

The Theydon Bois Spanish Connection - The Return

Sometimes villagers who have lived in Theydon for a long time comment on how much the Village has changed over the years, but what if you returned for the first time in 75 years. Would you remember and recognise Theydon? Well Theydon Newsdesk was able to find out on 10th and 11th May when Vicente Romero returned to Theydon for the first time since 1937.



Vicente Romero at the site of the Original Group Photo taken in 1937. The arrow indicates a young Vicente

In the December 2008, Issue 64 of Village News (still available as a pdf on the Newsletters Page of the Village Website www.theydon.org.uk) we carried an article called "Theydon's Spanish Connection". The article detailed how Covadonga Cienfuegos-Jovellanos (Vicente's daughter) had contacted Jim Watts our Website Editor via email from Spain to ask if we knew anything about Basque Refugee Children from the Spanish Civil War staying in Theydon between 1937 to 1938. With a bit of local plus internet research and also some help from members of the Loughton & District Historical Society (who carried a follow up article in their Newsletter 181 in 2009 www.loughtonhistoricalsociety.co.uk) Jim was able to find quite a bit of information that formed the basis of that article and also put the Romero family in touch with The Basque Children of 1937 Association www.basquechildren.org.



Consuelo, Vicente & Covadonga outside Woodberry (Wansfell College) where he stayed in 1937. His bedroom was on the second floor above where he is standing.

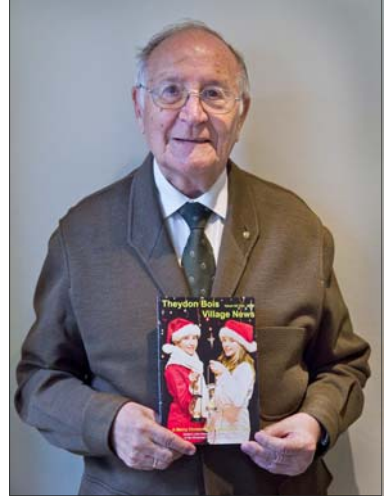
On an overcast 23rd May, 1937, Vicente disembarked from the SS Habana in Southampton with 3,826 Spanish children, 95 teachers, 120 volunteer helpers and 15 priests, hoping for a life now free from the trauma of war. Vicente was quickly transferred to Theydon Bois together with his brother Jose Lois, sister Maria and 18 other Spanish Basque children where they stayed for 10 months in 'Woodberry' a house that later became Wansfell College and has now been converted to flats.

As this year is the 75th anniversary of the SS Habana

The Theydon Bois Spanish Connection - The Return *(continued)*



Above & Left - Vicente points out the area on the golf course where the children exercised and holds up the Dec 2008 copy of Village News in which our article on the Basque Children first appeared.



arriving in Southampton the Basque Children Association arranged a reunion at Southampton University and Vicente, now still a sprightly and alert 88 year old, together with his wife Consuelo (75) and daughter Covadonga decided to attend. *And* they in particular wanted to visit Theydon Bois.

Vicente was certainly not disappointed and he had total recall of much of our village and surrounding area. Despite the alterations he thought the frontage of 'Woodberry' remained virtually unchanged and he was able to point out the rooms he stayed and slept in. Opposite the front door he pointed out



The Family at the Village Sign

the spot where the group photograph of the Basque Children was taken in 1937 and later on Theydon Golf Course the very spot where he and the other children exercised each day having been given permission by the club. He could still recall some elements of the now much changed Theydon Towers, the site of the former Loreto Convent where the children went for many of the activities. He was pleased to see the Green & the Avenue of Oaks were still well preserved & very much as he remembered them. In Forest Drive he recalled the times he had teas with an English family.

Vicente talked with many villagers on this trip with the help of Covadonga, his daughter who is fluent in English and as time pressed on he was reluctant to leave Theydon for the reunion in Southampton on Saturday. Although it has grown quite a bit in 75 years he considered it still retained much of its charm and remains one of the most beautiful places he has seen, retaining its essential village atmosphere and in particular the friendly villagers, who welcomed him today, much as in 1937.