

Norfolk and Romany? Now that IS a rumm'n

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"There's night and day, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon, and stars, all sweet things; there's likewise a wind on the heath. Life is very sweet, brother; who would wish to die?" – the famous words attributed by George Borrow to the Gypsy character Jasper Petulengro in his autobiographical novel *Lavengro: the scholar, the Gypsy, the priest*, published in 1851.

As is well known, the conversation between the novel's protagonist, no doubt a version of Borrow himself, and Petulengro, in real life called Ambrose Smith, took place on Mousehold.

Borrow was born in Dereham and, like Nelson, went to Norwich Grammar School. At one time he lived on Willow Lane in Norwich.

He was good at learning languages, though how well he learnt them we don't really know. One of the languages he learnt – perhaps on Mousehold itself – was Romany, the language of the Gypsies. Romany is, in origin, a language from northwestern India, quite closely related to Hindi/Urdu and Punjabi, but it has been transformed as a result of contact with other languages, as the Gypsies migrated over the centuries through Afghanistan, Iran, the Middle East, and the Balkans into Western Europe.

Quite a lot of words have been borrowed into English from the Romany language.



LANGUAGE:

Author
George Borrow learned some words of Romany – but the Norfolk dialect still uses many words of this descent today.

Lollypop, and lolly meaning money, are Gypsy words.

So are pal and cosh. And moosh, as a disrespectful form of address used to a man, comes from the Romany word for man.

Strictly speaking, though, many of these words have come into English not from Romany itself, but from Anglo-Romany. This is an in-group form of language which has English pronunciation and English grammar but uses Romany words.

It's still spoken by many Romany people in this country, and is sometimes used as an anti-language – a language which is designed to prevent other people understanding what you are saying.

Our Norfolk speech owes quite a lot to the

Gypsies. The dialect word cooshie, meaning a sweet, is probably a Romany word. And so is the word rum, meaning strange. This is a peculiarly British word – Americans don't know what it means.

And it has nothing to do with rum, the drink. It comes from the Romany word rom, which meant man, and in English originally meant exceptionally good. Then it gradually came to mean exceptional, and now it means odd.

Where would we be in Norfolk if we weren't able, from time to time, to exclaim: 'Ass a rumm'n'?

■ **Peter Trudgill is president of Friends of Norfolk Dialect.**

■ **What do you think? Email: EDPletters@archant.co.uk**