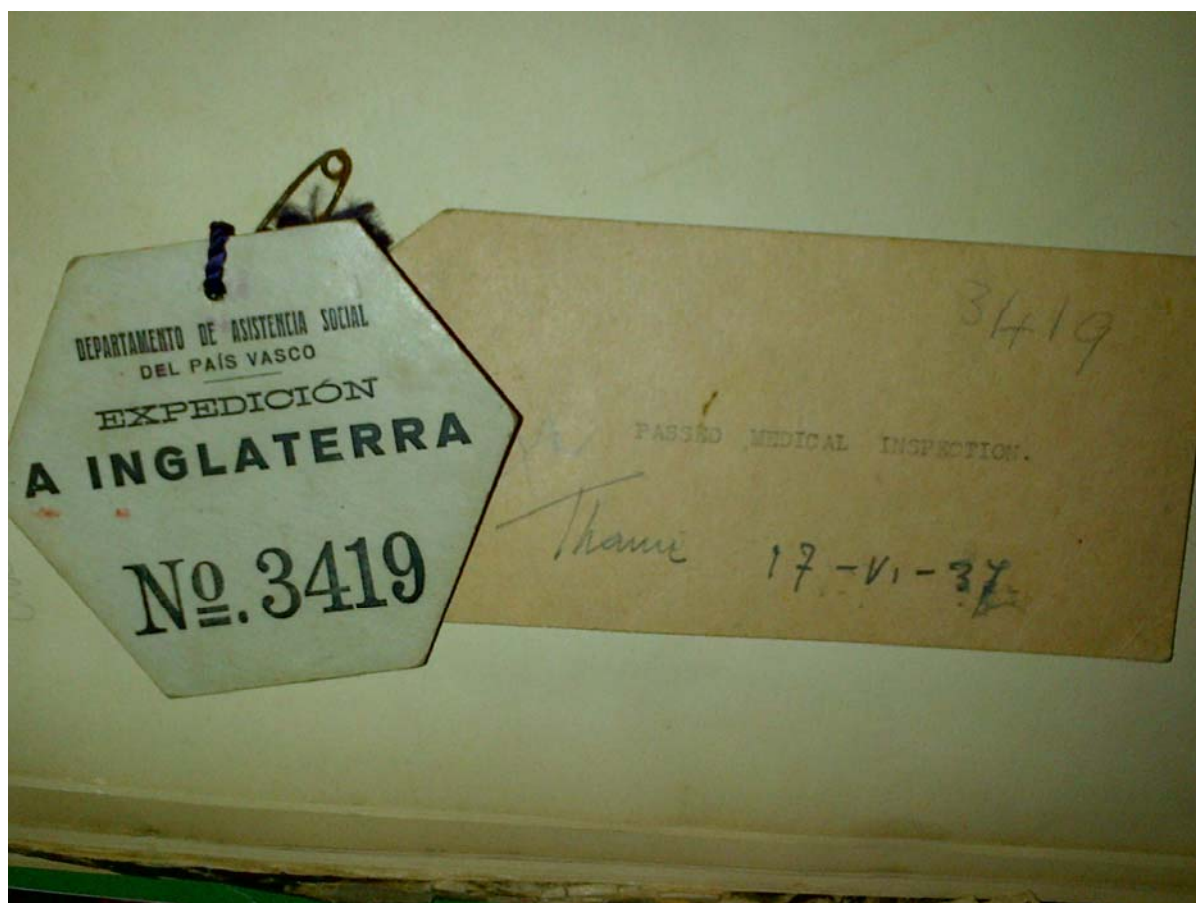


## BASQUE REFUGEES AT RYCOTEWOOD, by Diana Gulland



Identity label belonging to one of the Basque girls at Rycotewood.  
Reproduced by kind permission of Virginia Samuda

### INTRODUCTION

In 1933 the Old Thame Workhouse was closed and two years later was put up for sale. Cecil Michaelis, of Rycote House, bought it at auction for £2,500. His mission was to provide a school for young craftsmen, to obtain an education which had previously been denied to them because of the limitations of apprenticeship which gave them neither the time nor the means to study. However before he could put his project into practice he was asked to help with a crisis which had arisen nearly 600 miles away in Spain.

