

An excerpt from her autobiography
"Home Hills & beyond" by Wendy Henningsson
(Nork Books 2004 - www.norkbooks.com)

From the chapter on her father, Edgar Phillips, recounting his relationship with 'The Oaks' and 'Culvers' colonies at Carshalton.

Basque connections

Spanish was the first foreign language that I came into contact with, before I started learning languages at school. My father often sat with me at bedtime and instead of reading a goodnight story, he would tell me words from his Spanish book, and I had to guess what they meant in English. Then I had to "test" him by saying the word in English for him to translate.

This took our minds off the sounds of bomber aeroplanes, thuds and explosions that we could hear in the distance.

He attended evening classes to learn Spanish and became quite proficient. The reason for this interest began in 1936 with the Civil War in Spain. Hundreds of Basque children were brought to England as refugees and a number of them were housed in the domestic wing of the Oaks Park mansion near where we lived.

The mansion itself – the former home of the Earl of Derby – was empty and the windows boarded up. Inside was a beautiful circular ballroom with a marble floor which I once had the opportunity to see before the whole building was demolished after the war.

The mansion and its surrounding park and farmlands were only ten minutes' walk from our home and it was a beautiful area in which to roam around, until it became dotted with bomb craters which revealed a mass of white chalk.

My father would drive there in his "Swift" and soon became very involved with the running of the Basque children's colony.

In 1938, there were twenty-three children staying at the Oaks together with their three "Senoritas" – the teachers who had accompanied them to England. My father, together with Mr West and Mr Lewry formed the committee to support them.

The living conditions were none too good, and the children themselves helped transform the walls "from a dingy brown to a spring effect of primrose", as was reported in the "Advertiser" local newspaper at the time.

Some of the children came to play with my sister, brother and myself in our garden. As I was very small, I did not join in the games of French Cricket or darts, but it was a valuable experience to have the company of these friendly and lively individuals. Some of them were regular visitors in our home, including the sisters Espe and Pili. Gradually, I began to look forward to the days when they came to have tea with us as they cheerfully played a game of "Snakes and Ladders" with me. They were older than the others, Pili was now working in a London office, while Espe was on a secretarial course at Pitman's College; later,

they were both awarded scholarships by the Spanish Republican Government in exile for further education.

When I wrote a story at about the age of ten, my father asked the sisters to type it out for me, and I was very proud of the result. However, that proud feeling did not last long; I was brought down to earth by my sister who recognised a similarity to “Jane Eyre” – which we had recently listened to on the radio as a serial. “Why don’t you write something original?” she said.

But the Spanish sisters remained my heroes; I thought they always looked very chic, wearing smart outfits, make-up and exciting perfume.

They displayed a femininity and warmth which was welcome in our austere way of life. Pili, sadly no longer with us, and Espe with her continuing friendship – I am grateful to you for widening my horizons.

Geographically speaking, the Oaks Park belonged to Carshalton, so that when the colony moved to another home in 1940, it was to premises belonging to that local council. This was a Victorian residence on the banks of the River Wandle called The Culvers; it was large and rambling, and had probably seemed a cold and cheerless place when it was first taken over, but the children together with the voluntary committee in charge of them soon made it more homely, with friezes and paintings done by themselves on the walls. They also displayed copies of their own newspaper “Our Life” as decoration for one wall.

The walled garden had been transformed from a tangled wilderness into a vegetable garden, where they also grew fruit and kept hens and rabbits. The older children liked showing any visitors round and when they took me there, it was the first time I had ever seen grapes growing on a vine. I was fascinated by the leaves of a splendid fig-tree which stretched along one side of the greenhouse. I often accompanied my father to the Culvers on a Saturday afternoon. (By now the “Swift” had been replaced by a small “Morris” van). He would disappear at once into the staff sitting room where a committee meeting about the running of the house was held regularly.

I was free to run up and down the ground-floor passage and to peep into any door that might be open.

It was an eye-opener to me the first time I found the dining room fully occupied, the noise of about twenty youngsters all talking and laughing in a language I did not understand was a little frightening at first. I hovered in the doorway, until some of them called me in to sit with them. Then came the next surprise. They dunked their bread in their tea-mugs! I had never seen anyone do this before, let alone do it myself.

There was always activity in the building; someone might be playing the piano, others playing a card game, or having a heated discussion.

On one occasion, the girls took me upstairs to see the bedrooms. One room especially made an impression on me, there were about six beds all fairly close together and each one was covered with a brightly patterned patchwork bedspread. Patchwork was new to me, it all looked so cosy.

Back downstairs, I wandered about outside, waiting for my father to come out from the meeting.

It was exciting to watch the river flowing so near to the house, and I was intrigued by an inviting-looking wooden bridge which led from the river bank nearest the house over to unknown territory. But the bridge was closed, planks and barbed wire put a definite stop to anyone trying to cross it.

Gradually the committee turned into a "Consejo" a Council including representatives of the Basque children themselves.

