

Transcript of interview with Dennis Binns

interviewed by Lee Paton. 12th 13th and 15th May 2022

Extra notes from Dennis but not on the recording are in italics

(Additional clarifications in brackets)



Recording 1(12th May)

0:00

LP. Today I'm interviewing Dennis Binns who has lived in Auchencairn for over 30 years, but prior to that he was teaching travelling children in the Manchester area. So, Dennis, how did you get involved?

In 1966, Lady Plowden said travelling children were the most deprived children in Britain. The government then started paying authorities extra money to provide them with education and, also urged them to build sites where travellers could stay. Manchester education authority took this to heart and created a special teacher to take this on.

DB. I was looking for a new job. I was working in special education, educationally sub normal children and although I quite enjoyed the job the headmaster and I didn't really see eye to eye on many things. So, when I applied for new jobs. I was not getting any replies, so I spoke to the inspector, a Chinese woman, who was catering for the minority groups in Manchester. Anyway, because of the new legislation about providing education for the traveling children and extra money was available for it, she suggested I apply for this post, so I did, and I got accepted for the job. I might well have been the only candidate. It's not everybody's cup of tea but I didn't know what the job entailed and quite honestly, neither did the education authority. They just felt that they had to provide education for any of the travellers in Manchester and we did have an official Gypsy site with some families on it.

So, once I had accepted the job they put a mobile hut, a classroom hut, up on the playground at the nearest primary school to the gypsy site so that they wouldn't have to travel too far. I started at the beginning of the autumn term and on my first day there were seven pupils that came up the hill from the site, three girls and three brothers. The brothers were Nathan, John and Tony. The girls were Laurel, Elaine, those two were sisters, and the other girl was Yvonne. Luckily, they had all been to school somewhere or other in the past and so they all settled down, and we got to know each other. There was no one in charge of the school apart from myself. I started off by doing maths in the morning which is when people are supposed to be at their brightest and then reading in the afternoon and then perhaps art or craft. It was quite a nicely equipped classroom, it had windows around two sides and a sloping roof. I had a woodwork table in there and enough chairs and desks for everybody. With the maths I had some very basic maths books which I gave to each of the children, and they started working their way through it. They could all write their names which didn't apply later but for that first term they did. In the afternoon I tried to work out their reading level to find out how good or poor their reading was and so I had some Ladybird books and two or three other courses and kept a record of what they could read, what maths they were able to do. We did maths and English every day for the first week or two and I was beginning to order more equipment particularly in the craft line. I had a stone polishing machine and a sheet of copper for cutting up into bracelets and thongs for making pendants and necklaces and so we did all sorts of various work.

6:26

LP. What were their reading levels?

DB. Their reading was below their age as I remember it but only about two years below, about eight years and the three girls were eleven, twelve and about ten, I think. Of course, I'm talking about forty-six years ago, 1966. One of the first things I did that first week was to make go-carts. I would put the children in the car because there were few enough of them and we would go around Salford, around all the areas where they were knocking all the old buildings down and pick up any pram wheels we could find and we put lots of pram wheels in the car and went back to the school and then we started building the go-cart with a place for their feet for steering. Two wheels on the front and they could steer it on the bar across. Then a seat and making brakes was a problem to start with but eventually we managed to solve that and then they took them home and played with them on the gypsy site. What I wanted to do was to try to make most lessons relevant to their own lives and what they wanted out of it, so we got on quite well.

I think that first or second day was the first time I learned my first gypsy word. Tony said that John had been over and pinched a pencil off his desk and said "Sir! Sir! He's *chored* me pencil" and I knew

that *chored* was an old Sanskrit word in India and it had come with their ancestors all the way from India and Persia, right across to Europe and into Britain, and here was one of my pupils speaking ancient Sanskrit! Later of course I was to learn a lot more.

