

Remembering the Basque refugee children in Wickham Market, 1938-1939

Saturday 24 March 2018

Report and photographs (unless otherwise credited) by Dr Edward Packard

One hundred of the 4,000 Basque refugee children who came to Britain to escape the Spanish Civil War arrived at Ipswich in June 1937. Thanks to the generosity of Stuart Paul, a local businessman, the first seven months of their stay in the county were spent at Wherstead Park, a Georgian mansion not far from Ipswich. In February 1938, however, the young refugees found themselves in a very different form of accommodation: the disused workhouse at Wickham Market, deep in the Suffolk countryside. The local council supplied the building for a peppercorn rent, enabling the children to stay there until 1939, when the workhouse was required for purposes related to the Second World War. The remaining children were either repatriated to Spain, or sent to other parts of Britain.



Basque Children at Wickham Market: photograph courtesy of Jose Luis Duo

To mark eighty years since the children's time at Wickham Market, on 24 March 2018 the Association for the UK Basque Children (BCA'37 UK) organised a commemorative event in collaboration with the Wickham Market Area Archive Centre. This involved the unveiling of a plaque at the old workhouse building, along with an exhibition and talks in the nearby village hall. Refreshments were provided by the Archive Centre's volunteers throughout the day, including an excellent selection of cakes. The event was a great success, with well over 100 visitors throughout the day, including an audience of 80 for the talks.



Lydia and Daniel Vulliamy attended the event, and Daniel unveiled the plaque following an introduction by Carmen Kilner representing BCA'37 UK. Daniel's aunts Chloe and Poppy Vulliamy were two of the driving forces behind the campaign to bring some of the Basque refugees to Suffolk in 1937, and Chloe subsequently ran the 'colony' of children at Wickham Market Flagship Group, who now own 'The Old Workhouse' and have transformed it into affordable housing, kindly granted permission for the plaque to be affixed to the building, and Janet Coates represented Flagship on the day.



Paco Robles, who stayed at both Wherstead Park and Wickham Market as a child, also attended, and shared his memories. He was able to meet with a lady from the village who, like Paco, is now in her nineties. She remembers the children in the 1930s as they used to eat apples in her garden. Luís Jarrero's mother Mertxe and Simon Martínez's father Enrique both came to Wickham Market as children, and both Luís and Simon were present at the event.



The programme of talks began with Adrian Bell, author of *Only for Three Months*, who vividly described the story of the children's evacuation from the Basque country in 1937. His talk also covered the establishment of the Basque Children's Committee in Britain, alongside the local groups who looked after the 4,000 young refugees. He emphasised how they were almost entirely dependent on the support of local individuals and organisations. My talk picked up the story from Adrian, and focused on the hundred children who came to Ipswich in June 1937. I described the formation of the local refugee committee, and outlined the various people who raised money and otherwise cared for the children. My talk also described some of the children's experiences of life at Wickham Market, and their activities in Suffolk more generally (such as an extensive programme of fundraising concerts of Spanish songs and dances).



The BCA'37 UK exhibition proved very popular. This included four poster panels on Suffolk, which were created last year to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of the children arriving in the county, along with a new panel specifically concerned with Wickham Market. Barbara Coombs and Simon Martínez ran the Association's stall of books, DVDs and other items. The Wickham Market Area Archive Centre also had a stall, which sold the latest edition of the Archive Centre's history of the workhouse – this contains an updated section on the story of the Basque children based on my research.



Photograph courtesy of John Kilner

To draw a connection between past and present, Suffolk Refugee Support provided an information stand and were represented at the plaque unveiling. The East of England Co-op, who organised a wonderful commemorative event at Wherstead Park last June, also sent representatives. The Co-op provided immeasurable support for the Basque children in Suffolk throughout their stay in the county.



The event also included a presentation of the Bill Thornycroft archives to BCA'37 UK. This collection contains a great deal of useful material pertaining to the Worthing and Lancing Basque colonies. The presentation, by Anna Cordon to Simon Martínez (representing BCA'37) included a watercolour by one of the boys who stayed at Worthing. Anna, who is Bill Thornycroft's niece,

also read a letter written by her aunt Kate in 1938, which included a harrowing account of the repatriation of some of the children to Spain via the bridge at Hendaye

The day would not have been such a success without the support and exceptional organisation provided by the Wickham Market Area Archive Centre, who also provided a warm welcome to the Association for the UK Basque Children.

I would like to extend my own thanks to Nicole Gaunt, Carmen Kilner, Gill Packard, Dolores Phelps, Philip Tallent, and Ray Whitehand for their help in the weeks and months leading up to the event.

Although there are now commemorative plaques at both Wherstead Park and Wickham Market, there is still much research to be done on the Basque children in Suffolk. If you have any information that you would be willing to share, please do contact me via e.packard@uos.ac.uk

