

UNVEILING OF THE PLAQUE TO COMMEMORATE THE BASQUE CHILD REFUGEES WHO FLED TO CAERLEON IN 1937

This took place on Tuesday the 10th of July 2018 at 12.00 midday, outside Pendragon House, Cross Street, Caerleon NP18 1AF.



Pendragon House, Caerleon

It was hot and sunny just as it would be in the Basque province of Spain where these refugee children came from in 1937. There were fifty six of them that arrived in Caerleon out of almost four thousand that came to Southampton on the rescue ship the SS Habana. The unveiling took place 81 years to the day that the children had arrived at Caerleon.

Approaching Cross Street from the centre of town in Caerleon, Pendragon House shone out in the bright sunshine in its fresh coat of cream paint with its elegant clipped round balls of greenery at the entrance, the *Ikurriña* (Basque flag) hanging from the window above and the plaque over the doorway hidden behind it.

A group of friendly looking dignitaries stood in front of the door and another group of fifty six local school children aged between seven and fifteen years stood in their fresh uniforms to the right of them in neat rows with sun drenched expectant faces, accompanied by their teachers. The fifty six school children represented the fifty six children that arrived in 1937 and each wore a beige octagonal tag with their number in the same way the child refugees did eighty one years ago when they arrived in Southampton.



L-R: Peter (proprietor of Pendragon House), Cllr Debbie Wilcox, Deputy Mayoress, Mrs Meryl Hourahine, Deputy Mayor, Cllr Phil Hourihine, FRONT –Kathy (proprietor of Pendragon House).

The rest of the participants stood on the other side of the street in a semi-circle composed of relatives, descendants of refugee children, Newport City Council and other local organisations including Caerleon Arts Festival, Caerleon Roman Legion Museum and Caerleon Civic Society (who also contributed to the new plaque) and friends. Also present were members of the Welsh Section of the International Brigade Memorial Trust (IBMT).

Two members of the Welsh section of the International Brigade Memorial Trust



Councillor Debbie Wilcox, leader of Newport City council, gave a talk stating the importance of this historical moment in Caerleon's past. Everyone listened quietly and thoughtfully.

CLlr Debbie Wilcox



The secretary of BCA'37 UK - the Association for the UK Basque Children, Carmen Kilner, followed with a historical account of the circumstances leading to the evacuation which was directed primarily at the children.

She emphasised to the school children listening, that the Basque children's parents wanted them to be in a safe place in Britain while the Basque Country was at war.

Carmen Kilner

Carmen pointed out to the children that there were many similarities between Wales and the Basque Country: both have their own language and a love of singing, iron ore mining in the Basque country and coal mining in Wales which was exchanged in trade, both countries are roughly the same size, have a similar population and the same three colours in their flags. She gave a picture of how it would have been for the children who came here leaving everything they knew behind and would have been very bewildered on arrival. Most of them had never travelled before, did not speak English, were separated from their families and brought only a small bag of belongings with them at very short notice.

On top of that, communication was difficult - there were no mobile phones in those days! The four thousand children boarded an old boat together with ninety five teachers, one hundred and twenty helpers, fifteen Catholic priests, five English nurses and two English doctors.

The camp they arrived at near Southampton was prepared at very short notice by local people including boy scouts. The children had never seen tents before and the food was very different but much appreciated. They were soon divided into groups and sent to different parts of Britain including Caerleon with one or more teachers and assistants to each group. The children who could not return home after the Spanish Civil War, stayed in Britain. In Caerleon they left Cambria House where they first went to, and moved to Pendragon House, a move organized by Monmouth City Council.

Following this gentle significant talk, the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Phil Hourahine pulled a cord and revealed the plaque.

Deputy Mayor, Cllr Phil Hourahine and Cllr Debbie Wilcox



The choir, with pupils from three local schools, then made their delightful contribution to this ceremony by singing *Andre Madalen* in Basque, and *Ar Hyd y Nos* (All through the Night) in Welsh, rendering them with grace and charm.



Councillor Gail Giles, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, who was at the helm organising this event then closed by describing the excellent work undertaken by BCA'37 over many years, how the story of the Caerleon Basque children had been uncovered and thanked everyone for all their support, past and present. A special mention was made of a Mrs Fernández who looked after the children in this house and was remembered and loved to the end of her life by the children she looked after.

Cllr Gail Giles and Carmen Kilner



Curro's Spanish restaurant opposite Pendragon House opened specially for this event and was then invaded by everyone for much appreciated refreshments: juice for the children, sangria for the adults, and included some delicious Spanish tapas.

There is no doubt that it was a wonderful way to deliver a very special lesson to all, but particularly for the children. The appreciation of the refugee children and their families for their care and the generosity of the Welsh people is part of the social history which carries on till today. It was also pointed out that although the British Government did not get involved in the evacuation of the children during the war due to a non-intervention pact, the British public, after the gruesome massacre of Guernica, intervened and were able to do so because Britain then allowed one ship to bring the children over but would not fund the venture in any way. It was publicly funded out of freedom of choice. We have to make choices.

M^a Dolores Power

AFTERWORD



This is the beautiful blue ceramic plaque made by Ned Haywood MBE of Chepstow:

<http://blue-plaques.org.uk.websitebuilder.prositehosting.co.uk/ned-heywood>.

Those of you with long(ish) memories may recall that there was a previous plaque at this site provided by Caerleon Civic Society, and unveiled in October 2004 by Councillor Gail Giles, which John Kilner and I attended shortly after the association was founded. It was reported in the following Newsletter:

<http://www.basquechildren.org/-/docs/newsletters/20050301> (page 1).

With the years there was considerable degradation of the plastic surface and when I visited Caerleon in 2016 I was saddened to see how much it had deteriorated.

During the Caerleon Arts Festival last year the whole of July 10th was given over to commemorating the Basque children who had come to Caerleon exactly 80 years ago. It was a truly splendid day. It was also an opportunity to draw attention to the sorry state of the plaque. This was picked up by Councillor Gail Giles (not only an expert on the Caerleon colony but a staunch friend to the Association) and Councillor Wilcox leading to its replacement with the fine new plaque whose unveiling is referred to above.

Special thanks to Kathy and Pete, the proprietors of the wonderful Pendragon House Bed and Breakfast, for their unstinting support, interest and ingenious system for holding and releasing the *Ikurriña* - Heath Robinson would be proud of them!

<http://www.pendragonhouse.co.uk/>

Carmen Kilner