Then I had a group of Irish travellers coming in. They weren't on the site, but they'd heard about the school and there were about six or seven of them, probably all related, brothers and sisters. The oldest girl was about thirteen. I got them all sat down. They all came bare footed, none of them had shoes but luckily, I had a big bag full of school pumps which some other schools had given me. I got so that I could look at child's feet and say what size they were. So, I'm fitting them all out with plimsoles or pumps and they all behaved themselves and all sat in the classroom. I gave them colouring books to start with. The book would say "colour this blue" which had the first letter B which I had taught them. They would hold up the blue pencil and say "Sir. Is this pencil blue?" because they wouldn't know their colours, they had no idea what colours were called. So, I would say yes or no as appropriate and they would get on with it. Then the primary school bell went, and the primary school children came out to play. The oldest girl, I've forgotten her name now said "What's that bell for?" and I said "it's play time. Do you want to go out and play?" and she said "Lets go and *corbe* the *galluins*(?). I thought, *corbe*, that means hit and *galluins* means children, so I said "Right! Go back and sit down all of you, you are not going out to hit the children" and the oldest girl was a bit gob smacked when she realised that I had understood their language, up to a point. So, I made them sit there till play time was over and then I let them out. That's one of my little stories

12:32

LP. What about the time you let them all out for play time and they disappeared?

DB. Well yes, later, around about November we had a really, misty day. Foggy, a bit of November fog and the whole class went out to play as usual. When the bell went for them to come back, nobody turned up and in fact they didn't turn up after half an hour, and I was stood there waiting. So eventually, after about an hour they started turning up at the door. So, I thought I had better behave like a proper teacher here, so I made them all line up and told them off- You know you were doing wrong, and I don't want to ever see this happen again- I didn't lose my temper or anything, but I just talked to them. So, they all said they understood they had to come in when the bell went. Next day when I arrived at school, not one of them turned up and I suddenly realised I wasn't the only boss there. I had to sort of play it by ear really, just see what I could get away with before they did! Where the classroom was situated, by looking out the window, we could see the CIS building which is the tallest building in Manchester. CIS stands for Cooperative Insurance Services, and the top floor is used as an observation room, and the public are allowed up there. So, I thought it would be a nice idea to take all the class, this was in the afternoon after they had done all their work. We all walked, quite orderly down to the CIS building went in and got into a lift and got carried right up to the top floor. We all got out and went into the observation room, and they were looking at it. The oldest boy, Nathan, was looking at the windows and they were all metal framed windows up there and he said "They should knock this building down and this scrap iron would be worth a fortune" I said yes! Anyway, that was that trip.

16:05

Then it was getting near Christmas, and the fairground season was over and all the fairground families no longer operated their machines and stalls, and they all went to their winter quarters. Fortunately, Manchester winter quarters were just above the gypsy site and so I suddenly started finding I was having fairground children coming in. Fairground children call us flatties and that's

because we're all on the ground whereas they're usually raised up a bit on their machines. So, I now had three different groups. I had the Irish travellers, the fairground children and what I call the Romany Gypsies. And I often used to think that the fairground were the ones that looked down on the other two groups even though quite a lot of their ancestors were Romany Gypsy. The Romany Gypsies sort of didn't like the Irish travellers and that was it basically. But I did manage to keep them all at peace with each other in the classroom although it wasn't always easy.

Anyway, the fairground children, first of all there were two girls, Alice and Gaynor. Their mother was one of the poorer fairground people with a stall rolling pennies down slot machines and things like this, but they both had school uniforms that they'd had at some previous school, and it made my school seem really posh having two schoolgirls in school uniform! They could both read. Two other girls came in, Samantha and Gaynor, whose father was much richer, and they had a much bigger living wagon as they call them. They never call them trailers. They had dodgem cars. They take money to run and money to buy and they were more affluent than the other two girl's parents, but they all still accepted each other as fairground people. All fairground people throughout Britain all know each other and they always marry within the group, and they wouldn't dream of marrying outside the group. One or two of them do use some of the Gypsy Romany words. Anyway, I worked very hard on Gaynor who could read a little. It was very basic, but I pushed that up with various reading schemes and the next time I went and saw her I was visiting Knutsford and the fairground was there. The fairground was on, this is the next year, and there in the middle of the dodgem cars was Gaynor, sat there reading a book which I found really exciting. Her father was so pleased he bought me a bottle of whisky for Christmas!

