

# The Basque Children in Arkley - 1937-42

By Jeff Gale

## BACKGROUND

It is early 1937. In Britain significant events such as the coronation of King George VI takes place in Westminster Abbey, the first testing of Frank Whittle's innovative jet engine takes place at Rugby, and the new twelve-sided 'threepenny bit' coin is introduced. In Germany, the Nazi government continues its programme of re-armament, and the possibility of another major war looms ever more likely.

In Spain, the Civil War that had begun in July 1936 between the Republican and Nationalist forces continues to rage. Britain, along with 26 other nations, adopts a neutral stance to the conflict. Support for the Nationalists (who would eventually gain victory in April 1939) came with supporting forces deployed from countries such as Portugal and Italy - and from Germany, with Adolf Hitler assigning the Condor Legion, a unit consisting of personnel from both the German army and, significantly, their air force.

In an action considered later to be a dress rehearsal for 'terror bombing' against civilians in a wider conflict, aircraft from the Condor Legion attacked the town of Guernica in the Basque region of northern Spain on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1937 killing many civilians and causing major damage to property. It was met with shock and international disapproval.

Despite her neutrality, many from Britain chose to fight in the Civil War - a well-known combatant was George Orwell. In August 1937 the Barnet Press reported that a Barnet man aged 23 had been killed in the fighting, a former scholar at Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School.

## THE EFFECTS OF THE GUERNICA BOMBING



*Picasso's iconic painting 'Guernica'*

The Basque government immediately launched a request to other nations to assist them by facilitating the evacuation of their children to safety overseas, but the British government were initially reluctant to offer help in view of the neutral stance they had taken to the war.

Nevertheless, action was taken here by the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR), a voluntary association that had been formed at the end of 1936 to co-ordinate relief efforts to victims of the Spanish Civil War. Successful lobbying, led by their President, Katharine Marjory Stewart-Murray, the Duchess of Atholl, eventually secured the agreement of the government for some of the children - 'Los Ninos' - to be allowed to come to Britain.

But this was not without certain conditions. To comply with membership of the international non-intervention pact, the government would not provide any financial support for the programme; instead, the NJCSR were required to set up a new Basque Children's Committee to organise the funding and care required for the children, stipulating that they must commit to raising at least 10-shillings per week for each child to support their welfare and education.

Britain thus, reluctantly, joined countries such as France, Russia, Belgium, Mexico, Switzerland and Denmark in receiving refugee children from an embattled Spain. Nearly 4,000 came to Britain, some soon arriving in Arkley....

## THE CHILDREN ARRIVE IN BRITAIN

Much is written about the history of the arrival of the children at Southampton on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1937 aboard the aging steamship the SS Habana - built to carry 800 passengers but now carrying more than 3860 children, 95 teachers, 120 helpers, 15 Catholic priests and 2 British doctors.

Most of the children were accompanied by their siblings, but around 500 were recorded as having travelled alone into an uncertain new existence in a strange country.

On arrival they were placed in temporary tented accommodation at nearby North Stoneham, where initially conditions were probably as bad as those experienced on the two-day journey across the Bay of Biscay, escorted for safety by HMS Royal Oak and HMS Forrester. Just days before their arrival only 2000 were expected; hasty arrangements had been needed to cater for the actual number that arrived.

The Basque Children's Committee would now work with organisations such as the Salvation Army and the Catholic Church at both national and local levels to affect the transfer of the children into 'colonies' of various sizes across Britain.

Of direct relevance to the creation of the Basque Children's colony at Arkley is a letter (see next page) published in the Barnet Press in late May. Written by Mrs Florence E Tewson, a local resident and wife of Mr (later Sir) Harold Vincent Tewson, the vice-chairman of the ('entirely non-political') National Committee for the care of Basque Children.

Having personally witnessed the arrival of the children at Southampton, she invited 'prominent local citizens and organisations' to attend a meeting to discuss how the town might provide assistance in housing and funding them locally.

With the permission of the British Legion, the meeting was held on the 28<sup>th</sup> May at the Jellicoe Hall in Moxon Street. Agreement was reached on the creation of a local Executive Committee with the remit to seek suitable premises for a group of up to 50 of the children, and to consider how funds, estimated to be between £30 and £50 per week, might be raised to support the children and meet the costs of rent and supervision.

