

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

Manuel Rodriguez Urbano recalls life in Hutton Hall

“My mother’s friend, she went to Leicester, a colony in Leicester. They wanted so many children there so they went. Well the doctor promise her for my brother ... to be sent where she was. They tried very hard but Leicester didn’t want any more children, they had enough. Their quantity, they couldn’t afford to keep him, so the only colony that was going to take us, it was in Middlesbrough, just outside Middlesbrough, a place called Hutton Hall.”

“I think it was 17 of us had to go there, so when we arrive there ... a big house, a Hall they used to call it ... but it was empty. There was 20 boys before ... we arrive there, 20 boys and girls, there was staying there. They put us in our rooms where there’s no beds, only blankets. We could sleep on the floor. We was quite happy. We was in different rooms there, until they could afford to fetch beds. Well it came Sunday and they ask us, they said, ‘Are you going to church on Sunday?’ and we said, ‘No, we don’t go to church.’ So the other children say, ‘Go to church, you get sweets to go for church.’ ‘Oh no, we’d rather play football.’ So they went to Church and we stayed there, we stayed playing football and they can see us enjoying ourselves playing football and all that we wanted, so the next Sunday they refused to go to church...

“We had a routine in there. Make sure that our bedroom was clean, go down for breakfast. Breakfast was in a big table, trestles you know, trestles and that, and there three buckets full of coffee. There was three buckets full of coffee, and piles of bread and raspberry jam... dip into the bucket to get coffee, you eat as much as you could, no shortage of anything. Then is supposed to give us a lesson... the Basque teacher, Maria, ... but she was more interested ... because we could still write to our parents in them days, she wanted to see what we write, to censor them in case we put something wrong... And then she started to teach us for about an hour and it came dinner time.”

“The potatoes they used to come there it’s the leftovers in the fields... so whoever haven’t behaved himself, girls or boys... they have to do that [peel the potatoes]. And then in the afternoon we have to go out and cut trees in the six foot lengths, straight trees, which we used to like that. We was healthy there. We had a big lake. We make our own raft and we used to go there. I think the idea of cutting the timber is to help paying for our keep in there, ‘cause the people used to pay ten shillings a week or something like that for one of us. And that was all that we was asked except on a Wednesday. On a Wednesday we used to have a bus full ... old ladies used to go to look, with sweets and talking, try to talk to you and all that.”

“They was coming from Middlesbrough to there, and they give you sweets... and afterwards they’ll go to Mrs Flanagan and they said, ‘Oh I like the little boy or that

one. Do you mind if we could have him for Saturday or for the weekend?' So that's how you were. You used to go to their house... and have cakes and all that."

"We was invited to go... the well to do people, they was going shooting, so we have to go in front of them beating for the birds to take off. So we was there all day, going beating and... oh they was killing partridges... Now coming back we went to the... the peoples, the helpers entrance. The other ones went through the main entrance. We went through there. And there was bread, lovely bread, and cheese, as much as you want, cheese. But they made a mistake. They put cider in there. Course we was drinking cider well just like water. Now when we finish we had to go back to Hutton Hall. We had about a mile, a mile and a quarter to go back. We go through the railway. It was only single track... to Scarborough. We walk through there. In any case we must have been under the weather and one of the train [drivers] he told the police so when I go in there I remember that I wake up in bed, all wet through. They'd chucked me into the bath, with clothes on. So the police came there asking what happened. We told them. So they went to this Hall and they told the people they was going to fine them, all that, so that was one other outing."

"Then we had a look in the bad side of Hutton Hall. In this day we had the ladies coming in on Wednesday and with the ladies came a man with a sidecar, motorbike with sidecar. It was alright. He did give us a ride in the bike and all that because all private land. He came for two, two or three weeks running and the third one he came calling, we was finding different things like things underneath the seats... we thought it was a bit queer So we told him... in our own way, so we chase and he's running, forgot his motorbike. He left... he never came back for it... I think he was one of those... [who] mess... with the children."

"We was invited to go... to International Brigade Hall where the people was going to sign to go to Spain to fight. Wherever we went, they never had money, whatever they had it was ours... People that... never had anything much ever themselves."