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Leicester's refuge for Basque children from the Spanish Civil War (Part 1)

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On Tuesday 6th July 1937 'a huge crowd of Leicester people waited outside the Leicester Central Station to welcome the Basque children refugees, who are to stay at Evington Hall'. (1) This was a group of 50 children out of the 3,826 who had arrived at Southampton on board the steamship *SS Habana* from Bilbao in northern Spain, in the largest single influx of unaccompanied young refugees ever to arrive in Britain. They were refugees of the Spanish Civil War. The *Expedición a Inglaterra*, as the evacuation was called, remains to this day one of the least-known chapters of the Civil War. Leicester played a part in this story.



Basque refugee children arriving at Leicester Central Station, Leicester Mercury, 7th July 1937.

Civil War in Spain

Although the background and legacy of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) has been well covered by historians from most political angles, the evacuation of young refugees from Bilbao to Britain and their subsequent lives hardly receives a mention in the literature. Even Professor Hugh Thomas in his seminal history of the conflict, *The Spanish Civil War*, first published 1961 and revised in 1977, covers the event in just eight lines.

By the spring of 1937, after the first winter of the Civil War, approximately half of Spain was in the hands of the

Nationalist rebel forces under General Franco. The industrial and mining belt in northern Spain, including the Asturias and the Basque provinces, was staunchly loyal to the Republican Government, but was now isolated and cut off from the rest of Republican Spain. Franco vowed to terminate the war in the north quickly and by whatever means he had at his disposal. These means included a *Luftwaffe* detachment of Hitler's Condor Legion, which was serving with the Nationalist forces. For Hitler, Spain's internal fratricide presented an opportunity to test his aerial weaponry in support of sympathetic Fascist allies, a rehearsal for the wider European conflict just 30 months

later. On 31st March Hitler's bombers targeted the small town of Durango killing 250 civilians, and then on Monday 26th April fighter planes and bombers attacked the market town of Guernica, the ancient seat of government and therefore of enormous symbolic importance for Basque culture and the aspirations of the nation for independence. The intention of the attack was to undermine morale by using aerial power for the first time to systematically kill and terrorise a civilian population and destroy their homes. After four hours of saturation bombing and

aerial machine-gunning the town was razed to the ground, left in flames, and an unknown number of civilians were killed. Britain's Foreign Secretary at the time, Anthony Eden, later described this as 'the first blitz of the Second World War'. (2)

A Safe Haven in Britain

As refugees swelled the population of major urban centres such as Bilbao, the autonomous Basque Government appealed for other countries to relieve the pressure by taking in young refugees. In Britain, the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR) had been established at the end



Saying farewell before the SS Habana sailed.



Basque refugee children on board the SS Habana about to depart Bilbao for Southampton, 21st May 1937.



One of the ID tags worn by the children on board the SS Habana.



The children disembarking from the SS Habana at Southampton, 23rd May 1937. Members of the Salvation Army wait in the foreground.

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of 1936 to co-ordinate the activities of a multitude of voluntary relief agencies in Spain. The Chair of the Committee, the Conservative M.P. the Duchess of Atholl, and the Independent M.P. Eleanor Rathbone, had visited Madrid in April 1937 and had been deeply affected by the conditions they witnessed. As public pressure to act increased, the NJCSR set up a Basque Children's Committee. The Duchess eventually managed to persuade a reluctant Prime Minister Baldwin to allow up to 4,000 young refugees into Britain on the strict condition that the Government would not take any financial responsibility for the children. This would be the responsibility of the Basque Children's Committee, which would have to guarantee at least ten shillings per week for the care and education of each child. As children were signed up for evacuation, the

Foreign Office insisted that the parents' political affiliation be recorded on their application form in an attempt to achieve a 'balance' in what has been described as 'a quixotically English notion of impartial humanitarianism'.⁽³⁾

A site for a tented reception camp for the refugees was identified in three fields owned by Mr G. A. Brown at Swaythling Lane Farm, North Stoneham, near Eastleigh, Southampton. A local committee enlisted many volunteers from the community, and the site was prepared in two weeks. The ship, the *SS Habana*, which normally carried around 800 passengers, left Bilbao on 21st May carrying the 3,826 children, accompanied by 96 *maestras* (female teachers), 118 *señoritas* (young women who had volunteered

to accompany the children), fifteen Catholic priests, two English doctors and five nurses. The *SS Habana* arrived in Southampton on 23rd May 1937.

The intention was to disperse the young refugees in smaller groups around the country as soon as practically possible. Local committees were hastily set up all over the country and temporary refuges were identified and prepared to receive the refugees. Practical support by a number of agencies produced a variety of material offers of help, including '1,037 pairs of youths and maids boots and shoes' from the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives, the only major trade union with its national headquarters in Leicester at the time. (4) Guidance was issued to 'local committees desiring to assist the National Committee for the Care of Basque Children'. (5) It was suggested that a minimum of 40-50 children per centre was desirable 'to avoid a feeling of loneliness on the part of the children; simplifying repatriation when that is possible; preserving their Basque identity and permitting a teacher to be sent with the group in order that Basque education may be continued'. (6) Finance was to be raised locally to support as many of the children as possible. The local group homes and refuges became known as "colonies", in the sense of the Spanish word *colonia*, or *colonia escolar*, a summer camp for schoolchildren. In all around 100 "colonies" were established across the country. In total around 38,000 young people from the Basque region were evacuated abroad, mainly to France, Mexico, Russia and Belgium. This included the 3,800 who came to Britain. The story of the exile to other countries has been recorded in Spanish publications, but the British exile has been ignored until relatively recently. 'It was as if it hadn't happened.' (7)

In 2002 the "Basque Children of '37 Association UK" was formed by a small group of people, who had direct links to the events of 1937, perhaps as children themselves of the *niños vascos* or of the teachers and volunteer assistants, who had accompanied the evacuees. There was a realisation that the story of these events in Britain in 1937 was disappearing unrecorded, and there was a determination that those who had arrived on the *SS Habana* in May 1937, should not become *los olvidados*, the forgotten ones, of the Spanish Civil War. The aims and objectives of the Association are to support research, to inform and to educate, and to recover the history before it is too late. Although local committees were formed to establish and manage around 100 "colonies", formal minutes and records of proceedings are largely non-existent, and even the very existence of some of the colonies was not known about, or had been lost in memory, until recent research efforts. Although the Leicester "colony" was known about, the Association had virtually no information about the set-up in Leicester. The aim of this paper is to record what can be found about the colony from available sources.

