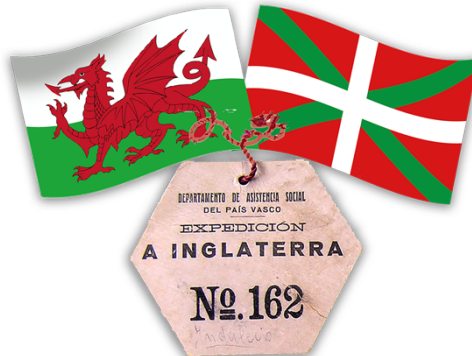


Basque Children Association of '37 UK and BCA'37UK-Euskadi



The 85th Anniversary commemoration event of the arrival of the Basque Children in Caerleon, Wales.

A three-day event took place in Caerleon on 14th-16th July to commemorate the 85th anniversary of the arrival of the Basque children in Wales. This was organised by the BCA'37 UK and BCA'37UK-Euskadi. The team was led by Carmen Kilner who has a link to both associations, and supported by Gail Giles and Christopher Evans in Wales, with Derek Doyle in Euskadi.

On May 26th 1937 the Basque town of Gernika suffered the first blanket bombing of a civilian population. Following this atrocity over 27,000 children were evacuated from besieged Bilbao, 4000 of those coming to the UK. There was no support from the British Government, but there was from the British people - notably from Wales who had a centuries-old and close relationship with Euskadi through the importing and exporting of Basque iron ore with Welsh coking coal.

On 10th July 1937, almost seven weeks since fleeing Bilbao and staying at a temporary camp in Southampton, 56 young Basque children, or *niños vascos*, arrived at Newport railway station (with two interpreters and three teachers). They were greeted by a number of eminent local people, including the Mayor in his regalia. Wales was welcoming the children with open arms.

From the station, the *niños* were put on a bus to nearby Caerleon, where they were initially housed at Cambria House and then Pendragon House.

Caerleon became one of the most successful and happy colonies in the UK, with the children raising money through performances of traditional Basque singing and dancing.

The Caerleon colony was well-known for their formidable football team, Basque Boys AFC. The team, which amazingly included three sets of brothers (the Garateas, the Achas and the Espigas), caused quite a storm in Wales. The local newspaper the South Wales Argus labelled them 'The Basque Wonder Team' and 'The Basque Unbeatables.'

Led by their captain Juan Antonio Hernández, the boys' brilliant performances led them to a match against the reigning league champions Moorland Road School. In front of nearly 4,000 people at Ninian Park in Cardiff, the Basque Wonder Boys upset all the odds, winning 2-0, with goals from Emilio Espiga and José Luis Acha.

Inaugural Day: Thursday 14th July

The inaugural day, which was by invitation, saw prominent people from both Wales and the Basque Country in attendance. This included the First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, local Member of the Senedd Jayne Bryant, and the Mayor of Newport, Martyn Kellaway. Marian Elorza, the Secretary General of Foreign Affairs of the Basque Government, and Mikel Anton, its Director of European Affairs, were also present. Derek Doyle OBE, a former British Consul in Bilbao and committee member of BCA'37UK-Euskadi, also attended and helped organise the event. We were very fortunate to have had fine weather and the beautiful setting of the grounds of The Priory Hotel for the three days of events.

Darren Cumner and two Basque colleagues represented CAF Newport, whose parent company in the Basque Country very generously provided major funding for the event. In another show of generosity, the Basque Government hosted the buffet and dinner at The Priory Hotel on the inaugural day.

Both our associations would also like to thank our own CAF - Caerleon Arts Festival - for the use of their marquee, equipment and very welcome advice, help and support throughout. Also, we thank the Priory Hotel for their tremendous support and help and for allowing us to use their beautiful grounds which can be seen in so many photos.

Speaking at the opening of the event, Mark Drakeford said: "The fascist attacks on the Basque Country were amongst the worst that that awful civil war endured. The links between Wales and Euskadi were already strong through our shared history, the nature of Welsh industrialisation, the Trade Union movements – all of these things led to the arrival of children from the Basque Country, in those astonishingly difficult circumstances. 56 of them came here to Caerleon. We think of those things, particularly today, as what we saw 85 years ago, we are seeing being repeated today in Ukraine."



First Minister of Wales Mark Drakeford makes a speech (Credit: Chris Sheehy)

He continued: “It is so important that we remember what happened and that we continue to draw attention to the links with what happened then, to what is happening now. But also, to draw on that experience to give us the strength to go on forming new relationships in the present day. The relationship between Wales and the Basque Country is so important to us. We both have an outward-looking, European-nation sense that we want to endure, and for the future will lead to advantages to us all.

I would like to thank the BCA '37 Associations, for everything that goes into organising these events. There is a fantastic programme to help us to reconnect with the events of 85 years ago. Then we need to make those events real in our own lives, to draw those things from it, and create a platform from which we can help to create successful, peaceful and cooperative futures for us all.”

Carmen Kilner thanked those who had given their support to the event and in attendance.

She said: “How desperate do you have to be to send your children to a country where they don't know anybody, don't speak the language, with an alien culture and food? 1937...2022...it's like a broken record: Serbia, Syria, Afghanistan Ukraine. Different eras, the same problems, the same disastrous consequences for nations and families, the same call on humanity. We continue our associations' work of recording, archiving, educating, through exhibitions, talks and placing commemorative plaques at the sites where the children stayed, as here in Caerleon. Thank you all for coming.”

Marian Elorza, of the Basque Government said: “The solidarity, generosity and courage of those people who welcomed the Basque Children with open arms will not be forgotten. They were sent by the parents and arrived traumatised fleeing from a war. 85 years have passed since that immeasurable feat of humanity by thousands of ordinary people in the United Kingdom, and particularly in Newport, Caerleon and Wales.”

