

Basque Children in Manchester, Salford and environs 1937:

The story of the Colonies established in the Manchester region in June 1937 to support children evacuated from Bilbao during the Spanish Civil War.

Nearly 4,000 Basque children arrived at Southampton on 23rd May 1937 and were dispersed around the UK in the following weeks and months. Some 250 children came to Manchester and while there they were supported by a popular movement which housed, educated and celebrated their language and culture. On leaving their parents the children were told they would be away from their families 'solo por tres meses'¹ (only for three months) and some stayed for that period of time, others never returned.

Basque Children's Colonies in the Manchester region:

Buckley Hall, Rochdale (Brothers of Charity, Roman Catholic): number of Basque residents unknown.

Harold's Memorial Orphanage, Seedly Road, Seedly, Salford (Christian Volunteer Force): 25 boys and girls.

Holly Mount Convent, Tottington, Bury (Sisters of Charity Jesus and Mary, Roman Catholic): 50 boys and girls.

Nazareth House, Heaton Park, Manchester (Sisters of Nazareth, Roman Catholic): 16 girls.

Our Lady of Lourdes Home, East Didsbury (Missionary Sisters of St Joseph, Roman Catholic): 30 boys and girls.

St Josephs Home, Worsley Road, Patricroft, Eccles (Missionary Sisters of St Joseph, Roman Catholic): 8 boys and girls.

St Vincent's Convent, near Facit, Rochdale, (Roman Catholic): 10 boys and girls.

Sisters of Charity Home, Rumford Street, Chorlton-on-Medlock, (Sisters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul, Roman Catholic): 15 girls.

Watermillock, Bolton (Basque Children's Committee, BCC.): 54 boys and girls.²

Introduction

Eighty years ago this year in 1936 the legally elected Republican government in Spain was challenged by a military uprising which led to the three years of the Civil War. The population who supported the government are termed Republicans and the supporters of the uprising Nationalists. The Nationalists employed terror as a policy. This included executions or imprisonment of supporters of the Republic, bombing of civilian areas, and the blockade of ports to reduce government controlled areas to starvation and restrict their freedom to import medical supplies, arms and armaments ³.

By March 1937 the Nationalist advance had reached the Basque Country. The towns of Durango and Guernica and other minor villages of no strategic significance were bombed by planes of the German air force's Condor Legion. The port of Bilbao was blockaded. The civilian population of that city were experiencing terror arising from the bombing of civilian areas, hunger because of the lack of food, and fear of summary trial and execution should the city fall to the Nationalists⁴.

The Basques had sought and been granted independence by the Republican Government in 1936 and through its president and ministries was organising the army for its defence, organising the administration of schools, health, supplies of food, organising the cities with air raid precautions, and maintaining order. As the front got nearer to the main city of Bilbao they were forced into a decision about what to do with the increasing numbers of children, women and the elderly (non combatants) who needed to be kept safe. As with the British War Cabinet in 1940 the decision was reluctantly made to evacuate this civilian population to safety and it appealed to countries to open their borders, and welcome these refugees. The British government faced initially in two directions both warning the Nationalist that attacks on refugees in international waters would not be tolerated but that Britain would not respond positively to the request to host refugees. The first policy was maintained and fortunately for the nearly 4,000 Basque children and accompanying teachers, priests, and volunteers who travelled on the ship '*Habana*' from Bilbao to Southampton arriving on the 23rd of May 1937 the second was reversed. This benefitted the Basque children and later the Jewish children brought to Britain by the Kinder Transport. The 'welcome' offered by the British Government was conditional on the total cost of supporting the evacuees being met by public fundraising and donations from individuals and organisations.

The preparations for the arrival of the children were widely reported in the national newspapers including the erection of the camp at North Stoneham, between Southampton and Eastleigh, to receive the children. The departure of the children from Bilbao in 'the pouring rain and their happy arrival in Southampton on May 23rd' was widely reported. 'Thousands of Bilbao's citizens stolidly faced pouring rain last night to see off the army of Basque children who are to be evacuated to this country. Seven trains successfully steamed out of the station for the dockside carrying 600 youthful passengers. They were all medically checked before leaving Spain and on arrival in England.

