The Ockenden Venture: reception and resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in the UK

My name is Jill Hyams and, to mark Refugee Week, I'd like to talk to you about the Ockenden Venture, an extraordinary refugee charity, whose extensive archive is held at Surrey History Centre.

The Ockenden Venture was established in Woking in 1951 by local schoolteachers, Joyce Pearce, Ruth Hicks and Margaret Dixon, who were moved by the plight of countless displaced families in camps across Europe whose lives had been torn apart by the war. They set up the charity to receive small numbers of Eastern European teenagers from the displaced persons camps in Germany, and support them through their secondary education in Britain. But world events and the increasing numbers of refugees worldwide would lead Ockenden to widen its ambitions and operations.

Over the next 50 years, Ockenden helped countless people at home and abroad, establishing schools for Tibetan refugees in India, fighting apartheid by sponsoring the education of black South African students, bringing Biafran refugees to Britain, and sending aid to those suffering under the Communist regime in Poland in the 1980s. Many educational and vocational centres were established for refugees in Sudan, Pakistan, Cambodia and Algeria. But Ockenden is perhaps best known for its major role in the resettlement in Britain of Vietnamese refugees escaping the Communist regime there in the 1970s and 1980s.

Ockenden's involvement in Vietnam began in 1971 with its takeover of the Hoi Anh Duc [Hoi Ang Duh] orphanage in Saigon. Two years later, in 1973, Ockenden brought five Vietnamese girls who had polio to England for intensive physiotherapy treatment. This was only permitted on the condition that the girls did not learn English and returned to Vietnam after their treatment.

In April 1975, with the imminent fall of Saigon to the Communists, the editor of the Daily Mail chartered a plane to rescue Vietnamese orphans, including children from the Ockenden Hoi Anh Duc [Hoi Ang Duh] Orphanage. The Home Office sanctioned the move on condition that the children were initially cared for in Britain by a registered charity, and Ockenden was chosen to undertake this task. The 99 children on the airlift included the five Vietnamese girls with polio who had come to Britain for medical treatment in 1973.

Following its involvement in the 1975 orphan airlift, Ockenden became increasingly involved in the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in the UK. In October 1978, 350 Vietnamese boat people were rescued by a British ship, the 'Wellpark', and brought to the UK. The following year the British government agreed to accept a further 1,500 Vietnamese refugees and three organisations – The Ockenden Venture, Save the Children and the British Council for Aid to Refugees - worked with the Home Office to resettle these refugees in the UK.

Many of the properties already owned by Ockenden were used as reception centres for Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s and 1980s. Additional centres were leased across the country, the largest being Nelson Hall in Staffordshire which could hold 400 refugees. From 1978 to 1995,
Ockenden ran an office in Birmingham to plan and coordinate the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees from reception centres into different parts of the country. With the active help of local support groups, Ockenden found housing for refugee families, provided vocational training and arranged emotional family reunions.

The archive of the Ockenden Venture is held at Surrey History Centre and contains a wealth of information about the charity's work with Vietnamese refugees and includes reports, letters, photographs, newsletters, magazine articles and recorded interviews. Importantly, the archive also includes papers of individual refugees including these heartfelt verses written by a 60 year old Vietnamese refugee who arrived in England in November 1979 and initially stayed at the Ockenden reception centre at Sunshine House, Gosport. This is a translation by a fellow refugee:

"A huge bird stretched out his wings and with a loud noise flew up into the sky. He travelled thousands of miles over mountains and seas to search… And he was deeply glad when he was able to reunite with his closest relatives. I, a tired and toiled traveller, no longer have any worries because of my joyful reunion. It is not yet too late to begin a peaceful carefree life. The universe is vast and its beauty endless but now I can sing of the wind and toy with the moon and the night grows deeper and deeper imperceptibly. Now, I am old but I have achieved my aims. And my spirit is still strong like the green pines that cannot be attacked by the strong wind and the heavy snow. I truly love England from my heart. And now all my dreams have come true. This house received me with open arms and endless love. For my situation was so bad that God pitied me and opened the doors to my freedom. The huge bird flapped quickly and flew away. Though his nest was demolished his eggs are safe and so all his travelling was not in vain. Let everybody praise the Queen for her kindness and mercy towards the refugees. Let's thank the Mayor and Mayoress and all the people in Gosport for all the help they had given."

For more information about the archive of Ockenden International (formerly The Ockenden Venture), please contact:

Surrey History Centre, 130 Goldsworth Road, Woking, GU21 6ND. Tel: 01483 518737
Email: shs@surreycc.gov.uk
Web: https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/culture-and-leisure/history-centre
Twitter: https://twitter.com/surreyheritage
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/surreyheritage

For more information about the Ockenden Venture see:


Discover more about Ockenden International and the archive at Surrey History Centre https://www.exploringsurreyspast.org.uk/themes/subjects/refugees/ockenden_international_from_vision_to_venture/

View Surrey Heritage’s online exhibition ‘From Vision to Venture’ and download the collection leaflet at https://www.exploringsurreyspast.org.uk/themes/subjects/refugees/the_ockenden_exhibition/