

A Home of Smiles - Rusthall's Beacon

by Anne Krisman Goldstein

In 1937, sixty Basque refugee children arrived at The Beacon in Rusthall, Kent. The Beacon is an elegant Arts and Crafts house in a Victorian and Edwardian beauty spot called Happy Valley. It is now a restaurant and popular wedding venue.

The Basque children allocated to Rusthall had a wonderful time. It was a “home of smiles” according to the Matron, Miss Blackwell. The Beacon was known for its caring and healing approach. The children’s troubled drawings of ships being bombed changed to pastoral scenes of cattle in fields.

The local Marquis of Abergavenny took the ‘*niños vascos*’ on a hunt at Eridge Castle. There was boating, cinema trips and a memorable time when the Basque children were saluted in admiration by local school children on a visit to the Opera House.

Rusthall raised funds to keep the children at The Beacon, supported by the 250 members of the Kent and Sussex Children’s Appeal committee, led by the inspirational nurse, educator and writer Miss Muriel Amy Payne. She had been involved with the early days of the Tavistock Clinic in London, running their hostel for patients with mental health difficulties, an early experiment in therapeutic communities.

Adults paid 6d and children 3d to visit The Beacon and to see the Basque children, dressed in their traditional costumes, dancing and singing their poignant songs from home.

Individuals sponsored children at 10s a week and Mrs Hodgson, the warden, spoke to various groups, such as the Women’s Institute, urging them to make donations. The churches were generous. The Mayor of Tunbridge Wells, Councillor Edward J Strange, set the local tone by saying it was people’s ‘Christian duty’ to raise funds for the refugees, whatever their political views.

Manuel, a Basque child who was disabled, was helped to walk through physiotherapy from Mr RC Cheesman in Tonbridge. People in Rusthall helped by giving lifts. He is the only child on the Rusthall list that we know by name.

The Basque children stayed in Rusthall for more than three months, celebrating Epiphany in January 1938. Twelve returned home after the festival, their bags stuffed with toys and considerably plumper than when they arrived.

The Beacon welcomed thirty Jewish refugee children fleeing Nazi Germany and Austria at the end of 1938, with others to follow. Its history of compassion in action continued.

When local playwright Jon Oram heard about the Basque children in Rusthall, their story became part of his summer 2021 play ‘Happy Highways.’ The play depicted the painful recollections of the bombing of Guernica and the children’s departure on the

SS Habana. In the final scene, an actor playing a former *niña vasca* thanked the community for their kindness in welcoming her and the other Basque children. The cast sang a poignant song “Entertaining Angels” which affirmed the importance of continuing to reach out to refugees and welcome the stranger.



Photograph: The actors playing the ‘*niña vascas*’ Photograph taken by Phil Goodwin.