

Jim's eldest daughter Janie plaiting the family horse's tail

the **gypsy** life



During the 1960s, AP reader **Tony Boxall** spent four years photographing a gypsy family in Surrey. Forty years on, he talks to **Gemma Padley** about the enduring appeal of his images and his concern for the future of the collection



Valentine, Jim and Louise's eldest son

darkroom in the evening and stay there until one or two in the morning.'

Tony invested a great deal of time and money in the family. He even sold cameras he had won in photographic competitions to fund his hobby. Fortunately, Tony's wife, Eve, was sympathetic to her husband's spare-time activities and so family life was not too badly disrupted.

Tony's images have been recognised not only as a unique account of gypsy life but also as an archive of significant cultural importance. In 1971, Tony won the European Golden Lens award in the photographic competition 'Europe: Yesterday and Tomorrow'. In 1984, 160 black & white prints from his gypsy collection were displayed at the Royal Photographic Society in Bath. The RPS still has his images in its archives and others are stored at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

As a result of the interest sparked by his photographs, Tony has spent the past 30 years giving lectures to camera clubs across the UK, and his gypsy photographs, along with the more than 100,000 others he has taken, have been published in thousands of publications internationally.

The enduring appeal of the gypsy photos lies perhaps in their natural, spontaneous feel, which was largely due to Tony's reliance on natural light and refusal to use set-ups.

'I tried to photograph the family exactly as it was,' he says. 'If the children were going into the woods to pick daffodils, I'd photograph things as they happened. It was pure candid photography.'

Tony feels that his film images are particularly valuable in our digital age because they capture a rawness and innocence that cannot be replicated

It is surely every photographer's ambition to produce images that survive the test of time. Tony Boxall's photographs of a gypsy family, taken between 1964 and 1968, depict a way of life that has long since disappeared, yet they have a raw honesty that transcends their era.

Tony's book, *Gypsy Camera*, containing b&w images, was first published in 1992, but the colour transparencies he took at the same time have never been reproduced. It was only when Tony, 78, bought his first computer two years ago that he began to give serious thought to preserving his photographic legacy.

In 1964, while chairman of Horley Camera Club, Tony met Jim Vincent, a gypsy who lived with his family in Surrey's woodlands. 'I first saw Jim driving down a country lane in his horse and cart,' Tony recalls. 'I took some pictures and he was very rude, he told me, in no uncertain terms, what to do with my camera! However, when I processed the film, there was something about the pictures that made me want to find him again.'

This chance meeting was the start of a project that would last four years. Tracking the family down, however, was

no easy task. 'Their way of life was so different to what I was accustomed to,' he says. 'Being on the road, they moved on every few days.'

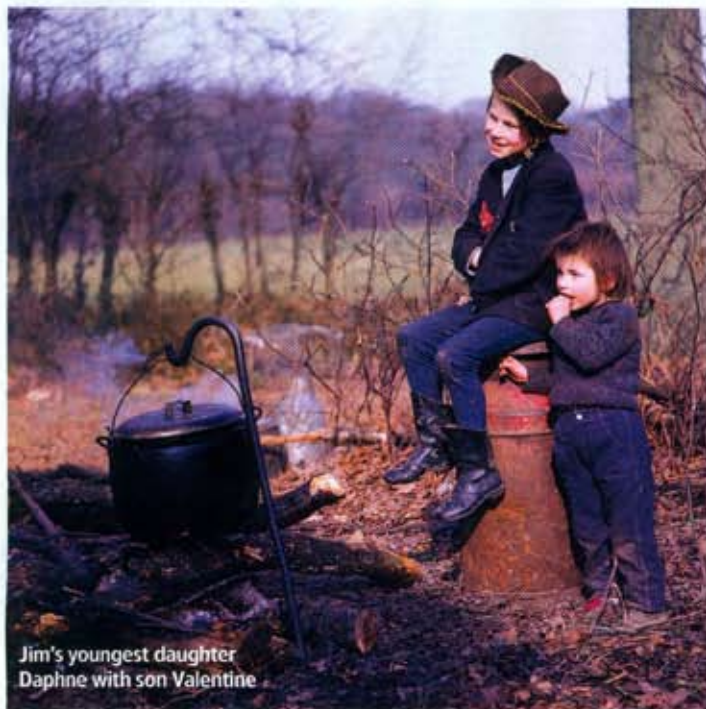
When Tony found Jim a couple of weeks later, he asked if he could photograph the caravan, Jim's wife Louise and their six children. 'They were very suspicious at first,' he recalls. 'They thought I was some sort of figure in authority. But even though I never really got to know them, they came to accept me because I always carried a packet of cigarettes, and I took some sweets in my camera bag for the children.'

Tony was fascinated by the gypsy way of life and would go out on weekends with his two Mamiya C33 cameras – one loaded with colour film, the other with b&w – to photograph the Vincents. 'It was like finding an ancient tribe in the jungle,' he enthuses. 'I wanted to capture how they lived. I'd try to find them, but you could never tell where they'd stopped as they'd clear up everything before they left. However, they would break a branch from a tree and point it in the direction they'd gone.'

'In the winter, I'd come back absolutely frozen, with ten rolls of film that I'd spend hours developing. I'd go into the

Jim's wife Louise cooks dinner with Janie, one of her six children





Jim's youngest daughter
Daphne with son Valentine



Louise with the family dog

'Shortly before he died, Jim asked to be buried with a copy of my book. I thought that was a wonderful compliment'



Jim's son Nelson sits
on the caravan steps

electronically. 'What's going to happen to these digital pictures when people die?' he asks. 'Digital cameras can produce incredible results, but there's something lacking.'

Although he no longer takes photographs regularly, Tony uses a digital compact camera to take the occasional 'family snap'. He has never been tempted to buy a digital SLR and says his focus is on preserving his photographic collection. 'To me, there's nothing new - I've photographed it all before, but with the gypsy images I've got something unique.'

Although Tony briefly considered publishing a book of colour prints of the gypsy photos, he decided against it for financial reasons. He has, however, started to copy all his images to CD. He fears that unless he acts now, the images may be 'packed-up' and locked away or worse, destroyed. 'I'm frightened about what's going to happen to my transparencies,' he says. 'I'm hoping my sons will look after them.'

Forty years on, the Vincent children have grown up, married and moved away. Tony no longer sees what he calls 'his family', although the eldest daughter, Janie, recently visited him at home to ask about the photographs.

But perhaps the most poignant endorsement of Tony's gypsy photographs came four years ago, shortly before Jim died. 'Jim asked to be buried with a copy of the book. I thought that was a wonderful compliment,' says Tony. 'I consider myself very lucky that I was able to capture a vanishing way of life.' AP