



A NIGHTMARE SCENARIO

Neil Sjoberg, Manager of Epping Golf Club, recounts his experiences dealing with a with traveller invasion

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Neil Sjoberg, the manager of Epping GC, recounts an incredible five-day stand-off between the local community and a group of travellers who moved onto land next to the golf course. He also offers advice to help others avoid a similar situation

At 6.15 pm on Friday July 16 this year we were on the M5 near Exeter driving back to Essex after our annual Cornish holiday. Our son, William, had just started as assistant manager at the club and asked that we returned a day early to help with the weekend.

My mobile phone rang and Gaye answered. She was speaking to a lady neighbour that we did not know. The conscientious Margaret had gained our mobile number from the clubhouse and thought we should know she had just seen three caravans pulling onto land adjacent to the golf course.

We have had several previous encounters with travellers. Often they had been pleasant but very short lived when little groups with hired clubs and lots of friendly advice decided they would try playing. Some showed promise but always came in after a few holes. Less pleasant had been the theft of trailers, a generator and a water pump, all on separate occasions and all pre-reconnoitred. The worst had been an unsolicited laying of tarmac followed by violent threats and a long negotiation refereed by seven police officers. Various other local clubs and communities have been the subject of encampments lasting years.

Now my worst nightmare was unfolding at our club and however fast we travelled we were still at least three hours from home. As I drove, Gaye telephoned as many neighbours as she could to help take the only action I could come up with - blockade the drive.

At this point I should refer you to the map below, Epping Golf Course rests in the northern segment of the M25/M11 junction.

Our access off a private road is shared by a private school, a light industrial estate, a dozen cottages and a farm and riding stables off a farmer's track (also private).

Through the phone calls we encouraged a "round robin" and this threw up more information. One lady had seen the caravans in the drive hurrying on her way to work and phoned back to her

neighbour. She had gone to investigate: on the ruse of walking her dog, she visited the site and found this was the advance party. They were expecting "hardcore, heavy plant and more families". This information was invaluable. The travellers further told her they had bought the site with planning permission, neither of these facts we believed for a moment.

Back on the M5 we continued phoning, this time asking others to make contact with local councillors and the local authority's out-of-hours emergency service. This was the weak link exploited by travellers throughout the country - local authorities (including the 24 hour emergency line) cease functioning at weekends. Because we too had gone through a harrowing experience of buying the drive from a gypsy we were convinced that this small plot had no access and we were perfectly in our rights to blockade it.

We later found out that the travellers had both ownership and access but because they were setting up on green belt land and likely to cause a breach of the peace, we were within our rights to use peaceful means to avoid that.

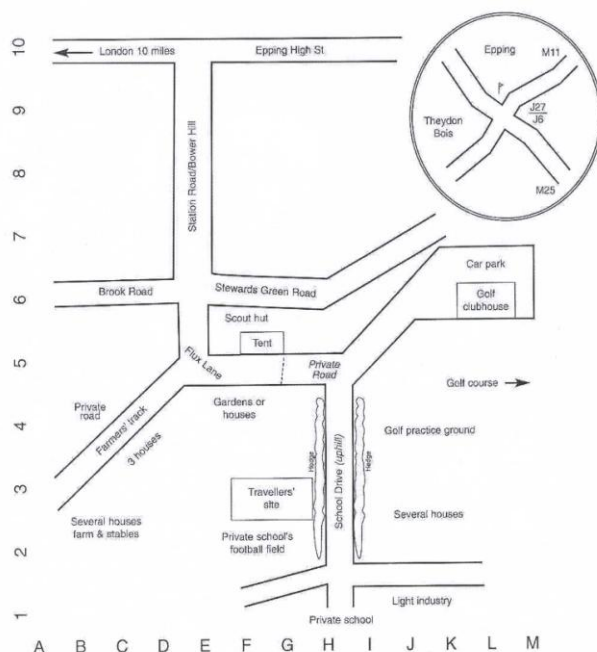
The saga unfolds

We finally arrived in the twilight at 9.15pm and found five neighbours (some unknown from nearby streets) milling around the private road entrance with aimless, anxious looks on their faces. Three police cars had just arrived and, to my relief, said they were about to evict the travellers as they were on school land. They were relieved I had arrived as they need "the landowner" present to confirm his opposition to the occupation. When they discovered I was not the school owner and when the travellers showed them a photocopy of a land registry entry apparently proving ownership, the police said this was out of their jurisdiction and left.

