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Another building worthy of mention is Moorlands House. Once a handsome Victorian country residence it is now split into two dwellings thus its original grandeur is now somewhat diminished. But of special interest is that during the Spanish Civil War it was the home of a group of refugees and during World War II it was taken over by the Air Ministry.



*The Spanish refugees at Moorlands House, circa 1938*

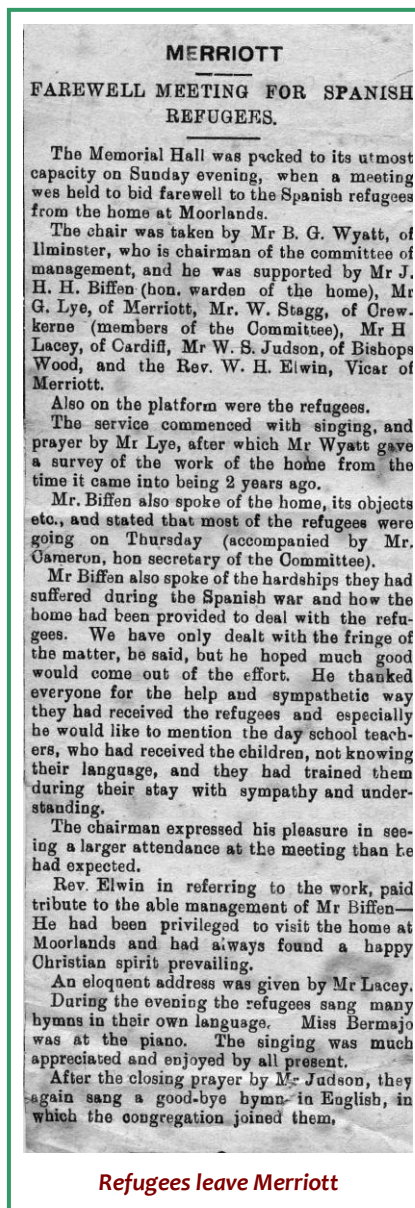
The refugees were in some way linked to the Gospel Hall, I'm not sure how, being the Spaniards were most likely Catholic and the Gospel Hall community are non-conformist. What I do know is that they attended services and other events there on a regular basis.

My particular memory of them is as a very small pre-school boy sitting on our cottage steps in Broadway when suddenly around the corner from Moorlands would come this group of young Spanish women and girls. With shrieks of exuberance, they used to head for me and would sit beside me for a while, cuddle me and otherwise make a fuss of me in typical Spanish fashion before making their way up the hill to the chapel. I imagine I would have quite enjoyed the attention.

Who were the Spanish refugees who came to live at Moorlands and how did they get there? Here's my attempt at a brief explanation.

The Spanish Civil War has its roots in the worldwide economic depression of the 1930s. In response to widespread poverty and unemployment, socialism gathered momentum and, in 1931, the Spanish people, having dispensed with the monarchy, voted overwhelmingly for a Socialist Republic. Attempts at social reform, however, were only partially successful and, by 1933, there was a reversal of political fortunes. A right-wing government came to power and promptly demolished all the reforms introduced by the socialists. Over the next two or three years there was much civil unrest. In 1936

there was yet another election, the Popular Front regained power, and they soon set about releasing political prisoners and again introducing reforms that penalised the rich.



Refugees leave Merriott

Seeing their privileged way of life being eroded, the wealthier Spaniards, supported by senior army officers, began plotting to overthrow the Popular Front government. Franco, who was now commander of the army in Spain's African colonies, joined in the revolt and led a military assault on southern Spain. Elements of the Spanish army stationed on the mainland supported the rebellion; others, about fifty percent of the armed forces, supported the legitimately elected Popular Front government. After just three or four weeks of fighting, the Nationalist Front army controlled about one third of the country. The fighting, which, thanks to the German and Italian involvement, now included aerial bombardment and mechanised warfare, intensified. Both sides committed appalling atrocities. Thousands of men and boys were killed in battle or captured and shot. Hundreds of civilians caught up in the fighting, especially the bombing raids on undefended cities, were killed and injured. (Only in recent times, as mass graves are excavated, is the full extent of these atrocities, especially those committed by the Nationalists, being revealed.) As the Nationalists pushed north, refugees, mainly women and children, began pouring over the border from the Basque region of Spain into France. In response to public concern, the British Conservative government agreed to take a limited number of refugees but refused to finance them and so many organisations such as trade unions and the churches formed relief committees to raise funds, arrange accommodation and provide ongoing support. Consequently, on 22<sup>nd</sup> May

1937, an old liner called the *Habana*, carrying 4000 refugees, mainly women and children, many of the children unaccompanied by an adult relative, set sail from northern Spain bound for Southampton. On arrival in Southampton two days later, the passengers were housed in a tented camp and later dispersed and sent to live in 'settlements' dotted around the country. Since the *Habana* appears to have been the only refugee ship to sail to England, it seems highly probable that the Spanish refugees who ended up in Merriott were amongst those passengers.

Eventually the legitimately elected Popular Front government was overthrown and Franco established a right-wing authoritarian regime that was to last until 1978. Thus peace of a sort prevailed and so the British government, urged on by the Franco regime and the Catholic Church but opposed by the relief committees, recommended

repatriation. Most refugees did return, but not all, believing, or perhaps knowing, that it was simply not safe to do so. They were probably right, because many women returned home to find that husbands and brothers they had left behind had been killed or were imprisoned. The persecution of Popular Front supporters by Franco's regime continued. Many of the returning children - maybe some of those happy faces in the Moorland's photograph - ended up in orphanages where they were often badly treated. Look again at those children and consider this: it could well be that the happiest days of their young lives were those spent in Merriott.

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