



Professor Eric Hawkins with niña María Luisa Toole.



Some of the niños at the unveiling ceremony.

## Unveiling of a Blue Plaque at Cambridge



**On 15 May 2005, 12 niños vascos, their relatives, former volunteers and friends gathered in Jesus College, Cambridge. They came from around**

**the country to celebrate the unveiling of a blue plaque to commemorate the 29 Basque children who stayed at 1 Salisbury Villas on Station Road between January 1938 and November 1939.**

*Niña, María Luisa Martínez (Toole) writes:*

I travelled down to Cambridge from Bolton the day before with two of my daughters. We spent Saturday looking round the city, which brought back many happy memories of the time I spent there. By Sunday, I was really looking forward to the ceremony and meeting up with old friends again. As people started to gather at Jesus College, I was overwhelmed as I had just expected there to be *niños vascos* who had been in the Cambridge colony. But there were many who had made the trip from London, also representatives of the Basque government, the Spanish Embassy, Basque television, the local newspaper and the Mayor of Cambridge! For me, it was very emotional to see two people who'd been at the colony with me and whom I hadn't seen for 50 years, María Luisa Gallego and Primitiva Rojas. Some of the others, like Antonio Gallego, I'd seen since at one of the London lunches.

There were several speakers, after which I was honoured to help Professor Hawkins unveil the plaque. He used to come to the colony at Pampisford to give us lessons. Finally, there was the showing of a long lost short film showing various facets of our daily life in the colony, at mealtimes, sitting in the classroom, on holiday

in Norfolk and dancing the jota. I can't remember this, but I saw myself there, wearing a big sun hat!

Altogether it was a lovely day. We were sad to leave and the goodbyes went on for quite a while! I would really like to thank all the people who'd organised it for all their hard work, especially Natalia Benjamin and Manuel Moreno.

*Her daughters, Ana and Marisita, write:*

For us, too, it was a very emotional day. It was the first time we'd been to Cambridge as adults with our mum, and it made a lot of things clearer. Cambridge was where our parents met, so visiting all these places that reminded her of dad brought tears to our eyes. As only our mum can, she sweetly talked the porter of Gonville and Caius College, where dad went, so we could look around, although it was shut to the public as exams were on.

Sunday was like fitting another piece of the jigsaw into place. We were really moved to finally meet all these people who were such an important part of her life, and who shared what can only have been quite difficult times with her. We'd heard so many tales about them all as we were growing up that it was great to put a face to these stories! Talking to other sons and daughters of *niños vascos* felt like coming home, here were others who seemed to know instinctively why we hold our mum so dear after what she went through at such a young age.

We'd like to end this piece with her words as we drove home. They summed it all up perfectly: "I wouldn't have missed it for the world!"

*Teacher, Professor Eric Hawkins writes:*

So what message will your blue plaque send to those who hurry down Station Road on their way to their train or queue for their bus? It will be a quiet message, not a loud or strident call. I

think it was well summed up by Adrian Bell in Steve Bowles' timely BBC4 documentary. Adrian brought out clearly that it was the British people, not their government, who spoke for Britain in 1937.

What your blue plaque will say, quietly but patiently and importantly, amid the bustle and preoccupations of Station Road, may simply be that when the Basque people, and especially their children, were being given a cruel time by a dictator, the people of Cambridge joined with their famous old university in the national effort to help them. And that when the *niños* grew up, they and their children and their supporters came back to Cambridge to ensure that a good deed should not be forgotten and to say thank you.

*Son of a volunteer, Dr Colin Leakey writes:*

The Cambridge event was one of the encouraging things of the present year. There are not too many of these around. Compared with the "celebrity-driven" attempts to deal with today's problems, the quiet efficiency and efforts of a relatively small and unheralded group of people proved very effective in addressing a difficulty from the late 1930s. I think that at least one important message is that good will is better harnessed in many small initiatives than by vast programmes that tend to become impersonal.

I suppose that volunteerism is still just about compatible with the free market economy but needs defending. I hope that the present and future generation of Basque friends will carry that flag. It was a pleasure to be invited to be a part of that gathering and I hope to keep up with you. The frightening poverty is not that measurable in dollars but of spirit of human goodwill. However, on those terms I think, and hope, the third world may be less poor than the money men suppose.