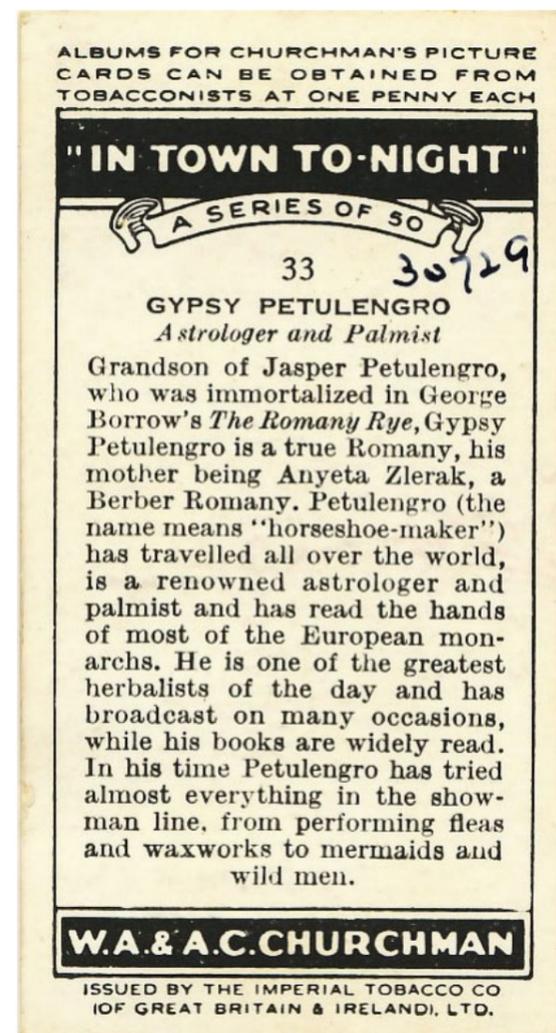
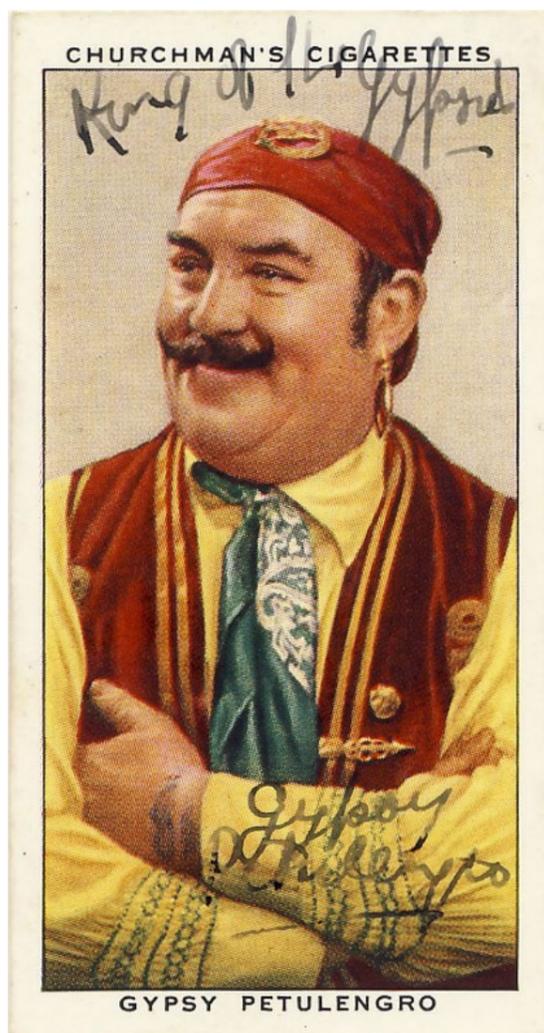


Gypsy Petulengro

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Xavier Petulengro – ‘King of the Gypsies’

He was born Walter Leon Lloyd on 8th July 1878 and changed his name by deed poll in 1937*. He was sometimes reported as being 20 years older (born in 1859) probably to support his claim that he was the grandson of the old gypsy “Petulengro” who featured in the Victorian books of George Borrow.



