

Basque Refugees at Hutton Hall, Guisborough, North Yorkshire

Based on Chapter 6 *The Last Pennymans of Ormesby, the lives of Jim and Ruth Pennyman*, by Mark Whyman, published by Bargate Publications 2008.

Ruth Pennyman of Ormesby Hall was the organiser of this colony. Early in 1937 she had been out to Barcelona and although she only recorded a description of her outward journey, she was clearly affected by what she had seen there. When news of the possibility of children being evacuated to the UK., she sought the help of a local Quaker Landowner, Sir Alfred Pease for the use of Hutton Hall, a large mansion, at this time standing empty in its own extensive park. He readily agreed and feverish preparations were made before the arrival of 20 refugees on 1st July 1937ⁱ. There were 13 girls and 7 boys aged between 7 and 15.



Hutton Hall near Guisborough, loaned by Sir Alfred Pease as a home for Basque refugee children
Mark Whyman

A letter to supporters described the arrangements;
The bedrooms are large airy rooms with three or four small beds in each room. Orange boxes, given by a local fruiterer, have been painted by the boys to use as bedside lockers and the girls have made curtains for them in cheap cretonne in bright colours. The floors were stained by voluntary helpers, and between each bed is a rush mat. A small table completes the furniture. The children's personal possessions such as photographs, purses, beads, dolls' tea-sets, &c., are all set out on the little tables and on nearly every bed there is a doll. A great many of the toys, dolls &c., have been collected and sent by schools in the district.

There is now a settled routine, the children doing most of the house-work including preparing meals and washing their own clothes under the supervision of the two senioritas who accompanied them from Southampton. Breakfast usually milk or weak

coffee, bread and jam or fruit at 8:30. is followed by housework, after which there are lessons until dinner which is at 12:30 and which usually consists of a Spanish Stew or a potato omelet with bread, followed by fruit. They do not eat puddings. The elder children, boys and girls, clear the pots and wash them whilst the younger ones rest until 2 o'clock. Another lesson follows and at 4 o'clock they have a slice of dry bread and either a penny bar of chocolate or an apple or banana. The interval until the evening meal is devoted to games or walks..... Supper, at 6:30 varies between Lentil or Bean Soup, Fish and Chips or a Green Salad with bread and milk. At 7:30 the younger children go to bed, followed at 8:30 by the older onesⁱⁱ.

David Thomson from the Carlisle Branch of the National Committee, which was run by the mother of the National Secretary, seems to have had an inspectoral role and visited Hutton Hall after helping with the transfer of children from the Harwood Dale Camp, to a disused hospital at Scarborough, who wrote that *Yours is a hostel of which to be proud*. The favourable comparison is not surprising as Harwood Dale had been wrecked by refugee children complaining of the food, the cook having apparently been held at knife pointⁱⁱⁱ. Another letter quotes from a child who had been transferred to Hutton (possibly from Harwood Dale) *The house is very good indeed and also the staff who is as good as the snow of white*. Thomson adds *Don't you think that it is nobly written^{iv}*.

Ruth's husband, Jim however had other views; *The girls were lazy, but the boys were very awkward. Two young women teachers who came with them were useless. The Spanish speaking matron couldn't stand up to it and left We tried various men and women and none of them stuck it, Ruth herself took over once and nearly had a nervous breakdown. After a bit things quietened down, but it was an anxious time. Neville Chamberlain came to stay for a big rally in the Park and paid a visit to the Basques, which put them and us on the map^v.*

The rally had initially been organised to provide the opportunity to lobby Stanley Baldwin concerning the stringent conditions placed on the National Committee but he had been unexpectedly replaced by Neville Chamberlain who spoke to some 8000 Conservatives at the rally in the gardens of Ormesby Hall.

By 1938 the enormous support that the refugees had enjoyed on their arrival had faded away and it was necessary to put a great deal more effort to raise funds to meet the government demand that 10 shillings per child per week should be raised by the National Joint Committee.

The arrival of Consuelo Carmona in January 1938 must have lifted Jim and Ruth's hearts. Consuelo was a well known Spanish Dancer and London Cabaret artist and she trained a group of five of the refugees, three girls and two boys, to present fund-raising concerts. In February 1938, they took part in a BBC Concert and in July of that year they embarked on a 14 day tour of Norfolk which raised £250. In September a tour of the Lake District was planned. These tours were far from being a holiday as there was at least one performance in a different town each day. The Lake District Tour visited Keswick, Kendal, Bowness, Ambleside, Grasmere, Langdale, Carlisle, and Penrith ending at Keswick. Nor were conditions ideal. In a letter to possible sponsors for the Lake District Tour Ruth says; *The two boys can camp out with the driver of the car and the 3 girls and warden require 2 beds^{vi}*.