The children settled into a life in canvas tents and the national Basque Children's Committee (BCC) which reported to the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR) set to organising supporting groups in towns and cities in England, Scotland and Wales to provide a longer term solution to accommodating the evacuees. Government policy continued that the children could only come and stay if they remained the sole responsibility of the BCC.

The situation in Bilbao had been terrifying for the children and their behaviour at North Stoneham reflected their experiences. Children were alarmed by planes flying overhead and saved bread in their pockets in anticipation of failed meals. When the Basque capital Bilbao fell to the Nationalists panic in the camp was reported and runaways from the camp had to be brought back by search parties. The Colonies had been stipulated as the means of caring for the children by the Basque government while they were in England and varied in size from 10 children to nearly a hundred. The children were to be kept together in familiar and familial groups and be accompanied by staff which the Basque government employed to ensure the children did not lose their cultural identity.

The children evacuated from Bilbao on the '*Habana*' had been accompanied by priests from the Catholic Church, and qualified teachers known if they were female as Maestras, or assistants known as Auxiliares.. There were 96 Maestras and 118 Auxiliares who travelled on the '*Habana*'. The Maestras had been introduced by the Republican Government in 1931 as part of the educational reforms which introduced free universal, secular, education. Those that remained in Spain either lost their jobs or were ill treated by the Nationalists as they took control of Republican areas. In Nationalist areas, and the whole of Spain after the end of the

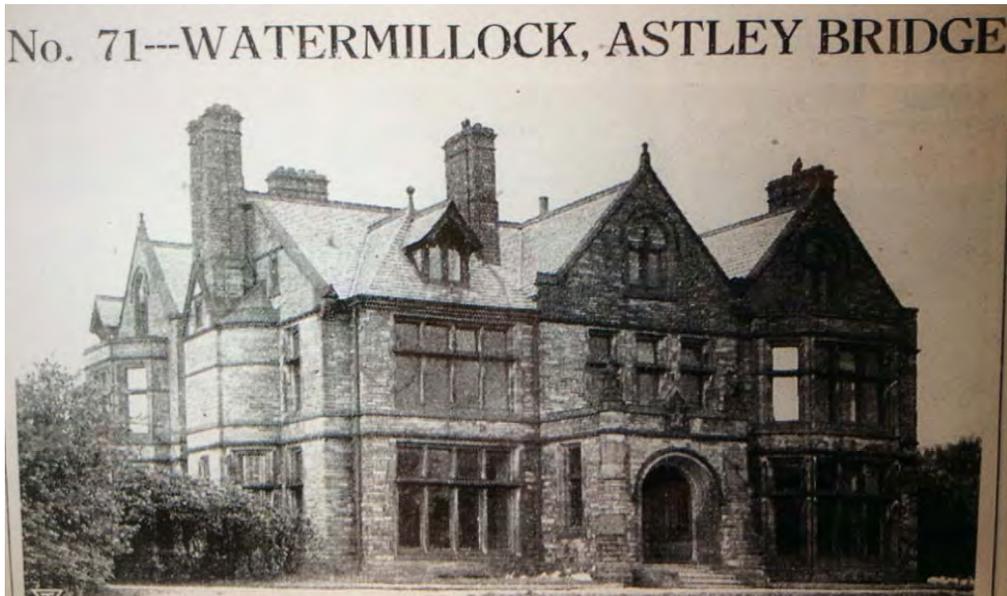
war, educational reforms were reversed and education returned to the Catholic Church. Of note the Catholic Church in Spain with the exception of the Basque country supported the insurgents. The Basque Catholic Church and its priests in contrast supported the Basque Government.

