

Vicente Romero returns to Theydon Bois

TERRY CARTER

Readers may recall Ted Martin's article, 'Leah Manning and the Basque Children in Theydon Bois', that we printed in Newsletter 181, in which Ted wrote:

'Jim Watts, a neighbour in Theydon Bois before I moved to Bedfordshire, is the editor of the Theydon Bois website and also manages the L & DHS website for us, so though we are now 40 miles apart we still correspond regularly by e-mail. On 20 November 2008 I received a request from him for the Society's help to find further information for Covadonga Cienfuegos Jovellanos, a Spanish lady who lives in San Sebastian, a city in northern Spain. Senora Jovellanos's father, Vicente Romero, who was 85 on 4 December 2008, and now lives in Gijon in Spain, had spent 10 months in Theydon Bois at the age of 13, with his brother, José, and his sister, Maria, and 18 other Spanish children. They were part of the nearly 4,000 Basque children, who were evacuated to England to escape from the Spanish Civil War, thanks to campaigners in England persuading the British Government to take them).'

The full article, which is both detailed and moving can be found on our website, and I recommend a re-reading to members. Among many things, it reveals the lasting impact that Theydon Bois made on Vicente who, happily, is a fit and youthful 88. So much so, that Vicente, accompanied by Senora Consuelo Romero, his wife, and Covadonga, came back to England, both for the 75th reunion of the Basque children's arrival in this country and to take the opportunity to return to Theydon Bois. Jim Watts hosted a meeting on Thursday, 10 May, attended by his three Spanish guests, plus Peter Newton of Roding Valley U3A, Theydon Bois Rural Preservation Society and also the L & DHS, Trevor Roberts, Theydon Bois Local History Recorder

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and myself. Ted was, of course, invited to attend but, much to his regret, he was urgently needed elsewhere. That morning, Jim Watts picked up the visitors from The Bell Hotel, and gave them a guided tour of Epping, a walk in Epping Forest and over Theydon Bois Golf Course. Covadonga, a distinguished lawyer, proved to be a charming and memorable lady, as well as an excellent translator, which was just as well, as my Spanish is limited to a few words and phrases, and Senora Romero spoke no English. The English that Vicente learned here in 1937/38 had deserted him, so Codavonga relayed his thoughts to us. From Newsletter 181: 'At 6.40 a.m. on Friday, 21 May 1937 the SS Habana left Bilbao. There were over 3,800 children on board, with 95 women teachers, 120 señoritas as helpers, 15 priests and Leah Manning. The ship was escorted by the destroyer HMS Forester.

Vicente, a retired engineer, remembers the crossing in the ship: "we all slept on the deck. Everybody else was sick; but my brother, sister and I were not. We were also very lucky because they took everybody's luggage away and mixed them up, but nobody took ours." Two

days later, on 23 May 1937, after a terrible journey, the Basque children arrived at Southampton. They were welcomed by the Duchess of Atholl, Sir Walter and Lady Layton and Sir Walter and Lady Citrine. Many famous names including Cadburys, Horlicks, Rowntrees, Marmite, Jaegers, Co-op, Woolworths, Standard Fireworks, Prudential Assurance, Sidney Bernstein, the RSPCA and Marks & Spencer donated goods or money to the relief agencies.'

Through Codavonga, Vicente recalled that the children were dispersed all over England, and that his group, 21, as he related, were sent to Theydon Bois. They were sent to Woodberry, a house in Piercing Hill, which for a time was known as the Leah Manning Home (for her extensive involvement with the rescue of the children, and their subsequent aftercare, please refer to Newsletter 181). Woodberry later became part of the sorely missed Wansfell College. Vicente delighted in pointing out to us, in a very old photograph of Woodberry, the very window of the room in which he stayed for all his time in Theydon. Vicente, although only 13, seems to have been a leader in the group, looking after their luggage and possessions. He spoke of staying in

' "a lovely residence in a long avenue with smart houses". Next door to them lived a family with young daughters and the Basque children used to play with them. The neighbours' wife's family were part of the Cadbury chocolate family and next to them lived a family with a son who was an "aviator". One day the aviator threw a message from a plane and it fell down in the Spanish children's garden. The teachers gave it to the neighbours. It said he wasn't going to be on time for the tennis match.'