By 19<sup>th</sup> June the Barnet Press was able to report that 'negotiations have this week developed rapidly for the renting of suitable premises at Arkley, and an early conclusion of details is anticipated'. Suitability was endorsed by them "being in ideal surroundings, with facilities provided that will greatly assist in the efficient and economical administration of the home'.

The report also included confirmation that several local organisations and individuals had now offered to 'adopt' - ie sponsor - individual children at the home by undertaking to provide 10-shillings per week to clothe and feed them.

The following week the Press carried a letter from the Executive Committee signed by Lord Plumer (Chairman), Mr E Stanmore Lewis (Hon Treasurer), and Mrs Florence E Tewson (Hon Secretary) which confirmed that the arrangements were now almost complete for Rowley Lodge, a sizable property in Arkley, to be used as the home. An appeal was included for help to meet the need for items such as single bedsteads and bedding, cutlery, crockery and small items of furniture such as chairs and rugs etc.

#### HELP FOR SPANISH CHILDREN.

SIR.—Almost everyone will have read in the Press of the great welcome given at Southampton on Sunday last to the Basque children. The national committee which is responsible for the arrangements is representative of very wide interests. Members include the Duchess of Atholl, Miss Eleanor Rathbone, M.P., Dame Rachel Cowdray, the three M.P.s, who went to Spain on the all-party deputation, representatives of the Archbishop of Westminster, the Quakers, the Save the Children Fund, the T.U.C. and other bodies.

I had the pleasure of going to Southampton, and I saw the children on the boat, disembarking, and in the temporary camp erected for their reception. I found scores of private individuals and nearly every organisation in the city co-operating in what impressed me as being a really wonderful humanitarian task. I had the privilege of giving some help, and have come home with the deep conviction that, if the people of Barnet could have seen those dear little children, nearly all of whom were in the terrible bombing of Guernica or Bilbao, they would want to do something to help.

Through the kindness of Mr Mays and the British Legion, a room has been placed at my disposal at the Jellicoe Hall, Moxon-street, Barnet, and I have asked many prominent citizens and representatives of nearly all organisations in Barnet to attend a meeting there on Friday Night (May 28th), at 8.30 p.m.

Time prevents me writing personally to the many people who would be intensely interested in this matter. May I, therefore, make this appeal to Barnet townfolk to attend the meeting to give their help in determining how we can help these children and by doing so comfort their anxious mothers in a time of great danger and anxiety.—Yours, etc.

FLORENCE E. TEWSON.

73, Chesterfield-road, Barnet.

Preparations clearly continued apace, for on 10<sup>th</sup> July the Press carried the news that on the previous Saturday:

**THE BASQUE CHILDREN  
ARRIVE.**

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**And How They Welcomed a Bed !**

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**HERTFORD JOINS THE BARNETS  
AS FOSTER-PARENTS.**

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On Saturday, at 5 p.m., a red double-decked bus of the London Transport service lumbered up the narrow road leading to Rowley Lodge, Arkley. Overhanging trees had to be negotiated with care. Inquisitive branches peeped in at the bus windows, front, rear, and side. No wonder. They had never seen a double-decker bus before.

In the bus were children. The trees had seen children before, but had never heard such strange chatter. No wonder the branches clambered round inquisitively and had to be pushed aside. Barnet's big adopted family of Basque children had arrived at their new home at Rowley Lodge.

Rowley Lodge was always called their 'home', not a 'colony'. It also appears that just forty children would be housed there.



*Rowley Lodge, Arkley, Hertfordshire*

## THE EARLY DAYS AT ROWLEY LODGE

As the Barnet Press picture below serves to confirm, the new arrivals certainly appeared to be well and happy by the time they reached their new home. The presence in the back row of two gentlemen wearing white topped caps suggest that they may have been the driver and conductor of the bus that had brought them to Rowley Lodge - meaning that the picture was probably taken very soon after they had arrived.



No doubt also in the picture would be the Matron, Mrs Geary and her assistant Mrs Holliday, together with Mr and Mrs Tewson and other members of the organising committee. The press report of the arrival also indicated that members of a committee that had been established in Hertford were present, noting that 'they were to co-operate in what is now to be regarded as a Hertfordshire scheme' to provide care for further groups of the children.

(It noted that contacts had been established with interests in Welwyn, Berkhamsted and Hoddesdon, although it appears that these did not result in the creation of colonies there).