### SPANISH CIVIL WAR

In April 1931, after the fall of the Spanish monarchy, an alliance of left-wing parties, having established a 'Popular Front' government, proclaimed a Republic. Jubilation soon gave way to unrest as the government was well-meaning but weak and the promised reforms were slow to materialise. In July 1936 a military coup was countered by an uprising of pro-Republican resistance erupting into a civil war, a major conflict that devastated Spain from 17 July 1936 to 1 April 1939, and ended with the founding of an authoritarian State led by General Francisco Franco.

The Basques had always been staunchly loyal to the Republic, regional autonomy had been granted to them in 1936. The Nationalists hoped to shorten the war by attacking and capturing Madrid but when they failed to do so they headed north into the Republican enclave. In March 1937 they bombed the small town of Durango and a month later Guernica, a small market town of 7,000 population. This was the first ever saturation bombing of a civilian population and caused international outrage. As the Basque forces fell back on Bilbao, fears mounted for the safety of the population of the town, especially the children. France, Belgium, Denmark, Switzerland, USSR and Mexico responded to appeals from the Basque Government to offer asylum to children. Initially the British Government adhered to the Non-Intervention Pact but finally gave in to public pressure and in April approved a limited evacuation of children from the region to Britain. Approval was subject to stringent conditions: no public funds of any sort would be made available and the responsibility for the children's maintenance, welfare and eventual repatriation would be borne entirely by the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (formed in England in 1936) who had to guarantee to be able to provide 10 shillings per child per week. The children were to be between the ages of 5 to 15 years and from families of all political affiliations and religions. The Basque Government stipulated that the children were to be kept together so as to retain their national identity.

Britain was divided about the wisdom of taking in the refugees, however when the NJCSR appealed nationally for financial support, majoring on the destruction of Guernica, the fear of further attacks, and the pressing need to remove to safety as many children as possible, £12,000 was received in donations with a promise of an extra £5,000 from the Trades Union Congress. On the 21 May the liner, SS Habana left Spain for Southampton with 3,826 children, 96 teachers, 118 volunteers and 15 priests. Initially the children were taken to North Stoneham Camp, Eastleigh, just outside Southampton, where 400 tents had been erected in a field. A Basque Children's Committee was set up by the NJCSR and as quickly as possible the children were despatched to homes, to be known as colonies, throughout England, Wales and Scotland, all financed and staffed by volunteers. About 100 colonies were set up in locations ranging from redundant workhouses, rectories, old hospitals, large country mansions, down to huts and tents with involvement by the Catholic church, the Salvation Army and many other organisations and members of the public. Four colonies were established in Oxfordshire at Aston, Faringdon, Shipton-under-Wychwood and Thame. In nearby Kingsey, in Buckinghamshire, 72 Basque children were accommodated at Tythrop House.

Cecil Michaelis was approached by the Basque Children's Committee to provide accommodation in the Old Workhouse for some of the children. 50 girls arrived in Thame in June 1937, accompanied by a Spanish school mistress and a Social Welfare Worker, Mrs. Harley from New Zealand, who handled them with such kind efficiency that when the children went back to Spain they asked her to become the first Matron of Rycotewood School. Below is a personal account by one of the girls, together with contemporary press reports from the Thame Gazette and relevant Minutes of the Basque Children's Committee which give a picture of life at Rycotewood when the children were in residence.

**From: BENJAMIN, Natalia, ed. Recuerdos; Basque children refugees in Great Britain. Published by Mousehold Press for Basque Children of '37 Association, 2007, pages 98-99**

Personal testament of Leonor Marcus Prieto. 22 days at North Stoneham and then straight to Thame. 'We were very well looked after. Our every wish was immediately fulfilled, the volunteers tried to cheer us up to forget the sadness of the past. There I became familiar with the noble heart of the townspeople, especially Mrs. Michaelis, our Director and protector. During the summer, after our siesta, we would go to the surrounding fields and gardens, where English children welcomed us to join in their games as if we were part of their families.

