

## **The Brampton Colony: Introduction**

The Brampton colony was amongst the seventy or so colonies established during the summer of 1937. Amongst its supporters from Cumberland and Westmorland were Wilfrid Roberts M.P., his parents Charles Roberts, treasurer of the Cumberland and Westmorland Basque Children's Committee and his wife Lady Cecilia, Alastair Morton, artist and textile designer, and David Thomson, warden of Currock House Community Centre in Carlisle.

The conversion of the disused Brampton Workhouse into a hostel for some 100 Basque children was supervised by Lady Cecilia with support from the local community. The conversion was completed in time for the arrival of the 'Little Basques', as the children were referred to in the local press, on 17 June 1937. Generally speaking the children were the sons and daughters of factory workers from Bilbao who were of a number of political persuasions - Communist, Socialist and Syndicalist. The children were accompanied by a priest, Don Antonio Rentería whose accommodation was at nearby Warwick Bridge, and two teachers Virginia Martínez del Castillo and María Dolores (Lolita) Ezquerro Nùñez. Between October 1937 and March 1938 Brampton opened a satellite hostel at Ambleside to provide the children with more space.

Initially investigation into the history of the Brampton colony was limited to contemporary newspapers, a small number of Cumberland County Council records in Carlisle Archive Centre, and the Ministry of Health reports into conditions at the colonies in The National Archives. Brampton was also mentioned in the minutes of meetings of the National Joint Council for Spanish Relief and the Basque Children's Committee held at the Labour History Archive and Study Centre in Manchester and the University of Warwick Modern Records Centre. The deposit in 2021 of a folder of correspondence between Charles Roberts and the supporters of Brampton and adopters of many of the children which was deposited at Carlisle Archive Centre (DROB/Box 15) has enabled a large number of the children to be identified as well as the many Cumbrian contributors to appeals for their support. This archive also reveals the extent of support from beyond the county boundaries, in particular from the counties of Northumberland and Durham and from the Glasgow area. With the closure of the Hexham Hostel in late 1937 and Tynemouth Hostel in October 1938 many people and organisations in the north-east switched their support to Brampton, and with only one hostel in Scotland at Montrose, people and organisations around Glasgow, encouraged by the Scottish Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, seemed to have supported the Brampton hostel as the nearest hostel to 'Red Clydeside'.

Like many of the colonies the relationship of the local community with the hostel varied during the years it was open. There were some issues of petty vandalism and local landowners were concerned about the children trespassing on their land, but the hostel was supported by local companies who provided goods and services, as well as local people who helped to run the hostel or came to teach there. However as time passed it became more difficult to raise the funds that were needed to keep the hostel open, and as elsewhere the children toured the region singing Basque songs and performing traditional dances.

A new appeal to Cumbrians for support was launched at the end of November 1937 at a conference at Dalston Hall attended by the Duchess of Atholl. At the meeting Charles Roberts 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'. The repatriation of some of the children from January 1938 meant that the cost of running the Brampton hostel began to reduce, and the need for the Ambleside hostel disappeared. The closure of the Tynemouth colony in October 1938 and the transfer of children from there to Brampton, led to a temporary increase in children and therefore running costs.

In August 1939 the Brampton hostel closed, and with the exception of four children who were lodged in a neighbouring farmhouse, those who had not been repatriated were fostered with families, many in the Glasgow area.

For information on the Brampton colony see: D. Watson, 'Politics and humanitarian aid: Basque refugees in the North East and Cumbria during the Spanish Civil War', *North East History*, Vol. 36 (2005), 8-41; 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). In addition some of the testimonies in N. Benjamin (ed), *Recuerdos: Basque Children Refugees in Great Britain*, (Oxford, 2007) relate to Brampton.

As this 'Spotlight' was nearing completion, the Roberts family found a further very substantial archive related to Brampton. This archive has yet to be studied in detail but it is clear that it contains an enormous amount of further information about individual children at Brampton as well as about the running of the hostel. In time this will allow the information contained in this 'Spotlight' to be significantly extended. This 'Spotlight' should therefore be regarded as an interim report.

Rob David (November 2022)