Establishing the Leicester colony

As there was, initially at least, widespread public interest and sympathy for the young evacuees, there was often lively coverage for a time in local newspapers across the country. This has proved to be the most fruitful source of information regarding the Leicester colony. Media reports acted as a spur for local voluntary groups and committees to form in order to play their own role in ensuring the evacuees were quickly dispersed to smaller "colonies" around the country. Leicester was no exception.

Ten days after the arrival of the *SS Habana* it was reported that 'Fifty Spanish refugee children will be arriving in Leicester within a fortnight or three weeks' time, according to present plans, and the committee responsible for their reception and care has still to settle upon suitable quarters for them. The chairman of the committee is Councillor C. R. Keene and the secretary Mrs Attenborough. Some members of the committee have inspected five or six properties and a recommendation will be made to the main committee very soon'. (8) The afore-mentioned secretary was Mary Attenborough, wife of Fred Attenborough, then Principal of the University College of Leicester, and mother of Richard, David and John.

By 5th June it was confirmed that 'the 50 Basque children who are coming to Leicester will be housed at Evington Hall. This was settled at a meeting of members of the committee last evening, and the children will arrive by the end of the month. The Hall, which will be rented, is a big brick mansion with considerable park ground, and buildings that can be adapted as play houses'. (9) Evington Hall had been sold in 1930 to Thomas Henry Bowell following the death of the previous owner, local hosiery manufacturer, John Faire. It was a stuccoed mansion built around 1830 for Henry Freeman Coleman. It was described by auctioneers, Warner, Sheppard and Wade and P. L. Kirby, in the sale particulars dated May 1930, as an 'imposing County Mansion distinguished as Evington Hall, standing in its own spacious grounds adjoining the Spencefield Lane near the village of Evington. A residence of pleasing design and moderate dimension, it is provided with modern comforts and conveniences and commends itself as a Country Home of superior attraction'. (10) In early 1937 however, the Hall had been empty for some time. It had been inspected by members of the committee and found to be in very good structural condition with little overhaul work necessary. The initial expenditure on the Hall for furnishings and rent would be around £1,000.

At this point we learn more about the Leicester committee: 'The local committee, which has been in existence for some weeks, is representative of all religions and social activities

in the city. The Lord Mayor (Councillor A. H. Swain) is president, the Bishop of Leicester chairman, and Mrs Attenborough of University College House, the secretary. The Rev Glan Morgan is the chairman of the executive committee, and there is an appeals committee, of which the Deputy Lord Mayor, Councillor Richard Hallam, is chairman and Councillor Charles Keene secretary.’ (11) On Tuesday 8th May 1937 the *Leicester Mercury* published a letter from the Lord Mayor, Councillor A. H. Swain, and the Bishop of Leicester, Dr Bardsley:

We would commend to the people of Leicester the following appeal from the Leicester Committee for Basque Children. This committee is fully representative of all the interests and life of the city, and it confidently appeals for the help and support of Leicester citizens. The committee has undertaken to house and maintain 50 of the Basque refugee children, and Evington Hall has been taken for this purpose. A sum of £1,000 is needed immediately to meet the initial outlay for repairs and equipment, and then there is the provision for the maintenance of the children. Help may be offered in these ways: 1. Donations can be sent to the Treasurer, Mr G. C. Turner, 15, Churchgate, Leicester. 2. Individual firms or groups of people can provide for one child by subscribing 10s. a week. 3. Gifts may be offered in kind, e.g. bedding, furniture, linen etc. 4. Volunteers can help (a) to clean and prepare the house (b) to act as interpreters of the Basque language. Offers of help other than donations should be sent to the Hon. Sec. Mrs F. L. Attenborough, University College House, Leicester. (12)



Carrying a doll's house into Evington Hall, where 50 Basque children are to stay.

Preparations for the children's stay at Evington Hall, Leicester Mercury, 6th July 1937.

David Attenborough recalls his mother's involvement in preparing Evington Hall: 'My clearest memories of this are of seeing my mother on her hands and knees scrubbing the floors of this disused house to make it ready for them'. (13)

Settling in at Evington Hall

As the 50 young refugees arrived at Leicester's Central Station on Tuesday 6th July 1937, 'members of the committee, including Mrs F. Attenborough, and members of the Leicestershire A.A. waited for them and took them to Evington in their cars. Dr R. Ellis, who has been to Bilbao and also to the camp where the children have been staying, was on the platform. As soon as the train stopped one small child jumped out and into his arms with a very happy smile of recognition. With another small boy she clung to his hand and refused to leave him. The children were accompanied by several helpers, some of whom could not speak a word of English.' (14)



A happy party of Basque children, refugees from the Spanish war, who have arrived at Evington Hall, near Leicester.

Arrival at Evington Hall, Leicester Mercury, 7th July 1937.

David Attenborough recalls: 'The children, when they eventually arrived, seemed very exotic to my eyes with their black hair and dark complexions, and did not of course speak much English. I accompanied my mother on some of her regular visits and got to know some of the children slightly as their English improved.' (15)

During the summer of 1937, after the arrival of the refugees, the *Leicester Mercury* followed events at Evington Hall closely, eager to provide news and information to its readership and to local people, who responded in various ways to the appeal for assistance. On the day after their arrival, the *Leicester Mercury* explained how 'the children are being kept together in families as much as possible, and about seven families have come to Leicester. Dr Richard Ellis, who was on the platform to meet them, was

immediately in great demand by the children. He came over from Spain with them, and has often stayed at the camp (nr. Southampton) since. The English helpers were rather handicapped by their lack of Spanish when they started to show the children to their rooms, and of the three assistants who travelled with them, one teacher and two pupil teachers, only the teacher speaks English. This difficulty was quickly overcome when Miss McPhee, the matron, came on the scene. She has had a great deal of experience in Spanish Morocco and speaks Spanish fluently'.



Basque children peeling potatoes at Evington Hall, near Leicester, where a party of refugees are being accommodated.

HAVING THE TIME OF THEIR LIVES

*Basque Children Think Everything's Lovely
At Evington Hall*

Sharing in the work, Leicester Mercury, 7th July 1937.

