

Orconera Iron Ore Co Ltd – Bilbao



This view shows four of a row of five houses located on the south side of the Alameda Serralta at Luchana, west of the Rio Nervión and downstream from Bilbao. These houses were built from 1891 for the use of senior employees of the Compañía Minera de La Orconera Ltda and are of potential historical interest to Baracaldo and Consett, and to Wrexham in North Wales, where there is a village called Minera. It may have sourced iron ore from La Orconera at some time in the past.

An aerial view of these houses can be obtained by inserting their geographical co-ordinates into a Google Earth search and choosing an appropriate altitude to fill the screen. The co-ordinates for the fourth house from the left (above) are 43° 17' 19.82" N and 2° 58' 51.66 W. It is House No 49, former residence of Mr George Edward Woof, born in 1864 and employed in about 1880 by the Stockton and Darlington Railway, until he emigrated to a new opportunity with the Orconera Iron Ore Company in 1887. This view along the row fits with only one double-family house having a single chimney, seen from the footpath.

George Woof lived as a bachelor until the early years of the twentieth century. In 1906 he met and married a girl of English ancestry living in the Bilbao area named Flora Lammin. They had a family of four children and, according to the census records sent by Baracaldo Archives Team, lived at the same house at Luchana until 1917, when they found a new dwelling. They remained in Spain for nearly ten more years until 1924 when George passed sixty and looked to his future. Edward grew and was taken to England each term to attend Hillside Primary School at Godalming. This history does not focus on the lives of his sisters Silvia (Sila), Margaret (Peggy) and Mary Woof.

Edward progressed to Haileybury College in the second term of 1921 and boarded at Hailey House. He was a quiet boy with no particular distinctions in sport, but he joined the Officer Training Corps in 1922-23, and in Term 2 of 1925 was promoted to the rank of Lance Corporal in the Army section. He left Haileybury in the summer of 1925 and matriculated for the Michaelmas Term, resident at Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He graduated with a BA in Economics in June 1928.

By this time his parents had moved to England, and settled in 1926 at Sevenoaks, Kent in a pleasant detached house named Linden Beeches, in Linden Beeches Road within the town boundary. Edward is shown on the electoral roll for 1929, so clearly joined them on a permanent basis after graduation. It is believed that he commuted to London to a post with Adolf Bleichert & Co, a German company based in Leipzig, and patentees of aerial ropeway conveyor systems, also known as telpher railways, for quarries and mines. They had installed 1,400 such systems around the world by the end of the nineteen-thirties. It is likely that with this company, Edward acquired his further foreign-language skills in French and German, perhaps due to working abroad.

It must have been an interesting career while it lasted, but by 1938 the signs of impending war with Germany were clear. Edward had to find a future, which would use his foreign language skills. First he applied for a degree course in Modern Languages at the University of Oxford and matriculated for the Michaelmas Term of 1938 in St Catherine's Society. He graduated BA (with a distinction in colloquial German) in June/July 1940, on the eve of the Battle of Britain, and applied to the RAF. He joined 201 Squadron at Liverpool (Speke) on 04 September 1941 as Airman Woof and commenced officer training at Cranwell. On 07 January 1942 he joined the RAFVR as Acting Pilot Officer Edward L. Woof and went to O.T.S. Uxbridge with its Operations Room, to train for the RAF Administrative and Special Duties Branch.

Edward Woof was transferred to service at RAF Cheadle w.e.f. 29 January 1942 and posted to the Administrative and Special Duties Branch under Officer Number 116004. RAF Cheadle was a 'Y' Listening Station with no runway. He was a non-flying pilot officer, whose training in the practical aspects of flying was applied to our own and enemy aircraft on missions. These Y or 61 Stations were equipped with powerful radio equipment, which could receive even weak signals from aircraft in flight, and distant terrestrial transmitters.

RAF Linguists including APO Woof were employed to intercept and translate signals in German and relay them to RAF airborne and operations staff for action. Their work also involved the transmission of misleading replies to enemy aircraft at a higher power than signals from their distant home bases, for example to redirect bombers away from their intended targets in Britain. He was promoted to Pilot Officer w.e.f. 07 March 1942 and was gazetted for this achievement.

After two months at Cheadle, he was transferred to the pioneer Air Base of Bomber Command at Pocklington w.e.f. 9th April 1942. The base was 12 miles SE of York and is still visible. In April 1942 RCAF 405 Squadron converted to Halifax bombers and continued operations from Pocklington until 7th August 1942, when they moved to Topcliffe. On the same day RAF 102 (Ceylon) squadron moved into Pocklington, where they were to stay until September 1945.

