

'A Little Basque' - Carmen Cid at the Brampton 'colony'

This account has been compiled by Rob David
from the testimony of Carmen Cid in September 2021

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Carmen Cid and Ken Alford

‘A Little Basque’:ⁱ

Carmen Cid at the Brampton ‘colony’.

On 18 June 1937, less than a month after arriving in the United Kingdom, Carmen Cid (b. 18 March 1929) was one of 100 children (47 boys and 53 girls) from the Basque region of Spain who arrived at the Brampton Hostel.ⁱⁱ She was accompanied by her elder sister, Edurne (aged 11), and her elder brother Luis (aged 10). Aged eight, Carmen was amongst the youngest of the child refugees to board the SS *Habana* and to travel from Bilbao to Southampton.

Carmen’s parents were Francisco and Frutosa. They were part of the traditional Basque population of Bilbao rather than more recent immigrants to the area from other parts of Spain. Frutosa spoke the Basque language *Euskera*, but the family spoke Spanish at home. Francisco worked in the shipbuilding industry in Bilbao, and Frutosa was a nurse. They lived in a suburb of Bilbao known as Deusto. The family, although traditionally Roman Catholic did not, as a result of the politics of the Spanish Civil War, have any strong religious affiliation.

By 1937, Francisco, like many of his compatriots in the Basque region was fighting in the Republican army against Franco’s Nationalists. Guernica was bombed and the war was getting ever closer to Bilbao, and in May 1937, Frutosa learnt through her hospital contacts that a ship, SS *Habana*, was to sail to Britain taking some 4000 children aged between 5 and 15 to safety. The British government had given authorisation for this evacuation subject to the Basque Children’s Committee of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR) providing a guarantee that the ‘children would not become a public charge and to take responsibility for their maintenance, welfare and eventual repatriation’.ⁱⁱⁱ It was decided that the three siblings, Edurne, Luis and Carmen, should be registered to join the evacuation. They were allocated numbers 1607, 1608 and 1609. On 21 May, the three children said good bye to their parents in the belief that they were going on holiday, and that they would return home before long. They were unaware that the authorities expected the evacuation to last for three months before repatriation would take place. The vessel, which was never intended to accommodate 4000 passengers, was extremely crowded with the children, adult supervisors, teachers and priests. The priority for the three children was to stay together which they did despite the rough crossing through the Bay of Biscay, and being seasick for much of the voyage.

On 23 May SS *Habana* docked at Southampton where the children were met and taken by bus to a tented encampment at Stoneham, near Eastleigh. Once there the three Cid children were separated for the first time, the two girls being directed to one tent, and their brother to another in another part of the camp.

Before long the three children, now reunited, were taken to Brixton in south London where the Salvation Army had set out a large hall as a reception centre. While there, Carmen remembers going out on to the streets with the Salvation Army members to raise funds for their upkeep. The children did not remain long in Brixton and on 18 June became part of a trainload of children destined for Carlisle. The inclusion of children who had previously been sent to the hostel at Brixton was not generally recorded at the time. The newspapers which recorded the children's arrival in Carlisle referred to them as having come from Southampton.^{iv}

The train arrived at Carlisle Citadel Station at about eight o'clock in the evening and Carmen confirms the newspaper reports that there was no welcome party there. The *Carlisle Journal* reported that 'each [child] had a label attached to their breasts, certifying that the bearer had been medically examined and was destined for Carlisle. Each bore his or her own scanty belongings in a small linen kitbag, a few in suitcases - foreign-like wooden cases, which looked heavy, but were woefully light'.^v Carmen carried her belongings in a pillow case. They were then taken in three buses to the building in Brampton, the disused workhouse, which had been converted to accommodate them. The Brampton group were accompanied by two Spanish teachers, Srta. Virginia Martínez del Castillo and Srta. María Dolores Esquerri Nuñez and two helpers, Srta Lolita who Carmen remembers, and who was an accomplished musician who accompanied the children to their concerts and later married a local man. Others involved with the children were Joseph Ordeig and Señor Calzada, a Maths teacher. Mrs Hersant, an English woman who could speak Spanish had been appointed matron at the hostel, and she was assisted by Miss Thomas and the cook, Miss Walker. A further cohort of children aged between eight and fifteen arrived at Carlisle station on 26 June. 10 girls were taken to the Convent of St Mary, Wigton, and 14 boys and 11 girls to the Sisters of Nazareth House in Carlisle.^{vi}