'The children are being quartered in several bedrooms, all containing three or four single beds. They will use one of the larger rooms in the house for the classroom, and lessons will begin almost at once.' (16) By Friday 9th July local interest and curiosity apparently reached a point where police had to be called to control crowds at Evington Hall, and the *Leicester Mercury* reported that:

According to the matron, Miss McPhee, visitors sat on the railings surrounding the grounds after they were kept out by the police and plied the children with cigarettes. 'It is most undesirable that the children should be spoiled like this', said Miss McPhee. 'Of course we know that some of the older boys like to smoke occasionally, but we do not want them smoking a lot.' All the children are very well, but it is felt that the children must have some time to settle into their

new surroundings ... Yesterday a contingent of 50 desks arrived, and the books and pencils are expected within a day or two. Although there is no definite routine in operation as yet, all the children do their share of the work in the home and the grounds. Boys peel the potatoes and help in the kitchen, girls tidy the rooms and scrub the floors. Some of the boys were busy cutting the long grass with sickles to make a football pitch ... One room in the home is being used as a church. Father Dunstan Sargent of Leicester is on the committee and will celebrate Mass every Sunday. (17)

By the middle of the second week formal education was underway at Evington Hall:

Three hours classroom lessons in the morning. In the afternoons girls will do domestic science or some other practical subject while the boys are busy in the carpenter's shop. Several offers have been received from people eager to help in giving lessons or lending equipment and a course in English lessons started today. 'It is a great relief to have them out of the way for a few hours during the day as 50 children all over the house are rather apt to upset household arrangements', said Miss McPhee. (18)

On the following day, Thursday, 15th July 1937, came another stark reminder of how the civil war in Spain was having a direct impact on communities in Britain. News had been received that Fred Sykes (35 and single), a member of the Leicester Communist Party, and a well-known speaker in the Market Place, had been killed while fighting with the International Brigade on the Guadarama front near Madrid in February.

There was no news of his friend, Jack Watson, but it was feared that he had also been killed. Mr James Hand of Gopsall Street, Leicester, with whom Sykes lived, said: 'He was an ardent worker for the Spanish people, and was the first person to work for them in Leicester'. (19) He had left for Spain with Watson on 20th December 1936.

At the end of July, ten of the boys from Evington Hall had been invited to be guests for two weeks of the St James the Greater (Leicester) Scouts at their summer camp at Salcombe, Devon. 'District Commissioner Pank said he expected no language difficulties. Some have been Scouts and can speak French. He can speak French and Spanish so they should cope.' (20) The report regarding the summer camp in Devon prompted a letter to the *Leicester Mercury* asking at whose expense the boys were enjoying the holiday and a subsequent response from Commissioner Pank himself: '... the major part of the money consisted of the

usual weekly amounts set aside for their keep, and the balance was donated by people interested in the welfare of these boys. It is a pity that Mr W.'s sense of humanity is so small that he apparently resents an inexpensive holiday for boys who have lost mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters, and who spent last year, underfed, in towns subjected to daily bombarding ...' (21)

At the end of July, after almost a month at Evington, the *Leicester Mercury* gave a brief update:

Business as usual at Evington Hall although 14 older boys are away, 10 with the Scouts, 4 more with Dr Ellis in Devon. Miss McPhee said she was rather glad on the whole that so many boys are to be away for a fortnight. 'It will give me a chance to get the house cleaned up. There isn't much hope with 14 nearly grown-up boys all over the place.' The children enjoy going to Leicester to the shops. They do not like walking much. Most are town-bred and are much more at home in the busy streets of the city than on a country walk. Some have received letters from their mothers, who had fled to France.

Here for the long haul

As the internecine warfare in Spain entered its second year and the Basque country eventually fell to Franco's Nationalist rebels, initial thoughts of a temporary stay in England for the young refugees turned into the realisation of a much longer stay, particularly for many who did not know the whereabouts or fate of their own family members. Efforts were made to live alongside the local community and retain some semblance of 'normality'. In early September 1937, the *Leicester Mercury* reported how a team of Leicester Boys beat the Basques at football:

At Evington Playing Fields last night ten English boys and one Italian boy from Melbourne Road School Senior Boys Team played the Basques from Evington Hall. Leicester won 4-2 in a closely-fought game. Practically all the Basques played without proper boots and some had only tennis shoes to wear. Their lack of equipment was a cause of two slight accidents. Francisco Cabrera, captain and centre-half, and Francisco Perez, goalkeeper, were both slightly injured by the other boys' boots ... Mr K. L. McKinnon, who is touring the Basque camps to pick a football team to tour the English public schools, refereed the match, and a very complicated job it was. His Spanish is very good ... but shouting out instructions in two languages while rushing up and down the field with a whistle, he found very tiring ... All the boys seemed to enjoy the game ... and managed to convey the impression that they were all good friends. (22)

Interviewed in 1986, Leicester man, Ernest Hunt, recalled Basque boys at his school in Mantle Road when he was

about 15. He remembered them 'having no shoes and playing football barefoot'. (23) Another interviewee, Ms D. M. Adams, a former teacher, recalled pupils at Wyggeston Girls School who mended shoes for the Basque children. (24)

In late October 1937, the *Leicester Mercury* again conveyed a sense of long-term normality at Evington Hall with another update:

The 50 Basque refugees, who are living at Evington Hall, have settled into a very normal existence with lessons and games just like any ordinary boarding school. When I visited the Hall today I found a large class of children carrying on with their ordinary lessons in the schoolroom. There was none of the restlessness, which characterised them when they first arrived. They all looked extremely healthy and happy. Their English had improved enormously. In addition to their normal lessons, which they are given by their Spanish teachers, a number of English people are helping. Miss Catherine Peach visits the Hall twice a week to teach girls embroidery and handicrafts. While the girls are busy learning the gentler arts the boys have been working in the garden with Mr D. Lake, who has been living at the Hall for seven weeks teaching them woodwork, gardening, English and coaching their football. It is hoped to hold a bazaar and exhibition soon of the work done by the children. Some of the work is in London where it was sent to the national exhibition of work done in all the camps in England. They have been very successful with football, having won six out of seven games, and are hoping for fixtures with other Leicester schools. The happy atmosphere has been greatly helped by news from parents and relations. Most receive letters regularly from their relations. One family, who had not heard anything since they left Bilbao, had a letter from their grandmother last week. None of the letters has asked the children to return home. Relatives are happy to feel the children are in safety. (25)

Almost six months after their arrival at Evington Hall we hear of the first departures. On 14th December 1937 the *Leicester Mercury* reported that: 'Some of the Basque children living in Leicester for a few months are set to return to parents in Bilbao in the next few days. Three of the fifty children from Evington are all prepared to leave England, Anastasio Badiola, 13, Jose Luis Alonso, 10, and Rosalia Palacios, 7 years old'. (26) The following day the newspaper explained that the children leaving Evington were not sure how they felt about going back: 'They have been happy and safe, learned English ideas and customs and have almost forgotten the tragic circumstances which led to them coming to England. Although all have heard from their parents no mention has been made in any letters that they might be going back. The little girl is quite happy to go back to her home, but one of the boys is sorry to leave his new friends.