Another group are the Scottish Tinklers, but they do travel around and we had some in Manchester. Then there are the New Age Hippies who are not usually interrelated and choose this lifestyle. I used to visit the sites around Manchester and although they never attended school, I used to take workbooks to the parents. Then there are the Circuses who usually provide their own schooling system by a mobile bus. One teacher on a school bus I knew was married to the Ring Master

Recording 2 (13th May)

0:12

DB. I was there sixteen years altogether, so it covers a lot of time but one year the Romany Gypsies, their religion tends to be evangelical, they like preachers who are very Protestant, and down in Derby there was a big religious meeting, and some French Gypsies came over and set up their tents with their preacher. The Gypsy children are often given very unusual names and one boy in my class was called Toffee, and Toffee really wanted to be a minister, an evangelical minister, and so he was quite keen on learning his reading. His parents were very pleasant and always welcomed me in their trailer. So, I went to this meeting and took some photographs there of the religious tent where they all went and sat to hear a service with the French and English Romany. Of course, the French call their gypsies Gitans. The Germans call them Zigeuner and so do the Polish. Then there's Kalderash and then the Sinti, there are different groups in Europe. The Roma in Hungary are well noted for their fiddle playing. If you go to a Hungarian restaurant, they'll probably serenade you while you're eating, like it or not!

Anyway, another thing I used to do with the traveling children, I used to take them ice skating. There was an ice rink at Altringham, and of course, when I wasn't used for ice skating it was used for ice hockey and so the whole rink was marked out where the corner posts were in big red blobs underneath the ice. Anyway, I took my class round there and they were a bit nervous especially this one lad, and he got terrified when he saw these red blobs because he thought it was blood! I had to assure him it wasn't blood. I quite enjoyed doing the ice skating with them.

One time a circus came to Manchester and my wife and I decided to take the whole class of ten. We took them home for tea and they had tea with us and then we went to visit this circus and luckily it had elephants in it and other animals and horses. They really enjoyed this.

Then one of the theatres in Manchester was showing a Gypsy play or showing a play with a Gypsy theme, and the wardrobe mistress came round to try to find out what the travellers wore. She was a bit disappointed to find it was normal dress! Because of my help- I took her down to the site to meet some of the traveller parents, showed her what they wore and everything, I think she wanted them to be a bit more fancy but anyway she was disappointed- but because of my help we got free tickets for the travelling children, so I took the whole group along. Now, there was an unfortunate aspect to this because somehow, they had got hold of hedgehog flavoured crisps, they got a whole load of these and gave them away free, and one of the lads I took got really upset and said, they're taking the mickey out of us, and I had to assure him they weren't. It was just part of making the place seem more real, but anyway, I think they all ate their hedgehog crisps. That's that little story.

06:05

I used to have a lot of visitors especially students from university who had elected to study travellers in some way or other. Three of them were doing photography and so I had to take them out to meet the travellers so that they could photograph them with the traveller's permission. One of the photographic students, he hit on this idea of standing in front of a group of travellers and suddenly pointing up to the sky so they all looked up there and he took their picture, and it was just one of his quirks I suppose.

LP. Did the travellers like having their photographs taken?

DB. Yes, they didn't mind. They were ok with me so if I said it was ok, they would accept it. While I was there, I used to travel a lot to other sites. Ones at Liverpool and all around the place, Alton, Derby, Wakefield, the Oldham site we went to often, and also Rochdale and Stockport.

LP. What were you doing there?

DB. Well, I'd take the children with me and just see if they had any relatives there and sometimes, they did.

LP. So, it was a social visit then, you weren't going to advise them on education?

