

## National news

# Gypsy wagon museum vies for top prize

Maev Kennedy Arts and heritage correspondent

The Gypsy children clustered around the dazzlingly painted horse-drawn wagon, parked just inside the gates of their Pembrokeshire school, are highly amused at the rabbits hanging from a string by the open half-door.

They know from their grandparents that there would have been rabbits hanging there in the days when the wagon was on the road, awaiting the pot. What they think is funny is that Pembrokeshire Museums Service had to buy them and have them prepared by a taxidermist. Given half an hour in the hills, they and their dogs could fill the wagon with rabbits for free, the boys boast.

The judges assessing the wagon for the Gulbenkian prize for museum of the year did not get rabbit stew out of the big iron cooking pots, but had to be content with bottled smells, including "coal fire", and "wash day".

The wagon is part of a unique partnership between the museum, the Gypsy families and their school, Monkton Priory. It cost nearly £7,000, a huge chunk of a small budget, but the exhibition has made the final four shortlisted for the £100,000 Gulbenkian prize.

About 20% of the pupils in the school come from a Gypsy background centuries old in west Wales. But although some of those involved in the project can trace their families back 200 years in the area, they are largely ignored in official histories and displays.

The Varda project — named for the Romany word for the elaborately carved and painted wagons — began with the children's work. Their teacher approached the local museum, to see if it would mount a small display and the idea grew of a display in a traditional wagon, which has since toured Gypsy sites, festivals and museums.

Many of the families

involved live in chalets or mobile homes in Catshole Quarry, out of sight on the outskirts of Pembrokeshire. They contributed photographs, cooking pots, and memories which have been recorded and can be heard on headphones.

It was a history on the point of being lost. Although many photos show stunning vardas, none left in the area were in good enough condition to use. The museum wagon came on a lorry from Lancashire. It is drawn, for short distances, by a horse bred by 13-year-old Charlie Price. His great grandfather, Old Charlie, is shown in one of the photos in front of a staggering wagon he built himself.

Charlie wants to be a horse dealer. "I don't care where I live. If I marry a Gypsy girl, I'll live in a wagon. If I marry a girl from a house, I'll live in a house. So long as I've got somewhere to keep the horses."

The school head, William Rees, had no contact with Gypsies until he came to the school 20 years ago. "I love these people. What they've got is so rich, so precious. I hate the word tolerance. I tolerate a toothache, it's something you hate but you have to put up with. I want respect, I don't want tolerance."

The judges have already been to look at the medieval herb garden recreated at Norton Priory in Runcorn, in the ruins of what was once one of the largest medieval priories in Europe. They travel to Newcastle today, where the university's Museum of Antiquities has worked on a history project which has pupils at local schools chatting by email about Roman and iron age Britain with university academics and other schools.

The judges then move on to a spectacular piece of land art, Landform Ueda — based on chaos theory — created outside the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art.

The winner will be announced on May 11.



The painted "varda" or wagon at Monkton Priory school, Pembrokeshire. Inside, two of the prize judges and a museums officer get a taste of Romany history Photographs: Jeff Morgan