Gaye returned home to unpack and I settled down in my car, parked across the roadway. I was to stay in the same clothes as I had worn on the Cornish beach that morning for the next five days.

All four of us on the road block hardly slept - we were all quite frightened. Several vehicles came then turned and sped away. We kept a log of number plates and were able to report suspicious vehicles to the next shift. Invariably our stereotyping proved correct and repeat incidents were avoided.

At 5.45am on Saturday four huge 40 tonne lorries arrived bringing hardcore machinery which we bravely brought to a halt by jumping in front (*see G5 on the map*). I had just been reading of the new laws that threatened on the spot fines for lorries not carrying waste transfer notices. Feeling very shaky I asked: "Have you got your Waste Transfer Ticket?" The effect was amazing! Without a word to me he gestured to his mate and



they reversed up the drive very quickly, with us taking down their numbers. The next two proudly showed their tickets and we argued the toss about whether they had access. Feeling a bit more confident we insisted they turned round. This they did and set off up the farm track (D4) trying to gain access across the field (E3). Behind the lorries was the biggest tracked excavator I have seen, followed by more hard core lorries and another with fence panels. I record the dialogue because I think it is important. The excavator transporter ignored me so we stepped in front. Immediately someone ran from a 4x4 behind the queue.

"We are with the pikeys (his word) and we are going to take this lot on site. We are late so we are in a hurry."

"This is a private road you can't go up there."

"Who owns it then?"

"I do." (I spoke collectively of course but it was the right approach I am sure)

"Well, I'm going up your road to get to the site."

"You've got to go over my car to do that."

"That's no problem."

"You'll have to go over me too."

He said nothing but then eyed up the fence to the right through the garden of house number one (F4).

"Right," he shouted to the driver, "we'll go through here."

"You can't go through there; that's their garden."

"We're going through there; anyway he's away."

(How did he know that? And why are they all so very aggressive - what's in it for them? Answers later!)

At this point I called the police. (Thank goodness for mobile phones - without them the whole event would have been so much worse.) A lady police sergeant came within minutes accompanied by a very young policeman. She was excellent. She stalled the whole situation by establishing who everyone was and what their business was at this place. She stayed for four hours.

At this stage the Saturday morning golfers started arriving and the two lorries came back across the field (E3) with sleepy residents running in pursuit. Having taken on board the fact this was a private road and these lorries were obstructing our business, the sergeant ordered them out to wait on the road (G6) to clear the way. This was no easy manoeuvre in the narrow country lanes and I went off to open up the clubhouse for business. Later the lorries were moved on for obstructing.

We then started the long processes of vetting all the traffic to find genuine golfers so set up a second car parked across the road beyond the golf entrance (I5). I managed to persuade two of our golfers (one a member, one a pay and play) that rather than play golf on this sunny morning they wanted to man a checkpoint. It is a reflection on our clientele that they volunteered without hesitation.

Digging in

Through the course of the day we were able to contact more helpers. Every vehicle that came was vetted and many travellers tried to get in but were turned away. When the details were explained all were co-operative. Obvious non-golfers claiming they were "Jus' comin' for an 'it" were asked to show their clubs. They often sped away.

A few slipped passed the net and by mobile phone we managed to intercept them in the clubhouse, but not before they had opened fire doors or broken open gates (*M6*). As a result of the latter incident on Sunday morning I called in the greenstaff who dragged old machinery over any gap in our perimeter they could find; under this pressure there were many gaps.