Lady Cecilia Roberts (1868-1947) and her husband Charles had led the project to convert the Brampton workhouse into a hostel. Work had started around 1 June. 66 people had offered to assist in the conversion of the workhouse into a hostel suitable to accommodate 50 children, a figure soon revised to 100 at the request of the NJCSR.^{vii} Within a few days the building was transformed 'from a rather dirty, uncared-for building' into one that was 'cheerful and pleasant'.^{viii} It was rewired and decorated and a limited amount of furniture ('only such things as are essential') acquired. 'One room [was] fitted up as a chapel for religious purposes. It is understood, however, that not all the children are Roman Catholics'.^{ix} Carmen and her siblings were part of the group who were not Catholics. Although Carmen does not know why she was not brought up in the Catholic faith, it may have been because many Republican families repudiated Catholicism because of the church's support for

Franco. There are descriptions of the interior of the hostel. One by Miss Quinlan, an inspector for the Ministry of Health who visited on 2 July 1937, a few days after the hostel had opened, described the building as containing five bathrooms, five indoor water closets, spacious dormitories with straw or fibre mattresses (on hospital style beds according to Carmen), a large dining room, a good kitchen and a separate isolation building.^x Later the same month some visitors from Edinburgh described 'a shabby, old red brick building ... [with] long whitewashed flagged corridors... [but] rooms gay with sunshine and vivid coloured wool and little girls knitting ... a dining room, bare but cheery with white and blue check oil-cloth on the tables, and vivid bold pictures, the work of the children themselves, on the walls'.^{xi}

Carmen has strong and fond memories of Lady Cecilia. She describes her as 'a lovely person', small in stature and rather tubby, and aged about 60 (in fact she was aged 69). Lady Cecilia visited the hostel frequently, driven there by her chauffeur who, according to Carmen, kept the children amused by removing his false teeth! On occasions Lady Cecilia invited groups of children to come to her house and garden at Boothby, an experience recalled by Agustina Pérez San José.^{xii} Carmen remembers one such visit which included tea, and described the house as 'beautiful' and 'like a mansion'. Carmen does not remember the other members of Lady Cecilia's family: her husband, Charles, and their children, the MP, Wilfrid Roberts, a champion in parliament of the Republican cause, and the artist Winifred (Nicholson) who taught some of the older children art.

Carmen does not have many memories of the hostel. She remembers the kitchen and the fact the teachers and other helpers had separate rooms from the children. Her main recollection of living at Brampton was being persistently hungry, a condition also noted by Agustina Pérez San José.^{xiii} She remembers that the adults had better food. There was a school in the hostel run by the Spanish teachers and other helpers who had come with the children. They were supplemented by people such as Dr Froelich, an Austrian Jewish refugee, a talented physicist and fluent in Spanish and English who read to the children and took them on outings, and Lady Cecilia's daughter Winifred (Nicholson) who taught the older children art.^{xiv} Dr Froelich was well-remembered by Carmen. Carmen has little recollection of any education at Brampton, an experience mirrored by Valentín Sagasti Torrano who said later that his 'education at Brampton had been nil and my knowledge of English matched it'.^{xv} Like most of the children Carmen did not speak any English. She slowly began to learn the language, not through school, but informally in conversation with English people. The language barrier meant that the children had little contact with the Brampton children either in their school or around the town. Local people often gave the children coins, and Carmen and her siblings saved these up to buy stamps to send letters to their parents.

These letters were received in France and some replies were received by the children as at some point in 1938 or 1939 a decision was made that the children should not be repatriated as they learnt that those that were returning were sent to convents and not returned to their parents.