Following the speeches, a children's choir from the two local primary schools (Lodge Hill Primary and Charles Williams Primary), sang traditional Basque and Welsh songs on the Priory lawn under a beautiful Welsh blue sky.



Lodge Hill Primary and Charles Williams Primary with the First Minister Mark Drakeford and the Mayor of Newport, Martyn Kellaway (Credit: Charles Williams Primary School Twitter)

A showing of Eddie Butler's 'Wales and the Basque Refugees: The Children's Stories' took place at 2pm. This was followed by guided tours by museum and CADW staff of the National Roman Legions Museum, the Roman baths and amphitheatre, as well as the barracks.

Later there was some wonderful traditional Basque and Welsh dancing (Kezka Dantza Taldea and the Tredegar House Folk Festival Dancers, respectively).

Welsh harpist John L. Thomas also performed beautifully in the early evening, as well as during the inaugural dinner event later that evening. The dinner, held at The Priory Hotel, was attended by many prominent people including The Baroness Wilcox of Newport, Jessica Morden MP, Jayne Bryant MS and John Griffiths MS. The afternoon buffet and evening dinner were kindly hosted and funded by the Basque Government.

Friday 15th July

Friday morning saw children from Lodge Hill Primary and Charles Williams Primary play an exhibition football match at Caerleon AFC, with one team representing the Basque Boys. The children wore bibs donated by Newport County in the colour of Basque Boys AFC, with the names of the footballing *niños* on the back.

The matches played were superb, with all the children receiving a certificate following the final whistle. They were also given hexagon identification badges that replicated those that the fleeing children were issued before they left Bilbao.





Footballers from Lodge Hill Primary and Charles Williams Primary. (Credit: Charles Williams Primary and Lodge Hill Primary Twitter)

In the afternoon there were talks based on the theme 'Euskadi to Cymru', where Carmen Kilner (BCA'37 Associations), Adrian Bell (author), Hywel Davies (author) and Gail Giles gave fascinating insights into the history of the Basque refugees in Wales and the UK.

The evening saw superb performances again by Kezka Dantza Taldea and the Tredegar House Folk Festival Dancers, who also spontaneously danced together. There were also performances by Basque musicians Irantzu Garamendi and Asier Berrojalbiz and John L. Thomas on the harp.





Kezka Dantza Taldea and the Tredegar House Folk Festival Dancers perform in front of onlookers at The Priory, Caerleon (Credit: Chris Sheehy)

Saturday 16th July

Another football match took place on the Caerleon playing fields, undoubtedly following in the footsteps of where the Basque children would have once kicked a ball around whilst taking refuge in Caerleon. The Caerleon AFC Under 9 girls' football team wore the names of the niños this time, with a large crowd onlooking, and Basque television EITB filming. Carmen Kilner, Christopher Evans and Gail Giles of the BCA'37 were interviewed about the event.



The certificate that each of the footballers received on both days (Credit: Gaizka Garamendi)



*Caerleon Under 9s, those in purple with the names of the Basque Boys on their backs
(Credit: Tim Evans)*

A panel discussion entitled 'Caerleon, Refugees and Football' took place in the marquee at the Priory in the afternoon. Famous Welsh sporting personality Eddie Butler was joined by Carmen Kilner, Tom Wardle and Christopher Evans, with Gail Giles chairing the session.



The panel discussion: Caerleon, Refugees and Football (Credit: Gaizka Garamendi)

This was followed by the draw for the football raffle, with prizes donated by Athletic Club de Bilbao. The raffle raised almost £400.



A signed football from Athletic Club de Bilbao was part of the raffle prizes (Credit: Tim Evans)

A beautiful evening of poetry, singing, dancing and togetherness ensued. Basque duo Irantzu Garamendi and Asier Berrojalbiz again providing mesmerising Basque songs. The crowd were then wowed with a special performance of the traditional Welsh lullaby *Suo Gân*, sung by Irantzu Garamendi and accompanied by harpist John L. Thomas.

Welsh poet Patrick Jones then read a selection of his poems, with eyes-filling up as he performed a new emotional poem written for the event about the Basque refugees in Caerleon.



Irantzu Garamendi and John L. Thomas (Credit: Gaizka Garamendi) and poet Patrick Jones (Credit: Tim Evans)

Conclusion

The 85th commemoration of the Basque refugee children arriving in Wales was a special, emotional and outstanding occasion that will live long in the memory. It was a stark reminder that this is not just history, it is happening now. History sadly repeats. The hope is that people will be as empathetic, welcoming, and willing to help those in need as their ancestors were.

Links:

Basque/Spanish articles

<https://www.elcorreo.com/sociedad/caerleon-recuerda-acogida-galesa-nenes-vascos-guerra-civil-20220715173628-nt.html>

<https://www.deia.eus/actualidad/sociedad/2022/07/16/caerleon-reune-ninos-vascos-exiliados-5823099.html>

Welsh (English language) articles

<https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/20284851.caerleon-honours-basque-refugees-fled-spanish-civil-war/>

School Twitter Links

<https://twitter.com/LodgeHillPS/status/1547924110591660033>

<https://twitter.com/LodgeHillPS/status/1547539428243030017>

https://twitter.com/cwp_dovey/status/1547582346081099779

<https://twitter.com/cwprimary/status/1547979144998244352>

Basque Boys AFC articles by Christopher Evans

<https://nation.cymru/sport/how-a-basque-refugee-football-team-overcame-tragedy-to-take-wales-by-storm/>

<https://nation.cymru/sport/unearthed-programme-from-basque-wonder-team-match-in-wales/>

<https://nation.cymru/sport/a-special-relationship-when-wales-played-the-basque-country/>