

Almost 4,000 children came as refugees from the Basque region of Spain to Great Britain in 1937. 450 came to Yorkshire, 20 to Almondbury.



The Spanish Civil War was a bitter conflict, which divided the nation. Even now, the Spanish people are still learning to come to terms with their past which saw tens of thousands of deaths and millions uprooted and destitute. The plight of the Basque people was particularly tragic following the bombing of the town of Guernica in April 1937 by the planes of the Nazi Condor Legion.

Despite the British government's policy of non-intervention, it was persuaded to allow voluntary groups to arrange the evacuation of refugee children to the safety of Britain. On 23rd May 1937, the *Habana* docked in Southampton with 3,861 children, 95 women teachers, 180 women volunteer assistants and 15 Catholic priests on board. The children were taken at first to a campsite at North Stoneham, lent by an Eastleigh farmer. The preparation of the camp in less than two weeks was the result of a remarkably dedicated and enthusiastic effort by the whole community. It was preparing to receive 2,000 children, but three days before they arrived, they were told that the government had agreed to take a further 2,000. It was the biggest single influx of refugees in British history, and the only one made up entirely of children and relying so entirely on voluntary help.

Little by little, the children were distributed in residential homes, or 'colonies', round the country. The Basque government had insisted that the children should not be adopted by families, but stay in groups so as not to lose their national identity. The first to offer asylum was the Salvation Army, who undertook to care for 400 children, followed by the Catholics, who committed themselves to take 1,200 children. There were altogether over a hundred different colonies at the start.

The Yorkshire branch of the Spanish Relief Committee was among the first to step forward and offer help and Yorkshire was the county which housed the most colonies - ten in total. Standards varied greatly: some had good facilities with many volunteers to help run them, others were not so good in terms of facilities and level of care. In total Yorkshire cared for over 450 Basque children: the largest colony was at Keighley which housed around 100 children.

The ten colonies in Yorkshire were (in alphabetic order) Almondbury (Huddersfield) The Old Clergy House; Bradford, Mannigham Lane; Hull, Elm Tree House; Keighley, Morton Banks Sanatorium, Riddleeden; Leeds, Cottage Homes Bramley; Sheffield, Froggat (not in Yorkshire, but organised and financially supported mainly by Sheffield); Middlesbrough, Hutton Hall; Scarborough, Harwood Dale, and Wakefield, The Old Fever Hospital.

It was a tremendous humanitarian achievement - support came from many sides, from trade unions, the Co-operative society, the Communist Party, chapels and churches, large and small companies, industries and businesses, local committees and individuals - some helping with finances, fundraising, goods, expertise or volunteering their time.

The children of the colonies also used their own talents and efforts to raise funds for their upkeep: they performed concerts of Spanish and Basque dances and songs throughout Britain; they printed, published and sold their own magazines; and their football teams held charity matches. The Basque footballers had a reputation of being almost invincible and had a wide following because of their successes.

The then Mayor of Huddersfield Cllr Joseph Barlow was a key player in organising the local Spanish Relief Committee, finding a site for the colony at the Old Clergy House and helping to run and organise it. The Old Clergy House, proved to be a perfect place for the 20 young evacuees, all boys aged between 7 and 12.

There was a tremendous public response to requests for help. Various groups including the Labour Youth League, the Women's Committee and individuals cleaned, redecorated and furnished the Old Clergy House under the supervision of Mrs W Lawton, chairman of the house committee. There were requests for clothes, linen and towels, toys, games and musical instruments and these were generously forthcoming.

The children and their teacher Señorita Soledad Gorriño arrived on 28th July to a big welcome reception at the station and were greeted by Cllr Barlow, who thoughtfully didn't make a speech as he realised that the children didn't understand English!

By 1939 when the Spanish Civil War ended many of the children had been repatriated to Spain, but others had no home to go to, their parents had been killed, were in prison or exile, so they stayed in Britain, and in many cases, settled here permanently.