

# NEWSLETTER 181

MARCH/APRIL 2009

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Loughton High Road, 1910

Members and readers will notice that this issue of the *Newsletter* runs to 16 pages, the first time we have done this. It mainly reflects our good fortune in having a strong inflow of excellent material to choose from, something from which, we hope, will suit the varied tastes of our members and readers. Rather than store some of these pieces in the 'bank', we have decided to end the *Newsletter* season in this way, also including a colour photograph, and we hope you approve. This will not happen every time but, with the usual plea, if the articles come in, enlarged issues will appear from time to time.

Ted Martin has created CDs, on which he has stored some 50 previous *Newsletters*, from number 130 to the present. With this ability to look back, it has been a revelation how fresh and fascinating much of the past material has been. So, occasionally, some chosen pieces may reappear, no less absorbing for being read 'second time around'.

## Leah Manning and the Basque children in Theydon Bois

TED MARTIN

Jim Watts, a neighbour in Theydon Bois before I moved to Bedfordshire, is the editor of the Theydon Bois website and also manages the L&DHS website for us, so though we are now 40 miles apart we still correspond regularly by e-mail. On 20 November 2008 I received a request from him for the Society's help to find further information for Covadonga Cienfuegos

Jovellanos, a Spanish lady who lives in San Sebastian, a city in northern Spain.

Senora Jovellanos's father, Vicente Romero, who was 85 on 4 December 2008, and now lives in Gijon in Spain, had spent 10 months in Theydon Bois at the age of 13, with his brother, José, and his sister, Maria, and 18 other Spanish children. They were part of the nearly 4,000 Basque children, who were evacuated to England to escape from the Spanish Civil War, thanks to campaigners in England persuading the British Government to take them.



Covadonga, José, Vicente and Maria

When I received the e-mail from Jim I circulated it to the officers of the Society. Richard Morris pointed out that Stan Newens might know something about this. This proved to be the case and Stan very kindly sent me a copy of his biography of Leah Manning, which showed that she was very much involved with the evacuation of the children. I scanned the relevant pages and some photos and they were sent to Spain by e-mail.

Mrs Leah Manning, a teacher and social reformer who had been President of the National Union of Teachers and a Labour MP in 1931 (and would be again in 1945) was involved with Spanish Medical Aid. She was asked, in April 1937, by the Duchess of Atholl, President of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, and the Basque delegation in London

to go to Bilbao, which was threatened by Franco's forces, to try to arrange the evacuation of children from the war zone to Britain.

*Leah Manning*, by Ron Bill and Stan Newens,<sup>1</sup> tells the story. Leah with Edith Pye of the Society of Friends made the hazardous journey to northern Spain and arrived on 24 April. Two days later Guernica was destroyed. They visited the town after the bombing and saw the death and destruction. They met the British Consul, contacted the Basque Government, broadcast over the radio to reassure the families of those to be evacuated and personally supervised the embarkation of thousands of people. Leah was in some personal danger and was given permission to carry arms. When the British Government, which had agreed to accept some refugees, resisted the despatch of more, she sent telegrams to the Archbishops of Canterbury and Westminster, to Lloyd George and Sir Walter Citrine begging them to intercede.

Finally, at 6.40 am on Friday, 21 May 1937 the SS *Habana* left Bilbao. There were over 3,800 children on board, with 95 women teachers, 120 senioritas as helpers, 15 priests and Leah Manning. The ship was escorted by the destroyer HMS *Forester*.



On board SS *Habana*

Vicente, a retired engineer, remembers the crossing in the ship: 'we all slept on the deck. Everybody else was sick; but my brother, sister and I were not. We were also very lucky because they took everybody's luggage away and mixed them up, but nobody took ours.' Two days later, on 23 May 1937, after a terrible journey, the Basque children arrived at Southampton. They were welcomed by the Duchess of Atholl, Sir Walter and Lady Layton and Sir Walter and Lady Citrine.

Many famous names including Cadburys, Horlicks, Rowntrees, Marmite, Jaegers, Co-op, Woolworths, Standard Fireworks, Prudential Assurance, Sidney Bernstein, the RSPCA and Marks & Spencer donated goods or money to the relief agencies.

Next day, in the pouring rain, the first group of children were moved into a reception camp, at Stoneham, Eastleigh – their new temporary home – run by the Salvation Army. The purpose of the camp was to allow enough time for the English Basque Children's Committee to make arrangements for their

transportation to the 94 designated 'colonies' around the country, including Theydon Bois. Vicente says 'In the camp at Eastleigh it was a mess. Nobody could find their luggage but we were really happy as we had ours.'



Stoneham Camp, Eastleigh

In Britain, Leah Manning helped to organise accommodation. A few days later the children were divided into groups and sent all over England. Vicente's group reached Theydon Bois by train, with some Spanish teachers who were in charge of them. The London Teachers' Association (NUT) was particularly helpful in finding accommodation and sent some of the evacuees to a house in Piercing Hill, which for a time was known as the Leah Manning Home. The property, Woodberry, later became part of Wansfell College which has since sadly closed. Vicente had looked after their things and happily they arrived with everything intact.