The Arkley children were extremely fortunate to have been re-homed just six weeks after their arrival in Britain. The last of the children would not leave the North Stoneham camp until September 1937.

From this local reporting it would appear that the Arkley home benefited greatly from having the association, dedication and organisational capabilities of Mr and Mrs Tewson so closely involved in its speedy creation.

The picture taken at Rowley Lodge so soon after the children arrived may well have been taken to serve as publicity rather than 'just' to record the event locally. The presence of the Hertford committee members suggests that they may also have been seeking to publicise, promote and perhaps even assist with the creation of further homes in the surrounding areas.

Despite any such possible aspirations, reference to lists of the colonies suggest it is probable that the only other Hertfordshire home which was established for the children was located at St Dominic's Priory, Ponsbourne Park, near Hertford Heath.

For further information see the very detailed Basque Children of '37 Association's website [www.basquechildren.org](http://www.basquechildren.org)

What is certainly evident from the reports regarding Rowley Lodge that appeared in the Barnet Press across the following months is that local organisations and many individuals were keen to welcome and provide support for the children.

The home welcomed many visitors at weekend 'open days', when the children would provide entertainment by singing and dancing, often dressed in traditional Basque clothing.

Invitations were also made for them to join in with events being organised for local children in the area. One example was a summer outing by coach organised by the Playing Fields Estates Association (funded by public donations totalling over £79) soon after they arrived at the Lodge.



**THREE Cheers FOR EVERYBODY**, including the "Barnet Free" photographer, when he arrived to take a picture of some of the 300 settled children and 130 adults, who, on Wednesday, enjoyed an outing arranged by Barnet Playing Fields Estate Association. The party, which included 37 of the Basque children from Rowley Lodge, Apsley, spent a memorable day at California, near Woburnham, Berks. The photograph was taken a few minutes before the start from Fairbairn-way.

There was however also evidence that a few of the children may not have settled so well into their new existence in Britain, although any problems appear to have been less evident at Rowley Lodge than with other homes elsewhere.

Here, a strong defence was tabled by Lord Plumer on behalf of the local committee in a letter published in the Press on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1937 (see extract right).

In regard to the behaviour of the children, it does seem un-British to attempt to brand 4,000 for the sins of 40 or 50. Of course, they are all children, and one expects difficulties to arise. Even at the Barnet home some of the older boys were rather difficult to handle amongst younger children, and were moved to Camberley—a home for older boys—where they are very popular.

How many parents, with two or three children, might smile sympathetically at the inevitable difficulties with a family of 40 children?

Then there has been the manufactured scare that the children are likely to spread disease. No case is known where this has happened.

Again, Barnet has not been without its crop of rumours about the Basque children having terrible skin and other diseases. All quite unfounded. Dr Stewart and Dr Cuff, the medical officers, are delighted with the health of the children.



The following week a letter in response, from a correspondent living in East Barnet, was published endorsing Lord Plumer's comment regarding not allowing the behaviour of the few to taint the majority, but then moving on to question the wisdom of having brought the children to Britain rather than, say, spreading them over the French Pyrenean provinces where 'not only are the climate and feeding similar to their own, but also.... it is possible to travel from Biarritz to Cerbares (sic) speaking Spanish only'.

The correspondent also referred to the many questions and possible difficulties that would arise when the time came to repatriate the children to their parents who, it was also stated, may have fled the fighting in Spain or may even be unwilling to take them back 'having abandoned them in their hour of need'.

It might also be the case that parents may have been killed in the fighting back at home, and this and other letters that the Press published demonstrate that not every member of the public (both locally and nationally) was entirely in favour of the children having come to Britain at all. Concerns were also aired regarding the current and possibly long-term requirement for the public to continue to provide both practical and financial support for the children.

Notwithstanding such expressions of concern - which were certainly far fewer locally than the many supportive letters and positive reports of developments at the Lodge - it is clear from analysis of the Barnet Press coverage that the home was well run, well supported, and that the children were generally happy and being well cared for there.

Confirmation of the last paragraph is evidenced by the Press item copied in full below - a summary (anonymous) of the first three months that Rowley Lodge had been in operation:

## THE BASQUE CHILDREN/

### The Happy Family at Rowley Lodge.

(Contributed.)

It is three months since the Basque children came to Barnet.