Several neighbours came and reported that over the last three weeks they had seen suspicious events that now made sense. The five men with two whippets spitting and slapping hands in the gypsy ritual of a "deal done" on the field in the dusk (*G3*); the rough "Ordnance Survey people" with maps and clipboards and not looking quite right; the man hanging around for days taking pictures. None had felt it significant enough to mention and no-one asked them what they were doing.

In all we stopped over 800 vehicles coming into the site, always politely and neutrally, and noted down over 60 suspicious vehicles which either sped away on seeing the block or tried to get through on false pretences. The duty pad was passed on to the next shift.

During Saturday afternoon it started to drizzle and a garden pergola tent was produced (*F5*). This was followed over the next few days by tables, chairs, blankets, anti-insect flares and torches. A steady stream of residents from surrounding streets brought over coffee and cakes and put their names on the rota for barricade duty.

What's this gypsy thing all about?

Travellers always need a place to stay and the majority do look for a trouble-free site. Generally there is always somewhere they move to, even if it is only a lay-by.

In 1989 the Conservative Government abolished the law that every authority must provide sufficient sited accommodation (and infrastructure such as school places etc) for a set number of travellers on their patch. From 1989 it was expected that travellers would buy their own land and, to a degree, the more reasonable travellers (and there are many) have done this.

The increase in house prices has brought a new angle to the formula. Travellers, armed with their green "human rights" leaflets issued by the ED via opportunist solicitors, buy agricultural land (which costs about £1,500 per acre usually) at enhanced rates (often by bullying or terrorising the owner) for say £30,000 per acre. The ownership is lodged at the land registry and a planning application submitted at 4.45pm on a Friday evening. A land registry certificate is obtained with a local authority receipt for the planning application.

The paperwork is undertaken at exorbitant rates by solicitors and their agents.

The planning application is prepared by official-looking people in an "Ordnance Survey" van. The new land owners move in after 5pm on Friday when the council offices are closed. The hard core and diggers are paid in cash for a Saturday morning delivery. Other families are booked in and as soon as the Saturday morning groundworks are complete (often tapping in to others' sewers and power lines) the new families move in, each parting with £10,000 cash in return for the two fence panels that mark out enough space for a caravan and a towing vehicle beside.

In about the same time it takes a proprietary golf course to plan and build a new green our travellers would have turned their £60,000 stake into £600,000, or later - having encroached completely illegally onto the school field and the neighbours garden - well over £1 million. The follow-up is that the travellers can so overwork the system that authorities are pleased to grant approval for building so the travellers move their mates off to draw on the big profits of a plot with planning permission. Meanwhile, the whole event is orchestrated by the firm of solicitors.

The vehicles can be stopped from entering but all those already on can only be moved by injunctions which, with appeals, can take five years or more to be effective.

So, that's £10,000 for five years' rent, rates and services - pretty cheap accommodation.

Official interest

On Saturday afternoon our "round robin" phone calls started to bear fruit. We were visited by a local district councillor and several town councillors. We received a message of support from the local MP and the district councillor explained that the legal way forward was to gain an injunction on illegal planning development on green belt land. To get this we needed ratepayer support so must lodge letters of protest with the local authority by Monday before they were entitled to act. She also contacted the county gypsy liaison officer and told him his attendance and advice was needed urgently.

Throughout the whole proceedings we had all been on mobile phones endlessly. My bill alone for the calls made in those four days was over £60.

The school owner knew that his school couldn't open while the sports field was occupied by travellers and was in constant conversation with his solicitors and the travellers. He then passed the resultant instructions to me as I stood on picket duty.

We had been talking to the travellers at intervals. Once we knew they had bought the land we made it known we would be willing to purchase the land from them and made it clear we felt they had been tricked as there was no access to the land they had bought.

We felt some sympathy for them until we found later that this was not a bid for a place to live, they had just been evicted from another nearby site where they had made money selling plots to other families.

