

“The Basque Children in Bradford and Keighley”

A talk by John Birkbeck to the Thornton Antiquarian Society, 13 June, 2018.

Report by Simon Martinez

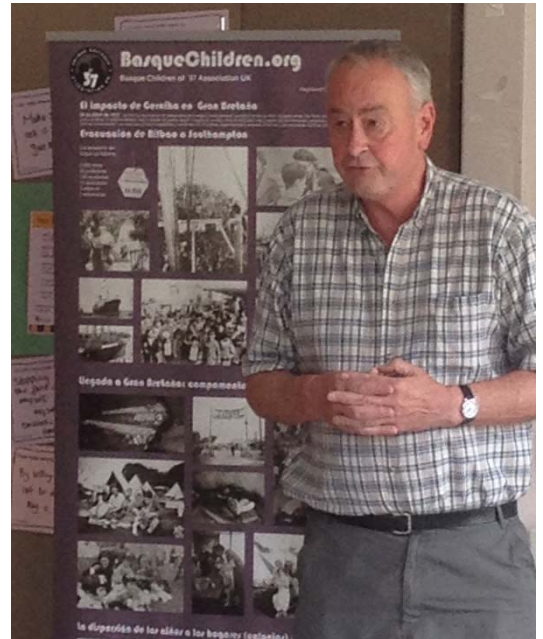
John Birkbeck visited the village of Thornton, birthplace of the Brontës, to talk to the Antiquarian Society about the Basque Children who stayed in Bradford and Keighley in 1937 and 1938. The audience of nearly 50 members and guests heard how the Colony in Keighley was the largest in West Yorkshire and had drawn financial support from Leeds and Halifax. About 120 children and seven teachers and auxiliaries (*Maestras* and *Senoritas*) came to Keighley and a further 24 children to Bradford. Financial support was forthcoming from Leeds and Halifax as well as the money raised locally. There were other Colonies in Huddersfield and Leeds.

John’s grandfather, the Reverend John Nicholson Balmer, was the main organiser of the effort to support the Basque Children in West Yorkshire. He was the minister at the Keighley Congregational Church. Some of his responsibilities were challenging. One of the *Niños* recalled being held off the bus by him which was taking other children to the station. His name did not appear on the list of children supplied by the Basque Children Committee for return to Bilbao and we know that some of the forms reclaiming children were tampered with. Another was how to deal with a bill for £100 from the owners of the Morton Banks Isolation Hospital. John hopes that the bill to the health board was never paid.

There was a more enjoyable side to the work with the children. Football matches with the shirts being in the same colours as the Barakaldo team, singing and dancing Basque folk songs and dances, and trips to the Alhambra were noted. And translating the Yorkshire witticism ‘here come the Spanish onions’ as they walked through Keighley to the cinema. Watching the children skating on frozen ponds in the cold January of 1938 was another memory.

Reference was made to the plight of current refugees on the boat *Aquarius* which was initially refused docking rights by Malta and Italy and had been accepted on the day before this meeting by Spain. Questions were asked by the audience about how much money had to be raised for each child, how they were educated and helped into training or employment, and whether any children had remained locally.

A special thanks to the Antiquarian Society who invited John and the BCA to talk at their meeting, and especially to John Birkbeck who continues to research the history of the Colonies and the role of the Reverend Balmer in the story of the Basque Children in West Yorkshire.



John Birkbeck talking to the Thornton Antiquarian Society