

ALDRIDGE COLONY

BRIEF HISTORY OF ALDRIDGE LODGE

Aldridge Lodge no longer exists. It was demolished in 1958. The plot which was occupied by the house is covered by a small wooded copse and two noticeboards at the edge of the wood indicate "Lodge Wood" – the only indication that a lodge was in the vicinity. Indeed, nothing of the original house remains.

The Lodge was an old house – which seems to have always been called Aldridge Lodge – and records I have seen suggest it was in existence from the 17th Century – although it was possibly a farmhouse at that time. It would have been found along a track off Bosty Lane just after the junction with Birmingham Road at one end, Walsall Road at the other and about 1 mile from the centre of Aldridge.

In the book "A Topographical Dictionary of England 1848" it states: "The village (Aldridge) is pretty, and contains some good houses: about a mile southward of it is Aldridge Lodge, occupying elevated ground, surrounded with 200 acres, and commanding a panoramic view of the circumjacent country; it is the property of the Rev. Thomas Burrowes Adams, M.A. together with Druids' Heath and Mill Green."

Many of the archives suggest it was a 19th Century Shooting Lodge but there appear to be no records available which show who built or designed the original house or farmhouse or indeed when it was actually constructed. We must therefore assume that it was a small farmhouse that was extended over the centuries and which ended up as a 19th century manor house.

In 1903, following the death of the owner of the house (Frederick Furhman Clarke), the house was sold. Although I have no concrete evidence, I believe it was purchased by Walsall Corporation as in 1918 attempts were made to turn the Lodge into a hospital for Shell Shock Victims.

ALDRIDGE LODGE REFUGEES

In 1937 there were few places around the UK who hadn't heard of the plight of these children and in the Midlands three homes were set up with the aid of donations and the assistance of volunteers. There was Elford Hall just outside Tamworth, Burnaston near Derby and Aldridge Lodge. Walsall Corporation agreed with Councillor Whiston – Labour Councillor for Walsall - that Aldridge Lodge could be adapted to accommodate 50 of the refugee children.

The first meeting of The Walsall Committee for the Relief of Spanish Children was held on the 21st June 1937 at The Council House in Walsall. The Committee included: Mayor A.J. Stanley in the Chair, Alderman Whiston, C.N. Greddon (Treasurer), Mrs. Brockhurst, Rev. J. Carpenter (Vicar of Walsall Church), Rev. W. Warlock, Mr S. Willets and Miss Cross.

All the Minutes for this Committee, together with the Superintendent's Reports have been retained and it is these Minutes which give us such an incredible picture into the running of the house. They include expense accounts for food stuffs, furnishings, medicines and clothing etc. They also include details of the day to day

running of the house. Unfortunately none of the children are named within the Minutes.

About 2 months after their arrival in England, and with the phenomenal assistance of Alderman Whiston, the Co-operative Society, Cadbury's and several other benefactors, arrangements were made for 50 of the children to be collected from Southampton.

At one of the first meetings of this Committee Mr. Whiston reported on the allocation of children to Aldridge Lodge and it was decided that the children should be brought by buses from Southampton and the Transport Managers of Walsall and Wolverhampton would provide this service. It was also agreed that the Chairman and Secretary would go to Southampton to collect the children.

There is some discrepancy about the type of buses used, but the local archives report that two single-decker Walsall corporation buses driven by Arthur Morrell and Billy Hall arrived in Southampton to take the children to the Midlands. These 2 buses were escorted by the Mayors car with Mayor A.J. Stanley, Alderman Whiston and driven by the chauffeur Ted Barlow. There was one bus for the boys and one bus for the girls and both of these were destined for Aldridge Lodge. The Basque children were fascinated to see a man in a bowler hat step out of one of the buses – this was Alderman Whiston.