The children will sail to Bilbao on a Franco ship. Conditions in Bilbao, according to letters received, are quiet so far as fighting is concerned, but there is a lack of work, money and food. The other children are not envious.' One of the volunteers, Señorita Margarita Indart, told the reporter that her parents and sister were living in Bilbao, but both her brothers were prisoners of Franco. 'I don't want to go back to Spain yet. I have been as happy as the children in England'. (27)



Christmas 1937 at Evington Hall. (Reproduced by kind permission of the Basque Children of '37 Association.)

Into 1938

In early 1938, the Leicester Committee published a report on its first six months' work with the refugees. The report was summarised in the *Leicester Mercury* on 2nd February 1938 under the headline: '50 Basques kept on £25 a week'. According to the newspaper, the Basque children had:

... found many friends among Leicester people, who go to the Hall regularly at weekends and take them out. These friends, and the regular football matches, have done a great deal towards helping the children to feel at home. The 30 boys and 20 girls, whose ages range from 7 to 15, live in rather a Spartan atmosphere, but with limited resources it has been found impossible to do otherwise. The hall is run by the matron with a daily cook, and all the domestic work is done by the four Spanish señoritas and a few older girls. Owing to the differences in age the Spanish teacher who came over with the children found it difficult to teach the older boys, who disliked taking lessons with younger children. To overcome this difficulty 12 senior boys were placed in schools in Leicester. These boys are learning English from their school mates, while the English boys are picking up some Spanish. Six of the older girls come into Leicester during the week for lessons in English and typing, while Mrs Collinson and Miss C Peach teach all kinds of handicrafts at the hall once a week. (28)

The £25 weekly for our 50 children provides for their food, and that of the six adults on the staff, for the

matron's salary, the wages of the cook and part-time man, for heat and light, postage on the children's letters to Spain, some clothes and incidental expenses, and bus fares (which, now that the boys go to school, cost at least £1 a week). Many of those who have adopted a child by promising to subscribe 10s. weekly, have chosen a special child, and have taken a personal interest in him. Such a relationship is particularly valuable to these children, who have been suddenly cut off from their family and country; it gives them back confidence in themselves, and we should be glad if more of our subscribers would come to Evington to choose a child. (29)

We learn that seven children have gone back to Spain, but others will not return until their parents are living in better conditions. Mary Attenborough, author of the report, writes: 'Either both parents are refugees, living in appalling conditions, or the mother is a refugee and the father a prisoner in Franco territory. We cannot send these children back yet, and undo all that we did when they were rescued from Bilbao.' (30) We also learn from a letter written by Mary Attenborough to Father Pedro Atucha that the repatriated children were replaced by children whose parents were refugees. (31)

David Attenborough recalls: 'The organisers, including my mother, were of course anxious to engage local people in helping and making the children feel at home. One of the ways of doing that was to arrange parties at the Hall during which the Basque children dressed in an approximation of their traditional costumes, performed regional dances and sang Basque folk-songs.' (32)



Getting ready for the concert at the Edward Wood Hall, Leicester Mercury, 12th February 1938. (Reproduced with acknowledgement to the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

In February 1938, the Leicester Committee organised an appeal and fund-raising concert performance by the local Basque children at the Edward Wood Hall, now the Fraser Noble Hall, on the corner of London Road and University

Road, Leicester. It was hoped to attract an audience of around 500. (33) Sourcing appropriate music proved difficult and unable to get any music ‘... all accompaniment of the dancing has to be voices only, which is a great shame for the singers’. (34) Eventually copies of some Basque songs were borrowed from Father Atucha. (35) The children made the costumes themselves with the help of their Spanish voluntary assistants. The concert was attended by the Duchess of Atholl, M.P. for Kinross, who was chairman of the national Committee for Basque Children, and who delivered an appeal to the audience. She explained the background to the Basques’ presence and ‘claimed that those who said that the children were rescued from imaginary dangers, either did not know the facts, or did not want to know them’. (36) We learn that ‘adoption’ of children by individuals or organisations raising and contributing 10s. per week (the weekly cost of keeping one child) was popular in Leicester and elsewhere. Subscribers to the ‘adoption’ scheme in Leicester included Wyggeston Boys School and Wyggeston Girls School, with two children each, the Newarke, Alderman Newton and Collegiate Girls Schools, the Western Park Open Air School (staff and friends), the Domestic Science College, the nursing staff at the Leicester Royal Infirmary, the Church of Christ (Evington Road) and the Society of Friends. (37) Also at this event were the two doctors, who had flown to Bilbao to make the necessary arrangements for the evacuation on the *SS Habana*, Dr Richard Ellis and Dr Audrey Russell. Councillor Richard Hallam proposed a vote of thanks to the Duchess of Atholl, and, referring to Dr Ellis, he said they felt proud of him as a Leicester man, who had worthily upheld the traditions of his family. (38)

The following month saw a significant group of the young refugees depart from Leicester London Road station on the first stage of the journey back to Spain. On 22nd March the *Leicester Mercury* reported how: ‘22 small travellers’ set off, ‘only those who will have parents or friends with homes in comparative safe parts are being sent back, although ‘Mrs F. L. Attenborough, who saw them off, told a reporter that many of them wept because they hardly knew what they were returning to’. (39)

In May 1938, the “Mr Leicester” page of the *Leicester Mercury* referred to the impending first anniversary of the arrival of the Basque refugees in England. Mary Attenborough explained that there were now 45 children left at Evington Hall, who would remain there until the end of the Civil War. Their parents were either not traced or were prisoners, or were themselves refugees. ‘She has heard from most of the children who recently went back to Spain in Franco territory. The reports are not encouraging, for many of the boys who were here doing so well in school are now running the streets, there being no school for them to attend. This is a real shock to those who, in Leicester, had put such

hard work into making these children happy here and their days useful (40)

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Leicester's refuge for Basque children from the Spanish Civil War (Part 2)

Richard Graves

This article continues the story of Leicester's role in the evacuation of child refugees from the Spanish Civil War where a colony of Basque children was established at Evington Hall in July 1937. In Leicester, support and friendship came from many members of the local community, including Fred and Mary Attenborough, and the children's arrival generated extensive and daily reporting on the war in Spain, not only in the national press, but also in the pages of the *Leicester Mercury*.