One of them, Javier, wrote as follows in the newsletter: "The Council has changed the house in many ways. There is much more co-operation with one another and everyone is happy and does his duty so that he can help the others.

...

As we grow older we see much clearer what are the reasons for our being out of our country, and then we are interested in the problems of Spain and we think of a free Spain when Franco is overthrown and the fascist regime wiped out." In 1943 the "Newsletter" reported that there were still about four hundred other Basque children living in England, some of them would come for weekends or holidays at the Culvers, so that the numbers of residents could vary around twenty to thirty at one time.

Of the permanent residents, three were studying at Croydon School of Art having won scholarships, another was learning cabinet making at the Shoreditch Technical Institute, yet others were at the West Central School and hoping to move on to the County School. One girl, Ana Mari wrote about Dinorben High School: "Thanks to the kindness of Miss Foster I now go to a High School. They have kindly bought me the school uniform, which is nearly all grey and very nice. The girls are very friendly so I have found it very easy to make friends. As I live a long way from school I have my dinner there with the rest of the girls. I am very lucky to go there and I like it better than the other school because I think I will learn more."

There are several testaments to the kindness of people involved with the care of the children. Raimundo wrote a charming and spontaneous appreciation of the new clothes he was given: "One day I went to a friend of mine's house. My friend one day bought me a pair of corduroy trousers, some new shoes, socks and a shirt. She is extremely kind lady, she is. The other time she also bought me a tie and a sweater. So you can imagine how kind she is in your dreams. And with all the things she has bought me I am the luckiest boy in the house."

Displays of Basque folk-dancing and singing took place often, together with play-readings and performances of plays in the Basque language.

One of the energetic forces behind these artistic efforts was Pirmin, who formed the "Entertainment Committee" together with Eduardo and Manolita. They organised their first party for Guy Fawkes Night, which was a successful stage in the process of getting to know the neighbours. As Eduardo reported: "After the bonfire, we all came in (including the English friends) and had refreshments. They brought a violin and there was dancing. And then we had some fireworks. We went to bed feeling happier for having made friends with the neighbours." The next project was planning a Christmas party, for which Manolita, writing in the "Basque Home News" in 1945, requested "a bright idea or any sweets to spare".

The third member of the Committee, Pirmin, later became a professional ballet dancer. He once took my father, myself and one or two friends backstage at Sadler's Wells Theatre – my interest in the theatre included ballet at that time – which made this a very exciting experience.

Somewhere in London – I know not where – we went to watch a full length comedy acted by a group of Basque players; I thought the scenery and costumes very colourful and exciting, red, white and green predominating. However, a whole evening's performance in a strange language made me conscious of the very hard wooden chair I had to sit on and no doubt I became impatient and fidgeted. My father, calm as always, remained unperturbed and appeared to enjoy the play with the rest of the audience, and so we sat it out.

I was also taken to the Christmas party at the Culvers. One game I remember particularly was the "Postman". We sat in a circle and one of the youths stood in the middle wearing a satchel round his neck which contained small pieces of folded-up paper, the "letters".

He called out a name and the owner of that name responded, and then the "Postman" took a "letter" from his satchel, very ceremoniously unfolded it and read out a message, which was mostly in the form of a forfeit. When it came to my turn, he read out that I was to go to the kitchen and drink a glass of water. This presented problems for me, as the long dark Victorian passage was empty and the kitchen deserted, because everyone was taking part in the games. My terror of being alone in the dark prevented me from getting as far as the kitchen, with the result that I hopped about just outside the door for a few moments, then returned to my seat, and no-one seemed to notice! I could "pretend" as well as the "Postman".

It was quite some time later that I understood that the messages were made up as he went along, and that there was nothing written on those little pieces of paper.

Thus by the age of ten I had already had the great good fortune to become accustomed to being with spontaneous, imaginative people who enriched my experience of life.

Gradually, the idea grew in my father's mind that he would like to travel to the Basque area of Spain and visit some of the families whose children had come to England. There were still restrictions about travelling abroad in 1948, and it was not a straightforward process getting a passport and even more difficult to get a visa to enter Spain. He crossed the channel by ferry, took a train to Paris, where he was met by two of the Basque boys who had promised to put him on the train to France on his way to Spain.

In a letter home, he described how he was "rushed across Paris by bus to take the train for S.France without opportunity to get anything to eat or drink... We could only buy single tickets, unreserved for our journey." As a result he spent twelve hours on the train without a seat. Then there were formalities to go through with both the French and the Spanish Passport and Customs authorities. Immediately on arrival, he had to report to the Police before settling in at the flat belonging to his hosts – Pili's family.

It was an anxious time for us at home while we waited for his return; when he did appear, he had a dramatic story to relate about how he had been “detained in custody” for a night by the Spanish Police merely because he had overstayed his visa by a few hours.

But he also brought back a collection of sketches and photographs to remind him of the hilly villages, the home of our Basque friends.