DB. No, it was to find out, I was inviting myself to find out what provision there was. Most of Greater Manchester and all the outlying towns had Gypsy sites and some sort of provision being made. Eventually I set up a once-a-month meeting of all the teachers in the area, and we would all meet in one of their schools or mine and just discuss our problems if any and how we solved them and so it became more advanced. And I forget what year now, but after about four or five years the government made more money available for traveller education and so Manchester received quite a lot, so they decided to spend the money on an extra ten teachers. And also, the method of employment of teachers was changed as well. Instead of isolating the Gypsy children from all the

others they were now going to be taken into the schools and my staff of eight teachers and the EWO, which is the Education Welfare Officer, began to go into the schools with the pupils. The secondary schools as well as the primary which was a big step forward and it began to work with this extra help. Sometimes the teachers would sit in with the pupils or other times they went out to advise other subject teachers on how to approach them and so on. So, it became more sophisticated. They moved us out of the hut although the hut still remained there, into another primary school which had closed down, Burgess Becker, and all my staff came there for meetings, and we used to meet every Friday afternoon to discuss things.

11:14

My wife had diabetes and she had to retire early which was about 1989 and the same year, I was asked if I would take early retirement and they would then hand me my pension, so I hung on for a while and eventually they made a better offer and I finally accepted it and I think it was 1989 when I retired, and Eileen. We wanted to leave Manchester then. My wife had been a teacher in secondary school in Manchester. We looked at various places, but I'll come to that. We moved to Auchencairn and that was 1991, in January.

DB. What happened to traveller education after you left?

DB. Another person was appointed to the job had. A woman from the Leeds area. She took over but I lost contact with her, in fact I never actually met her. Once the job had finished, I left. The only occasion with travellers since then was once we had been here in Auchencairn for three or four years, two Gypsy women came here. They were Romany Gypsies, and they were from the Bolton site and they both had heard of me, I hadn't met them before. So we sat out on the front lawn on the bench with a cup of tea and they were selling lace doilies which I bought two of and we had a long chat about pupils I used to teach and apparently Elaine, or Lainie, had died of a brain tumour, and Nathan, who was the one who wanted to use the CIS building as scrap, he had gone bad, but the rest of the others all seemed to be ok and we had a long chat with them.

LP. Quite a small world?

DB. Oh yes!

Dennis worked for Manchester City Council Education Department as Head of Traveller Education Service at Abbott Primary School and later at Burgess Becker CP School

Recording 3 (15th May)

0:00

LP. This morning Dennis is going to talk about Auchencairn and his years here.

DB. In Manchester I had taken early retirement in 1980(90?) and my Wife had to retire due to having diabetes type one, and Eileen thought that after being in Manchester for over twenty years it was time to move on so, we put our house on the market and started to consider where to move to. First, we looked at Shropshire where we had had a short holiday and then at Richmond in Yorkshire where we had both had holidays previously, but we rejected both of these places for being a little bit too gentele. Then we had a two-week holiday at Balcary Mews and after many walks along The Shore Road and many nights in The Smugglers we were a bit smitten. But just to be sure, we looked at a house at Mute Hill on the road to the (Kirkcudbright) lifeboat house. The view was fantastic, and the

price was right, but what deterred us was the pot holed lane to the house and two other factors. One, the only water was from a spring and secondly, to get to the third bedroom one had to go through the bathroom. We looked at another house in Gatehouse which once had been a brewery. The bedrooms were enormous, and we liked the house very much but unfortunately it had no garden and would be useless for two newly retired people. We then looked around Auchencairn and 57 Main Street, this house, had been empty for three or four years and half the garden was covered in foliage. Betty Agnew, across the road held the keys and said her friend's son Graham Aitken had been asked to cut all the foliage down as it was growing wild. But what we liked was that one could see the sea from the front door and bedroom window, also coupled with The Smugglers (pub) and restaurant being nearby. Also, when we were holidaying here, everyone we met was so friendly and ready to wave at us.

We had a lot of furniture in Manchester as my wife, Eileen's Mother had died. So, when the furniture vehicles arrived it took all day to empty the vans. Miss Hilda Lees, the previous owner, had also left a lot of furniture. I like counting things and I noted that there were fifty-six chairs in the house, so we got Halls of Castle-Douglas to take quite a few. There was a set of reclining chairs and Chrissie Ashton asked if she could have them so that's where some went.

