

Basque Children's Colony, Montrose

After the infamous bombing of Guernica in April 1937, fears were expressed that the fascists would bomb other civilian targets in the Basque country, particularly Bilbao. Consequently, 25,000 Basque children were sent out of Spain to different parts of Europe.

The numbers of the children who came to Britain vary in the different accounts, but according to the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, some 3,840 children came, together with 80 teachers, 120 auxiliaries and 15 catholic priests aboard the ship *SS Habana*, which left the port of Santurce on the night of 22nd May 1937 on its journey to Southampton. May Wilson of Dundee travelled to Southampton to help with their arrival and settlement.

Only one Basque children's 'Colony' was established in Scotland, at Mall Park House in Montrose, where, from September 1937, about 30 children stayed until it was felt safe for them to return.

The hosting of the Basque children in Montrose was the result of a long campaign of fundraising in Dundee and the surrounding area, attracting pledges and funds from over 30 organisations including the Women's Liberal Association, TOC-H, Dundee Breakfast Club, Shop Assistants Union, Trades & Labour Council and many more. Fundraising rallies and concerts were held in the Caird Hall and other venues. A home for them had been sought in the City, but none suitable could be secured, so the children found themselves a few miles down the coast at Montrose as guests of the Dundee Free Breakfast Mission in their holiday home there; Mall Park House.



The children arriving at Montrose Station, 1937.

Some of the names of the children & staff at Montrose:

Julio Larrondo, Encarnacion Benavente*, Benedicta Gonzalez, Francisca Gonzalez, Jesusa Lucas, Enrique Mollinedo, Jose Perez, Victor Anduiza, Josefina Gonzalez, Fernando Mollinedo, Esther Benavente*, Alicia Gil, Lola Mollinedo, Pilar Huertas (daughter of Adelina Larraga), Basilio Redondo, Abastasio Gil, Josefina Lucas, Elia Redondo, Maria Blanco (Auxiliary from San Sebastian), Miss Kinni Inglesa (Helper in the colony), Miss May Wilson (Director of the colony), Adelina Larraga (Teacher at the colony), Amelia Huertas (daughter of Adelina Larraga), Maria Huertas (daughter of Adelina Larraga)

** Encarnacion and Esther never went back to Spain. Encarnacion worked for the family who owned the Pump House bar in the Overgate. Esther was taken in by the Mitchell family. Both married Dundonians. Esther later set up in business as a seamstress and emigrated in 1957 to Canada with her husband, Alf Small. Their son, also called Alf, was going on 7 yrs old, his older brother Brian was 9 and younger brother Allan was 5. Another brother, Bruce, was born in 1959. Esther died some years ago and three of her sons still survive, the oldest, Brian, having died of cancer in 1989. Encarnacion also has a surviving son who lives in Tayport.*

Elia Redondo made friends with Margaret Grundison, daughter of the Ritchie family who she stayed with, and Margaret McGregor during her time as a refugee and when she returned to Spain they all kept in touch, and have done so ever since. Elia and her family came over to Dundee to visit both Margarets, and other contacts from that time, in 2005.

A group of the former children made an emotional return to Montrose in July 1985. As tokens of their appreciation for their happy stay almost 50 years earlier, the former refugees presented Angus Council with a silver plaque from Bilbao and a silver salver from the Province of Biscay. (Reported in the *Sunday Post*, 21 July 1985.)



Mall Park House Montrose, today.