

# Gypsy spokesman conned OAPs

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A “born again Christian” traveller and spokesman for Gypsy rights from Epsom conned elderly and vulnerable victims, some of them in their 90s, out of thousands of pounds in a gardening scam.

Benjamin Brown, 62, would overcharge for landscape gardening, paving and fencing and respond to

To be sentenced: Benjamin Brown

any challenge with threats and aggression, according to the council who prosecuted him.

He racked up as much as £665,000 from the cons over seven years, Guildford Crown Court heard last week, from victims across Sutton, Wallington, Richmond, Twickenham and other parts of Surrey using business names Greenfingers Gardening and Homecare Property Maintenance.

The scams took place between 2006 and 2013 while Brown, of Cox Lane, was chairman of the respected Surrey Travellers Forum.

John Hockley, chairman of Surrey Travellers' Forum, said Brown was joint-chairman of the group for a year between 2008 and 2009.

He said he was “sad and disappointed” at Brown’s actions.

Mr Hockley said: “The whole community does get tarred by incidents like this.

“It is a shame because there are lots of decent people out there.

“I do know this guy and feel deeply sad.

“It was not the person I knew back in 2008.

“It is a real shame.”

In 2009, Brown spoke about the impact a new “blanket ban” on cold-calling on people’s homes was having on the Gypsy and traveller community.

He said in a video posted on YouTube: “What do we do?”

“Don’t go out and try to knock on doors to get a living? Go and sign on the dole and then live off the state.

“We don’t do that. We like to go to work and earn a living.”

He added: “If you do a job and it goes wrong, they are not giving you a chance to

rectify it, they are coming straight along and nicking you for it.”

He also said: “I just think we are being targeted, we are being persecuted. I am not prejudiced in any way. I like everybody and I try to get along with everybody.

“And being a born-again Christian, you know God says we have got to love everybody and get along with everybody, we have got to love our enemies.

“Sometimes you might think it is hard to do but that’s what we do.

“They could not do to blacks, Chinese, or anything what they do to us.”

One woman was charged £12,000 in 2013 for landscape gardening he had said would cost between £4,000 and £6,000.

Another elderly woman was charged £10,500 for fence repairs.

When he lifted up garden patio slabs against her wishes, he charged her £1,500 to

put them back.

Victim Margaret Scurry, 85, said: “He was all right to begin with, but he got aggressive every time we would ask how much the job would cost. “He’s not a pleasant man at all. He is a bruiser.”

Another victim said he “no longer came over as Mr Nice” when Brown asked him for more money to leave a skip in the road, and that “he very aggressively told me I was interfering and must keep out of his way”.

He advertised in local newspapers including the Epsom Guardian and its sister paper the Sutton Guardian, in parish magazines, and by posting adverts through doors, but was only prosecuted this year.

Brown will be sentenced on August 14 for eight counts of fraud and four of money laundering.

Surrey and Sutton councils, which brought the prosecution, hope to get some of the victims’ money back.

## THE LAST WORD

RTT editor David Rankin says goodbye



After almost five years at the helm of the Richmond and Twickenham Times, this is to be my last edition.

It has been a privilege to serve the people of Richmond and humbling to see how engaged they are with their local newspaper and with local issues.

Any newspaper that supports three letters pages each week must be doing something right, and I hope I have continued that tradition.

Richmond is a borough that does things properly and people are very quick to comment when things go wrong. It has always been heartening to see people power in full flow when necessary.

Newspapers have changed massively in my 15 years at Newsquest and the way people digest news has also changed, with many coming to our website via Twitter and Facebook, rather than waiting until Friday for all the latest news.

But the Richmond and Twickenham Times as a newspaper has weathered many storms other newspapers have not and continues to deliver a very good offering both in print and online. This is very much thanks to your input.

Please continue to support your local newspaper. Without you we simply would not exist.

Keep writing letters, keep calling in with stories, follow us on Twitter and keep buying the paper. I leave behind a group of people who understand just how important your local newspaper is to you.

I cast my mind back to one of my first engagements, a talk at the Richmond Society, in front of people who have read the Richmond and Twickenham Times for 60+ years.

The passion and enthusiasm they all had for the paper made it immediately clear what I had let myself in for.

But I now understand where their passion comes from. Richmond is a wonderful place filled with exceptional people.

I am very sad to leave, but thank you all for your support over the years.

DAVID RANKIN  
Editor

## Entrepreneur in the picture with grant

An entrepreneur will take the first step to launching a photography business in Richmond after receiving a £1,000 grant from Richmond Council.

Elizabeth James launches Fine Art Photography at 65a Sheen Lane, Richmond, after successfully applying for the Empty Shops Grant.

The shop opens on August 3 and will remain at the site until August 30.

Council cabinet member for business Councillor Pamela Fleming said: “The council wants to boost the vitality of our high streets by providing small grants to support the efforts of those who want to make use of an empty shop.

“Thankfully in Richmond our empty shop rates are relatively low compared to most other London boroughs – but that does not mean we will become complacent.”

Ms James added: “I am a



Support: Elizabeth James with Richmond Councillor Pamela Fleming

local artist and have exhibited in London and abroad but have not had the opportunity to exhibit in my home town of Richmond in a

gallery setting.

To apply to Richmond Council for an Empty Shops Grant visit [richmond.gov.uk/empty\\_shops\\_grants](http://richmond.gov.uk/empty_shops_grants).



In partnership: Links have been forged with African pupils

## Partnership plea to schools

A Hampton Hill charity is on the lookout for schools to partner with a college in Uganda and Zambia.

Activities from African Revival’s schools linking programme include exchanging letters and

supporting schools with fundraising events. To find out about how to link your school with one in Uganda or Zambia, email Emily Brewster at [emily.brewster@africanrevival.org](mailto:emily.brewster@africanrevival.org) or call 020 8939 3190.

## Cost-cutting could see Richmond Magistrates’ Court close

Richmond Magistrates’ Court could be closed as the Ministry of Justice plans to shake up family courts in order to reduce costs.

The court, in Parkshot, is one of many earmarked for “closure and integration” as Secretary of State for Justice Michael Gove told

Parliament on June 23 in order to reduce costs “a significant number of additional courts will have to close”. Shailesh Vara, who is the

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Courts and Legal Aid, said as digital technology was brought in for more efficient access to

justice, fewer would physically need to be in court.

The consultation process began on July 16 and will conclude on October 8.

## Valuables on display leads to increase in theft from vehicles

Thefts from unlocked cars have increased, sometimes due to owners leaving valuable items on display.

Police revealed that while the overall number of

vehicle-related crimes had gone down, the number of people leaving their cars insecure was on the rise.

Since February, 30 per cent of all thefts from vehicles

were due to cars being unlocked, with Barnes a particular hotspot.

Items such as bags, laptops, mobile phones and satnavs were left unattended.

Councillor Tony Arbour, Richmond Council cabinet member for community safety, said: “The police are working hard to reduce crime across the borough.

“However, there are still too many examples of people being complacent with their personal items making the work of criminals a lot easier.”