



A recent visit to Hutton Hall: a personal reflection

by Cliff Kirkpatrick

Since becoming a member of the Association in 2007, visiting as many Basque children's homes as possible has been high on my "things to do" list. I was sorry not to have been able to attend the Hutton Hall exhibition that was held in June 2009 but, at the instigation of Natalia Benjamin, was pleased to have reviewed Peter O'Brien's excellent book, "A Suitable Climate: The Basque Refugee Children at Hutton Hall", which appeared in the November 2009 Newsletter. Peter and I have exchanged a number of letters and emails and recently my wife Janet and I managed to fit in a visit to Middlesbrough. We went by National Express bus from Victoria on 12 October and stayed two nights in a basic but clean and comfortable hotel. We hired a car the following day and arrived at Peter O'Brien's house shortly after 10am. We were immediately put at our ease by Peter and his wife Jean: for me it was good to put a face to someone I had only previously corresponded with.

Peter had arranged to take us to Hutton Hall and we were received by the owner Joan Wilkinson, a devout Christian, who

epitomised northern friendliness and overwhelmed us with her endearing nature and generous hospitality. Her father had bought Hutton Hall shortly after the end of World War II and she and her husband Leslie were married in the Chapel there. Today they live and work extremely long hours on a farm close to the Hall. This didn't stop Joan from being a superb host and after a brief time chatting we all went in my rental car the short distance to Hutton Hall. I had been looking forward to seeing the house but the experience far exceeded my expectations.

Hutton Hall is an imposing edifice built for Joseph Whitwell Pease MP, a prominent Quaker, industrialist and at the time Liberal Member of Parliament for South Durham. There had been an earlier and less grand Hall which was demolished in 1868 when the present building was fully functioning and in its heyday, Hutton Hall would have been magnificent. Its former splendour is still evident, but it is now 144 years old and long before the Basque children were cared for there it had fallen into a serious state of disrepair. Much has since been done and the estate has a warm, lived-in feel about it. Joan kindly showed us around the gardens and parts of the house converted into

modern flats in which her children and their respective families live. It was particularly moving for me to see features within the house, such as a picturesque tiled fireplace, that would have been there when the Basque children were being cared for. After an hour or so we went back to the farmhouse for tea (I was asked if I would like a pint of tea!), sandwiches, quiche, trifle and other offerings, all home produced, including the most delicious beetroot in vinegar I have ever tasted. Joan showed us some photographs that Leslie had taken of Hutton Hall blanketed in snow. They were fantastic and she insisted on taking us to the spot from where the pictures had been taken, which she said provided the best view of the house. This unexpected excursion was well worthwhile and on returning to the farmhouse, Leslie, whom we hadn't met until then, had just returned and gave both Peter and me some of the photographs of Hutton Hall which Joan had shown us earlier.

Some of the Hutton Hall *niños* had lived for a while at nearby Ormesby Hall, the home of Ruth Pennyman who had been so involved with the Basque children. We spent a pleasant half hour being shown around privately by Liz Hayward, Education Officer of the Hall, as that day it was closed to the public.

The next morning Peter, quite unexpectedly, turned up at the bus station to see us off, giving me a beautiful signed card with a photograph taken by a friend of his of Roseberry Topping, a local landmark that the Basque children who lived at Hutton Hall would have known.

Altogether, the trip is something we shall remember with enormous pleasure, having made new friends and seen two extremely important buildings that played significant roles in the story of the Basque children.

The English and Spanish, as seen by those in the Street colony

Father Christmas – a Spanish speaking member of staff – came in. Each child had a really good gift. It was a delight to see their faces.

When the ceremony was over, a boy jumped on to a table and spoke in Spanish. He referred to the ILP and there was vast handclapping. Then suddenly the children

burst into song – the "International" and Spanish workers' songs. I shall never forget the thrill of it – the children standing round the tree with the light on their upturned faces, arms round their toy and dolls, their bodies swaying to the rhythm of the music – these little "aliens" with their shrill voices singing their own songs in a strange land, among people who cannot even talk to them much.

A little bit of Spain tucked away at the foot of the Mendip hills.