The Repatriation Debate

Initial thoughts of a temporary stay soon turned into the realisation of a much longer stay, particularly for those children who did not know the whereabouts or fate of their own family. Although 7 children were reported to have gone back to Spain by January 1938, and a further 22 children who were considered to have parents or friends with homes in comparatively safe parts were repatriated the following March, 45 children were recorded as being at Evington Hall in May 1938.

After May 1938 there is no more reporting in the local press from Evington Hall. Instead, through the spring and summer of 1938, we see comments and views expressed by correspondents through the letters pages. The British public was fairly well-informed at the time about the context for the evacuation of the Basque refugees. By the middle of 1938 it seemed clear that Franco's Nationalist rebels would be the eventual 'victors' in Spain even though the conflict only formally ceased almost a year later. Events in Central Europe were now dominating the news, with the conflict in Spain being replaced by daily reporting on the fruitless attempts to appease Hitler. As Britain faced its own external threats, and as the conflict in Spain extended into a second and a third year, the events at Guernica became more remote in the public memory. More often now, when the public remembered the refugees, a sense of impatience was expressed that as the conflict in Spain had been 'resolved', even though in reality, the situation was far from resolved by Franco's 'victory', the Basque refugees should return home so that Britain could focus instead on the mounting threat to its own existence and identity.

On 26th May 1938 the *Leicester Mercury* published a letter from a group known as the Spanish Children's Repatriation Committee, chaired by Sir Arnold Wilson and based in



Evington Hall in 1937, home to Basque children refugees. Leicester Mercury, June 1937. (Reproduced by permission of Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland Record Office.)

London. The letter was in response to comments made in an article on 18th May. The letter claimed that the new Spanish Nationalist Government had made education 'a very special feature in the reconstruction of Spain ... and the number of schools already constructed in war time is considerable'. (1) The letter goes on to say that readers need have no concerns about the treatment of children '... returned to their own country and people, as they should be at the earliest possible moment. Any of them who have lost their parents, or whose parents cannot for the time being be traced will be well and carefully looked after by the social welfare organisations of National Spain. These centres have been personally inspected by three members of this committee, who can vouch for their humanity, efficiency and the good food supplied therein, all children being treated with impartiality, quite irrespective of the political colour or acts of their parents.' (2) This letter produced a swift response from Mary Attenborough in her role as Hon. Secretary of the Leicestershire Committee for the Basque Children who wrote to the group saying it 'has not helped to repatriate any of the 1,800 children that have been sent back to their parents by the Basque Children's Committee'. (3) Mrs Attenborough continues:

We know that at least three of our families in Bilbao and one in San Sebastian are not able to attend school. In one case the aunt of a child still at Evington wrote saying how thankful she was that her

niece was receiving regular lessons since her little friend who lived in the same street in Bilbao and who had been repatriated to her parents had to ‘run the streets’ ... We now have 45 children at Evington whose parents are either prisoners or refugees. Sir Arnold Wilson’s Committee has previously suggested that these children, too, should be sent back en masse to Bilbao, there to be cared for in institutions – where, no doubt, they would be taught that their parents are traitors and the cause for which they are fighting is wicked.’ (4)

Directly addressing those who have supported the cause in Leicestershire, Mrs Attenborough concludes:

We should be failing in our duty to the children, and to their parents who confided them to our care, if we adopted the course urged by these gentlemen, and I cannot believe that charitable people in Leicester would agree for one moment that we should do so. Our desire is to be able to keep our Leicester children until they can return to their parents, but at the end of June our funds will be exhausted, and if we are not to fail in our task we must beg all our friends to help generously once again. (5)

The continuing debate, both locally and nationally, reflected the divided political sympathies, even in this country, sparked by events in Nationalist Spain. The Spanish Children Repatriation Committee members continued their ‘dialogue’ with Mary Attenborough through the letters pages of the *Leicester Mercury*. In an attempt to clarify the position once and for all a letter from J. H. McCallum Scott of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, in London, states:

The position regarding repatriation is perfectly clear. The Spanish Children’s Repatriation Committee is perfectly aware of this. All those children whose parents are in Bilbao and at liberty are being returned ... The children remaining in this country cannot be reunited with their parents, who are either missing, or political prisoners, or refugees in France or in any other parts of Spain. According to the information we have received (from perfectly trustworthy sources) such children would not necessarily be well-treated on their return to Bilbao. (6)

The Spanish Children Repatriation Committee remained single-minded in its view. In reply to Mr Scott:

We can without hesitation, affirm that all children, whether their parents can be traced or not, and whatever the politics of parents

or relatives, will be cared for by the social welfare centres of Nationalist Spain with the utmost kindness; there is, in fact, no reason why all the Basque children now in this country should not be sent back to the Basque region of Spain. We might mention that three members of this Committee have personally inspected these social welfare centres, and can vouch for their efficiency. (7)

In her final word on the matter Mary Attenborough makes her most impassioned statement yet in a letter in early August:

If we were to write to the refugee mother of one of our families at Evington and say that we had decided to send her children back to Bilbao into the hands of those same people who are holding her husband prisoner, it would not be much comfort to her to be assured that, in the words of your correspondent, her children will be treated ‘with the utmost kindness’. It is difficult for her to realise that the same authority who is still bombing open towns and villages with unparalleled barbarity can be relied upon to treat her children ‘with the utmost kindness’ ... If we can send back children to parents with homes to receive them, then we think that they should go, whether the parents are in Nationalist or Government Spain – but we will not deliver the children up to their parents’ enemies. (8)

The end of the Leicester colony

After August 1938 there are no further reports or letters about Evington Hall in the *Leicester Mercury* until March 1939 when the newspaper reported that the Hall was to become a Convent School:



The only known surviving envelope cover of a letter sent to a child at Evington Hall, sent to Luciano Lambarri from Bilbao on 22nd July 1938 - note the Spanish military censor stamp bottom left. (Cover reproduced with acknowledgement to Cliff Kirkpatrick.)