When we first arrived, Betty Agnew was very helpful and introduced us to David and Nancy Aitken. Betty, Nancy, Eileen, and I were quickly in and out of each-others houses for a blether and to keep up with the news. Davy took us to his farm at Auchnabonny outside Dundrennan and told us how he used to run the farm. His Father had been an undertaker, and he was very interested in this side of life, or death as I should say! We once made a meal for them in the conservatory for all nine of us. Their daughter, Lorna, sons, David and Graham and their wives, and Eileen and I. When David died, Nancy bought us a Magnolia tree to plant in the back garden and this year it has blossomed better than it has ever done.

04:53

Eileen and I often visited The Smugglers and Sharon Graham used to challenge me to a game of darts and by sheer good luck she always beat me! Sharon, Eileen and I also went to the old Free School where Trevor (Leat) has his workshop and played carpet bowls. The head teacher when the school was active used to live in the room above. When we went the head teacher's desk was still there, but it's gone now.

We also knew Miss Euphemia Trotter in Spout Row and Mrs Gibson. In fact, when Geordie Milligan's dog -he also lives in Spout Row- we had one of its puppies which we called Dante. Probably a bit of a mistake as it used to snap and bite and was a bit of a danger to children and eventually had to be put down.

Number 57 took s nearly two years to redecorate, and only then did we start to really explore this wonderful area of Scotland. We both climbed The Merrick, the highest hill in southern Scotland and when we went up to Benyellary before nipping across to The Merrick we were a bit shocked to see two lads on mountain bikes coming down the hill past us.

As we became more entrenched in Auchencairn society, so invitations for meals began to increase. First was Margaret and John Taylor for a very pleasant meal, and then Jim and Elise Hendry. It was then that we notice different customs. When Eileen and I have entertained we have always placed the wine bottles on the table with the food so that people can help themselves if they wish to, but we found our hosts always kept the drinks on one side and had to leave the table to offer more

drink. I don't know if this is Scottish people being canny or if it is a left over from the temperance days.

In those days, the Women's Guild used to organise coach trips usually organised by Norman Osbourne and his wife Hazel. We were always intrigued when Helen Sankey (Nee McWilliam) told us she was brought up in the Osbourne's house, Mill House, and there were eleven children and we have met a few of them. They all slept in the attic. I also met the Tweedies who lived in The Pepper Pot. I think they also lived in the cottage on Hestan just like the Sankeys (McWilliams). And Beryl Scott also who has written a book about it (Living on Hestan) and now lives at Islecroft in Dalbeattie.

Around about 1998, Margaret McCrae asked me if I would like to form a new society. Dumfries and Galloway Council were offering fee laptops to new societies. I always hated history at school, but I could see local history being something quite different. So, this is how The Auchencairn History Society began. We never did get the laptop, but The Community Council gave us a hundred pounds to get going in place of it.

09:46

This is an insert to Norman Osbourne organising trips out. Eileen and I always went on these trips which was exciting for all our friends would be with us walking round the castle grounds at Castle Kennedy. Mrs McCleary often came with us and at this time I used to produce The Auchencairn News and Jim McCleary gave me a lovely article for it on how he used to make cheese on the farm he worked on. At one time, I had every copy of The Auchencairn News from long before I started it and gave the whole lot to The Kirkcudbright Museum.

LP. Who did it before you Dennis?

DB. Lots of various people did it before me. I think Bob Beresford did. I don't have them now so I can't check.

LP. For a while you did The Auchencairn News and the History Society magazine.

DB. Yes, I did both, but it was too much. I had to stop doing The Auchencairn News, also the community council, I think a lot of the members on the council took turns to produce it. I remember when I did it, I managed to put a local artist on the cover of every one I did. Auchencairn was full of artists at that time. There was John Halliday who recently died, there was Hilary Neil and my wife, Eileen did one cover, Davy Gordon did one, Sarah . . . it was Eddy who died in the motorcycle crash, his girlfriend, . . . Godsill? She did a cover, and her picture was in Dumfries, where the cinema is in Dumfries, she did that cover. But at that time, I started not only The Auchencairn History Society newsletter, also some of the monographs that we started publishing. We published ten altogether. They're all available in all the local libraries.