



1. Children at Stoneham Camp, Southampton; 2. Basque children on board the SS Habana, May 1937; 3. Stoneham Camp; 4. Appeal poster to 'help the children of Spain'; 5. Exterior of Congress Hall in Linscott Road; 6. 'Thank you' Christmas card from the Basque children

La expedición a Inglaterra

By Sally England

HACKNEY has a long history of welcoming new residents from all over the world, who arrive here to make a better, safer life for themselves and their families.

One of the more unusual migrations was in 1937, when 400 of the 20,000 Basque children who left home to escape the horrors of the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39 came to Clapton. The 'Expedición a Inglaterra' (expedition to England) was the largest ever single influx of refugees into Britain, with a total of 3,889 children.

Youngsters were taken to Bilbao where they were photographed, vaccinated and given numbered identity tags. They were then shipped out of danger to France, England, Belgium Denmark and Switzerland in May 1937, with the

ships so overcrowded that children slept on the floors of the captains' cabins.

The SS Habana docked at Southampton and refugees moved to a specially prepared camp at nearby Stoneham. The people and businesses of Southampton were committed to providing food and clothing for the new arrivals, with 2,000 residents pledging their help and money.

Manuel Moreno later remembered the generosity that met them: "It must not be forgotten that this was the first time in British history that the British people opened their arms and hearts en-masse to say 'we will care for you'."

Three days later, 400 children were moved from Stoneham to Clapton and housed in the Salvation Army Congress Hall in Linscott Road. They had been selected simply by being the ones who responded to a loudspeaker call in the camp of 'who

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wants to go to London?"

A huge crowd of mainly mothers and children greeted the 11 coaches full of refugees, waving and cheering and handing out toys and picture books.

But Congress Hall itself was old and dilapidated and not at all welcoming. The first meal was awful, as one boy recalled: "When we arrived at Clapton, they served us a stew of sorts, nothing identifiable. We all sat there, unable to eat it ... The same food reappeared at lunch and dinner; no one ate. A hunger strike!"

During the first night the older boys threw all the mattresses out of the windows whilst one boy escaped, and ended up being taken to prison and

whipped. The police were called to deal with the uproar and the Basque delegate in London, Don Jose Lizaso, rushed to Clapton to give a tearful lecture to the now subdued boys on the bad example they were setting.

However high spirits soon returned and the children often escaped from the hall and the timetable of lessons imposed on them, climbing over the walls to explore the area, with Hackney Marshes being popular.

Brigadier Martin, of the Salvation Army, said: "The youngsters are not settling down too badly, but the girls are much better than the boys. The trouble is that these children have had no schooling since the

war started and they are completely undisciplined. The boys go climbing together over the walls and roofs like little monkeys."

He also asked for the public to stop handing out sweets and money to children and instead buy useful equipment such as text books to help the staff with their work.

By June, news of truancy and bad behaviour had reached worried parents back in Spain, who then inundated Don Lizaso with requests that the offenders should be punished in 'the good old-fashioned way, which would certainly be applied to them at home'.

Quite what that was isn't recorded, but local people did become worried that the children were being held prisoners and mistreated, attempting to storm the gates after the hall was sealed off and a guard placed outside. But this was in fact simply quarantine precautions after a girl

developed typhoid, and the crowds dispersed.

The care and feeding of 400 children was expensive as well as difficult for staff. Some 200 were soon moved on, half to Brixton and half to Suffolk. By the end of July, the Salvation Army asked for the hall to be returned to its intended use in preparation for a large autumn conference, and over the next few weeks the last 114 children were moved to other sites or repatriated, their short but colourful stay in Hackney coming to an end.

MORE INFO

 Hackney Archives looks after Council administrative records and archives dating back to 1700. It also keeps records for individuals and organisations with links to Hackney. Call: 020 8356 8925; e-mail: archives@hackney.gov.uk; or visit: www.hackney.gov.uk/archives