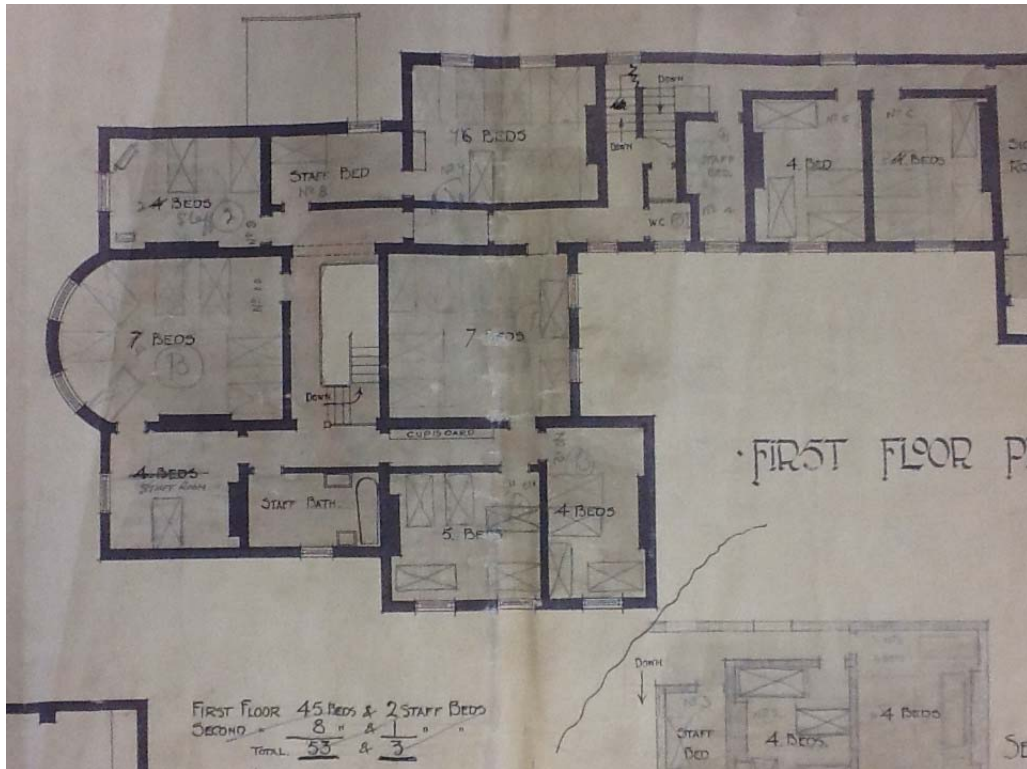


513. Grupo de niños vascos de la colonia de Walsall.

There were 50 children, 3 adult women, 2 teachers Lucita and Maria Luisa and a social worker called Paquita. One of the boys, Rafael, described the scene as they arrived at Aldridge Lodge -

“... we went up a road between two grass fields belonging to Mr and Mrs. Adams from the dairy farm at the back of the lodge and finally we reached the house. I am sure that when we saw it we breathed a sigh of relief and we had a feeling of security for it was beautiful place. It was surrounded by green fields with cows and facing the house was a civil aerodrome which was mainly used for training....”

The house had been made ready for their arrival with various rooms being allocated as bedrooms, a kitchen, a schoolroom, a nursery and a dining room. There was lots of space for playing.



Interviews for staff took place and the following people were appointed:

Cook - Mrs. M.G. Jordan £40.00 per annum

Working Housekeeper - Mrs. Parker £40.00 per annum

Maid - Mrs. E Ford £35.00 per annum

Handyman Gardener - Mr. J. Keen 50 shillings per week-end plus food – hours to be fixed

On the 22nd July £270 3s was received for the maintenance and equipment of Aldridge Lodge and £87 4s 7d for care of the children.



The children were aged between 5 and 14 and spoke no English. They had their own senioritas to help and I believe teachers were brought in to assist with their education. The school within the Lodge was held twice a day: 9.30 to 11.30 in the morning and 3.00 to 4.00 in the afternoon. Apparently the teacher, Avelina Robledo, was overly keen on her work. She was a strict disciplinarian and insisted the school be held according to schedule. The Spanish Ladies assisting with the education were Luiz Oses, Paquita, Galiano Asensio and Concepcion Barco and for a short while they received 2/6 pocket money from the funds raised by The Walsall Committee for the Relief of Spanish Children.

Religious education was put in the hands of Dean Yeo and he agreed that his priests were free to visit the children whenever they wished.

Lessons consisted of:

- Language – Grammar and Literature (in English)
- Mathematics – Arithmetic and Geometry
- Geography – Relating to Spain and The Rest of The World
- History of Spain
- Physiology and Hygiene
- Dancing and Singing
- Gymnastics

Mr Whiston also created a carpenters store for some of the older boys and I believe some of the children attended a school in The Chuckery for carpentry.

It was not an easy ride bringing refugees into a close community such as Aldridge and there were many complaints about the children being accommodated here and newspapers carried reports of them causing trouble in the area. It appears that this was brought on by fear rather than reality and Alderman Whiston invited the “public men” (who had complained) to visit the Lodge and challenged them to find any evidence of the children having done damage. Needless to say no damage was found.

