

The Basque children refugees in Caerleon

As the children arrived in Southampton plans were already underway to bring them to South Wales and the Cardiff Aid Spain Committee negotiated with Monmouth County Council for the loan of Cambria House, Caerleon. A new fund was instigated by the Duchess of Atholl and subscriptions to fund care for the children also included reserve money for their eventual repatriation. The Mayors of Newport and Cardiff set up a committee comprising members from all political, religious and social groups and the Cambria House Committee was formed to prepare the house for the arrival of fifty-six refugees. As there had not been time to hold a public meeting, residents raised concerns about the costs involved in supporting the children, but local councillors assured them that there would be no increase in the rates and asked for a sympathetic approach to the refugees. In the event, there was no shortage of help: students, social workers and local people helped clean and prepare Cambria House.

Cyril Cule, a specialist in Spanish language and literature, who had been teaching in Madrid when the Civil War broke out, was appointed Director of Studies at Cambria House and he was paid ten shillings a week with full board. Other teachers, such as the historian Christopher Hill, worked voluntarily and there were three Spanish teachers. Gwen Jones was appointed Warden.

The children arrived at Newport Station on 10th July 1937, and were given a warm welcome by representatives of the various committees. They appeared to settle down well, willingly helping with meal preparation and washing up, but found it difficult to communicate with the Warden as she didn't speak Spanish and was a stickler for rules. Subsequently Mrs Maria Fernandez took over the running of the home and her first priority was to encourage the children to go out into the community and for visitors to come to Cambria House to meet the children. She had come to Wales at the age of 3 when her father came to work in Dowlais in 1907. After marrying a Basque seaman, she was living in Cardiff when a request arrived for an interpreter for the 56 Basque children in Caerleon. Mrs Fernandez was highly successful as Warden and organised Spanish food and arranged the children's education, initially at Cambria House and later at local state schools. The high standard of care and education that the children received was clearly successful as three girls went on to Newport High School and one won a scholarship to the Quaker school at Badmington. Discipline was achieved by reminding the children that they were representatives of their country and their behaviour had to be exemplary.

Everybody was involved in fund raising, from the local committees and the Miners' Federation to the children themselves. They formed a highly successful football team, having a collection at matches, and produced their own newspaper **The Cambria House Journal** which they sold for 2d a copy. In addition, the children performed Basque dances in national costume and presented the shows throughout the South Wales valleys, where they received a hearty welcome.

Repatriation of the children had taken place throughout 1937-39 but many parents were desperate to have their children back as war broke out, even though conditions were very difficult. In November 1939, twenty-five of the children returned to Spain and clearly some had mixed feelings, which is a tribute to the care they received in Caerleon:

It is a great joy to go back to our parents, but it is a sad thing to have to part after living together like brother and sisters for two years. Still, however far away I may be, I shall never forget the friends I am leaving behind in Britain. Goodbye and thank you for all you have done. (Cambria House Journal, June 1939)

At the beginning of World War II, the military took over Cambria House, so some children were taken in by local families and the rest moved to Vale View. However, no sooner had they settled than the army again requested the building and accommodation for the remaining 29 children was found at 18 Cross Street, which is now known as Pendragon House.

This is a remarkable chapter in British and in particular, Welsh, history. There was a huge response by miners in the Welsh valleys to the plight of the Basque children during the Spanish Civil War at a time of great hardship and deprivation in Wales. When all other sources of support had dried up, it was the miners who were to provide funding throughout the years that the children were dependent. It was also a time of great political activity, especially by the Communist party, who turned its political beliefs into highly successful fundraising and publicity activities for the Basque refugee children. Local authorities too played a crucial part and were not influenced by the negative propaganda that raised its head from time to time.

But it was those who cared for the children at Cambria House that were the most remarkable. Cyril Cule, Christopher Hill and especially Mrs Fernandez provided these exceptionally courageous and traumatised children with a secure and comforting environment. Because of the adults' outstanding dedication to the children in their care, these innocent victims were able to find peace and safety far away from home.

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