

Theydon's Spanish Connection

An overcast 23rd May, 1937, Southampton witnessed a particularly unusual cargo disembarking from a converted aging liner The SS Habana. There were no fanfares or ships sirens - just a quiet unannounced entry into port. Down the gangway 3,826 Spanish children, 95 teachers, 120 volunteer helpers and 15 priests disembarked, hoping for a life now free from the trauma of war they had left behind - the Spanish Civil War. During this war, nearly one million Spanish were exiled, but this cargo was of a sector of Spanish society that had no choice in their future - children that had become the pawns of war.

Next day in the pouring rain, the first group of children were moved into a reception camp, at Stoneham, Eastleigh - their new temporary home. The primary purpose of the camp was to allow enough time for the English formed Basque Children's Committee to make arrangements for their transportation to the 94 designated "colonies" around the country including Theydon Bois.

Recently our Village Website Editor had an e-mail from Covadonga Cienfuegos-Jovellanos (*pictured right*) a Spanish lady who works as a lawyer in San Sebastian, a lovely city by the sea, in northern Spain. Between May 1937 and February 1938 her father, Vicente Romero had spent 10 months in Theydon Bois together with his brother Jose Lois, sister Maria and 18 other Spanish Basque children. Covadonga was hoping that we could help her with more information as she was planning a birthday surprise for her father who was going to be 85 on the 4th December 2008 and still has fond memories of his time in Theydon Bois.



The Basque Children at Woodberry, Piercing Hill in 1937. Leah Manning (right of centre with child on knee) Vicente Romero (top far right), Jose bottom right, arms crossed) and Maria (on the knee of the woman on the right)."

Vicente, a retired engineer who now lives in Gijon, Spain was 13 at the time, his brother Jose 9 and Maria about 5. Jose, a retired teacher, is now 81 and lives in San Sebastian, but unfortunately Maria, a nurse, died about 25 years ago.

We found an early photograph of the children and also found they were brought to Theydon Bois by Leah Manning, who had visited Guenica, Spain at the time of the bombing. She was a social reformer who had been President of the National Union of

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Teachers and the MP for Islington East. A supporter of the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, she was very active in arranging the evacuation of children from the war zone and persuading a reluctant British Government to take some of the refugee children. She later became the Labour MP for Epping from 1945 – 50. The house the children stayed at in Theydon Bois was the former Wansfell College building, then called 'Woodberry' and also known at the time as the 'Leah Manning Home'.

Covadonga's father Vicente recalls "I remember the crossing in the ship La Habana and how 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. In the camp of Eastleigh it was a mess. Nobody could find their luggage but we were really happy as we had ours. I looked after all our things and happily arrived at Theydon Bois with everything. We stayed in a lovely residence in a long avenue with smart houses (Piercing Hill). Next door to them lived a family with young daughters and the Basque children used to play with them. The wife's family were part of the Cadbury's chocolate family (the Cadbury's, Rowntree's and others also helped the refugees) and next to them lived a family with a son who was an 'Aviator'. One day the aviator threw a message from the plane and it fell down in our children's garden. The teachers gave it to the neighbours. It said he wasn't going to be on time for the tennis match.



Vicente Romero 85
(Covadonga's father).



Jose Romero 81
(his brother).

During our stay an English teacher lived with us and also taught us English. Children from the village used to visit and play with us. All the children used to walk in the golf courses in the afternoon and play football or visited Epping Forest. Some evenings the Basque children had activities in a catholic convent of nuns (the Loreto Convent which used to be located on the site of Theydon Towers, by Forest Side) because all the children were catholic. Occasionally on weekends volunteers of the Labour party came from London and took us for an outing to the capital by train. We were often visited in Theydon Bois by Miss Manning, who had promoted the idea of giving shelter to the Basque children. I remember her as a nice lady who loved all the children very much. She got angry on her last visit to Theydon Bois, when she found out that Vicente his brother and sister had been sent back to Spain without her knowledge".

Covadonga says "Naturally, after so long my father has forgotten most of the English that he spoke perfectly when he came back, but what he has never forgotten was a country and specially a village, Theydon Bois which offered to love them and shelter them far away from the misfortunes of a war".

Are you old enough to have played with the Basque children in 1937 or do you know more about the children's times in Theydon Bois? If so Covadonga, Vicente and Village News would love to hear about it. E-Mail: webeditor@theydon.org.uk or contact us via the Parish Office.