

THE BASQUE CHILDREN IN GREAT BRITAIN

THE COLONY AT ASTON

The destruction of Guernica, which inspired Pablo Picasso to paint his masterpiece of the same name, also brought nearly 4,000 children to Britain as refugees from the Spanish Civil War. Public opinion was outraged by the bombing of Guernica, the first ever saturation bombing of a civilian population. The Basque government appealed to foreign nations to give temporary asylum to the children, but the British government adhered to its policy of non-intervention. The Duchess of Atholl, President of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, took up the campaign to urge the government to accept the Basque children and finally, permission was reluctantly granted. However, the government refused to be responsible financially for the children, saying that this would violate the non-intervention pact. It demanded that the newly formed Basque Children's Committee guarantee 10/- per week for the care and education of each child.

The children left for Britain on the steamship the *Habana* on 21st May 1937. Each child had been given a cardboard hexagonal disk to pin on his clothes with an identification number and the words 'Expedición a Inglaterra' printed on it. The ship, supposed to carry around 800 passengers, carried 3840 children, 80 teachers, 120 helpers, 15 catholic priests and 2 doctors. The children were crammed into the boat, and slept where they could, even in the lifeboats. The journey was extremely rough in the Bay of Biscay and most of the children were violently seasick.

The steamer arrived at Southampton on 23rd May. Thousands of people lined the quayside and the children, in spite of their ordeal, were excited, thinking that the bunting that was up everywhere was to celebrate their arrival: later they learned that it had been put up for the coronation of George VI which had taken place ten days earlier!

They were sent in busloads to a camp at North Stoneham in Eastleigh that had been set up in three fields. The setting up of the camp in less than two weeks was the result

of a remarkable effort by the whole community: volunteers had worked round the clock and all through the Bank Holiday to prepare it.

The children were completely unprepared for camping: the majority had lived in densely packed flats in the working class districts of one of the most industrialised city in Spain. In fact, many of the children did not stay there long: the idea was that they should be dispersed in homes or 'colonies' as soon as possible. The first to offer asylum was the Salvation Army, who undertook to take 400, followed by the Catholic Church, who committed itself to take 1,200 children. Little by little, from the end of May, and during the summer, the children left the provisional camp in groups to go to other homes situated all over Great Britain and staffed and financed by individual volunteers, church groups and trade unions.

The Aston colony was made available for the Basque children refugees at the end of June 1937. It was a large house. Called St Joseph's, it was built around 1910 as part of the complex that was known as the Aston Training School which had been set up in 1888 by a Mrs Clarke, a local philanthropist, to train young girls, many of them orphans, as laundresses and for domestic service. In addition to vocational training, the girls received a rudimentary education there. When Mrs Clarke died in 1918, the Waifs and Strays Society took over the running of the school.

A local committee of the Basque Children's Committee was set up in Witney to manage the venture, with Patrick Early as its Chairman. He was prospective Independent progressive parliamentary candidate for North Oxon, and a member of the well-known Early family from Witney, who owned several blanket mills in the town and who were staunch Methodists. Each refugee was given a scarlet woollen blanket from the Early mill.

Annie Wheeler, who for a time was cook at St Joseph's, reported that the children didn't like English food as they found it insipid. She said that when they first arrived they were petrified by the sound of planes and took a long time to settle down. In June 1939, three older boys arrived from the Shipton colony which was closing down. By the end of 1939, the younger Basque children had been gradually repatriated to Spain or France; only seven older children were left at Aston and they were moved to a house of their own in Witney, the first to be built on the new estate at Schofield Avenue.

In spite of the fact that a teacher, Maria Teresa Mayoral, had come with the children, she was unpopular and soon left. The colony, managed by the Witney BCC, was internally run by a young woman of 17, Pili Merodio. She was helped by one of the older teenage girls, Ketty Maiz. It was run with affection, patience and understanding, the atmosphere was not one of discipline, but one of sharing, both one's sorrows and joys. The house was large and very cold, conditions were stark: there was a coal range in the kitchen that was used for cooking and heating water. It was the cosiest room in the house as there was a coal fire in only one room. There was a lovely big garden at the back of the house where the children would have their lessons in summer. The villagers were friendly and the children had fun trying to ask for what they wanted in the local shop.

The children loved having visitors, and would tear down the uncarpeted stairs to see them. Regular visitors at the weekends were Geoffrey Turner, Convenor of Oxford University, who used crutches because he had been crippled with polio as a child. He turned up regularly with a gramophone and records, and the children were so excited as they practised their folk dances for the fund-raising concerts they gave. Edwin Edwards was a 19 year-old librarian from the Oxford Library. First called "Eduardo" by the children, this became "Eduardissimo" when they got to know him better. He taught himself Spanish to be able to converse and he would pump the water for hours on Saturdays so that the children could have baths. Another constant visitor was Cora Portillo, a student of Spanish at St.Hilda's College, Oxford; because of the Civil War in Spain had not been able to go on her Year Abroad. It was suggested to her that she go and help with the children at the Aston colony, where she would surely practice her Spanish. She was a regular visitor, striking up a particular friendship with Pili and Ketty. In 1939, as colonies closed when many children were repatriated, three boys came to Aston from the Shipton colony, together with a teacher, a refugee and Professor of Civil Law from the University of Salamanca. He was Luis Portillo, and he and Cora fell in love and married. One of their sons is the former conservative MP Michael Portillo.

Although the children seemed happy, at the back of their minds they worried constantly about what was happening back home. News was not forthcoming and many weeks went by without letters from their families. When Ketty did get a letter, it was to tell her that her father had been shot on his doorstep in front of her mother, who had gone to France to join a third daughter. It was as if Ketty's light had gone out. She couldn't join in any of the activities and wore deepest black for a very long time.