Lord Plumer, in a letter to the "Press" last week, referred to the spirit which pervades the home. It has often been repeated that the home is not run on ordinary institutional lines. Those in immediate contact with the home are highly satisfied with the progress from several points of view.

In the first place, the health of the children has materially improved. Whilst they had a clean bill of health on their arrival, it was evident that many of the children were still suffering from the effects of their experiences in their own country, although they had had several weeks' recuperation in the camp at Southampton. There was a general "nerviness"; isolated cases of mild hysteria occurred when letters arrived. Some of the children shed tears of joy; others who had heard nothing, and were fearful of the fate of their parents, were very dejected. Nervous twitchings could be observed. One of the youngest children who had gone through terrible trials was considered by Dr. Cuff to need special rest and care.

There has been a general increase in weight. Grim shadows of the past are further in the background, and the health generally is remarkably good. The tiny tot who had to rest and was considered to be suffering from shock is now one of the brightest children. Care, attention, and good food have played their part in the physical well-being of the children. Emotionally, the children have progressed. Peaceful surroundings have contributed to this, but to the keen observer there has been another great contributing factor. These are the words of an interested visitor who has great experience in children's homes, including many of those in the country caring for Basque children:

"Well, you have no such a large house as at —; you have not the furniture and carpets which they have at —; but you have something which transcends all those things. There is love in this home."

This is indeed a tribute to the great-hearted but shrewd matron, Mrs. Holliday, and her staff. This is the great factor which has brought about the happy family spirit, which has calmed war-shattered nerves and brought peace and warmth to the hearts of children who might otherwise have been starved of a semblance of mother-love.

The children find it difficult to express their appreciation in words, but several times I have seen a child go to the matron for the sheer love of being near her, and say: "Mother one (putting up one finger)—France; mother two (up go two fingers)—Mrs. Holliday." And what a couple of patient and tactful big brothers are Mr. Hortal and Mr. Gifford!

If the spirit of the home can be appreciated even to some extent, more and more people will accord their material support. More money is needed. Blankets are needed for the colder weather that is coming. A representative circle of individuals and organisations are responding manfully to needs which have to be met. The circle must be widened, and it will be when there is a greater realisation of what is being accomplished in the cause of children away from their homes and parents.

An interesting example of the kindly thoughts, combined with practical help, which make the work possible, is the gift of fruit, vegetables, and bread from the Congregational Church, Wood-street, after their harvest festival.

This week end the National Committee for the care of Basque children is holding a conference in London, at which representatives of the various homes will talk over common problems. Representatives of the Barnet committee will be in attendance.

In November 1937, the Press carried an item recording a courtroom challenge on behalf of Mrs Harriet M Geary, the initial Matron to the home at Rowley Lodge, against the Basque Children's Committee for wrongful dismissal soon after the children had arrived there. The case rested on whether notice and pay should have been given for one-month rather than the one-week that had been applied. The former was deemed applicable, Mrs Geary's 'excellent references' were taken into consideration, the Committee paid £10 into the court as compensation, and with the judge's consent the case was settled between Counsel.

Although a relatively trivial matter it is noted here because it appears to explain how the Assistant Matron, Mrs Holliday, became the Matron and served with acknowledged distinction throughout the time that Rowley Lodge was operational. Indeed, one child thought of her as their second mother according to the review on the previous page.

In December an appeal was issued for help with raising more funds to allow the purchase of extra food at the Lodge so that the children might 'have the sort of Christmas which will be enjoyed by our own children throughout this country on Christmas Day'. The public were also invited to join a party that would assemble at the bus terminus at the Arkley Hotel on Christmas morning to deliver presents to the children.

The appeal included a quote from a visitor to the Lodge:

'Only those with hearts of stone could refuse to help these innocent youngsters'.

One can only hope that the response was good and that the children ended their first six-months in Arkley, well-fed and happy as they, unknowingly, faced what was to become a lengthy stay for many of them.

## 1938 AND BEYOND - TO LATE 1942

A letter from the Basque Children's Committee in London that appeared on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1938 summarised the steps that were already being taken to reunite the Basque children with parents either still in Spain or scattered as refugees themselves in other countries for safety.

Some 800 applications had been received requesting repatriation, but the chaos left by the fighting made it hard to verify the validity of many that were possibly of a dubious status. Legal advice had been taken but it had not been until November that a request for the Committee to visit Spain for verification had been approved and had finally taken place.

