



Rose Champion de Crespigny

Gypsy Lifestyle Observations

Rose Champion de Crespigny was born Annie Rose Charlotte Key on 9 November 1859 she died on 10 February 1935. She was an English artist and author, who published many novels as Mrs. Philip Champion de Crespigny.

Rose was the daughter of Admiral Sir Astley Cooper Key (who later changed the surname to Cooper-Key) and his wife, Lady Charlotte Lavinia (née McNeil).

The New Forest by R. C. De Crespigny and Horace Hutchinson was published in 1895.

In this book there is a chapter (page 80) on Gypsies with facts about their lives and interesting anecdotes. Below are just a few snippets from the book.

Rose describes gypsies as the 'immortal child' - 'a picturesque nomad with his caravan, his Eastern aspect and indifferent raiment. Gypsies love the sylvan glade and sheltering wood. A pleasant mystery surrounds him and his unrestricted comings and goings'.

They were excellent musicians, playing the violin and the rest would dance, but now (1895) this is rarely heard. Their funeral rites were celebrated with some ceremony.

In 1895 there were about 70 families in the Forest - names that still live on today, but no acknowledged king or queen of the gypsies.

In winter their livelihood relies on making clothes' pegs and meat skewers and a small trade in rags and rabbit skins and intricate plaiting of grass mats.

In summer they gather nosegays of wildflowers to sell, but many move away, seeking jobs in haymaking, fruit picking, harvesting and hopping. Most return to the New Forest at the end of the season.

Although not much used in this year, they still spoke in the Romany tongue, which is said to come with them from Hindustan.

As well as their decorated caravans some live in small, rounded tents not big enough to stand in. Donkeys were used to carry the tents when they moved from place to place.

She goes on to say that 'the purest in descent of all is the White family'. (This family can be found in census records and photos of them camping in the Forest. Some censuses show families 'living in the woods or living in a shed').

Fortune telling, in 1895, had almost died out.

Interesting anecdotes:

One old man, a gypsy, served in the army during the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny, but returned to the old life to wander in a van for the rest of his life!

Another, compelled to live in the Workhouse, observed when he came out that it was lucky for him he was not obliged to stay there longer, for 2 days more of it would have killed him!

A gypsy boy came into a house to learn some badly needed lessons. When lessons were over he was told he might go, but this was of no use to him - he had never been in a room before, so had no idea how to open the door!

Food was scant, they lived mainly on hedgehog roasted in a clay ball or toasted snails!

Local communities mainly spoke well of them, apart from their enviable immunity from taxes.

They had curious superstitions - to some, observing Lent meant giving up soap!!

