

## **Basque children at Ambleside colony**

*Rob David*

During the autumn of 1937 a satellite colony for Brampton was being considered. On 1 October 1937 the *Carlisle Journal* reported that a second colony at Grasmere was in the offing, and there was some possibility of a colony being established in a Youth Hostel Association property in Troutbeck. However these projects did not materialise and the second colony was established at Fairfield Guest House on Rydal Road in Ambleside around 23-25 October 1937. The house had been acquired by the Cumberland and Westmorland Basque Children's Committee with the status of what appears to have been a satellite colony of Brampton. According to the *Barrow Guardian* it was opened because more space was required at Brampton for 'additional classrooms and playrooms'. Initially 25 children were transferred there from the Brampton colony, although some may have come from The Larches, the hostel at Hexham which had closed with the need to relocate about 30 children. It has been suggested that these children were relocated to Keighley, London and Ambleside. The children were accompanied by two of their Brampton teachers, Virginia Martínez del Castillo and Herr Froelich.

At a fund-raising meeting held at Dalston Hall on 26 November 1937 and addressed by the Duchess of Atholl, the chair of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief and also the Basque Children's Committee, Charles H. Roberts, the treasurer of the Cumberland and Westmorland Basque Children's Committee and the instigator with his wife Cecilia of the hostels at Brampton and Ambleside, asked the invited audience 'quite definitely and practically for a lot of money'. He pointed out that the local committee needed 'about £40 a week for Brampton, and about £25 a week for the new Ambleside hostel which had been established the previous month. He commented that 'the money had rather dried up. He felt sure that though subscribers had helped so well in the past, they were still prepared to carry on, so long as it was necessary. A number of people and organisations from Westmorland supported the Ambleside colony including the Kendal and District Committee for Basque Children and General Relief in Spain who in January 1938 gave a donation which was specifically to be used for the Ambleside hostel. An Ambleside resident, the late Joan Newby, remembered that the children stayed at Fairfield for a short time and local children were encouraged to play with them in the park. It seems that the Basque children did not integrate into the community as they were looked after by Spanish adults and a lack of a common language made communication difficult.

The names of four children are known at Ambleside. Agustina Pérez San José was there with her two siblings, Asunción and Antonio. She remembers being at the hostel near the famous Bridge House in Ambleside. There is also a report in the *Westmorland Gazette* of 28 January 1939 referring to the Brampton children performing country dances of the Basque provinces, Aragonese jotas and Andalucian gipsy music at the YMCA Hall in Ambleside. 'Fermin Arriba [Fermín Arribas Ege No. 1557, Age 14 in 1937, repatriated 19 December 1939] who was one of the children accommodated for some months last year at Fairfield Guest House, Ambleside and who was heard in the North Regional wireless programme a short time ago,

contributed Flamenco songs - part of the Spanish heritage from the Moorish occupation of the country'. Most of the Ambleside children had come from Brampton or from Hexham via Brampton and returned to Brampton when Ambleside closed. The hostel probably closed during February 1938, and at the latest during March.

The Ambleside colony has largely been forgotten locally. It was referred to as one of the places in Cumbria where 'Basque children were billeted' in K. Harper, *The Story of the Lakeland Diocese, 1933-1966*, (Carlisle, 1966), p. 20. More recently the hostel is mentioned in R. David, "Let politics and differences be forgotten": The "Little Basques" in Cumbria, 1937-39", *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*, Vol. 19 (2019), 231-50; R. David, *A County of Refuge: Refugees in Cumbria 1933-1941*, (Kendal, 2020).

This 'Spotlight' has been able to benefit from the deposit of a folder of correspondence of Charles Roberts which the family deposited at Carlisle Archive Centre in 2021 (DROB Box 15). As this 'Spotlight' was nearing completion, the Roberts family found a further very substantial archive related to the Ambleside and Brampton hostels. This archive has yet to be studied in detail but it is clear that it contains a considerable amount of further information about the founding, running and closure of the Ambleside colony with details of many more of the children who lived there. In time this will allow the information contained in this 'Spotlight' to be significantly extended.

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Rob David (November 2022)