

Basque children at Ambleside colony - introduction (Revised January 2024)

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During the autumn of 1937 a satellite colony for Brampton was being considered. On 1 October 1937 the *Carlisle Journal* reported that a second colony at Grasmere was in the offing, and there was some possibility of a colony being established in a Youth Hostel Association property in Troutbeck. However these projects did not materialise and the second colony was established at Fairfield Guest House on Rydal Road in Ambleside. At a meeting in the village on 11 October a local committee was formed with Lady Chance of Grasmere in the chair, and around 23-25 October 1937 the home was opened. The house had been acquired by the Cumberland and Westmorland Basque Children's Committee with the status of what appears to have been a satellite colony of Brampton. According to the *Barrow Guardian* it was opened because more space was required at Brampton for 'additional classrooms and playrooms'. Initially 25 children were transferred there from the Brampton colony, although some may have come from The Larches, the hostel at Hexham which had closed with the need to relocate about 30 children. It has been suggested that these children were relocated to Keighley, London and Ambleside. The children were accompanied by two of their Brampton teachers, Virginia Martínez del Castillo and Herr Froelich.

At a fund-raising meeting held at Dalston Hall on 26 November 1937 and addressed by the Duchess of Atholl, the chair of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief and also the Basque Children's Committee, Charles H. Roberts, the treasurer of the Cumberland and Westmorland Basque Children's Committee and the instigator with his wife Cecilia of the hostels at Brampton and Ambleside, asked the invited audience 'quite definitely and practically for a lot of money'. He pointed out that the local committee needed 'about £40 a week for Brampton, and about £25 a week for the new Ambleside hostel which had been established the previous month. He commented that 'the money had rather dried up. He felt sure that though subscribers had helped so well in the past, they were still prepared to carry on, so long as it was necessary. A number of people and organisations from Westmorland supported the Ambleside colony including the Kendal and District Committee for Basque Children and General Relief in Spain who in January 1938 gave a donation which was specifically to be used for the Ambleside hostel. An Ambleside resident, the late Joan Newby, remembered that the children stayed at Fairfield for a short time and local children were encouraged to play with them in the park. It seems that the Basque children did not integrate into the community as they were looked after by Spanish adults and a lack of a common language made communication difficult.

The names of nineteen children are known at Ambleside. Amongst them were Agustina Pérez San José was there with her two siblings, Asunción and Antonio. She remembers being at the hostel near the famous Bridge House in Ambleside. There is also a report in the *Westmorland Gazette* of 28 January 1939 referring to the Brampton children performing country dances of the Basque provinces, Aragonese jotas and Andalusian gipsy music at the YMCA Hall in Ambleside. 'Fermin Arriba [Fermín Arribas Ege No. 1557, Age 14 in 1937, repatriated 19 December 1939] who was one of the children accommodated for some months

last year at Fairfield Guest House, Ambleside and who was heard in the North Regional wireless programme a short time ago, contributed Flamenco songs - part of the Spanish heritage from the Moorish occupation of the country'. Most of the Ambleside children had come from Brampton or from Hexham via Brampton and returned to Brampton when Ambleside closed. During the winter there were financial problems, members of the committee resigned and quite a number of the children were repatriated to Spain. The home had become uneconomic to run and it closed on 4 February 1938.

The Ambleside colony has largely been forgotten locally. It was referred to as one of the places in Cumbria where 'Basque children were billeted' in K. Harper, *The Story of the Lakeland Diocese, 1933-1966*, (Carlisle, 1966), p. 20. More recently the hostel is mentioned in R. David, "Let politics and differences be forgotten": The "Little Basques" in Cumbria, 1937-39", *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*, Vol. 19 (2019), 231-50; R. David, *A County of Refuge: Refugees in Cumbria 1933-1941*, (Kendal, 2020); R. David, *'Happy and Safe': The Basque Child Refugees in Cumberland and Westmorland 1937-1939*, (Carlisle, 2023).

This 'Spotlight' has been able to benefit from the deposit of the correspondence of Charles and Cecilia Roberts which his descendants deposited at Carlisle Archive Centre in 2021 (DROB Box 15) and 2022. Subsequent deposits are temporarily listed as DROB accession H15988 and DROB accession H16127. At the time of writing many of these documents had not been listed but they can be viewed on request at Carlisle Archive Centre.

These new deposits have transformed knowledge about the Ambleside hostel and the local people involved in supporting the venture and the Basque children. Further information is contained in the file cards originally kept by the BCC in London on each child and which related to the children who were still in the U.K. in the autumn of 1939, and were later transferred to the Republicans government in Exile in Paris, and then in 1977 to Spain where they were deposited at FUE (Fundación Universitario de España) also make reference to children at the Ambleside hostel. The cards contain personal information which is covered by the 100 year rule so any publications must be anonymised.

I am grateful to Gerald Hoare and Carmen Kilner for help with this section.

Rob David (January 2024)