

Telling our stories - voices from the Basque child refugee oral histories: (6c) Life in the colonies

Rafael Leandro Flores recalls Aldridge Lodge, Walsall

“We stayed [at the Stoneham camp] until one day two blue buses arrived and they said to us that we should go... In front of them was a man with a bowler hat and a coat and he was telling us to get on these buses... and this man was Mr Whiston, John Whiston, Walsall Town Councillor... Superintendent of Aldridge Lodge.”

“The place was a country house, been empty for a few year. It was next to farm, a dairy farm and they had refurbished it quite a bit in order to take us. It was not a tremendous castle, it was big enough for 50 of us. It was a very comfortable house... and it had quite a lot of grounds. Next to it was a civil aerodrome used for civil school training... We were very attached to this aerodrome... it was great for us to see this activity.

The house... had a sort of big hall with a marble staircase and it had rooms upstairs for most of the kids... They were big rooms... I was with about six in the same room, but we were comfortable, very comfortable...”

“We had an allotment, a greenhouse and we had a gardener. And I think we had one or two English domestic helps but all this was changed very quickly I think because of Mr Whiston’s ideas of how to educate us and to make us feel useful. We could not go to the ordinary English schools... But he did organise evening craft classes of cabinet making and art school... The town hall organised two weekly visits to the swimming baths.”

“The younger kids were taught by the Spanish staff. One of Whiston’s son Tom was the first attempt to teach us English... Two sons Ron and Tom and their girlfriends, Winnie and Ivy, spent all their free time with us...”

“We picked up English very quickly, very quickly. Within a few months we were already saying things, phases you know that made sense.”

“The Whiston family came to live in the colony and the lived with us... They cooked as well... Sunday dinner was always a joint, beef joint. Mr Whiston carved it and served it. It was all done by the children. We looked after the garden... We were taught these things... There we learned to love birds and plants. It was not a case of sitting down to a book. It was all practice, it was all practical.”

Another adult who made an impact was a composer and musician from Madrid who was then working for the BBC:

“He taught to sing in a choir and to sing Spanish folksongs. I was quite musical... I could sing and harmonise with people... He taught to sing as a choir at Aldridge Road

and some of the women who came with us knew how to teach folk dancing so taught the kids to dance. Eventually a Basque group for dance were formed... That was used for going to different places. I remember going to Derby, I remember going to ... Barrow on Furness.... We went to different places to sing and dance and collect money.”

“The Bourneville Cadburys took us two different Christmases 37 and 38... and we danced and visited the Garden City (Bourneville) which was very new. We met the Cadbury family... and a woman named Peggy Gibson... They were regular visitors to Aldridge and took us out at weekends and for tea.”

“The nostalgia that was created by the kids that were there for a year or two or three at Aldridge, I don't think they have ever forgotten that. It still sticks to them.”