Also, during our meetings at the site we saw the 40-year-old son punch his elderly mother to the ground because she had spoken out of turn; the toddler daughter run out and hand the grandfather

a knife as she felt these visitors may require it; and two toddlers pushed under a lowering 15 tonne skip to stop the caravan route being blocked. The latter was done with complete disregard for the children's well-being, right in front of the police who were there to witness the skip's positioning to slow up extra caravans if we were unable to stay alert 24/7.

The tide turns

On Sunday a lot happened. Despite promises from all and sundry they would man the barricades as long as it took, we were all very tired, so a rota was arranged and some relief obtained. I had a shave. The farmer bought in a big digger and dug a trench all round the plot leaving only a small gap. He also put up a five bar gate to his lane in about two hours. I booked the blacksmith to make us two sets of pillars to strengthen our main access points (*F5 & I5*).

Through internet access to the land registry files, we traced the seller of the land to a "neighbour" who had been using the plot for logging. We had protested that this agricultural land was being used for wrongful purposes but the council had not acted. (A council enquiry is underway on that point). We managed to speak to the seller but he claimed not to know to whom he was selling.

The gypsy liaison officer arrived. He interviewed us and the travellers. We couldn't read his position and wondered whether he was about to say we had restricted their lifestyle or whatever.

After 20 minutes of weighing the situation he pronounced judgment:

"I've been in this job 17 years and I've never seen anything like this before. I reckon they were rocked to the core to see you lot out here. They never expected opposition like this. Keep on doing it, peacefully and politely. You have far more clout than the police in situations like this. They might sell up when they realise their scam won't work. If only more people opposed such squats at an early stage it would solve a lot of problems. If you let more come in it will escalate and you will never get them out. Meanwhile let the district council get the injunctions going. They won't take any notice of it but the earlier you get it going the quicker you will eventually get them out."

"How long will that take?" we asked.

"You might be lucky and take six weeks or so, but no less than three weeks and it could take seven years or more."

He explained the financial scam orchestrated by the solicitors and that he had passed 12 families in their caravans sitting in a lay-by nearby waiting for the gap in our defences to move in. We felt shocked that the end was so far off. We were tired and knew support could not last that long. We considered security guards but we knew a five minute lapse would let another group in. No commercial guard would be as diligent as us.

A senior police inspector arrived with three officers and interviewed the travellers at length. He examined their documents; spoke to their solicitors on the phone and to the two solicitors representing the school, who had arrived along with the school owner.

The travellers' "agent" also arrived - man known to the local council who introduced himself as a gypsy who lives in a house. He ranted and raved at us about all the human rights issues we had broken. This was all obviously to earn his money. In fact he looked silly as he got all the facts wrong.

The breakthrough

One of the neighbours knew a gypsy negotiator whose family had great standing in the community. She had asked if he could come and help, unknown to us, and she had explained to him that there was no way we would let more caravans on and that we were willing to buy the land back off them provided they left promptly.

The negotiator arrived and finally put our view. The police inspector decided the value of his visit was over and beat a hasty retreat –he said he would return immediately if requested by either party. The travellers and their agent had turned a shade of grey, immediately changed their attitude to the police and announced they did need the inspector back –but he had already gone.

There followed 40 minutes of lively negotiation in our lane outside the site (*H3*). The neighbours all stayed well away, peeping round the corner (*H5*) to observe progress, with the children, gran and aunt also peeping out of the caravan with anxious looks.

I loitered nervously nearby, trying not to impose but being on hand to answer queries. I was very grateful to see Gaye hovering on the practice ground (*K4*) with Harry (the sappy labrador) in case things got rough.

The negotiator told the travellers they were operating a scam on his friends' land and that they had no chance of succeeding and that we would buy the land back off them (at a loss) if they went by 2pm on Wednesday. Suddenly they stopped shouting and parted company.