Evington Hall, which has eleven acres of land, and which at present is the home of the Basque refugee children, is to be acquired by the Sisters of the Order of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin for use as a convent secondary school. The Leicester settlement of the Order is the only one of its kind in the country. There are eighteen sisters now in residence at their present Convent in Glenfield Road, opposite St. Paul's (Anglican) Church. The Convent School has scholars from kindergarten age up to eighteen. It is stated that the school has outgrown itself, the increasing numbers of scholars and a waiting list making necessary consideration of new premises. The Order will move into Evington Hall in September, and in the meantime the Hall will be adapted for its new purposes. The present Convent is likely to be sold. The cost of the Evington Hall conversion will, it is stated, run into many thousands of pounds. (9)

At the time of this article the colony was still at the Hall, although in view of the comment that adaptation work will be carried out 'in the meantime' it is likely that the numbers of children present had dwindled significantly by March 1939, and it may have been possible to start some conversion work with minimal disruption to the remaining refugees. Evidence that a sale to the Sisters was under consideration as early as the autumn of 1938, is found in the archives of former Leicester auctioneers and estate agents, Warner, Sheppard & Wade, *Evington Hall sale 1938-39*. A letter to solicitors acting for the purchasers, dated 4th October 1938, stated: 'As previously mentioned the sale is at the sum of £5,600 ... The property is at present let to a committee responsible for the Basque children ... In the case of the tenancy of the Hall, as soon as the contract has been signed we will make arrangements so that possession can be available before Easter next.' (10) The minutes of the national Basque Children's Committee meeting in London on 8th November 1938, record that: 'A formal note had been received from Mrs Attenborough informing the Committee that Evington Hall must be closed next Easter, and the Leicester Committee could not obtain alternative accommodation. It was agreed to use the Leicester Home to its fullest capacity as long as it remained open, as the children there enjoy many advantages not available elsewhere.' (11) In February 1939 the Central Basque Children's Committee minutes record that:

Mrs Attenborough reported that when Evington Hall closed, the House Committee would continue its work for the purpose of keeping in touch with the children who were in private houses in the district. Mrs Attenborough thought her Committee would be very willing to cover the whole of the Midland area for the Central Committee if this were necessary. (12)

Mary Attenborough attended the next meeting of the Central Basque Children's Committee on 20th March 1939, but did not attend the next two on 22nd June and 14th July. There is no specific mention of Evington in the list of recently closed colonies reported to the June Committee. However, confirmation that the proposed sale probably proceeded on schedule comes in a book by A H. Kimberlin entitled *The Return of Catholicism to Leicester 1746-1946*. In a reference to the Convent and School of the Nativity, Kimberlin notes:

'Removed in 1939 to Evington Hall (then part of Sacred Heart Parish) where a school could be established in larger grounds and with wider possibilities for education. The school quickly flourished in spite of war difficulties; and reached rapidly the number of 210.' (13) The Convent School remained at Evington Hall until 2011 when it moved to alternative premises. Today the Hall is home to a Hindu faith free school. From the evidence above it must be assumed that the Committee relinquished the lease and vacated Evington Hall sometime between



Plaque situated at the entrance to Southampton Library and Art Gallery, designed by Herminio Martinez for the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Basque children aboard the Habana.

April and July 1939. How many refugees remained by that time is not known. Presumably the remaining children were repatriated, transferred to other 'colonies' or found new homes, and possibly employment within the host community in Leicester or elsewhere. It is not clear what happened to the Basque teachers, señoritas and priests, who originally accompanied the children, and who faced serious personal risks if they returned to Nationalist Spain. Fred and Mary Attenborough were to continue their work with refugees and by July 1939, they had taken in two young Jewish refugees from Berlin, Irene and Helga-Maria Bejach, who were to remain in their care for the duration of the war. (14)

Memories of Leicester

In much the same way that there are very few contemporary records of the Leicester colony apart from the reports and correspondence in the *Leicester Mercury* there are also very few later references after its closure in 1939. However, the very paucity of references makes it worthwhile recording

whatever is available before it all becomes lost with the passing of time and the generation of 1937. One of the aims of the Basque Children of '37 Association, when it was founded in 2002, was to gather and record as many testimonies as possible from surviving refugees and their families, a task never attempted before in any systematic manner. In 2012 to mark the 75th anniversary of the sailing of the *Habana*, the Association published a volume of collected testimonies entitled: *Memorias: The Basque Children remember and are remembered*. Helpfully, it contains two references to the Evington colony, one from Vicente Alti Carro, the other from Manuel Villeras Martinez.

Vicente Alti Carro describes how he, aged about 6, and his younger sister, Ana, about 5, arrived with 50 other children 'in front of an enormous house, headquarters of a huntsman's club ... The boys' bedrooms were on one side and the girls' on the other. There were army-style beds, but they were comfortable. Life followed its smooth course. We used to go to classes at the Art and Technology College, and at the weekends English families would invite us to spend the day with them. We made a lot of friends like this. The one who used to come most frequently was the well-known film producer, Richard Attenborough. There were other friends, too. Thanks to people like them our exile was made more bearable'. (15) Vicente eventually moved to stay in a family home at Hucknall, Nottinghamshire, and then to another colony, before being sent back to Spain in December 1939 with his sister and another group of children without having had any news of his parents in the meantime. His father had been interned in a concentration camp in France before being 'rescued' and travelling to exile in Chile. Back in Spain, the next few years for Vicente, at home with his mother, grandmother and younger siblings, were times of privation. The whole family was eventually re-united in Chile in August 1945, eight years after Vicente had left Spain on the *Habana*.

