodate about 30 families and they might not all come from Dale Farm. The Dale Farm families are afraid of severing ties - with their local health workers, with the school, and with each other. And who can blame them? The world has not shown them much kindness.

The question is how long they can hold out. The Environment Agency, a government watchdog, has visited Dale Farm and is said to have found some asbestos in the ruins. For our part, we may try and raise funds for a toilet. We have asked the Basildon Council whether it would grant planning permission and received no answer. No matter. The Council cannot continue to treat the Travellers like unwelcome refugees and hope that they will be driven away by the awful conditions. And if the toilet plan doesn't work, we might just propose the Cray's Hill primary school teachers for the Nobel Peace Prize.

- [Read Peace Fellow Susan Craig-Greene's blogs from Dale Farm](#)
- View [Susan's photos from Dale Farm before the eviction](#).