Responses in the Manchester region – Aid Spain and the Basque Children

The Aid Spain Movement in Manchester had four elements: medical aid; food aid; volunteers to the International Brigades; and supporting the refugee Basque Children. The Communist Party initiated the medical aid committees but many individuals and organisations did not wish to be associated with them so broader organisations were developed which raised money to buy and equip ambulances, recruit nurses, doctors and drivers, and produced bandages and other supplies to send to Spain. As the war developed towards the end of 1936 food collections were initiated, particularly focusing on milk, which left on food ships to Spain. Through 1936 and 1937 66 men joined the International Brigade including the speedway rider Clem Beckett, and 17 of these were killed in action ⁵.

Durango and then Guernica were bombed in April 1937 and these events changed the focus of Aid Spain to supporting refugees and particularly children. Some 250 children and their supporting Maestras came to Manchester. The largest group of 54 children were accommodated in a decaying mansion at Watermillock, Bolton⁶. The Catholic Protection and Rescue Society of the Diocese of Salford which had established institutions across the region took the majority of the children in groups of 8 to 50. And 25 children were accommodated by the Christian Volunteer Force.

At a meeting at Manchester Town Hall on 31 May 1937 the responsibility for supporting and organising the care of the first children to arrive in the city was transferred to the 'non sectarian, non political' Manchester and District Committee for the Care of Basque Children at Watermillock (MCCW). This twenty two strong committee was very broadly representative of the city's political, cultural, professional, and religious elites. There were Liberal Party grandees who had national and local prominence prior to the collapse of their party in elections. The secretary of the Halle Concerts Society became the committee's treasurer and the



University of Manchester's Vice Chancellor and other academics joined. Merchants and industrialists were members, as well as leading local doctors and surgeons. And all three Christian denominations – Anglican, Roman Catholic and Non Denominational were represented. Watermillock was prepared by volunteers who refurbished the building and prepared it for the arrival of the children. On the 9 June the children arrived in two coaches from Southampton and were greeted by a welcoming crowd of 400 people.

On 18 June 25 children arrived at the Harold's Memorial Orphanage having been delayed leaving Southampton by a typhus scare. This home was staffed by the Christian Volunteer Force, an organisation similar in its missionary aims to the Salvation Army but supported in kind by amongst others the Salford Corporation which supplied beds and bedding.

Finally on the 24 June the remaining children arrived by train to be dispersed to the orphanages, refuges, and convents of the Salford Catholic Diocese. The largest group of 50 children went to the Holly Mount Convent, near Bury which was a school and orphanage run by a Belgian Order of nuns. Groups of 25 went to East Didsbury and Heaton Park in North Manchester, 15 to the convent at Chorlton-on-Medlock, and the smallest groups of 8 or 10 children to Patricroft and Facit near Rochdale. Large crowds met each of the arriving groups of children and continued to visit and show support.

Having left the tented camp at Southampton the children supported by their Maestras, staff and volunteers at the homes settled to new routines. The children aged from 6 to 16 helped with daily tasks, and an educational programme started. Did the children show signs of distress at the trauma they had experienced and the separation from their parents and extended families? Mostly apparently not, though one girl, Dolores Lopez, whose father and three brothers were fighting on the Bilbao Front remained alone and wept inconsolably. She was admitted to hospital with suspected appendicitis but was discharged without treatment having been finally diagnosed with a digestive problem brought on by anxiety ⁷.

Between 1937 and 1938 Bolton was the setting of one of Mass Observation's projects to document through word, photography and film the lives of working people. Bolton was chosen as a typical northern industrial town. The observers tried to record how ordinary working people lived without themselves affecting the behaviour of the observed. Williams describes the account of Joe Willcock an experienced hostel warden from London who had joined the Mass Observation Team and joined the staff team at Watermillock on 10 June. This approach of participant observation and recording of everyday events is informative about how the children reacted to bad news from Spain (the fall of Bilbao to the Nationalists) and relived their experiences of air raids.

“ ‘Their experiences had not frightened them off the thought of war – but had aroused their more savage instincts.’ Given the slightest reference to the war, they would break out ‘quite spontaneously’ into angry accounts of their menfolks’ struggles against the Fascists, of how ‘aeroplanes had come and ... their houses had been destroyed,’ and ‘how the defenders had replied with guns and rifles.’ ‘Their

faces lit up Wilcock reported, ' and they seemed quite transported at the idea of bringing down the planes and firing the guns.' " 8.

