

Interested Party Reference Number: 20048684

To whom it may concern,

The Belvedere marshes were once the largest Romani site of its kind in Europe, largely owned directly by us (The Romani people). Vardos, our traditional wooden caravans, would have filled these pastures, and as many as seventeen hundred individuals would have lived here with their animals.

For almost a century, we were as good as synonymous with these lands, however, this life, as close to stability as this country has allowed us, was washed away in the floods of 1953.

When the waters retreated, the land was deemed to be unsafe by authorities and seized from us with minimal reimbursement. It was then promptly built on. This was not surprising, we fended off attempts to remove us for many years. One councillor for Erith described the travellers living there as 'A blot on the good name of the Earth', and that 'blot' was washed away.

Nowadays, a far smaller Romani population lives in this area, most of us have been pushed away, yet instead of occupying the wide grazing marshes which stretched down much of the Thames estuary, we are now confined to a few tiny sites with a total area of around 10 acres + a small parcel of accompanying grazing marsh. What right do you have to take even that away from us?

If we are so synonymous with this area, should we not have access to it, and be able to rebuild the lives we once lived there? There is a massive shortage of Romani grazing land across the country and it is only ever getting stripped away from us - nobody has promised to restore any of our lands and we always appear to be the very last people to be consulted. This development violates our legal rights to a traditional lifestyle and I do not believe that this process has adequately attempted to get our community involved.

There is no faith in the community that they will be listened to and very few people even know it is taking place - this process has not adequately made appropriate adjustments for our voices to be heard.

Nowadays, when I use this land, here and along the ridgeway, I notice huge barriers designed to stop us even using this land as we once did. This is what dispossession looks like.

Without access to even our traditional sites, and let's be honest a marsh on the banks of the Thames was never exactly prime real estate to begin with, we have been moved to ever more unmanageable sites. This will just be one more way in which we are cut off from our traditional lands and our traditional way of life.

Kind regards,

Scott Redmond (Romani Educator & Historian)