



Fforest Glyn Cothi Cultural Heritage Project

The Fforest Glyn Cothi Cultural Heritage Project set up by the Brechfa Forest and Llanllwni Mountain Tourism Cluster raises awareness of the traditional lifestyle of forest dwellers and the built and natural heritage sites within Brechfa Forest, Llanllwni Mountain and the communities which encircle them.

You can find information about famous local figures and about spiritual, religious and tourism sites in our literature and on our website:

www.roam-brechfaforest-llanllwnimountain.co.uk

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Basque Children

The Spanish Civil War broke out in July 1936. It was one controversial event just under a year later that triggered the evacuation of the child refugees: the ruthless saturation bombing of the town of Guernica in the Basque country in northern Spain, 30 km east of Bilbao.

Fighter planes killed what is thought to be hundreds of civilians by targeting the town on what would have been a market day, Monday 26 April 1937, as part of Operation Rügen by the Nazi Condor Legion.



The Spanish Civil War was a bitter conflict which divided the nation with tens of thousands of deaths and millions uprooted and destitute. The plight of the Basque people was particularly tragic. Following the bombing of the civilian population in the town of Guernica in April 1937 by the planes of the Nazi Condor Legion, public opinion was outraged.

The Basque government appealed to foreign nations to give temporary asylum to the children of Guernica, but the British government adhered to its policy of non-intervention. After a campaign, the government reluctantly relented and 4,000 children came to Britain as refugees. However, the UK government refused to be responsible financially for the children saying that this would violate the non-intervention pact and demanded that the newly formed Basque Children's Committee guarantee 10/- (50pence) per week for the care and education of each child.

All the children were initially brought to one large camp and from there were split into 'colonies' and sent to various parts of the UK. The old labour camp in Brechfa was reopened to house sixty boys. Hywel Davies in his book *Fleeing Franco* provides a historical record of the stories of the Basque children who came to Wales.

José - one of the boys sent to the Brechfa Camp recalls "There was one person in charge of 60 kids. We had mattresses made of straw and nothing to eat but corned beef sandwiches and cocoa for the first few days. It was not a very good impression."

The majority of the children had lived in densely packed flats in the working class districts of one of the most industrialised cities in Spain. Dropped in a Nissen hut camp in a rural location with nothing to do, with limited supervision and a language barrier, feeling neglected and traumatised by experiences,

the boys became unruly. "Three or four boys went to the sweet shop and helped themselves to sweets," José recalls. "It was naughty but we didn't have much of that kind of thing. The owner caught them and slapped them." The boys were terrified when the police came to the camp after accusations were made that a group of boys had vandalised a car in the village. Men in uniform were rarely benign where the boys came from. The scandal from this and from a 'riot' when a group of boys threw stones through windows in the village resulted in a lot of negative press for the refugees. And the 'riots' were reported worldwide. This was used by the government as a reason to repatriate some of the children. Other press coverage was more sympathetic.

José further says that "the Locals, hearing of the boys' plight, started to visit the camp bringing gifts and food. People started coming over to see us, ordinary people not big names. The family that took me and my brother up were so kind. All of us felt the warmth of the people. From then on we changed as well."

It was agreed that the camp was not suitable. The boys were moved to a disused mansion and spent less than three months in Wales before being moved to

Margate. Some of the children returned home, but others who had lost their families in the civil war remained in the UK. There can be no doubt that lessons were learnt from the experience. When a few years later, thousands of UK children were evacuated from the cities to rural areas during World War Two they were housed with families rather than in camps or colonies.