In 1901 he married Margaret Agnes Lloyd (born 1884) and had two children. Their second child, Walter Leon Lloyd, was born in 1909, who later changed his name to Petulengro. William Anthony Lloyd was born in 1903 (he kept the name Lloyd)

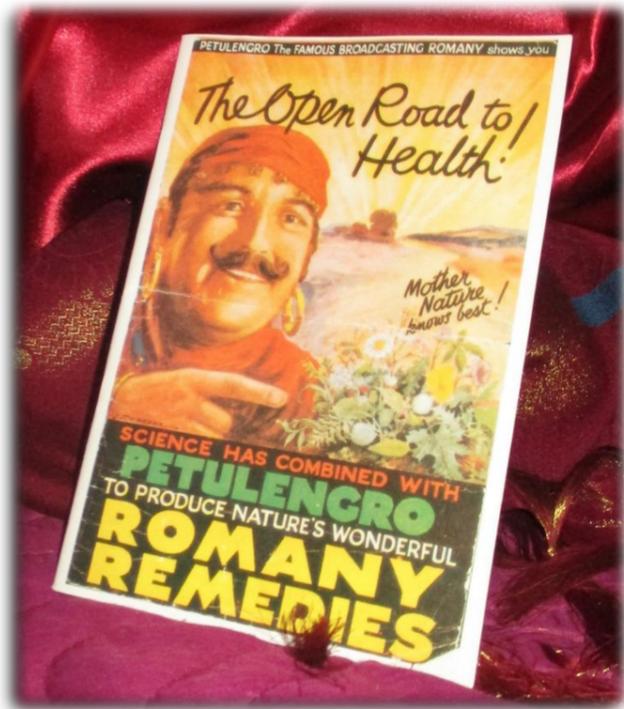
The family lived in a very respectable suburban home, 118 North Station Road, Colchester Road. In their early days Walter and Maggie were described as photographic artists. Margaret died at North Station Road in December 1976 and William in 2000. Leon followed his father into publishing, herbal remedies and astrology.

*20 August 1937, London Gazette Issue 34429 of 24.8.1937 page 5420.

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His Life: 1878 to WWII



Xavier Petulengro, also known as Gypsy Petulengro, Walter Smith and Walter Lloyd was more glamorously titled the 'King of the Gypsies.' Petulengro's life is vaguely described in a few sources mainly based on his own accounts, but needs to be judged carefully to separate mythology from reality. Petulengro claims to have been born into a Romani family in Rochdale, Lancashire.

He claimed he was the grandson of Ambrose Smith (1804-1878), known as Jasper Petulengro, the semi-fictionalised subject of the bestselling books *Lavengro* (1851) and *Romany Rye* (1857) by George Borrow (1803-1881). Borrow wrote a semi-fictionalised account of Romani life and claimed a fictional brotherhood with the Romani. Borrow died in 1881, but his evocation of an earlier pastoral England and his abhorrence of industrialisation was an anecdote for urban readers in Britain. His books were very popular in the early twentieth century, being admired by Edward Thomas and others.

In 1929 Xavier 're-invented,' gypsy gatherings in Yorkshire, with 'real' gypsies attending alongside local people dressed up in costume. In doing this he created an illusory, romantic gypsy world and helped contribute to both his, and 'gypsy appeal.' His fame grew because of his rich charismatic storytelling and the growth of the radio as an important broadcast medium. In 1934 he became a regular broadcaster making him a household name. From the response to this early programme and subsequent newspaper correspondence Petulengro was alerted to the enormous interest in herbal treatments. Petulengro set about exploiting this and wrote his first book of gypsy remedies in 1935, and established a mail order company selling herbs in parallel. By 1939 he was travelling widely – not on the open road – but between holiday piers, fairs and major events, working with Lavanya, while his wife and family lived in a well-appointed house in Colchester.



