



Newsletter

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Blue Plaque for Aston

On Thursday 17th July 2003, a blue plaque was unveiled by Cora Portillo at Westfield House, Aston, near Bampton in Oxfordshire. This was to commemorate the use of the house (then called St Joseph's) as a haven for 40 Basque refugee children between 1937 and 1939. The plaque, commissioned by the Basque Children of '37 Association: UK, also acknowledged the contribution of local volunteers.

Cora Portillo was an undergraduate in Modern Languages at St Hilda's College, Oxford, in 1937. She could not go to Spain to pursue her studies because of the civil war, and was advised by her tutor to visit the Basque children's colonies in Oxfordshire, where she could not only practise her Spanish but also help with the children. So she would go to Aston every weekend, where her contribution ranged from helping to organise activities for the children to giving English lessons.

It was at the Aston colony that Cora met her future husband, Luis Portillo. Like other Spanish intellectuals, he had been sponsored by British parliamentarians and had crossed the Pyrenees in February 1939, after



which he was sent to teach the Basque children, first at Shipton-under-Wychwood, then at Aston.

In her speech, Cora emphasised the sharing atmosphere that had characterised the colony, thanks to a sympathetic local committee and the many volunteers who were involved in the daily running of the house. There was a special camaraderie between her and the older girls, in particular with Pili Merodio, who was the unofficial 'house mother' and with whom Cora formed a life-long friendship. The villagers, too, went out of their way to befriend the children, and the well-known Early family, blanket manufacturers from Witney, provided each child with a scarlet woollen blanket. But the grim reality was never very far away, there was ► Page 2



Annual Reunion Lunch

On Sunday May 25th, the annual lunch of the *niños vascos* was held at the El Prado restaurant in Fulham.

As usual, it was ably organized by Helvecia Hidalgo, with Octavio Casado providing the seating plan. Although the meal was not until 2pm, people started arriving from 12pm, and the last left at 7pm! It was a happy occasion, a

chance to meet old friends and to catch up with news. Amongst those present were two *niñas vascas*, sisters, from the New Forest, who had never been to one of the reunions before. The Basque Children of '37 Association : UK had prepared display boards and books with photographs of some colonies; these were of great interest and proved very popular. ► Page 3

Editorial

Welcome to the first Newsletter of the Basque Children of '37 Association : UK! As you can see from the contents, there has been a revival of interest in the Spanish exile, so the setting up of our association in Great Britain was timely. We have been very busy – setting up the website, organising various activities. It has entailed many journeys from Oxford to London, but it has been a most exciting nine months: Leah Manning's work has been commemorated in various ways, there have been several interesting conferences and lectures, and we have met more *niños vascos* and made many new friends. The high point has to be the inauguration of the blue plaque at the Aston colony in July. Hopefully, this will pave the way for many more such commemorations.

Many of you have already joined the Association. We are nevertheless sending copies of this Newsletter to all *niños vascos* for whom we have an address, in the hope that they will be encouraged to become members and support us in our work.

We hope you will find the Newsletter interesting and informative; we welcome feedback and in future, we would like to have a Letters Page.

Our website is www.spanishrefugees-basquechildren.org and we are always on the lookout for any additional material. At present we are concentrating on the different colonies, so if you have any good photos or information, do pass it on to us.

Saludos y agur

Natalia Benjamin (*Secretary*)

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Opinions and comments made in any articles in this Newsletter are not necessarily those held by the Basque Children of '37 Association : UK

The photographs on the front page heading are children from the Aston colony taken by

Blue Plaque for Aston Colony

◀ Page 1 always an undercurrent of sadness: some children had no news of their families at all, two sisters received the news that their father had been shot on his doorstep in front of their mother.

Colin Carritt, of the International Brigades Memorial Trust, did sterling work in organising the blue plaque project, and many local dignitaries came to the unveiling, including the Lord Lieutenant of Oxford, Hugo Brunner. Also at the ceremony were representatives of local history societies, the International Historic Buildings Commission, the Witney Museum, Oxfordshire County Councillors and local inhabitants who had known the Basque children. The owner of Westfield House, Jill Hook, and the Headmistress, Hilary Fenton, were magnificent in their support for



Cora Portillo

the project, and provided champagne for the guests after the unveiling. A minibus was hired by the Association to take ten Basque *niños* from London to the ceremony. Amongst these were two of the former residents of the Aston colony, Mauri Antolín and Luís Santamaría, for whom the visit revived fond memories.

Natalia Benjamin and Juan Moreno had compiled an exhibition of archival material to inform the guests about the story of the Basque children. The exhibition included photographs and newspaper reports illustrating the arrival and stay of the refugee children at Aston.

The first two panels showed the evacuation from Bilbao and the camp at North Stoneham, whilst the other six focused on the Aston colony itself. Natalia had discovered some marvellous negatives buried deep in the basement of the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies. They were photos both of individual children and groups, taken by a Russian émigré, Cyril Arapoff, who set up as a photographer in Oxford in the 1930s. The final panel showed the last seven girls left in the colony outside the council house in Witney that was provided for them when St Joseph's closed.

Luis Santamaría writes:

It's very gratifying to note that 66 years after we arrived in the UK in such tragic circumstances, the exodus of the 4,000 Basque children refugees still remains alive to prompt and inspire people to action. I hope today's ceremony will set a precedent to move others to adopt a similar stance. It would be most desirable to unveil other commemorative plaques in as many as possible of the colonies, to remind people of the tragic plight of those unfortunate children. But more important nowadays, since the lesson still remains unlearned in some quarters, is to remind humanity that tragedies such as that of the Basque children refugees are still commonplace in many parts of the Third World and need to be eradicated.

What most lifted my heart throughout the emotive event was the tri-colour flag fluttering delicately in the breeze, adorning the main façade of Westfield House. And the presence of the little children, smiling and clapping with their tiny hands, probably not understanding what was taking place and most likely wishing to be let loose to run all over the house... And lastly, the very moving scene of a lovely little girl presenting a bouquet of flowers to a very gracious lady.

CHILDREN SHOULD BE THE HOPE FOR THE FUTURE, NOT THE VICTIMS OF THE PRESENT....!