When Cumberland and Westmorland offered to respond to the request from the NJCSR to provide accommodation for some of the child refugees, some families offered to act as foster parents. However the agreement between the Basque government and the British authorities included a requirement that the children must 'be cared for in institutions under due supervision' and 'not adopted and looked after in private homes'. The Basque government was concerned that if the children became separated in individual homes, they would quickly lose their Basque identity, and as few of the children spoke English there would also be language difficulties. In order to limit any disappointment felt by potential foster parents, local signatories of the appeal for funds to support the children 'hoped that many who might have been willing to take care of individual children in their homes will contribute at the rate of 5s per week for the support of one child, thus in effect acting as foster parents'.^{xvi}

A recent deposit by the Roberts family at the Carlisle Archive centre includes considerable correspondence between Charles Roberts, and later Walter Hobson who organised 'adoption', and those that supported the Brampton hostel financially and otherwise. Unfortunately there are no letters relating to the Cid children except one of 3 July 1938 which refers to Carmen's brother José Luis Cid.

Given the requirement that the children be accommodated in a hostel, what happened next to Carmen appears to be unusual. A short time after her arrival at Brampton, she left the hostel to be fostered in the home of the Alford family at 22 Currock Park Avenue in Carlisle. The driving force behind this arrangement was Norman Alford (1914-54). At the time of the National Registration in September 1939, Norman was a 25 years old lithographer who worked in the art department of the Carlisle branch of the Metal Box Co. (Hudson Scott), according to Kevin Rafferty one of a number of talented artists who were employed there.^{xvii} He was a man with left leaning political views and a strong social conscience. He was a trade unionist and a member of the Society of Lithographers, Artists, Designers and Engravers. It is not surprising that his sympathies were with republican cause in Spain. Norman, although born in Carlisle, had lived as a child in Hesket and attended the local school. He was a talented amateur artist but apart from some tuition at Carlisle School of Art he had no formal training. He began painting during the 1930s, exhibiting for the first time two paintings at the annual art exhibition at Tullie House in 1931. He painted landscapes, but also scenes which included ordinary people. In an appreciation written by Robert Hogg, the curator of Carlisle Art Gallery, after Alford's death, he stated that 'he loved his fellow man; he

sought out those whom life had treated harshest and humbly shared his gifts of character with them. The blind worker, the crippled war veteran, the old-age pensioners were the 'sitters' for his portraits'.^{xviii} For him it would seem that the Basque children were amongst those 'whom life had treated harshest'. In 1937 or 1938 he persuaded his parents Fred (b.1886) and Elizabeth (b.1888) Alford to take in one of the Brampton children, and for reasons perhaps associated with her young age, Carmen was selected to leave the hostel and move to Carlisle. The house was crowded as Norman had a younger brother, Douglas (b.1920), and a sister, Freda. The parents of Norman's girlfriend, Betsy Jackson (whom he married in 1939), also took in a refugee girl, Thalia Montero, who appears to have returned to Spain in 1938 or 1939. Carmen had only a mattress to sleep on and initially she was unhappy there, but living with the Alford's turned out to be her lucky break. Other refugee children, such as Ángeles Cubas Piñera and his sister were 'adopted', in their case by a Scottish gentleman, but their direct contact was limited to letter writing, excursions and holidays.^{xix} Where connections were made with people locally, it was often possible for extra food, clothes and toys to reach those living in the hostel. Carmen's siblings, as well as others, benefitted from food brought to the hostel when Carmen came to visit her brother and sister.

Carmen was too young to be part of the performances of Basque dances, songs and music that were given to audiences across the county. The first such occasions were organised by Lady Cecilia in Carlisle in mid-July 1937. The first was at the opening ceremony of the new Brampton playground where some of the girls performed country dancing. The second was in the Queen's Hall in Carlisle when 40 children from Brampton and six from Currock House in the city gave a performance as a thank you for the work of the Carlisle Spanish Relief Committee who had done much to bring the children to Brampton and renovate their accommodation. One of the Spanish teachers, Srta. Virginia Martínez del Castillo, also played music by Spanish composers.^{xx} Later, as money became tight, these performances were part of a programme of fund raising. Carmen remembers the older girls dressing dolls in Basque costume and selling them locally.