Gypsy Petulengro

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His Life: WWII to 1957

The allure of the romanticised gypsy had been embellished through stories of the powers of prophecy, reading palms and crystal balls and this had seen gypsy fortune tellers frequent all major events and sea side promenades.

Petulengro was quick to exploit this gypsy 'talent' which saw him produce his *Book of Mystery*, explaining how to interpret the meaning of dreams, read hands and predict the future from playing cards. He became a popular figure at the Epsom Derby and on Blackpool promenade. Seeing the opportunity to exploit his credentials and sell himself to a mass audience after the Second World War, he went on to write an astrology column, 'Your Fate in the Stars', in the *Sunday Chronicle* national newspaper and other major magazines and publications.



The 'Petulengro' Name

He did not own the exclusive title to his name. Many fortune tellers at the time exploited the cache of the name, and began calling themselves Petulengro. In Romany culture, anyone with the family name of 'Smith' was entitled to use the name Petulengro, a term for 'Shoeing Smith,' a 'Petula' being a Horseshoe and an 'Engro' a man/person. Many using the title today are hence only distant relatives of Petulengro or unrelated to him.

Petulengro appeared as the 'King of the Gypsies' at Romani weddings, such as that between his son Leon Petulengro in 1937. These were described as including blood rituals. These events were covered by several newspapers and filmed by Pathé News for showing in cinemas. His exact status among Romany people is unclear and these ceremonies may have been simple exercises in self-publicity.

Petulengro was a phenomenal showman and entrepreneur who seized the opportunity to mass market a romanticised image of the British Gypsy and himself. It was remote from the daily life of Romani people and travellers who travelled through the Dean and were increasingly oppressed.

This biography is based on the research of Noel John, Reading the Forest volunteer researcher.

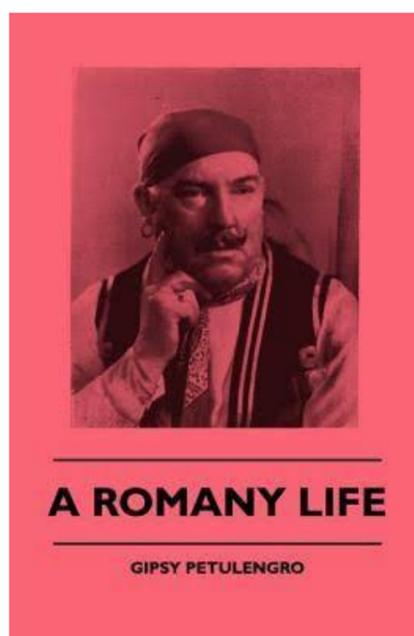
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Books

In 1935 Petulengro published his first book, *Romany Remedies and Recipes*, followed in 1937 by an autobiography, *A Romany Life*. Both were published under the name Gipsy Petulengro. His first three books *Romany Remedies and Recipes*, *Britain Through Gypsy Eyes* and *A Romany Life* were extremely popular. His others, including the novel, *Fanya*, appear to have done less well. His book publishing ended abruptly in 1938, however by then he had other interests such as his mail order business and writing horoscopes.

- *Romany Remedies and Recipes* (London, Methuen & Co., 1935).
- *A Romany Life* (London, Methuen and Co., 1935).
- *Romany Hints for Hikers* (London; Methuen & Co., 1936).
- *Romany Hints for Hikers* (London; Methuen & Co., 1936).
- *Gypsy Fiddler* - Gypsy Petulengro & W.B. O'Hanlon (ed.) (London; Sampson Low & Co., 1936).
- *Britain through Gypsy Eyes* (London: Methuen and Co., 1937).
- *Book of Mystery* (London; Methuen and Co., 1937).
- *Romany Love* (London, Methuen and Co., 1938)
- *Fanya* (London: Methuen and Co.,1938)



Other books: Nancy Price, *Jack by the Hedge* (London: Frederick Muller, 1946) –with an introduction by Gipsy [sic] Petulengro. Many of the titles were subsequently published by Lavanya Petulengro Publications (Wootton Wawen) after the Second World War.