I remember a naughty thing I did there. There were machines in the local shop where you got sweets when you put in money. I had a Spanish coin which I put in, in the full knowledge that I wouldn't get either sweets or my money back. Then I went into the shop and told the lady who was serving that I had put my money and had got nothing in return. She asked if I had put Spanish money in, and I answered "no". So the poor lady had to give me back something that wasn't mine.

The first journey I ever made to London was while I was in Thame. I travelled there for the first time. I was very impressed with the magnificent city, the greatest in the world, populated with tall buildings and large stores with several levels...

We lived in Thame for seven months until, after the first Christmas there, on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, we were told the sad news: the colony was closing and we were to be sent to other colonies. We were transferred to a really beautiful place – Langham, near Colchester ...later we were transferred to Margate.'

**From: THAME GAZETTE**

**June 22 1937, page 4**

'On Thursday last, some 50 Basque children arrived from Southampton, accompanied by Spanish schoolmistresses. The children, who are all between the ages of six and fourteen, are being accommodated at "Rycotewood", formerly Thame Poor Law Institute, where they will stay for an indefinite period. There are three English volunteer helpers and a superintendent and it is hoped that the children will have regular education in the mornings and craft work and other recreational activities in the afternoon. We understand that the children have settled down and are happy 'midst their new surroundings'.

**July 7 1937.** 'The Thame colony benefitted from a series of local entertainments. Frank Payne and his band performed for them on more than one occasion'.

**July 13, page 4:** 'Frank Payne and his band delighted the Basque children with an hour of music, when dancing and singing was entered into with real gusto by the children who at the close gave three hearty cheers to the musicians'.

**27 July, page 4:**

'Thame 'Social Evenings'. Frank Payne entertaining again at Rycotewood guests of Mr. & Mrs. Michaelis. On Saturday the Basque children were entertained and enjoyed themselves'

**27 July, page 6:**

Centenary celebrations of the building of the 2 Elementary Schools in Thame. Tea and sports. Basque children from Rycotewood invited. 'An added and pleasing innovation was the invitation extended to the Basque children... to join in...'. '4 o'clock infants had their tea, also the Basque children, followed by the senior scholars at 4.30, during which the Basque children participated in their sports'. 'Basque children:

6-10 years 1, Concepcion Gomez; 2, Maria Teresa; 3, Lucia Cano  
10-13 years 1, Amelia Schmidt; 2, Esther Murga; 3, Petra Lazaro  
13-16 years 1, Casilda Perez; 2, Maria Ramos, Consuelo Munariz  
Under 6 years 1, Esperanza Carriaga; 2, Marina Urquia

**3 August, page 4:**

Thame Garden Fete. On Thursday under auspices of Thame Troop of Boy scouts, garden fete held in grounds of 'Harwell' by kind permission of Mr. & Mrs. E.L.Lightfoot. Side shows, stalls, etc. In the evening a concert in which songs were given by the Basque children and other local artistes.

**26 October, page 5:**

'To the Editor of the "Thame Gazette". Sir- Will anybody willing to help in giving a tea and entertainment to the Basque children now residing in Thame, please send some small donation to the undersigned?

It is proposed to hold this on 6<sup>th</sup> November at Rycotewood and I shall be pleased to receive doations as soon as possible.

A balance sheet will be printed later. Trusting you will support me in entertaining these children. I am Yours faithfully S.P.Summersbee'.

**6 November, page 4:**

Saturday. Tea and entertainment. 50 Basque girls living at Rycotewood were given a tea and entertainment. Tea 4.30 followed by a concert under supervision of Messrs. S.P.Summerbee juns. And B.Wright jun. Those taking part in entertainment: L.Castenneda, R.Timms, W.Smith, D.Thomson, J.Rust, D.Martin, P & S. Payne. Event lasted 2 hours and included Frank Payne and his Piano-Accordian Dance Band. Refreshments were sold and a collection and 32s was raised to buy stamps for the girls. Subscription list was headed by Lord Nuffield who gave £5. A balance sheet will be sent to subscribers- thanks to all helpers.