Pocklington airfield became No. 42 Air Base in March 1943 under the command of Air Commodore 'Gus' Walker, following loss of an arm with 166 Squadron (of Guy Gibson). Pocklington was the first Air Base of Bomber Command from March 1943, after which the whole system of Bomber Command was altered, and many more new Air Bases followed. (Source: Tom Wingham RAF 102 Ceylon Squadron).

Altogether 1,015 members of 102 Squadron were killed during the war (729 while operating from Pocklington), 319 were taken prisoner, 47 were injured and 22 either escaped custody or evaded capture. It is estimated that 150 members of RCAF 405 Squadron were killed in action while stationed at RAF Pocklington.

Pilot Officer E L Woof relinquished his commission w.e.f. 01 May 1946 and became a civilian. In due course he sought employment in the teaching profession and was appointed Modern Languages Master at Birkenhead School H.M.C. under its headmaster K. D. Robinson.

In the early nineteen-fifties, the school taught the A-stream pupils Latin and Greek to satisfy university entrance requirements. This continued until the mid-fifties, when the entrance requirements were commuted to any modern language. That widened the scope of the UK universities' catchment area and gave a new impetus to the study of French and German at school. Edward Woof arrived at exactly the right time, and it is doubtful whether any alternative candidate could have brought better experience with him to teach these two languages to intelligent teenagers being groomed as leaders for post-war Europe.

The consequences of war were widespread in Birkenhead, Wallasey and Liverpool: in extensive bombed sites, repatriation of warships, vehicles and materiel, and movement of troops. The visible traffic of commerce in this large group of ports was based on transatlantic passenger and deep-sea cargo shipping. Local commodity exchanges dealt in the bulk shipments handled in specialised docks equipped with grain elevators and storage warehouses. There was a great deal of activity and transport, involving large numbers of people everywhere.

Trade with the Commonwealth during the nineteen-fifties was vast, as British industry was busy serving its needs, as well as supplying the domestic market with such a large range and volume of products that one could not conceive of a recession, or collapse of manufacturing. Exports sailed to Africa, the Middle East, Malaysia, the Far East and North and South America, borne by the multitude of shipping lines with facilities located in the Mersey Docks Estate. For much of this trade, the English language was adequate, but that would soon change.

Edward Woof came to Birkenhead School with four languages. The fourth was Spanish, which he had learnt at Luchana through infancy and childhood, but to avoid overloading him, he did not teach it. Other masters were employed during the nineteen-sixties, as Spanish was brought in as a substitute for French. It was easier to pronounce for the more strongly accented pupils who took the 25 per cent of free places.

Alongside French and German for Europe, Spanish was important in British export trade with South America. Just one local product comes to mind as a good example of natural export business thinking: Frank Hornby's Tinplate Trains were packed in cardboard boxes bearing descriptions in English, French, German and Spanish. Exports of Leyland buses from the factories in Lancashire also went to Latin America with an extra badge stating El Autobus Inglés on the front. It was there that the author commenced Spanish, not with Mr E.L. Woof.

The environment of his childhood home at Luchana is described on the hiru.com website, which is presented in the Basque and Spanish languages. The original web address is as follows:

http://www.hiru.com/artea/ondarea/industrial/orconerako_etxeak

Current description of La Orconera mining area west of Luchana:

It was a large parcel of land in the divisions of Abanto and Ciérvana-Abanto, Zierbena, Baracaldo, Ortuella and the Valley of Trápaga and Trapagarán, in which the mines of La Orconera, Carmen, Previsión, La Magdalena, one of the eight Concha mines, and half of the Caesar mine, were being worked. Today the parcel is situated next to a large decantation pool and a few detached dwellings. In close proximity can be seen the remains of two inclined planes. At the beginning of the 20th Century there were three inclined planes, whose task was to lift newly won ore from the mine to the furnaces and to the main railway.

The countryside fundamentally reflects the historical exploitation of minerals: inclined planes, terraces formed by excavating the ore, enormous mounds of waste, decantation pools, etc. All this activity has disfigured the original countryside of this area.

Today one can still see the remains of the works realised when the mineral exploitation began. Orconera is the most interesting site, as one can see the main calcining kilns. The scene shows perfectly the elements like a concrete inclined plane, an old wash-house, various deposits of iron ore and coal, an ore-sifter, a steam-hammer, the supports of a conveyor belt, etc. (End of Extract from HIRU website).

Author's description continues: The dilapidated industrial installations and machinery still visible were, of course, in full activity during the life of the Woof family until they finally left the area in or about 1925, to start a new life at Sevenoaks. No research into the three daughters has been done, but they all married and their lives are duly chronicled.

Among the information to be found on the hiru.com heritage website are the date of the original agreement between the Orconera Mining Company Ltd and Hermanos Ibarra y C^a in 1873 (misprinted as 1783, which is impossible) and the cessation of mining activities in 1945. It is hardly surprising that Edward Woof found a position with Adolf Bleichert in London, since they had installed an aerial tramway, as it is called in Spanish, at the Carmen VII mine in the Trapagarán Valley.