Carmen remained at the Alford's except for a few days in August-September 1939 when, at the time of the closure of the Brampton hostel, she accompanied her brother and sister to Scotland, where Eburne was fostered by a Clydebank family, and Luis by a Glasgow family. A connection between the Brampton children and people from in and around Glasgow seems to have emerged early on, perhaps because Scotland played little direct part in the hosting of the Basque children with a single hostel established in Montrose.^{xxi} In July 1938 the Dumbarton and District Spanish Medical Society were allocated José Luis Cid and his friend Rufino Loza, both aged 11, to adopt. Little further information about the two boys

was provided beyond a statement saying that José Luis Cid's 'mother lives in Bilbao, very poor circumstances' and that Charles Roberts would try to acquire a photograph of him.^{xxii} Carmen Cid feels that this statement was inaccurate. She would not have regarded her family as poor, and at that time her mother was a refugee in France. In August 1938, James Walker of Glasgow had sent 29/4d to the Brampton committee to cover the travel costs of Alfonso Alvarez for journeys to Peebles.^{xxiii} This followed a week's camping holiday for the children in Scotland which included a visit to the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow.^{xxiv} The Scottish Committee for Spanish Relief organised the transfer of many of the Brampton children to Scotland in the summer of 1939. The Cid children were not the only ones to be fostered by Glasgow families. Agustina, Asun and Antonio Pérez San José were also transferred from Brampton to Glasgow. As no family could be found to take in all three siblings, they too were divided between two households. Luis Ruiz López and Valentín Sagasti Torrano also found foster parents in Glasgow. Torrano suggests that his foster family were 'sympathetic to the cause of Socialism and the plight of the Spanish refugees', a characteristic of 'red' Glasgow that may have led to so much hospitality being provided by Glaswegians.^{xxv} At the outbreak of the Second World War there were 1054 children still in Britain, of which it was considered 477 might still be repatriated. The remaining 577 could not be repatriated as their parents were either refugees abroad, prisoners of war, or had died. At that time the NJCSR funds were very low and many hostels, including Brampton, had been closed. The committee suggested that 'homes should make strenuous and immediate efforts to place their children in private families ... and to send out a special appeal to their local supporters and adopters and emergency appeals for clothes'.^{xxvi}

Carmen chose not to remain in Glasgow and returned to continue living with the Alford family in Carlisle. In 1939 Norman married Bessie Jackson, and during the war he served in the Royal Artillery Regiment and rose to commissioned rank. He was severely wounded in Normandy in 1944. Carmen continued to live with Norman's parents Fred and Elizabeth whose humanitarianism and sense of social justice must have equalled that of their son's. Norman contributed some of his own salary to help his parents with the cost of looking after Carmen. After the war he became a founder member and secretary of the Carlisle and Border Art Society, and the late 1940s and early 50s were his most productive period, and he exhibited at either the Spring or Annual exhibitions held in Tullie House in every year between 1949 and 1954. In the early 1950s he lived at 49 Currock Park Avenue, but at the time of his death in 1954 after a long illness, he was living at 149 Blackwell Road in Carlisle.

Carmen attended Robert Ferguson school in the city, her uniform having been provided free of charge by the Co-op. When she left school in 1943 aged 14, she worked at Bucks clothing factory at Denton Holme in Carlisle. Carmen remained living with the Alford's until she mar-

ried a Carlisle businessman, Clifford Eckersley, at St Herbert's Church, Carlisle on 17 March 1952.

Not surprisingly the experience had a significant effect on the young Carmen. She did not see her parents between 1937 and 1950 when it was possible for them to come to live in Clydebank. This long separation during a formative period of her life meant that she had become a stranger to her mother and father. It was not possible to recover the relationship which had been lost through separation. Carmen also found herself feeling neither Basque nor British. When she finally had the opportunity to return to Bilbao, most of what she remembered had vanished. Although she has lived in Britain, become naturalised in 1958, married and brought up a family in Carlisle, she has never felt herself to be entirely British. She has continued to feel Basque and to a lesser extent Spanish, but has been very grateful to Britain for giving her the opportunity to live in this country.

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For further information see:

N. Benjamin (ed.), *Recuerdos: Basque children refugees in Great Britain* (Oxford, 2009).

R. David, "Let politics and differences be forgotten": "The Little Basques in Cumbria" 1937-39', *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*, Series 3: Vol. 19 (2019), 231-250.

