

..... Booker Past

Suitable Climate: How the Spanish Civil War Came to Booker

Seventy-five years ago on 16th July 1937 a party of 31 school children arrived at High Wycombe railway station. These were no ordinary visitors but refugees from the Spanish Civil War who with more than 3,800 others had been evacuated by ship from the besieged city of Bilbao in northern Spain two months earlier. At first the entire contingent had been housed under canvas in a transit camp just outside Southampton but it was always the intention to disperse the children to more permanent accommodation around the country. The initiative for setting up and financing these colonies (as they were called) was left to the organising ability and generosity of local communities. One of those which took up the challenge was High Wycombe.



Outdoor lessons

In its edition of 11th June 1937, the Bucks Free Press carried an article headlined "Basque Children in Bucks?" which revealed that work was already under way to find a property suitable to house twenty refugee children in the High Wycombe area and raise enough money to provide for their welfare. At a public meeting on the following Wednesday, Capt Macnamara, MP for Chelmsford and one of the secretaries of the Committee for Spanish Relief, explained that the Committee did not want to lodge the children with individual families but keep them together as a group to preserve their Spanish identity. His colleague from the Committee, Lord Addison, appealed to local pride declaring, "I cannot imagine a finer place than this for them. Bucks is glorious country and I can well believe that when they go back to Spain, they will take throughout their lives a memory of this delightful county and of the British people who have helped them".

The problem of finding a suitable property was soon solved when the Town Council agreed to lend the redundant smallpox isolation hospital in Booker.

This building was on the site now occupied by Beechlands Court on the corner of Barry Close and Cressex Road. Volunteers worked hard repairing the roof, lime-washing the walls and installing cooking equipment. Boy Scouts and girls from Wycombe High School cleared the grounds and put up tents. These were necessary because there was insufficient room to house all the children in the existing buildings.

After they arrived at the railway station, the children were driven in coaches to their new home. Most of them had grown up in apartment blocks in urban Bilbao and greeted the prospect of camping outdoors once again with dismay. However by mid-August when the Liberal MP Wilfred Roberts inspected the camp, a regular daily routine had been established with three sessions of school lessons, organised games, and swimming on Saturdays.

After torrential rain in mid-September the tents had to be replaced. Ursula Coulon, the camp foster-mother, herself a refugee from the war in Spain, explained to a visiting Bucks Free Press reporter that