Most of the staff and volunteers at Watermillock were not experienced at supporting children from difficult situations and they also struggled to work as a team. The Maestras and the children for their part soon expressed their disagreement with some aspects of their care or with some of the things said to them. The MCCW was able to manage these difficulties and staff were replaced and new experienced members were co-opted onto the house committee. Staff at the other Colonies appear to have had more experience in coping with distressed children and working in teams.

Daily life in the colonies for the children appears to have revolved around education including learning English and participating in the daily routines of cooking, cleaning, gardening, and meeting English children and families. Supportive families were allowed to take the children out after 3pm, and with permission to give them tea. They had to be back at Watermillock by 7pm. The children were also encouraged to maintain their language and culture, and joined in publicity and fund raising events their supporters organised. At the end of June, 12 boys and girls travelled to the BBC studios in Manchester to record songs and interviews for the radio programme 'Children's Hour' 9 and in July the 26 strong children's choir performed songs at the Victoria Hall which raised £36 10.

The first group of children to leave Manchester in October 1937 were those at the Harold's Memorial Orphanage who went on to the Colony at Froggatt near to Sheffield. The move appears to have been brought about by the need to spread the burden of raising money to support the children more widely 11,12.

Nationally the BCC was under pressure to return children to areas which had fallen to the Nationalists. Despite chronic lack of funds the BCC affirmed its commitment to the children that they would only be returned to their parents if it was safe for them and that their parents were able to take them. Some of the children's fathers had been killed in action or were missing, some of their mothers had been killed in air raids or were themselves refugees in Barcelona. The BCC brought together groups of children from November 1937 and the long drawn out process of returning children to Spain, or to countries where their parents were refugees had begun.

As the number of children being supported by the BCC reduced the number of Colonies also reduced. Children supported by the Catholic church were the next to leave. Watermillock started to close in March 1938 when 20 of the 54 children left to journey to London and from there onto Spain.



A group of 20 children at Bolton Station leaving Watermillock en route for Spain 13.

The last children to leave England before travel by sea was interrupted by the war left on a Spanish cargo ship on the 26 July 1940, leaving just over 400 children in Britain. The number of homes supported by the BCC reduced in number as children returned to their families in Spain or exile. Some children were found homes with sympathetic families or remained in the reduced number of Colonies. Our Lady of Lourdes in East Didsbury was one of the 6 Catholic homes to remain and Watermillock were amongst those which remained open to accommodate the reducing numbers of children who as the years passed were becoming young adults. The last Colonies changed into young workers hostels as the children became adults and finally closed in 1946/7.

Maestras and children in the Manchester and region 14.

<i>number</i>	<i>name</i>	<i>Age on arrival</i>	<i>Colony</i>	<i>Date returned</i>
760	Tejedor, Mahumud	15	Watermillock	
	Lopez, Elvira	14	Watermillock	
	Lopez, Susanna	12	Watermillock	
	Lopez, Dolores	16	Watermillock	
58 / 74	Marques, Noemi	Maestra	Watermillock	
8 / 75	Astrazarain, Martina	Maestra	Watermillock	
3127	Haez Gonzalez, Julia	10	Watermillock	
3128	Haez Gonzalez, Jose Luis	8	Watermillock	
3772	Diego Arteche, Fernando	7	Watermillock	2.4.39 - Bilbao
3773	Diego Arteche, Magdalena	11	Watermillock	2.4.39 - Bilbao