The injunction

During Sunday we had been phoning any judges we knew (it is surprising how many you can find when you are really up against it) as we wanted to arrange our own injunction. The two I managed to find advised us that the process is very expensive and often not successful. We would be much better off leaving it to the local authority.

Through all my planning applications and appeals over the years I have got quite familiar with the workings of the council and knew their mail gets opened at 7.30am, the officers arrive at 8am and the building opens to the public at 9am. The local residents had organised a petition and the newspaper shop owner had sent out requests for letters of protest with the Sunday paper delivery. These were steadily coming in and by midnight on Sunday we had 300 names on the petition and 60 letters of protest. I photocopied them all and took the photocopies up to the council letter box at about 3.30am to ensure they got them first thing. At 7.30am on Monday July 19, I waited in the council's staff car park (still dressed in my Cornwall beach wear from Friday) and presented my protest letter copies to a planning officer I knew. I impressed upon him the urgent need for a meeting to gain an injunction. He was shocked that there was a new encampment on his patch.

They were anxious to keep this one under control before it affected local rates too badly. (As it was, the bill to the council of our five days cost over £100,000!) He told me he would line up a meeting for 9.00am with the council's chief executive.

Sure enough at 9.00am, as the doors opened, we were ushered into the CEO's offices. All those there were, like us, shocked that they were facing such an influx near the centre of town and there were a good number of councillors and neighbours at the meeting.

A planning application had been received at 4.55pm on Friday night, it was photocopied and circulated. As it was green belt land further habitation could be stopped and those present could be required to leave (after appeals etc).

After leaving the building I realised there was an error in the travellers' planning application. We quickly returned and again (such was the concern in the council) meetings were cancelled and senior officers re-assembled. The errors in it indeed rendered it invalid, however our relief was short-lived, an invalid application simply granted applicants time to correct and try again. The officers agreed to try for an injunction that day and travelled up to Chelmsford Crown Court for a midday hearing and back with the papers which were served on the site later that afternoon. At least the legal clock (and the legal expenses) had started ticking to eviction.

Success

The siege continued with a rota of locals for the next two days. The numbers were dwindling and often there was only one on duty and various incursions were tried but always repelled by the simple chain across the road. The police made regular visits and neighbours and newspaper reporters came sightseeing.

All the while one of the neighbours (a girl of 29 years with the sharpest brain in Essex) was working with her solicitor and the travellers to buy the land. On Tuesday morning they came to an agreement and drove to Cambridge in the same car to sign the papers.

The land changed hands on Wednesday morning and the travellers moved out that afternoon. Our negotiator was there to see the agreement carried out. As you can imagine he received a generous present from us all.

We kept up the siege for another five days, just in case, until we had made the site secure and the new owner was registered at the land registry. We then took a big sigh of relief.

RISK ASSESSMENT FOR A TRAVELLER INVASION

As guardians of large areas of land in the countryside, golf club secretaries should consider themselves prime targets for the attention of travellers. If you own your land you are in a strong position to get them evicted fairly swiftly, but if they occupy adjacent land or land of which you are only a tenant you could be disrupted for many years and there is little you can do once occupation has started.

So while we are all preoccupied with netting the senior ladies' winter tee in case a shank enters the garden loo air vent of the neighbouring Albanian president's summer retreat while he is in residence, have a look around your patch with travellers in mind:

1. Are all your possible road access points ditched?
2. Are your remote hard standing areas gated and locked at night (particularly those with water taps and power points)?
3. Look at neighbours' spaces in the same light and alert the owners.
4. Stay alert to smart polite visitors appearing in funny places taking notes and photos.
5. Agree members' actions in advance and a telephone network to summon volunteer pickets quickly in the event of an incursion.
6. If travellers do move in, make early and frequent personal contact. Nothing beats a good relationship in limiting the impact. Plan for a long haul of habitation (years).
7. Get involved in traveller policy debates. A change in planning law that forbids development before application approved would be a big start; proper local provision would ease the pressure.
8. Be alert - late Friday afternoon is invariably the favoured time!

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