R. David, *A County of Refuge: Refugees in Cumbria 1933-1941*, (Kendal, 2020).

I. Monaghan, A history of Edurne Cid Santibañes, her brother José Luis and sister Carmen. (2020): <https://www.basquechildren.org/-/dpcs/articles/edurnecidsantiban>

D. Watson, 'Politics and Humanitarian Aid: Basque Refugees in the North East and Cumbria during the Spanish Civil War, *North East History*, 36(2005), 8-41

i *Carlisle Journal*, 22 June 1937. The newspaper headlined the article reporting the arrival of the children at Brampton, 'The Little Basques arrive'.

ii Manchester, People's History Museum, SCW/14/19.

iii Bill Williams, *Jews and other Foreigners: Manchester and the Rescue of the Victims of European Fascism, 1933-1940*, Manchester, 2011, p.108.

iv *Carlisle Journal*, 25 June 1937.

v *Carlisle Journal*, 22 June 1937.

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- vi TNA: MH57/323; *Carlisle Journal*, 2 July 1937.
- vii *Carlisle Journal*, 1 June 1937; 11 June 1937.
- viii *Carlisle Journal*, 4 June 1937.
- ix *Carlisle Journal*, 8 June 1937.
- x TNA: MH57/323.
- xi *The Scotsman*, 31 July 1937.
- xii N. Benjamin (ed), *Recuerdos: Basque children Refugees in Great Britain*, (Oxford, 2007): the testimony of Agustina Pérez San José, 126-30.
- xiii N. Benjamin (ed), *Recuerdos: Basque children Refugees in Great Britain*, (Oxford, 2007): the testimony of Agustina Pérez San José, 126-30.
- xiv N. Benjamin (ed), *Recuerdos: Basque children Refugees in Great Britain*, (Oxford, 2007): the testimony of Agustina Pérez San José, 126-30. Mr Froelich was Agustina's favourite teacher. Alfonso Ruiz López, who was especially gifted at art, especially liked Winifred Nicholson: N. Benjamin (ed), *Recuerdos: Basque children Refugees in Great Britain*, (Oxford, 2007): the testimony of Alfonso Ruiz López, 144-47.
- xv N. Benjamin (ed), *Recuerdos: Basque children Refugees in Great Britain*, (Oxford, 2007): the testimony of Valentin Segasti Torrano, 151-55.
- xvi *Cumberland News*, 12 June 1937. This figure was found to be too low and later adoptions were costed at 10/= per week.
- xvii Kevin A Rafferty, *The Story of Hudson Scott and Sons, Metal Box, James Street, Carlisle* (Charles Thurnam and Sons Ltd., Carlisle, 1998), p82. I am grateful to Adrian Allan for drawing my attention to this reference.
- xviii For details about Norman Alford see the catalogue for *Paintings and Drawings of Norman Alford 1914-1954*, The City Art Gallery, Carlisle, 1955; also *Norman Alford: An Appreciation* by RH (Robert Hogg), 26 November 1954. CALMG: 1969.83.1-3, and CALMG: 2004. 201. I am indebted to Melanie Gardner for making available the Norman Alford archive at Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle; and to Norman Alford's son Ken for providing further information about his father.
- xix N. Benjamin (ed), *Recuerdos: Basque children Refugees in Great Britain*, (Oxford, 2007): the testimony of Ángeles Cubas Piñera, 42-3.
- xx *Carlisle Journal*, 16 July 1937 and 23 July 1937.
- xxi <https://www.basquechildren.org/-/docs/colonies/montrose/montrose> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- xxii Carlisle Archive Centre: DROB Box 15. Whether the family who 'adopted' Luis Cid in the summer of 1938 is the same one as 'adopted' him in July 1938 is not known.
- xxiii Carlisle Archive Centre: DROB: Box 15, letter from J. Walker to C.H. Roberts 25 August 1938.
- xxiv R. David, *A County of Refuge: Refugees in Cumbria 1933-1941* (Kendal 2020), p.25.
- xxv N. Benjamin (ed), *Recuerdos: Basque children Refugees in Great Britain*, (Oxford, 2007): the testimony of Agustina Pérez San José, 126-30; Alfredo Ruiz López, 147-51; Valentin Segasti Torrano, 151-55.
- xxvi University of Warwick Modern Records Centre: Basque Children's Committee correspondence, 292/946/38/73 and 292/946/38/74.