3298	Gutierrez Calderete, Celedonio	8	Watermillock	22.3.38 - Spain
3297	Gutierrez Calderete, Guillerma	10	Watermillock	22.3.38 - Spain
3651	Ortiz Uribe Echevarria, Evangelina	12	Salford & Sheffield	7.1.38 - Bilbao
3652	Ortiz Uribe Echevarria, Felipe	8	Salford & Sheffield	7.1.1938 - Bilbao
3650	Ortiz Uribe Echevarria, M Paz	15	Salford & Sheffield	7.1.1938 -Bilbao
2697	Alameda Tamayo, Pila	13	Salford & Sheffield	18.7.1939 - Bilbao
1896	Collazos Barriuso, Leoncio	14	Salford & Sheffield	6.4.1938 - Bilbao
1899	Collazos Barriuso, Agustina	7	Salford & Sheffield	6.4.1938 - Bilbao
1897	Collazos Barriuso, Felix	11	Salford & Sheffield	6.4.1938 - Bilbao
1898	Collazos Barriuso, Juliana	9	Salford & Sheffield	6.4.1938 - Bilbao
678	Ibanez Echarri, Juana	15	Salford & Sheffield	6.4.1938 - Bilbao
679	Ibanez Echarri, Natividad	12	Salford & Sheffield	6.4.1938 - Bilbao
529	Morales Arenas, Emilio	11	Salford & Sheffield	30.6.1946 - France
528	Morales Arenas	12	Salford & Sheffield	30.6.1946 - France
	Castilejo Villa, Maria	15	Salford & Sheffield	
	Castilejo Villa, Asuncion	11	Salford & Sheffield	
59 / 96	Martin Torres, Cecilia	Maestra	Salford, Sheffield & Keighley	
2270	Burgos Urtiaga, Juan Jose	12	East Didsbury	
2271	Burgos Urtiaga, Natividad	11	East Didsbury	
2272	Burgos Urtiaga, Carmen	8	East Didsbury	
3891	Lopez Barassa, Eduardo	16	East Didsbury	
1927	Alonso Portela, Jose	16	East Didsbury	
2901	Onaindia Hernadorena, Adolfo	16	East Didsbury	
1705	Sierra Banos, Angeles	11	East Didsbury	
1706	Sierra Banos, Javier	8	East Didsbury	

Conclusion

For the first time in Europe between 1936 and 1939 'total war' was adopted by one side to achieve its objectives. This led to loss of life on a huge scale and a humanitarian crisis that left the civilian population seeking safety. The British Government's initial response was lacking in humanity because their policy of not allowing evacuees into Britain left the humanitarian crisis within Spain's borders. This was changed by a groundswell of public opinion and led to the arrival of the Basque Children. Then a very broad section of the public was motivated to support them. Manchester and its region supported Aid Spain and particularly the Basque Children. The children's parents had entrusted them to the care of an organisation made up of individuals who to them were strangers. The BCC and its affiliates in Manchester undertook the care and education of the children from 1937 and did not relinquish this responsibility before the parents requested the return of their children or the children had themselves become adults.

The Basque Children of '37 Association UK was established in 2002 to advance the education of the public, students and academics in the subject of the children's exile by preserving archival and oral history of the Basque Children^{15,16} and promoting research into this event. The Association maintains a website which contains many articles about the Colonies in Britain and the subsequent lives of the 'children' (www.basquechildren.org).

Footnotes

- 1 Only for three months Bell, Adrian (Mousehold Press 1996 & 2007)
- 2 Jews and other foreigners Williams, Bill (Manchester University Press 2011)
- 3 The Spanish Holocaust Preston, Paul (Harper Press 2012)
- 4 Preston, *ibid*
- 5 Williams, *ibid*
- 6 Bolton Journal and Guardian (7.8.1936)
- 7 Bolton Journal and Guardian (11.6.1937)
- 8 Williams, *ibid*
- 9 Bolton Evening News (26.6.1937, p2)
- 10 Bolton Evening News (22.7.1937, p2)
- 11 In search of the Basque children in Salford Hignett, Claire (basquechildren.org)
- 12 Basque Children in Sheffield 1937 Martinez, Simon (basquechildren.org)
- 13 Bolton Journal and Guardian (25.3.1938)
- 14 Ninos vascos evacuados a Gran Bretana 1937-1940 Arrien, Gregorio (1937)
- 15 From Bilbao to Britain Kilner, Carmen (2015)
- 16 Recuerdos Benjamin, Natalia (Mousehold Press, 2007)

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