

The Downs as Home

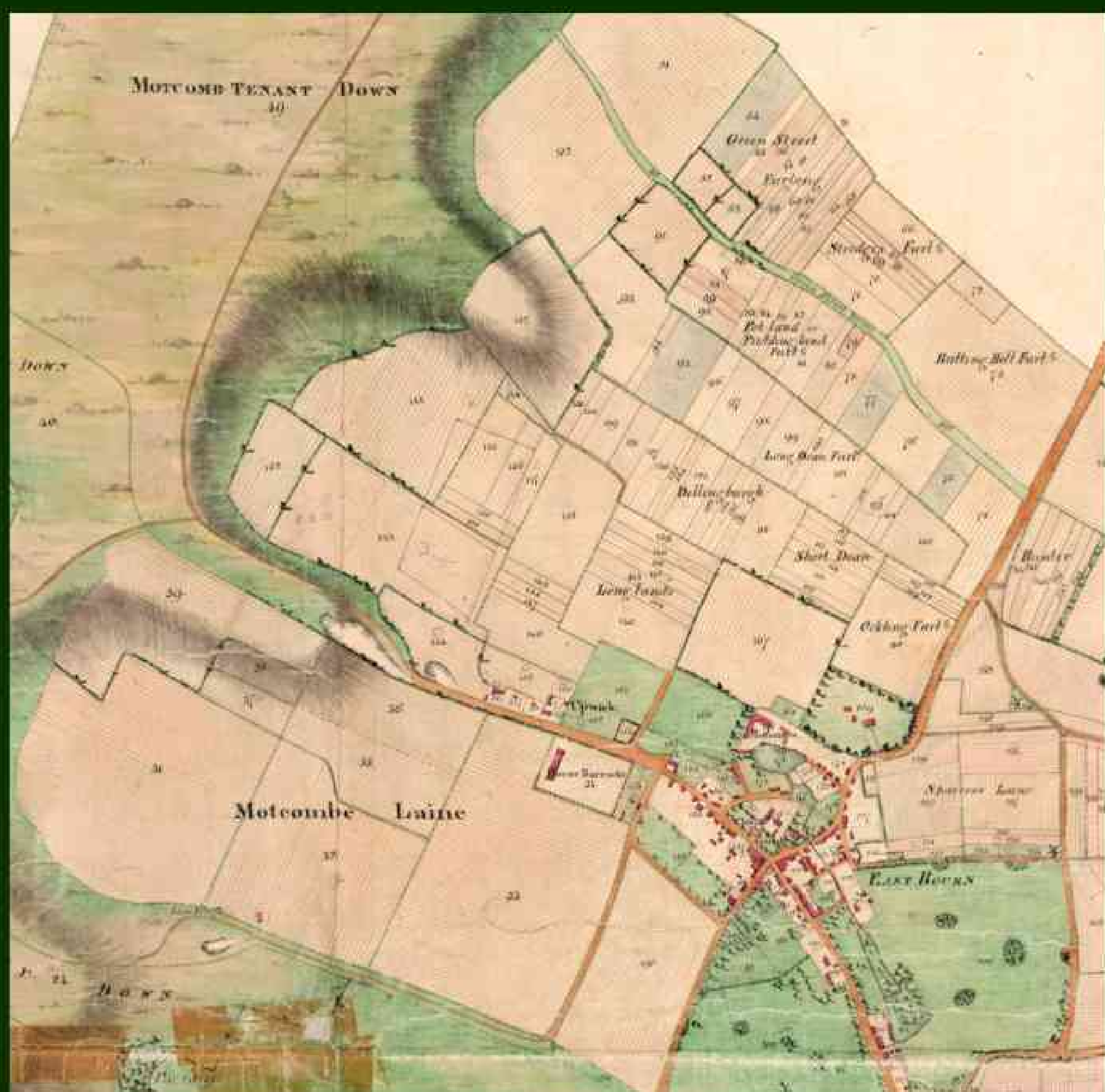
These droveways and other paths journeying across the South Downs would have been used by people in Gypsy and Traveller communities for 100s of years. Janet Keet-Black, Gypsy historian and author of *Gypsies of Britain* who worked with Changing Chalk as a consultant, helping with the archival material and community mapping, has identified one stopping place on the downland path from East Dean Road, Eastbourne used around 1900.

The **Hilden Family** was one of the families who stayed at this stopping place.

A newspaper column in the *Eastbourne Gazette* on 18th August 1886 describes the writer meeting a Gypsy family who had “pitched their camp very cunningly in a dell on the Downs... One day last week I went to Beachy Head in a char-a-banc. As we were rising the last hill, I noticed a pony browsing on the side of the hollow on the right... Two or three turns in the bush brought us to the first wigwam... it was simply a piece of canvas stretched over a few uprights.”

In 1949, Hubert Visick, an orthodontist in Eastbourne wrote about some of the Gypsy people he met in Sussex in the *Sussex County Magazine*. Two of those were Odger Hilden and Agnes Lee who, around 1900, were living at a stopping place in Eastbourne. The location was described as being “half way up the hill after leaving Old Eastbourne, the road skirts a thin beech wood... If we take a rough cart track just above the [wood] to our right, we shall soon come out on the rim of a great green bowl hollowed out of the side of the Downs. This is known as Cherry Garden Hollow. In a short distance, the track widens out into a level grassy floor... once upon a time there must have been a small chalk pit here. Now underfoot and all around is deliciously scented Downland turf; there are bushes and stunted trees to break the wind and upon which to hang washing. But, best of all, there is an abundance of firewood to be picked up in the wood just below.... The ground falls away so steeply that you experience the sensation of being parted from earth and all its troubles.”

Odger and Agnes probably lived in a bender tent and were hawkers when they were at this stopping place. They were also expecting their first child and Hubert wrote how they had made this chalkpit their home and had a number of good friends locally. “The lady from the Tally Ho! (a pub just down the road) had constituted herself chief adviser and friend for the coming event [the birth of their child] ... She used to come up every day with some dainty to tempt the appetite. George, the old shepherd, going off on his daily round, never failed to stop and leave a beer bottle full of milk, and sometimes a bit of cake.” When their child John Henry Hilden was born, he was christened at St Marys Church, Old Town.



1834 map of Eastbourne showing Green Street Drove and Old Town, John (Jack) Hilden and his children, John (Jack) Hilden's children, 1915 map showing Stopping Place off East Dean Road.



Made possible with
Heritage Fund

Changing Chalk
connecting nature, people and heritage



National Trust