As a result, most of the initial applications had now been verified and approved, and in all a total of 956 children had now been sent to re-join their parents in Spain, and 46 to parents in other countries. Most of the original refugees, now confirmed to have totalled 3826, therefore remained in homes such as Rowley Lodge around Britain.

It would not be until 1945 that the remaining children left the homes, although, as we shall see later, our research indicates that the last of the children at Rowley Lodge would have left some time during late 1942. Some it seems would move to another home locally until their future could be decided, no doubt with at least some of the older children joining others who across the years had chosen to begin new lives for themselves by remaining in Britain into adulthood.

## 1939-1942

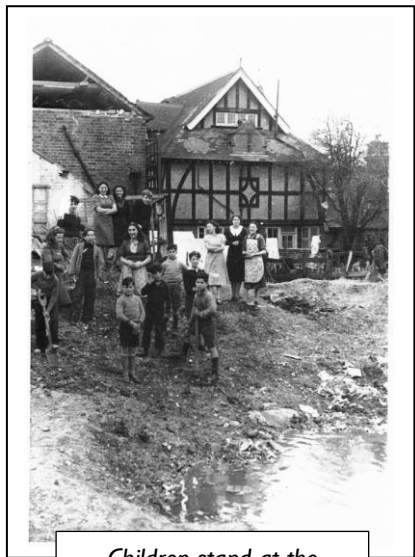
The Basque children who were sent to Britain in 1937 to escape a conflict were about to experience another when on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939 Britain declared war with Germany...

The Spanish Civil War ended in April 1939, and the Basque Children of '37 Association's website notes that many of the children in Britain had been repatriated by that September. A number remained in Britain, including

many at Rowley Lodge - where it appears that its sound reputation\* may well have made it an attractive option for the relocation of children that remained when other homes needed to close.

\*Readers might wish to refer to an interview with a former Rowley Lodge resident on the University of Southampton website which recalls an incident that might rather belie this generalisation - see: [Basque\\_stories\\_6d.pdf \(southampton.ac.uk\)](#). It also indicates that the children may have been relocated for a while (to the Oddfellows Hall in Barnet?) after the bombing, from where they may have witnessed another major local incident - the land mine which fell on the Oakmead Guest House in Bells Hill on 15<sup>th</sup> November.

It was not without irony that the aerial conflict from which the children had escaped in May 1937 would become a reality again when the German Blitz on London began in September 1940. Although Barnet was unlikely to have been a primary target, on 21<sup>st</sup> September the Barnet Press carried a report that several bombs had fallen in the town - one of them damaging Rowley Lodge, but mercifully only slightly injuring one of the children.



*Children stand at the crater after the bomb fell.*

In June 1941 the Press carried a report on the Lodge's annual garden party, noting that over £35 had been raised to help fund the repairs needed after the bombing. Later the same month they advised readers of the following news:

## **MRS ROOSEVELT'S BOY**

### **President's Wife Adopts Barnet Schoolboy**

The boy that she had 'adopted' was eleven-year-old Kerman Mirena Irondo, one of the children living at Rowley Lodge with his two older brothers. The arrangement was made under the Foster-Parents Plan for War Children, a scheme set up in Britain in 1937 to assist the Basque refugees which by 1939 had become a largely American group providing funds to support children overseas.

In October 1942, the First Lady visited Britain and during her stay made time to meet Kerman, and two other children she had adopted, at the Basque children's home at Hertford Heath.



The picture here shows them both, together with Jamina Dybowska of Poland and young Tommy Maloney, an orphan from the bombing on London's East End.

A short newsreel film of her visit can be viewed online at:

<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/mrs-roosevelts-adopted-children/query/Ladies>

As the war continued the Basque Children's Committee worked on to facilitate the process of securing repatriation for the children that remained under their care in Britain. By Autumn 1942 few would be left staying at Rowley Lodge.

The Press of 19<sup>th</sup> September 1942 carried a letter from the Honorary Secretary of the Hertfordshire and District Basque Children's Committee, Miss W B Attenborough, announcing that the committee, which had overseen the running of Rowley Lodge, had now been wound up.

The Matron, Mrs Holliday, and a Mr Walters, the only remaining members of staff caring for the reducing numbers of children there, were leaving and appreciation was expressed for all the support provided for the home by the staff and the public since it was opened over five-years earlier. However, she also advised that the National Committee were planning to continue to run the Lodge for a further few months until smaller premises could be obtained.

