

Bilbao, 24 April 2010

## **An Englishman came to Bilbao...**

### **Non-sustainable, philistine urban development in Baracaldo**

### **(Basque Country)**



The house, now demolished, in a photo from 2005 (Coordinates: (+43° 17' 20.00", -2° 58' 50.11") (43.288889, -2.980586))

Industrialization in the Basque Country in the last quarter of the 19th century came about largely as a result of the region's commercial relations with Great Britain. English companies such as Orconera Iron Ore, The Bilbao River and the Cantabrian Railway, Luchana Mining and Dícido Iron Ore invested large sums of money in exploiting mines in Vizcaya. Entrepreneurs arrived with their firms, accompanied by mining and steel experts such as Joseph MacLennan, Sir Charles Palmer, Windsor Richards and William Gill, who brought their technology with them: Hodgson, Stephenson, Bessemer, Cowper, Martin-Siemens and, moving into the 20th century, Babcock & Wilcox.

While it is true the British benefited enormously from these commercial relations, there can be no doubt that some of the members of the local industrial bourgeoisie, including the Ibarra family and Sir Ramón de la Sota, also did very well out of them. The incoming entrepreneurs certainly gave industrialization in the Basque Country a huge lift.

With the English came football, Arts and Crafts and the garden city. The first of the garden cities was built in the Luchana district of Baracaldo by the Orconera Iron Ore company

in the late 19th century, under the watchful eye of company director William Gill (<http://www.icevirtuallibrary.com/docserver/fulltext/imotp.1901.18880.pdf>). It was a residential and industrial zone with a large park and small, palatial-looking mansion house at the centre, plus workshops, offices, cinema and sports facilities; a model of urban development that sought to combine industrial expansion with the best possible living conditions in a pleasant environment. In its time a benchmark for urban development, the Orconera estate was the forerunner of the *Casas Baratas* (Cheap Housing) estate, built twenty years later, itself an extraordinary achievement of the local working class, and one that was to prove hugely influential in the future of working-class housing in Vizcaya before the Spanish Civil War. Skilled employees of the company, like George Edward Wolf, lived in the estate's detached and semi-detached houses. (<http://www.mk-marketing.eu/e-Pamphlets/MK-LangMaster.pdf>)

Most unfortunately, just a few days ago Baracaldo Town Council blithely permitted the demolition of the old Orconera estate's only surviving building, the last representative of what was the first-ever garden city built in the Basque Country in the 19th century, a house, moreover, the Council had promised to preserve after the demolition three years ago of the other four remaining houses. The demolition also did away with much of the until now still visible past of the mining and industrial town Baracaldo had once been, and of the presence and influence of the English. The town, which is currently seeking to break into and compete in a globalized economy, has proved itself incapable, in the early years of the 21st century, of implementing sustainable urban development and protecting and preserving the architectural heritage indissolubly linked to industrialization and its distinctively forward-looking approach to development a century ago.

The Basque Industrial Heritage & Public Works Association, which for the last eight years has fought to persuade local politicians of the pressing need to preserve this important part of our urban heritage and a worthy reminder of the English influence on industrialization in the Basque Country, deeply regrets its gratuitous destruction.



A passer-by observes the rubble left after the last of the five houses of the Orconera Iron Ore estate was demolished yesterday. :: PEDRO URRESTI El Correo 17/04/2010

More information in: <http://www.avpiop.com/cas/index.htm>



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