On returning to Spain, Manuel Villeras Martinez kept in touch with friends from the Leicester colony who had also returned to Spain, mostly to the Basque region. In 1987, fifty years after they had arrived in England on the *Habana*, a number of surviving former refugees in Spain decided to revisit the places they had stayed at. Manuel was one of a group of twelve who returned to Leicester in September 1987: 'We were full of anticipation when we went to St. Pancras Station to take the train to Leicester.' (16) The Civic authorities had been contacted and a reception arranged at Leicester Town Hall: 'After waiting for a few minutes, the Mayor was ready to receive us. And, oh, what a surprise! The Mayor and his wife were Hindus! He was wearing European clothes, but his wife was looking fantastic wearing the sari of her native country. I had to speak with the Mayor, tell him about our wanderings during the Civil War, which

he only knew about through Hemingway's books, as he must have been about thirty or forty years old.' (17) The *Leicester Mercury* reported this event very briefly: 'Childhood memories of life in Leicester came rushing back when a group of Spaniards made an emotional return to the city.' Referring to 'the dozen visitors' we learn that: '50 years on, the evacuees were greeted by the Lord Mayor Mr Gordhan Parmar and his wife Lalita and chatted about their memories over lunch.' (18) Manuel Martinez explains how the Mayor's secretary accompanied the group in taxis, expressing how surprised he was at the changes which had taken place between 1937-1987:

... [the Mayor's secretary] pointed out the little town on the outskirts, Evington, where the colony had been. I remembered various streets which by dint of going to school the same way every day had become etched in my mind; they still existed, but you can imagine how much a town changes in fifty years! In fact, Evington was there but it wasn't the Evington we had known and the drivers were getting very annoyed as we kept on asking the inhabitants we saw. The fields, where the colony Evington Hall had been, contained a whole lot of skyscrapers, each one very close to the other.

We had lost hope of finding it when we asked an old lady who was passing by whether in her childhood she had heard of a colony of Basque children. She replied quite naturally: 'Yes, sir, I've heard people speak about the colony and I had several friends there. It's quite close, behind those skyscrapers and now it's become a school run by nuns.' We each thanked her in turn and her friendly smile filled us with happiness. It was true that behind the skyscrapers there was a little path edged with trees and a fence: at the bottom on the left, we straightaway saw that it was Evington Hall. We knocked on the door and a small nun came out and I tried to explain to her the reason for our visit. She went to fetch the Mother Superior who, luckily, had lived in Gibraltar and spoke some Spanish. With my English and her Spanish, and with her permission, we went to look round the place where we had lived for three years. Tears flowed freely as we thanked the nun for her help and she told us that she had heard it said that her convent had sheltered Spanish children during the Civil War. We said goodbye, thanking her effusively because thanks to her kindness we had been able to realise the dream we had had for so long. We looked back as we left the place, it surely being the last time that we would see the colony which held so many memories of the 'Children of '37'. (19)

David Attenborough recalled an incident in 2010 when he attended a festival in Santiago de Compostela and 'found myself sitting next to a man of about my own age who said

he had come from a hundred miles or so away to the east in order to meet me, since he had been one of the boys at Evington – and he wished to say thank-you. He remembered the whole episode very well and was anxious to say how grateful they had all been. Apparently after the children returned to Spain many of them kept in touch.’ (20)

By the end of 1939 some 90% of the original *Habana* refugees had been repatriated. However, a significant number of younger children still remained the responsibility of the national Basque Children’s Committee during the war years. Even by June 1941 the Committee had responsibility for 148 children under the age of 14, too young to be financially independent. (21) Most of the colonies had closed by then or retained only small numbers, and the interest of local communities was by now re-focused onto wartime efforts to protect and in some cases evacuate British children. This increased the financial pressure on the Committee as resources dwindled, and so the idea of ‘adoption’ by willing local families had become seen as more necessary.

One of the refugees affected in this way was Herminio Martinez. He recalls time spent in Leicester, not at the Evington colony, but with a local family. His story was picked up by Adrian Bell, author of *Only for three months*. Herminio arrived in England on the *Habana* with his younger brother in 1937 and had lived in colonies in Swansea, Brampton, Tynemouth, Margate and Carshalton. One day at Carshalton in 1940 Herminio was told suddenly to get ready to move and was introduced to a man, Charles Green, who then drove him to Leicester. Mr Green and his wife had a daughter and had read in a Methodist journal about the Basque children. He had driven down to Carshalton hoping to adopt a girl as a ‘sister’ for his daughter, but was told there were only boys awaiting placement in family homes. Mr Green readily agreed to a change of plan, a gesture, which Herminio described as: ‘lovely and generous. Consequently, I finished up in Leicester ... and there of course I encountered English life for the first time.’ (22) Herminio was to spend three years in Leicester during the war years with the Green family: ‘How my aunt and uncle tamed me, I don’t know. How I adapted to that sort of life, I don’t know. Physically I was very, very active; I was tough and of course I couldn’t keep still; from the moment I left the house I would tear down the road, jumping over all the garage entrances. I went to junior school. In no time at all I had no end of friends. I think I adapted to that way of life incredibly well.’ (23) After three years of a ‘thoroughly English way of life’ Herminio had to leave his ‘pacifist guardians’ in Leicester because of the economic hardships they were suffering in the war. He returned to Carshalton, the last remaining colony by 1943. He reflects; ‘Whilst I think I was very lucky to have spent those three years with my aunt and uncle in Leicester, I think

really that, looking back, it was a period in my life that I value but I’m glad it didn’t continue, because I was losing my Spanish background. I was losing my language. Going back to the colony at that particular time meant returning to an environment which brought out the best of Spanish culture.’ (24)

When the national Basque Children’s Committee was finally dissolved in 1951, there were still 270 of the original group of almost 4,000 children living in England. Herminio was one of these. He eventually settled in London as a young adult and trained to become a teacher. Some years later he took an MA degree in Spanish Studies. He expressed the view of a long-term exile: ‘I had this need to establish some sort of roots, intellectual roots, and to find myself. I needed to have a background’. (25) In 2012, on the 75th anniversary of the sailing of the *Habana*, Herminio, then living in a flat in London, was interviewed by Sam Jones, a *Guardian* journalist. The last word belongs to Herminio: ‘I am of that Spanish generation that never was, the Spain that never flowered because it was cut off. Life has been very interesting, but I still have within me a sadness, a loneliness. In essence, I don’t belong.’ (26)

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16. *ibid.* p.102.
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19. Natalia Benjamin, op. cit. pp.103-104.
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Dr Richard Ellis (1902 – 1966) Dr Audrey Eva Ellis (née Russell) (1902 – 1975)

The names of Richard Ellis and Audrey Russell feature prominently in the story of the evacuation and care of the Basque refugee children. Ellis and Russell were two British doctors sent by the Ministry of Health to Bilbao in early May 1937 to check that each child who would be sailing on the *Habana* was medically fit to travel, and to make sure they would not be bringing disease into Britain. Ellis also assisted in the evacuation itself and undertook follow-up work at the reception camp near Southampton. Ellis became a member of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief between 1937-39.