Further thanks were given for this support in a letter published on 3<sup>rd</sup> October from the acting Honorary Secretary of the National Committee, E Dorothea Layton, which also acknowledged the 'untiring energy' of Mrs Holliday which had 'been an inspiration to us all'.

She urged continued public support be made via her committee for all the Basque children still remaining in Britain. She ended her letter by stating that, as the days of Rowley Lodge came to an end, care would still be needed for a dozen children of school age as well as several others who, although working in the district, some in war factories, were not earning enough to be self-supporting.

As this exploration into the history of the Basques at Rowley Lodge between July 1937 and late 1942 ends we can observe that the people of Arkley, Barnet and the wider local area could be proud of their contribution to the care and maintenance of the many refugees that spent time there. We conclude with a brief look into 1943 and beyond....

## 1943 TO 1945

For six months following the publication in the Barnet Press of the autumn 1942 letters detailing the closure of Rowley Lodge nothing further was reported regarding the Basque children still being at, or leaving, the Lodge. However, insight into the wider - and Arkley specific - gradual closure of the colonies between 1940 and 1945 is given in Adrian Bell's hugely informative book 'Only for Three Months' (a reference to the time it was

originally envisaged that the children would be exiled) in which he records the history of the evacuation of the children and their time in many of the colonies across Britain.

‘It was in these colonies, the last survivors of the 70 or so that had been operating at one time or another in 1937, that some of the youngest children were looked after during the [Second World] war. One by one, they too were to close: there were six in 1940, three by 1943 and only two by 1944. Soon after the end of the war, all that remained was the colony at Carshalton.... and the vestige of the Barnet colony, reduced to a hostel in Finchley for a few of the older boys and girls who were then working in London’.

His book also describes Rowley Lodge as being ‘a mock-Elizabethan mansion set in three acres’ which in 1937 ‘had been offered to the [local] committee by three elderly sisters’.

My research suggests that they were Wilhelmina Rose, Marian Violet and Evelyn May Aitken, daughters of the Rev William Hay MacDowall Hunter Aitken, Canon Residentiary of Norwich Cathedral (1900-1927). Reverend Aitken was involved in 19<sup>th</sup> Century evangelical work with two prominent Barnet figures, Reverend W Pennefather and Reverend John Trotter.

Wilhelmina was a portrait painter, and Marian is recorded as having been an active member of the suffragette movement in 1912. Their brother, the Reverend Wilfred Hay MacDowall Aitken, an Army Chaplain in WWI, was resident at Rowley Lodge when he died in 1960.

The Lodge has now been rebuilt retaining the exact exterior detail of the original building and in June 2010 played host to a nostalgic reunion of a small group of former resident ‘Ninos’ and their families. Organised by the Basque Children of ’37 Association, a report of the event in their November 2010 Newsletter records the many happy memories of the time they had spent at Rowley Lodge even after seventy years or more had passed.



## CONCLUSION

Thanks are due to Adrian Bell for permission to include the above quotation from 'Only for Three Months' (Mousehold Press) and for offering comments on this article which serve to confirm and extend assumptions drawn at the local level from reports and correspondence in the Barnet Press.

The first confirmed that the committee behind Rowley Lodge did indeed bring into play a wealth of experience and good connections which ensured it benefited from high quality organisation and administration from the start. Some other colonies varied in the quality of care provided, not least due to the amount of money their committees were able to raise.

He also emphasised that the National Committee always sought to stress that supporting the children - 'innocent victims of war' - was a humanitarian endeavour rather than a political one. Local committees were indeed therefore required to seek cooperation and support from as wide a range of other organisations, churches, voluntary bodies etc as possible – *not* just from left-wing organisations and political parties that might be the most obvious supporters.

As Adrian Bell records in his book, Sir Vincent Tewson, a Trade Union leader, and the Labour movement's representative on the National Committee, consistently impressed on its members the official view that the Basque children were best served by a broad base of support. In doing so he would cite the case of his wife Florence who, as Secretary of the Barnet Committee, had drawn in some 40 organisations including 'three churches, each political party, the Oddfellows, the British Legion and several others'. Sir Vincent Tewson, a Yorkshireman by birth, who died in Letchworth in 1981, became the General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) between 1946 and 1960.

**The Tewsons were true local players on a national - and international - stage.**