Just before Christmas 1938 they were presenting a concert in Harrogate and the *Harrogate Advertiser* reported; *The children from Hutton Hall gave two performances in the course of the evening. Nobody, of course understood a word they said or sung but they acted with such inborn and unconscious artistry, their gestures so unforced and so eloquent and their features so mobile that ones lack of knowledge of the finer points of Spanish was no handicap. All the items in this lovely little show were vivid, vital and picturesque, but little Juanica Asensio, who is very much 'a stranger in the world' as she is only 8 years old, achieved a tremendous personal success in her individual number. It was a charming and oddly poignant little interlude*^{vii}.

Probably the most important tour started on 3rd January 1939, a 25 day tour of Switzerland. This was most successful as Consuelo was able to write to Ruth on 12th January *We have already paid all our expenses and are having a wonderful time. You would love this climate, not nearly as cold as Middlesbrough*^{viii}. Alas on their return they were to learn that Barcelona had fallen to Franco. The fall of Barcelona was to produce an additional 20 refugees from other colonies, who had to be clothed and fed, when the National Joint Committee ran out of funds^{ix}. Thus a tour of the Cleveland area took place in March, visiting Hartlepool, North Ormesby, Darlington, South Bank, Loftus, Redcar, Saltburn, the Co-op Hall in Middlesbrough and Ormesby^x, where presumably the concert took place in the Village Hall, which had been opened by Myra Swan of Upsall Hall just before Easter 1938^{xi}. The Village Hall was still in debt but the community were said to be working hard to pay this off.

In April 1939, the Spanish Civil War was over and there was pressure from both Franco and the British Government to repatriate the refugee children. This was a difficult period as there were serious doubts concerning the fate of the 'enemy' children if they were returned to Spain. However Jim writes that *some of our children got themselves jobs and were making good, others were adopted by friends and those left were taken into the Old Wing and finally sent back to Spain* He sums up the episode; *They made a mountain of work for Ruth but it was a job worth doing – and I am glad we took them in*^{xii}.

One of those who got jobs was Fermin Magdalena who was employed as a footman at Ormesby Hall. Fermin visited the Hall in the 1980s and was persuaded to return to a fortnight later to tape record his memories of Hutton Hall. Sadly before this could happen his wife died and he felt unable to continue with the recording. This was a great loss, but we do know that he was one of a family of four, Julia, Pilar, and Federico. Their parents were refugees in France and so they could not return to Spain. Their father died in 1940. Fermin and his younger sister Pilar made their home in the North-East. After leaving Ormesby Fermin had a job with Co-op Dairies before moving to manage a wholesale fruiterer and then to set up Geest's banana import business in Shildon. Pilar married and also lived in Shildon. Julia also married and moved to Majorca where she died^{xiii}. Fermin died in 2005^{xiv}.

ⁱ Telegram dated 30 June 1937 20 children arriving tomorrow

ⁱⁱ Basque Refugee Children at Hutton Hall, undated Teesside Archives U/PEN(2)/11/28 envelope.

ⁱⁱⁱ Radio 4 broadcast *Basque Refugees 1937-38*, on 30th March 2002.

^{iv} Teesside Archive U/PEN(2)/29/31

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- v p 37 *JBWP dated 1950 et seq*
- vi Circular Letter from RP representing the Middlesbrough Branch of the National Joint Committee
17 August 1938. Teesside Archives U/PEN(2)/29/31
- vii Harrogate Advertiser 10th December 1938 Teesside Archives U/PEN(2)/29/31
- viii Postcard Consuelo Carmona to Ruth 12th January 1939 Teesside Archives U/PEN(2)/29/31
- ix p38 *JBWP dated 1950 et seq*
- x Teesside Archives U/PEN(2)/29/31
- xi North Eastern Gazette 2nd March 1939 Teesside Archives U/PEN/7/21.
- xii p38 *JBWP dated 1950 et seq*
- xiii Northern Echo 1st August 2002
- xiv Northern Echo 17th February 2005