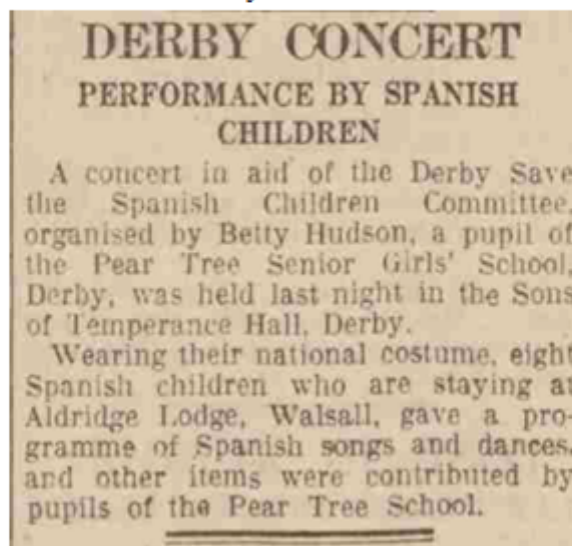
Ironically, the real trouble was not from the children. There was huge friction between the lady who had been appointed as a cook and the housekeeper. Apparently the cook lacked the skills required of a cook in such a large household and she resigned without telling the other staff. The position was offered to the maid and things returned to normal. It all sounds a bit like below stairs in Downton Abbey! The handyman also had an accident in the garden – but what happened to him seems not to have been reported and he disappeared for quite a while.

Mr. and Mrs. Whiston, together with their four Staffordshire bull terriers, came to live at the Lodge. Their sons, Tom and Ron plus their girlfriends Ivy and Winnie, spent a lot of their spare time there during the weekends and during the holiday period.

With the help of Alderman Whiston and his family they raised the awareness of the plight of these children and raised quite large amounts of money and gifts for The Joint Committee for Spanish Relief and the children of Aldridge Lodge. On the 18th November 1937 it is recorded in the Superintendent's Report that there had been numerous donations: Boots had been given by the Co-operative Union, a dart board and tennis table from Walsall Rotary Club, a pair of pyjamas each and 2 pairs of stockings for the boys and a pair of pyjamas and 2 pairs of knickers for the girls from the Walsall Co-operative Womens Guild.

In order to finance the Lodge and to help with their keep many of the children performed for various groups in the area. They made their own costumes with the help of their senioritas and they sang and danced to raise funds. Many of these events were reported in the newspapers. There are several reports of them performing around Staffordshire and Derbyshire

Derby Evening Telegraph
May 11th 1939





Dancing in the Grounds of Aldridge Lodge
The Birmingham Gazette



Dancing in the Grounds of Aldridge Lodge
The Birmingham Gazette

Their days at the lodge according to one of the accounts were happy ones even though most of them were desperate to return to Spain – remember, most of these children were too young to understand what was happening in Spain at the time and had no idea what had happened to their families.

Some of the children were sponsored by local families who agreed to provide clothes and food for their sponsored child. They were taken to their sponsor's families for lunches and the occasional day out. However, it was agreed that visiting days should be fixed and by permits in writing and only on Wednesdays and Sundays.

In August 1937 there was an inspection of the Lodge by a Mr. Neville Towne from headquarters. He inspected the home and questioned the children as to whether they liked being at the Lodge. They all expressed themselves as being very happy and Mr. Towne said he had visited many of the homes and this was one of the best three in the country.

The reports about the children were exceptionally good in that they were clean, obedient and willing to help. For the girls their day consisted of making beds, cleaning, helping with making the meals and education. For the boys they helped in the gardens, repaired anything that need repairing and had schooling most days.



The Birmingham Gazette

There were many people who befriended the colony, one of whom was a lady called Peggy Gibbins from Birmingham. I have tried to find where she lived but so far have been unsuccessful. However, apparently she regularly entertained several of the children to tea and in addition twice a week she would take some of them swimming in Walsall. They also took part in a swimming gala against another school.

A gentleman by the name of Thomas Wooley of Tipton was a great friend of the Colony and he took some of the children for days out. He took them to London for a long weekend, they would go to Walsall Gaumont cinema and they would stop and have tea in a restaurant. Apparently he later became a clergyman.