Petulengro wrote for numerous newspapers and periodicals beginning with the Bolton Evening News. Later, he was a prominent author in national newspapers and The Listener.

Gypsy Petulengro

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Who was Lavanya Petulengro?

Mary Lavinia Barnett was born in June, 1890 at Dagshai, India, a British colonial garrison, the daughter of a British soldier. Her early years were spent in Preston where her father Frank, was a prison warden. By 1939, Mary Lavinia was working with Gypsy Petulengro, and they were both living in a caravan and working on Llandudno pier. Mary Lavinia had by then assumed the name of Mary Lavanya Lloyd Petulengro. Lavanya, as she became more widely known, was Petulengro's companion and assistant for the rest of his life.



After his death in 1957 she lived at Church View, Viney Hill, near to his grave, until her death in 1978. She sometimes described herself as his sister and is recorded as being his sister on the dedication brass on the organ in All Saints' Church, Viney Hill. In his book *A Romany Life* Petulengro described an Aunt called 'Lavanya', a mythical character. Lavanya, published many of his books and it is likely she also co-wrote them.

Gypsy Petulengro

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Burial at Viney Hill

His body was brought, as his last wishes required, to the Forest of Dean. He was buried in a spectacular, 'celebrity' funeral at All Saints' Church.

The hamlet of Viney Hill was clearly a special place to Petulengro. He was said to have visited the area many times in his life and he was friends with Mr & Mrs Vines who lived in a cottage opposite the church.

The coffin was carried to the church on a horse and cart provided by Mr Alec Biddington of Pitching Green.

It was reported that he was buried in clothes made of gold fabric, although there was never any firm evidence of this. The funeral was arranged by Lavanya and the Vines, and took place in traditional Romanichal style, with about 200 mourners, some in traditional costumes, and over 1,500 sightseers including local children who were given a school holiday and photographers using ladders. He had become a massively popular figure and news of his death and funeral was broadcast all over the world. The funeral was his last great show and even the Blakeney Royal Antideluvian Order of Buffaloes, a popular men's club, were recruited to swell the cortège.

His black, marble headstone was prepared by Strike & Sons of Lydney and the lettering inlaid with gold leaf. Lavanya was anxious that this would attract thieves and kept watch over his grave from her house opposite the church.

Wendy George who lived down Church walk recalled:

'My Mum cleaned for Lavanya Petulengro. I always used to go with her in the school holidays. Lavanya had a budgie called Joseph, she used to get it out of the cage and put it onto the table, which always had a very thick green table cloth on. Joseph then used to do tricks. Lavanya told me: "One day when you are older and you see fortune tellers, if they are called Petulengro they are imposters, we were last of the line."'



Gypsy Petulengro

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All Saints Church



The construction on All Saints' Church began in 1865 and it was consecrated in 1867. It was built as a memorial to Charles Bathurst (died 1863) *. The church is built of local red sandstone, with grey sandstone dressings, to a design by Ewan Christian. The style is that of the late 13th century, with an apsidal chancel flanked by quadrant chapels, and a nave with north transept and south aisle and porch.

The north chapel was used as a vestry, and the south chapel was latterly converted to be a choir vestry. The roof is continuous over both nave and south aisle, but with a break of slope over the south aisle. In the 1960s parishioners funded and carried out, a major restoration led by the Reverend Alec Smith. The roof is currently the subject of a major overhaul.



The Reverend George Waddington-Jones, the eleventh vicar of the parish from 1955-1958 unexpectedly found himself in the international spotlight when he officiated at Petulengro's funeral. He had been a Chaplain to the forces during the Second World War.

*'Forest of Dean: Churches', A History of the County of Gloucester: Volume 5: Bledisloe Hundred, St. Briavels Hundred, The Forest of Dean (1996), pp. 389-396.