**7 December, page 7:**

RAF evening entertainment. At Thame last Wednesday was given to the Basque girls by a party of young men from RAF Halton, under supervision of Mr. N.Seaman. Commenced with a boxing match [?!], then a shadow operation scene, piano accordion solo and modern dancing. Old and modern dance hall music played by Munro and his Wing Four dance band. Dance also for the benefit of the older girls. Mrs. Harley of Rycotewood gave thanks, visitors had supper and left for Halton camp at 11p.m. Basque girls had gone home at 10.00p.m.

**28 December 1937, Page 3**

The Basque children who have been housed at "Rycotewood" for the past eight months, left today [Tuesday]. Some are returning to Spain, whilst others were transferred to different camps in the country. From reports which have appeared in the "Thame Gazette" from time to time, it will be seen that they have had a happy time. This came to a fitting conclusion on Sunday, when useful gifts were distributed from a Christmas tree.

**From: WARWICK DIGITAL LIBRARY**

292/946/39/94. House Committee, 10 June 1937. Position in regard to Centres: Please O.K.: 50 girls at Thame- Old Poor Law Institution. M.O.H. has approved. Position in regard to evacuation. Leaving [Stoneham] 14 June.

292/946/39/98. "Centres" Committee. June 16<sup>th</sup> 1937. Estimated weekly payments by Basque Childrens' Committee: Thame: 50 Their rent; Equipment: theirs for 4 weeks; Maintenance: matron £3; weekly payments: £3.00.

292/946/39/84. Evacuations from Camp [Stoneham]. First draft up to June 30. June 17 50 girls to Thame.

292/946/39/50 and 46i. Basque Childrens Committee. Minutes of the Executive Committee 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1937. Finance. Estimated future expenses for the colonies: For the 50 children at Thame £80 was the estimated amount of maintenance required.

292/946/39/34ii. Minutes of the Committee in House of Commons 22 December 1937. Homes closing: Thame: Will be definitely closed on December 28, and this will cause an additional expense for the Committee.

### **WHY THE CHILDREN LEFT RYCOTEWOOD**

Repatriation had begun as early as autumn 1937 following Franco's demand that all evacuees and exiles should be returned to Spain. The Basque Children's Committee had the challenging task of re-locating children as colonies closed when they were no longer viable as numbers declined. Some of the larger colonies, with accommodation for over 100 e.g. Bray Court, Maidenhead, became the destination for many of the children transferred from some of the smaller homes. The children at Rycotewood were transferred to Langham and then to Margate. Numbers were also falling at Tythrop House, due to repatriation, and as the house had the capacity to take 140 children it could easily have taken those remaining at Rycotewood if it had not been for a serious problem of misbehaviour by some of the older boys which caused the colony to close. Despite the repatriations, nationally over 1,000 of the 3,826 children who came to Britain were still here at the end of the Civil War in 1939; 400 remained here at the end of WWII, many of them settling permanently.

After the Basque children left Michaelis returned to fulfilling his project of forming Rycotewood School. The first pupils were taught at a house in Thame Park Road, called Graysmead, and in 1942 they moved to 30 Upper High Street. In those early days the courses were in woodworking. New buildings were added to the workhouse site in 1939 for the purposes of the school but for a period of time, during the Second World War, these buildings were used to billet soldiers. It was not until 1950 that Rycotewood School finally opened on the workhouse site. Agriculture and blacksmithing were added to the curriculum and the school was later given the status of a College. Bullock, who was farming Rycote Park, became Headmaster, whilst Johnson, an Oxford scholar and Blue, took over English, Maths and sport. A highly qualified cabinet-maker and instructor named Mr. Hussey came from London to set up woodworking.

### **References**

'THAME UNION WORKHOUSE : a collection of papers'. THMLM-L-2012-117 . Thame Museum Library.

GULLAND, Diana. 'Basque and Jewish refugees at Tythrop House, Kingsey, 1937 to 1940'. Records of Buckinghamshire, Volume 54, 20-14, pages 179-200.

GULLAND, Diana. 'Tythrop House - home to refugees from 1937 to 1940. Part 1: Basque children'. Haddenham Chronicles, Number Thirteen, pages 21-30.