The Author was placed under the teaching of this fascinating man in September 1957, at the beginning of his second year at Birkenhead Junior School, when Edward Woof had just turned 50 years old. With a year of Latin behind them, the new pupils of Form II Greeks started French and were told by Mr Woof that it was a living language, and that we would have to learn to speak it to talk with the people. It was the ideal start with this foreign language, and with his own excellent pronunciation, he made sure from the earliest lessons that his charges articulated the special sounds correctly, especially the French vowel u.

It was more difficult to understand the concepts of y and en, which are so important for the understanding of everyday written and spoken French. However, with Latin grammar as the foundation and the two above fundamentals depending on it carefully explained and practised, we were able to progress towards a high standard of French from an individual who spoke quite unaccented English and yet perfect speech in the French tongue. In retrospect, at the age of 13 during the year 1958, we did not think to question him on how he came to speak this language so well, nor where he had lived or worked in order to learn it. He was an old-fashioned and potentially rather intimidating man, of whom we were not quite sure enough either to joke with him or to ask anything approaching personal questions.

For the following school year starting in September 1958, we had been given the opportunity to choose our third foreign language from Ancient Greek or German. The former was only of interest to pupils planning to read classics and humanities at university, but for those who saw their future in an industrial, commercial, diplomatic or military environment, the latter was the natural option. British society was also closely connected through many links with the armed forces, to the rebuilding of post-war Germany and rehabilitation of Germans. In this environment we commenced German in the third form with Mr Woof, and to avoid confusion between the languages, French classes were given by another more academic but less practical teacher. He did not believe that the school should produce classes of Belgian waiters able to converse in four languages, but instead scholarly pupils with an appreciation of French literature. We had the best of both worlds, through instruction from the two different didactic directions.

Mr Woof therefore opened our first German lesson by repeating what he had said for French. We were to learn grammatically based written and spoken German, and pronounce the latter correctly. He taught us that the best spoken French came from Tours and the best German

from Hanover. He also spent adequate time on the German modified u and showed us how the mouth had to be formed to produce it from an ee sound funnelled through tubular lips, without embarrassment. He had test words or phrases for the different sibilant, interdental and interlabial sounds of Hanover German, test phrases for the German r produced lower down in the throat than the more rolled English r, and the reduction of the ubiquitous expletive Ach! To a light .. chhhhhh .. sound without the A, say while listening in wonder of disbelief to an amazing story or news item. It was the exact equivalent to Geddayaw or Gee, you don't say ... in the American idiom. Our German textbook was entitled Deutsches Leben (German Life), first published in 1937, and printed in Fraktur (meaning "broken" as opposed to joined script).

He also emphasized at the outset that German was a living language, and that he would be taking us for four lessons per week. "In two of those lessons", he said, "You will not be allowed to open a book, or at most only the reading book". This Lesebuch (spoken like Lazybook) contained illustrated articles on e.g. Hamburg Railway Station; air-travel by the Zeppelin Airships; the vocabulary of train travel, where the guard inspecting tickets uttered an expression repeated so many million times a year on the German railways: "Ist noch jemand zugestiegen?" meaning "Has anyone else boarded the train?" German has grammatical formality. The cases must be correct, as in Latin, and it is hard for us with such an excellent foundation in languages to even comprehend how people without grammar can begin to learn German.

The penultimate instrument of instruction (next to him, the ultimate instrument) was a hand-wound gramophone in the school library, with a set of scratchy 12 inch 78 rpm records from Linguaphone. The hotel scenario still echoes in many pupils' minds: On arrival by taxi, one of the guests asks another: "Shall I look after the luggage, or would you like to do it?" : "Soll ich mich um das Gepäck kümmern, oder willst Du es tun?". With Mr Woof, we truly became part of German Life. He never spoke about the war, nor of his rôle in it. He helped us to overcome anti-German feeling out there in less educated society, by simply not talking about it. We would find out about it soon enough in later life. He portrayed Germany as a normal nation in peacetime, whose history was full of music and mythology, science and industry, outdoor exercise and collective values, love of the homeland, travel and family life. Yes, it had suffered a major political accident, which is how we should see it and focus on the rest. The author took this belief and his language skills to the Metra Consulting Group Ltd in the 'seventies and was duly dubbed "The Secret Weapon". MK©2008.

Edward Lammin Woof was educated at Hillside School, Godalming; Haileybury College; and at the Universities of Cambridge (1925-28) and Oxford (1938-41).