There are many records of the children putting on performances of singing and dancing in order to raise funds for their Lodge. Life was not particularly easy for the young children who had to virtually sing for their supper but equally there are lots of reports of them having lovely days out to Colwyn Bay, to Crystal Palace in Sutton Coldfield, an excellent garden party in Pelsall, and a Garden Party in the grounds of Aldridge Lodge when it is recorded that over 1000 people attended over the course of a week-end.

FOR BASQUE CHILDREN.

A garden party held at the Spinney, Mouse Hill, Pelsall, in aid of the fifty Basque children who are residing at the Aldridge Lodge was opened on Thursday by the Mayor of Walsall (Councillor A. J. Stanley). Six of the Basque children accompanied the Mayor and Mayoress. Introduced by Councillor I. Haywood, who presided, the Mayor spoke very highly of the good behaviour of the children at the Aldridge Lodge. He also remarked on the hardships these children had suffered during the ghastly war in Spain, and how that very morning one of the children had cried for joy upon receiving a letter from parents still in Spain. Councillor E. Stackhouse proposed a vote of thanks to the Mayor, which was seconded by Mrs. C. A. Harrison, who is chairman. Miss Margaret Stackhouse presented a bouquet to the Mayoress. There were many attractive sideshows, and also many willing helpers who worked hard to make this village effort a great success. Miss Eileen Hall was responsible for the dancing display.

The Mercury - August 6th 1937

Mrs. Whiston and two of the oldest girls helped to manage the kitchen and Mr. Whiston had a couple of special tasks - last thing at night he prepared the porridge for the following day and one of the boys records that by morning it had become solid and it had to be cut into slices and milk and sugar added to make it soft again! He also got the children to line up before going to bed and if anyone had any cuts or scratches he and his wife would dab iodine on anything that was presented to them!

There are records of the kindness shown by Tom Whiston – Mr Whiston's son. He taught the children English, handicrafts and also took some of them by car to evening classes in art, woodwork and cabinet making. He transformed a room in the back yard of the lodge into a workshop and the children made items to sell to raise funds for the Lodge.

Funds and gifts were given by Cadburys and they supplied Aldridge Lodge with considerable amounts of chocolate. Mr. Whiston would distribute a piece of chocolate every afternoon. The children were also invited to Bourneville during Christmas of 1937 and 38 and apparently they had a wonderful time. They came out with boxes full of chocolate. The children also performed songs and danced for the Cadbury family. Life became even better for the children when a man called Manuel Lazareno, a musician and composer came to the Lodge to teach the children Basque songs, dances and music. He also set up a choir. Senor Lazareno was also a refugee who came from France and seems to have visited several of the colonies to teach the children music, singing and dancing.

A couple of events happened whilst the children were at the Lodge. In front of Aldridge Lodge was an airfield run by Walsall Corporation. In 1937 Amy Johnson made an unexpected appearance by flying too low in a glider. One of her wings clipped a hedge and her glider ended in a tree. One of the refugees, Rafael Flores Siosalido remembers the occasion very well and tells a story of all the children watching the crash and waiting by the tree waiting for Amy to be cut down!

Elford Hall was another colony in the Midlands. I am not sure how many children went to Elford but after a short while they couldn't raise the funds to keep it going and several of the children were transferred to Aldridge Lodge together with all the food and all the furnishings.

Children arrived at regular intervals from other homes as they closed down and children also returned to their parents or family members who had escaped to France and North Africa. In April 1938 Mr. Whiston was asked to accept more children from Brixton. He was very reluctant but as there was virtually nowhere else for them to go he agreed. They were older children and Mr. Whiston was quite concerned about the impact on the other children. Within one month all the children were in a verminous condition and the newcomers were moved to alternative colonies.



The Birmingham Gazette

There is an incredible amount of information within the Minutes and the Superintendent's report but we have very few names of the children and I have yet to find if any of the children stayed in Aldridge.

As we know the majority of the children returned home but out of "4000" who originally arrived in 1937 around 250 stayed and made their life in the UK. By 14th August 1939 there were only 26 children at Aldridge Lodge and by 10th January 1940 there was only 1. This young man – Rafael Flores Siosalido - went to live with the Whiston family for a while and then went to join his fellow countrymen in London. Eventually he returned to Spain with his wife and became a teacher in Denia. He remained in contact with the Whiston family for the remainder of his life.

This is a relatively small snapshot of life at Aldridge Lodge between the years of 1937 and 1940 and I have used many sources for my research for which I am exceedingly grateful.

Lynne Ingram
Local Historian
October 2014

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