The Salvation Army also did sterling service in helping to house the children from Spain. An exhibition of pictures by Spanish children entitled 'Spain – The Child and The War' was held in Central London and Leah Manning wrote the preface to the exhibition guide. She said she had, by a miracle, become the 'accidental' mother to 4,000 of them – which gave her a mother's right to speak on their behalf. She described the 118 drawings as representing the children's work, play, joys and sorrows.

Vicente Romero remembers Theydon Bois and his stay in England very clearly. Once in the village, 'we stayed in a lovely residence in a long avenue with smart houses'. Next door to them lived a family with young daughters and the Basque children used to play with them. The neighbours' wife's family were part of the Cadbury chocolate family and next to them lived a family with a son who was an 'aviator'. 'One day the aviator threw a message from a plane and it fell down in the Spanish children's garden. The teachers gave it to the neighbours. It said he wasn't going to be on time for the tennis match.'

During their stay, an English teacher taught them English and lived with them. Vicente recalled that the children used to walk on the golf course in the afternoon and played football or visited Epping Forest. Some evenings they had activities in the Loreto Convent in Forest Side, to the west of the Golf Course, because all the children were Catholic. The convent closed in the 1970s and was at first converted to a large house called Theydon Towers and recently

to flats and houses. At the weekends volunteers from the Labour Party came from London and took the children for an outing to the capital by train.



Woodberry, Theydon Bois, where the children stayed (later Wansfell College)

They were often visited in Theydon Bois by Leah Manning. Vicente Romero remembers her as a 'nice lady who loved the children very much'. Leah Manning got angry on her last visit to Theydon Bois, when she found that the three Romero children had been sent back to Spain without her knowledge. Vicente stayed for 10 months in England and it seems that a further group came to Theydon Bois after his group had left.



In the group photo above, Leah Manning is right of centre with a child on her knee and Vicente Romero is at the top on the far right; José Romero is at the bottom right with his arms crossed and Maria Romero is on the knee of the woman on the right.

Leah was also given charge of a group of orphans of Socialist families who were accommodated in Cambridge. The following month a rally was held at the Albert Hall – supported by, amongst others, the Duchess of Atholl, Picasso, J B S Haldane, P M S Blackett, H G Wells, E M Forster, Virginia Woolf, Havelock Ellis, Sean O'Casey, Philip Noel-Baker and Dame Sybil Thorndike – with songs by Paul Robeson. It raised £11,000 for the emergency appeal.

But who was Leah Manning? She was undoubtedly a woman who achieved distinction despite the obstacles which barred the progress of women in public life during the early years of the last century and was also a powerful personality with immense compassion and drive. She always had a vision of a better society that inspired her throughout her life.

Elizabeth Leah Perrett was born in Droitwich, Worcestershire, in 1886. When she was 14 her parents, who were officers in the Salvation Army, moved to America so she went to live with her maternal grandparents in Stoke Newington, London. Her grandfather was a staunch Methodist and had a great influence on his granddaughter. Her life was comfortable and she enjoyed outings to Theydon Bois during the summers.

At the second school she attended she came under the influence of the Reverend Stewart Headlam from whom she derived the Christian Socialist principles which she held and followed throughout her life. Headlam advised her to try for a place at Homerton Teacher Training College at Cambridge. She passed the examination and gained her place.

Leah was at the College from 1906–1908 and while at Cambridge met Hugh Dalton, later a Labour Cabinet Minister, who became a lifelong friend. On leaving the College she was offered a teaching post at the College's practice School in New Street, Cambridge, where mainly poor and ragged children were taught. She campaigned for school meals and milk, denounced the death of an underfed child and organised the provision of an After School Play Centre.

In 1913 Leah married William Henry Manning who was an assistant at the University Physics Observatory. It was usual for women teachers to resign their posts on marriage but the outbreak of the First World War allowed her to carry on. During the war she was a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse at The First Eastern General Hospital in Cambridge, even though as a member of the Independent Labour Party she was opposed to the war.

Heavily involved in war administrative work and political activities she lost her only child who died three weeks after birth in 1918.

She became head of a girls' school and then Vinery Road Open Air School and in 1918 was chairman of the Cambridge Trades Council and Cambridge Labour Party. She worked for Labour in the 1918 General Election and the 1922 Cambridge by-election and in 1920 became a JP. She was a member of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and was elected Secretary of the Cambridge Teachers' Association and had other education appointments in Cambridge.

She wrote a regular column in the *School Mistress* for some years and in 1924 was elected to the NUT executive. In April 1930, she was elected President at the NUT Diamond Jubilee Conference. Her Presidential Address advocated the raising of the school leaving age to 15.