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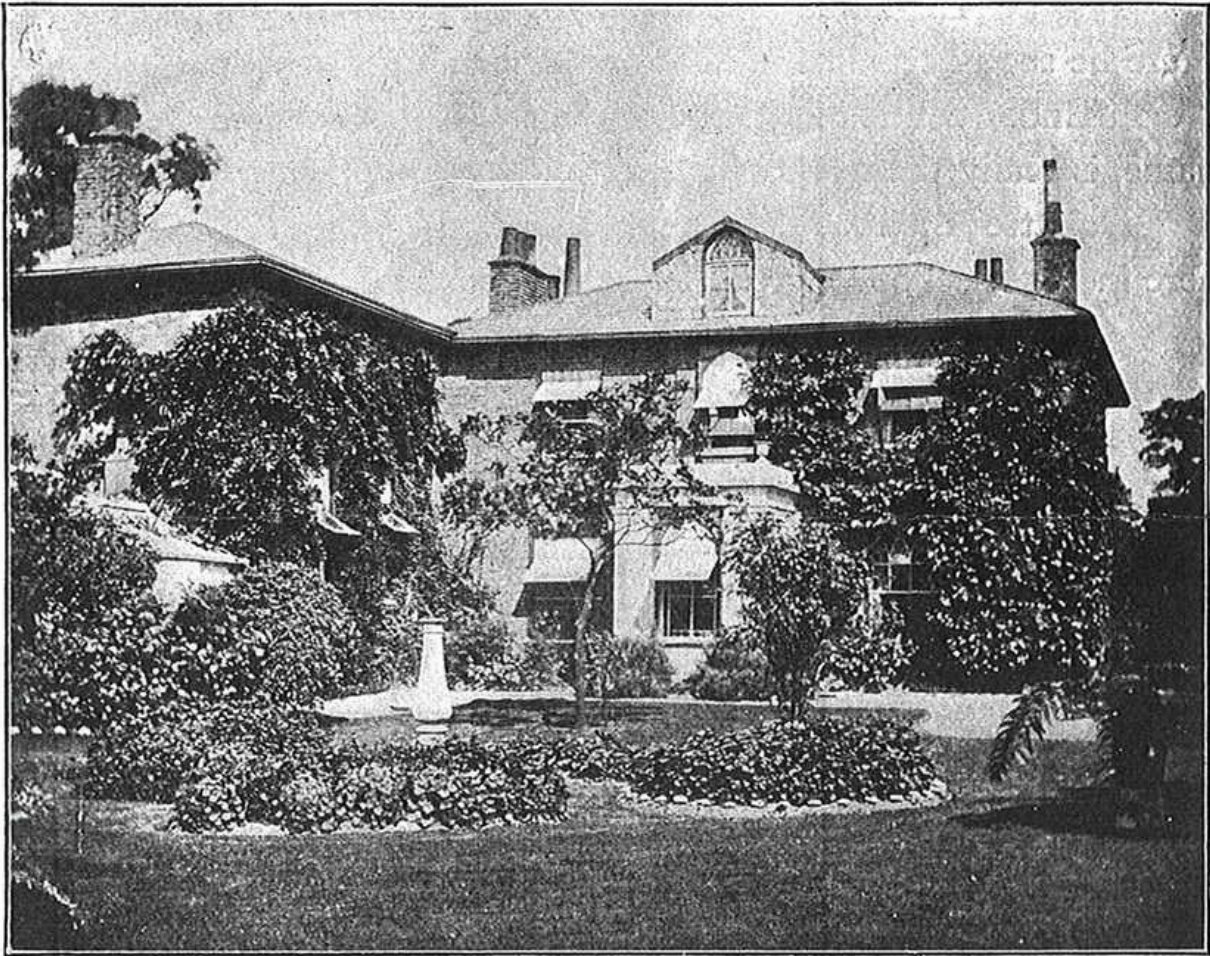
Hillside School, Godalming, demolished in 1971 to make way for a new road.

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Courtesy: © Archives Department, Charterhouse School, Godalming, Surrey.

The Lammin family house at Walham Green, Fulham, 1840-1881.

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Shorrol's. From a photograph by Mr. H. Ambridge.

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One can imagine six small children running about in this sunny garden, and playing games of hoops, quoits or croquet during the 1850's. Source: LBHF

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This is where Edward Woof's grandfather Archer Davison Lammin was raised. He emigrated to Deusto near Bilbao in Spain and became a merchant. Archer met and, in 1882, married a girl called Emma Ann Shade, who died shortly after the birth of their daughter Flora. From 1888, Flora was raised by Archer's new wife Emily Harriet (née Skelton). In 1906, Flora married George Edward Woof. Her firstborn became Birkenhead's Modern Languages Master, Edward Lammin Woof, who had three younger sisters: Sylvia, Margaret and Mary (next page):



Sila, Peggy, Flora, Mary & Ted Woof on 13/09/1920

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(thought to be at a location in Deusto or Iturrigori)

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by courtesy of descendants of George & Flora Woof