During their stay, an English teacher taught them English and lived with them. Vicente recalled that the children used to walk on the golf course in the afternoon and played football or visited Epping Forest. Through Covadonga, Vicente related how 'the man in charge' of Theydon Bois Golf Club, gave the children permission to use part of one of the fairways for their group exercises and fitness routines. He spoke of a house in Piercing Hill which was lived in 'by a famous admiral' and another in the road by 'a wonderful doctor' who often attended the children. Some evenings they had activities in the Loreto Convent in Forest Side, to the west of the Golf Course, because all the children were Catholic. The convent closed in the 1970s and was at first converted to a large house called Theydon Towers and recently to flats and houses. At the weekends volunteers from the Labour Party came from London and took the children for an outing to the capital by train. They were often visited in Theydon Bois by Leah Manning. Vicente Romero remembers her as a 'nice lady who loved the children very much'. Their parting was tinged with sadness. Leah Manning got angry on her last visit to Theydon Bois, when she found that the three Romero children had been sent back to Spain without her knowledge. Vicente stayed for 10 months in England and it seems that a further group came to Theydon Bois after his group had left.

Covadonga says that, after so long, Vicente has forgotten most of the English that he spoke perfectly when he came back to Spain, but what he has never forgotten was a country and especially a village, Theydon Bois, which offered love and shelter to him and his companions far away from the misfortunes of war. She spoke movingly of the pleasure it gave them to be shown the places by Jim Watts, that clearly still meant so much to Vicente. That made it so very much worth while, and I hope the three of them have many more years to be able to speak fondly of Vicente Romero's return to Theydon Bois.

There is more to say about the children, about Leah Manning and others, but space determines that, for this, as said earlier, you will need to turn to Ted's article. However, from it I will add:

'After the Romero children returned to Spain, Vicente became an engineer . . . He became a doctor of engineering, he went back to the Asturias region in Northern Spain

for his first job. There he married and then came back to the Basque country, where he worked for a large iron company until he retired, becoming the director responsible for organisation and security in the company. José Romero became a member of the Catholic teaching order of St Jean Baptiste of La Salle. He was a teacher in their schools for many years. He now lives in a community with other brothers near San Sebastian. Unfortunately, Maria died 25 years ago. She always wanted to become a doctor but in those difficult times her parents could not afford her training and so she finally became a nurse. She did not marry. When she died, she was the much loved director of a health centre near Bilbao.'

Tailpiece

On the first page of this Golden Jubilee edition, Ian referred to the early Transactions booklets of the Chigwell Local History Society. This is the Editorial from the second issue, published in 1974. Our apologies to those who may have seen this before.

No other capital has anything to touch Epping Forest



Epping Forest viewed from Loughton Lodge, Woodbury

Hills Committee member Carol Francis spotted the following article in the Evening Standard under the poetic headline: Catch the Fall in Old England: Epping Forest

The 6,000 acres of ancient woodland of Epping Forest is the largest public open space in the vicinity of London. In fact, no other capital city in the world can claim to have such an extensive area of undeveloped land near its centre. It has areas of grassland, heath, rivers, bogs and ponds, and technicolour autumn (looking particularly beautiful this year, we thought—Ed.) Misty mornings and golden leaves. And it's all of five minutes' walk from Theydon Bois (or Loughton —Ed.) station on the Central Line. At High Beech, there's a popular walkers' café or The King's Oak nearby has substantial pub food. Whether or not the claim can be substantiated—we wondered about Helsinki or Oslo to name just two—there is no doubt that 'our' forest is one of the reasons why so many of us choose to live in the Conservation Areas. Let's hope that the forest, at least, will be preserved from the developers. If you want to know what is going on in the forest information can be obtained from: The Epping Forest Information Centre. Email: enquiries.ef@field-studies-council.org

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Britain by Streets Printers, Baldock, Herts.

The functions of an historical society are not simply to hold monthly meetings, interesting and necessary though such meetings may be. To survive, a society must undertake research into local history and having done so should publish the results of such work periodically. The welcome extended to our first book of transactions has encouraged us to issue the second book. In it will be found articles of local interest by local authors who have a thorough knowledge of the subject. We are profoundly grateful to them for putting their knowledge at our disposal so generously. This little book is launched in the hope and belief that it will be of much interest, not only to present-day readers, but also may prove of value to historians in the future.