

Shipton-under-Wychwood colony

The house, called St Michael's and built in the early 1880s, was set up originally as a private school, St Michael's College for Young Ladies. In 1899, it was acquired by the Church of England Society for Waifs and Strays and called Shipton House. It took in girls from reformatory schools and "rescued (them) from immoral surroundings". From 1910, the name reverted to St Michael's Home and the residents changed to girls who were orphans or whose families could not manage them, then in 1931 it housed young boys in a similar situation. By 1933, the home was put up for sale, but stayed empty as no one came forward to buy it.

However, in January 1939, 30 Basque refugees, all boys, arrived from the Faringdon colony at Eaton Hastings. They came with an English Matron and a Warden, Walter Leonard, himself a German Jew refugee aged 27 whose real name was Walter Levy. He was always known as "Leon" by the boys. The villagers brought gifts of all kinds to the children and collected money and eggs. Many "At Homes" were held to raise funds to pay for their keep and the Wychwood Spanish Aid Committee was set up with local members from Shipton. However, the vicar of Shipton refused to be on the committee because he judged the children to be "reds" or communists, and so the church was represented on the committee by the vicar of Milton-under-Wychwood. In August 1939, most of the children had been repatriated; the three remaining children were moved to another colony, St Joseph's, at Aston.

(Information from the script of a talk given by John Rawlins to the Wychwood Historical Society in January 1999)

Luis Santamaria recalls that during their time at Shipton, a local dignitary Alex Wainman, a left-wing sympathizer who spoke many languages and who lived with his mother in the large Prebendal House, befriended the boys. When they were at Aston, he invited them to his house for a holiday in the summer of 1939; as there were so many, he had tents put up in the garden and his butler was ordered to give the children anything they liked.