Richard White Bernard Ellis was a member of the well-known Quaker family, prominent in many aspects of civic and commercial life in Leicestershire. He was born in Leicester in 1902, youngest of four children of Bernard and Isabel Ellis. One of his siblings was Colin Ellis, historian, author of *History in Leicester*, first published in 1948. The 1911 Census shows the family living in Avenue Road, Leicester. Richard Ellis attended Quaker schools at The Downs and Leighton Park before going up to Kings College, Cambridge in 1920 to study Natural Sciences. He later qualified in Medicine at St. Thomas's Hospital, London in 1926, and went on to the MD and MA in 1931. He trained in paediatrics at Boston Children's Hospital, USA, and then became a member of staff at Guy's Hospital, London. Audrey Ellis was born in Southampton on 31st March 1902.

Ellis and Russell co-authored a 'special article' published in *The Lancet* on 29th May 1937, entitled 'Four thousand Basque children'. The article describes conditions in Bilbao in April/May 1937 and the findings of their medical examinations of the children prior to embarkation. The following extracts from this article paint a picture of a city under siege and the impact on the health of its citizens:

The shipload of children from Bilbao, who arrived at Southampton on Saturday is a grim reminder of the magnitude of the refugee problem created by modern warfare. As the arrival of this group of children has already aroused interest and sympathy in this country, we feel that a few particulars of existing conditions in the Basque capital and of our impressions received of both parents and children during the medical examinations carried out there may be enlightening. The Basque Government is making magnificent efforts to deal with conditions becoming daily more impossible. Most of the public services are still operating though the schools have had to be closed owing to the incessant raids, the women and children spending most of the day on the steps of the 'refugios' (or bomb shelters) ready to take cover when the sirens give the alarm. For many weeks the people have been living on beans, rice, cabbage and 35 grammes a day of black bread ... milk and butter are almost unobtainable. There are



Dr Audrey Russell carrying out medical examinations of Basque children in Bilbao, May 1937. (Reproduced with acknowledgement to the Basque Children of '37 Association.)



Richard Ellis in RAF uniform with Spanish cap. The Spanish caption reads: 'Richard Ellis, one of the English doctors, who cared for the Basque children.' (Reproduced with acknowledgement to the Basque Children of '37 Association.)

small supplies of oranges and olive oil, but only a minimal amount of fresh vegetables. One pregnant mother who brought up five healthy looking children for examination was herself so weak she could hardly stand, and said, smiling, that perhaps she would find some time to eat when her children were in England. Perhaps the most surprising feature of the examination was the good health of the group as a whole, in spite of the conditions of deprivation, anxiety and overcrowding in which they had been living for many weeks. It was evident that even the poorer peasants have a high standard of care for their children, and that before the blockade almost all the latter were well-developed and well fed. The very high incidence of dental caries, however, is probably attributable at least in part to the deficient diet.'



Children lined up for medical examination near Bilbao, Leicester Mercury, 10th June 1937. (Reproduced by permission of Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland Record Office.)

On 10th June 1937, two weeks after their article in *The Lancet*, the *Leicester Mercury* published a full-page article written by Ellis. This was in the period between the *Habana* arriving at Southampton and the fifty refugees arriving at Evington. The article set the scene for readers in his native Leicestershire by describing conditions in Bilbao and also the conditions on board the *Habana* itself en route to England. The following extracts are taken from the article:

Everywhere the streets and squares were crowded with people, groups of men standing talking or unloading sandbags, women and children for the most part sitting on the pavements around the bomb-shelters that have been set up in every street. The shops are closed, or opened only for an hour or two a day (since they have nearly all long since sold all they had), the cafes remain open as meeting places, but they too have nothing to sell except camomile tea, without even sugar to make it palatable. Coffee can be had three times a week, meat occasionally when a refugee, evacuated from his farm, drives his cattle into Bilbao to be slaughtered, whilst milk, eggs and butter are practically unobtainable. Dogs and cats (which have a not unpleasant taste similar to rabbit) have practically disappeared from the streets. The bombardment of the city is a matter of daily, and often hourly, occurrence. On the second day I was there, the sirens had given warning of planes

overhead, and high explosive and incendiary bombs had been dropped five times before 8 a.m. The schools have all been closed owing to the continual necessity of taking cover, and during clear weather all normal activities are completely disrupted. The city welcomes a rainy day with a sigh of relief, as it means visibility will be too poor for intensive bombing! The children chosen to come to England were selected roughly in the proportion of the different political parties, the Basque Nationalists (who are those particularly anxious to preserve the

Basque language and traditions) being the largest single group. The children were embarked sardine-wise in the 'Habana', an old liner converted for refugee transport, and in the early morning we slipped out of the harbour to meet our British naval escort and a high sea in the Bay of Biscay. Owing to the

extreme expedition and co-operativeness of the port medical authority, Dr Williams, at Southampton the whole four thousand were re-examined and disembarked in two days, and transferred to a huge camp that had been prepared for them at Eastleigh. It is hoped that local committees will be able to organise homes for groups of children and be responsible for the financial 'adoption' of children within the group.

After the outbreak of World War II in 1939 Richard Ellis went to Hungary and Romania where he worked for a while with Polish refugees. He then joined the RAF where he served as a Wing Commander in North Africa, Italy and Belgium. Richard and Audrey were married on 18th January 1941, both aged 38, at St Marylebone, now Westminster, Register Office. Richard Ellis was described on the marriage certificate as 'Flight Lieutenant, RAF, and Doctor of Medicine, Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, main residence 22, Harley Street, W1.' Audrey Russell was described as a 'Bachelor of Medicine, resident at 10, Woburn Square, WC1'. Shortly after the war Richard Ellis accepted a post as Professor of Child Life and Health in Edinburgh where he spent the rest of his career, retiring in 1964. He died on 15th September 1966, aged 64, at Cholesbury, near Chesham in the Chilterns. Audrey Ellis died on 10th July 1975, also at Cholesbury, aged 73.