As President of the NUT she travelled widely and determined that she would like to enter Parliament. After a false start in 1930 at Bristol East, where she was forced to give way to Sir Stafford Cripps, newly appointed as Solicitor-General but with no seat in the House, she was selected as the Labour candidate for Islington East in 1931 and elected with a majority of 2,277. However, seven months later in the General Election she lost her seat to the National Conservative candidate. She moved on to be Assistant Education

Officer for the NUT and unsuccessfully tried to get back into the House at Sunderland in 1935



Leah Manning campaigning in 1931

Leah Manning campaigned against Fascism in Europe and in England and during 1936–38, was deeply involved in supporting the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War as well as opposing the Munich agreement between Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler.

During the Second World War she was the evacuation liaison officer for the NUT and travelled to every evacuation area in the country and, later, head of organisation at the NUT's London office. When Russia entered the War she became an ardent supporter of their cause in the Aid to Russia and Second Front Now campaigns.

In 1945, in the Labour landslide General Election after the Second World War, Leah Manning was elected as the Labour MP for the new Epping constituency<sup>2</sup> and she served until 1950. She was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1966 and lived at Hatfield Broad Oak for many of her final years.

At the age of 84 – sixty years after graduating as a teacher in 1908 – she was still busy teaching girls and encouraging them to go to university. Leah died in 1977 at the age of 91. The Rt Hon Barbara Castle, Baroness Castle of Blackburn, said of her: 'Leah Manning was one of the most dynamic Labour women at a critical period in the party's history.'

After the Romero children returned to Spain, Vicente became an engineer. He was always a bright pupil and to help his parents to afford university for him he became a private teacher to other students, especially in the summer. He used to go to the Asturias region in northern Spain to teach during his holiday. When he became a doctor of engineering, he went back to the Asturias for his first job. There he married and then came back to the Basque country, where he worked for a large iron company until he retired, becoming the director responsible for organisation and security in the company.

José Romero became a member of the Catholic teaching order of St Jean Baptiste of La Salle. He was a teacher in their schools for many years. He now lives in a community with other brothers near San Sebastian.

Unfortunately, Maria died 25 years ago. She always wanted to become a doctor but in those difficult times her parents could not afford to pay for her training and so she finally became a nurse. She did not marry. When she died, she was the much loved director of a health centre near Bilbao.

Senora Jovellanos says that, after so long, Vicente has forgotten most of the English that he spoke perfectly when he came back to Spain, but what he has never forgotten was a country and especially a village, Theydon Bois, which offered love and shelter to him and his companions far away from the misfortunes of war.

### Sources

I am very grateful to Stan Newens who kindly sent me a copy of *Leah Manning* by him and Ron Bill from which the biographical information in this article has been taken and to Jim Watts who informed us of this story in the first place, gave me further information as it developed and worked very hard to provide answers for Senora Jovellanos.

### Notes

1. Harlow and Brentwood: The Leah Manning Trust and Square One Books, 1991.

2. Consisting of Chingford, Waltham Abbey, Epping and Harlow and some outlying parishes. Winston Churchill who had previously been the MP for Epping was re-elected as MP for Woodford.

## Britain at war: preparing for air raids

### MRS M D SPARKS

(From a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*)

As many of us remember sombre events vividly (as to where we were and what we were doing at a specific time) so I recall exactly what I was doing on 3 September 1939: walking around a flowerbed in our garden in Loughton while everyone else in the family was gathered by the wireless to hear the news.

Then came the first air raid warning I'd ever heard, quite frightening. I was eight years old. Such a thing had never happened before. I rushed inside to find out that was going on and heard that we were at war with Germany.

A few, not many, preparations were made. We had no air raid shelter but the kitchen windows were strengthened by putting against them the slatted floor of the greenhouse.

Other windows were eventually criss-crossed with brown sticky paper to guard against flying glass, and draped with black-out curtains. A high bed was brought downstairs to the kitchen and beneath it my two sisters and I slept when the first air raids occurred.

At one time the warning would sound at about 8 pm every night. What with the ack-ack guns (I think they were called) and the planes overhead the sound was deafening. I don't know if it were really so but our parents told us that if the plane had an uneven sound it was German but if a nice steady sound it was one of ours. That made us feel considerably better, at least when we heard the even sound and it kept us occupied. All this time I can't remember feeling really frightened possibly because our parents were always nearby, mother on top of the bed, we three beneath it, but father upstairs because he absolutely would not give in to the Germans and leave his nice comfortable bed. But I do remember lying between two sisters and seeing my hand against the pillow and wondering if it would be there very much longer as we heard the shriek of the bombs coming down. Even so, the importance of the family and togetherness cannot be too highly stressed in a time like that. I'll never forget coming outside after the All Clear sounded looking towards London and seeing the dawn sky a brilliant red – and not from a rising sun either.

We were measured for gas masks, my younger sister who was about five at the time had one in the shape of Mickey Mouse. There were posters asking us to dig for