

Woodberry, the colony at Theydon Bois

by Natalia Benjamin

Over Christmas I was staying with my daughter's in-laws at Loughton, near Epping Forrest. I realised that it was very near to **Theydon Bois** where there had been a colony for the Basque children. The house, called Woodberry then, belonged to Leah Manning and was on Piercing Hill.

There is a photograph of what it was like in the 1930s in my book "*Memorias: the Basque children remember and are remembered*".

Comparing it with the photograph we took of the house as it is today, you can see that it hasn't changed very much so it wasn't difficult to find.



In "*Memorias*", Vicente Romero Olabarria wrote about his time there:

One fine day, a lady (Mrs Manning) told us to collect our suitcases as we were to leave the camp. First we went by train, then by bus, to the town of Theydon Bois. We stopped at a house and there was Mrs Manning, together with a fairly large group, waiting for us. We never did find out why she chose us to be part of that group (I think there were 21 of us) and to my surprise, one of the girls was Ma Pilar Cortés, the rest were all new faces.

The men and women who were waiting for us were very kind to us and started telling us where our rooms would be. The house was spacious with a large sitting room on the ground floor that was for meetings, a dining room and a classroom for English lessons, a large room where the older children slept, a room where the Spanish and English *señoritas* who looked after us got together, the kitchen and bathrooms. On the first floor there were separate rooms for the older girls, the younger girls and the little boys, so my brother and sister were on the first floor whilst I was below.

Life in the colony was organised like this:

- We would have breakfast in the sitting room, putting the tables together, accompanied by the Spanish *señoritas*.
- After breakfast, the girls, followed by the older boys would have English lessons in the same sitting room and on the same tables.
- English lessons were broadened by reading in Spanish and history lessons.
- We would take advantage of any free time by playing in the garden. In the beginning, it was like a jungle, but little by little we cleared it, transforming it into a magnificent allotment.

The Head of the home was an Englishwoman who was fairly young. She was helped by another lady, rather going on in years, and who as I remember, died during the winter. The cook was English and there were three Spanish *señoritas*.

The *señorita* who gave us English lessons was called Cari and came from Valencia. The one who was in charge of reading in Spanish was called Tomasa; I think she came from Madrid and as she didn't like her name, wanted us to call her "Taqui". My friends were all from Bilbao and most of them already knew each other.

They were really a very intelligent lot, but because of their social level they weren't very educated or respectful. One of them, Juan Urdampilleta, played chess fantastically, and when on Sundays English people used to visit us, and one would play him at chess, the winner was invariably Juan. Another one, Emilio Balsategui, used to sing very well and would please the visitors with his singing. Yet another, Jesús Alcón, had never played the piano, but as there was one in the house, he started to discover talents as a pianist. His brother Enrique was quite a different case; he turned out to be so uncontrollable that he was expelled and sent discretely to Barcelona.

All these boys from Bilbao were very keen on football so straightaway, a team, made up by a few of the boys from the town, was got together and it would play matches against neighbouring schools. Our home was on a hill (Piercing Hill) and the road lead to the town of Epping. We would go to classes there in the late afternoon with the nuns. The classes were mostly handicraft and drawing. One day I was surprised to receive a visit from my friend Kipiren Oscariz, who had been sent to one of the Salvation Army hostels. He came with a gentleman called David who had found my address, and taking advantage of Enrique Alcon's discharge managed to get accepted in our home.

The girls' behaviour was always exemplary. On Sundays we would often be visited by adults and young people, with whom, as our English got better, we had very nice gatherings. My sister and I went to London once with one of these visitors and we were shown the sights, the Houses of Parliament, St Paul's Cathedral and Buckingham Palace. We were invited sometimes to visit schools and were taken by car on trips through Epping Forest.

Our home suffered a rude change when the English Head was replaced by a Spaniard, Miguel Urango, who came with his Mexican wife and son. After he came, the señoritas who had been with us for breakfast, lunch and supper, stopped doing so because they had to sit together with the new Head and his family, in another room. And the Head wanted us to change our habits and taste. As he had lived for many years in America, he wanted us to play baseball and thought that we should play less football. We had a lot of records of Argentinian music. He broke them and wanted us to listen to foxtrots and the like. To put it mildly, democracy went by the board.

This man used to go to London to work during the week, coming back to sleep. During the day, his wife was Head and she began to organize the repatriation of children to Spain.

Some of the girls from Bilbao went with the first lot and I went in the next group with my brother and sister and another girl who lived in Baracaldo. It was in April and this was the end of our stay in England.

Flori Diaz Jimenez also wrote about the colony in "*Recuerdos: Basque children refugees in Great Britain*".

I don't remember when I was taken to Mrs Manning's colony at Theydon Bois, but that was just like a fairy story. In my own home, we used to have baths in a large pail, but when I arrived at this colony, I was shown to a bathroom with towels and sponge bags for all of us, containing soap, toothbrush, toothpaste and eau de cologne. And then there was the bedroom: four beds for the little girls, with eiderdowns and curtains. I've often wondered how we could have been so lucky, after the hard times we had the misfortune to live through in Spain during the war.

Life in the colony was splendid. We 21 children seemed like brothers and sisters, the older ones caring affectionately for the four smallest girls. Mrs Manning was marvellous, she was full of kindness and attention. English people used to come and visit and would take us to London to the cinema or for tea. I always say that they were they happiest days of my life.

If you happen to visit any of the former colonies, do take a photo and send us a report and we'll try to publish it on our web site!