

THE BASQUE REFUGEE CHILDREN IN WICKHAM MARKET, 1938-1939

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This article was originally written in 2018 for the Wickham Market Area Archive Centre for their publication on the Workhouse – copies can be purchased via [the WMAAC website](#). A report on the eightieth anniversary event at Wickham Market is [available here](#).

In early 1938 the decommissioned Plomesgate Union workhouse became a place of sanctuary for nearly one hundred children from the Basque region of Spain. These children, or *niños*, were part of an evacuation of 4,000 child refugees from the Spanish Civil War, who came to Britain in May 1937 in the aftermath of the bombing of Guernica. Groups of the children were then sent to ‘colonies’ all over the country, including in Suffolk. The British government refused to provide any financial assistance, so the *niños* found themselves almost entirely dependent on the care and support provided by local individuals and organisations.



When the children arrived at the Wickham Market workhouse, they had spent several months living in the relatively luxurious Georgian mansion at Wherstead Park and only sixteen of the original hundred children had returned to Spain. Chlöe Vulliamy, the country coroner’s daughter, was the colony’s secretary, and cared deeply about the plight of the Spanish people. She resisted efforts to repatriate the *niños* back to Spain if she had evidence – including often heart-breaking letters from parents – that they would face misery or starvation if they returned.

With so many children to care for, and no government support, fundraising was an urgent matter. The children toured the region in costume, putting on concerts of their national songs and dances. Some of the boys played football matches against Suffolk teams. Local people were encouraged to ‘adopt’ a child – this involved subscribing ten shillings per week (about £30 in today’s money). The government had made it a condition of the children’s stay that those looking after them had to guarantee this sum per child. Besides money, local people also donated toys and furniture. The

Ipswich Industrial Co-operative Society was an important contributor to the children's welfare: it helped with fundraising, as well as providing free bread and arranging occasional trips for the *niños*.

The memory of the Basque children's stay at Wickham Market is still vivid amongst local people, but not all agree about their friendliness or behaviour. Some say that there were frequent fights with the village boys; '...the place was wrecked'; '...they got on the roof and stripped the slates off'; '...they covered the walls inside with graffiti'. On the other hand, some remember them as very colourful and artistic. Their national dress was brilliant and they sometimes gave shows in the village. They roller-skated in Chapel Lane and executed elaborate dancing figures. They painted attractive murals on the walls of their rooms. One Chapel Lane lady gave them apples from her garden and they would sit in her front garden eating them and causing no trouble at all.

Chlöe Vulliamy suggested that the Wickham Market colony did not receive much interest from the locals there, and that the children missed Wherstead Park's proximity to the attractions of Ipswich. The *niños* did maintain the *paseo*, or evening walk, of their home country and could be seen promenading, arm-in-arm, around the village on fine evenings.

Some of the children who came to Wickham Market have shared their memories in the book *Recuerdos: Basque children refugees in Great Britain*, edited by Natalia Benjamin (Basque Children of '37 Association UK, 2007).

Maria Dolores Barajuán Fernandez, recalling the move to Wickham Market from Wherstead, remembered 'The change was terrible' and 'The feeling of neglect was overwhelming' at the workhouse.

Paco Robles Hernández described the Plomesgate workhouse as 'truly ancient' and stated: 'I disliked that colony because we suffered from scabies, which had been brought in by some children who came from a different colony, and moreover it was infested with rats.'

His sister Maria described the colony as 'somewhat Dickensian' but not all bad:

'My memories of that colony are always of hot summer days, when we would walk to the river and spend the whole afternoon swimming. The colony had a number of outhouses and often some of the bigger girls would be in one of these outbuildings curling each others' hair with hot curling tongs. I would look on fascinated at the transformation taking place.'

Maria thinks that she received her first letters from her mother while at Wickham Market - at that time her father was a prisoner of war in Spain.

During 1939, the children gradually left Wickham Market: they were either sent to other Basque 'colonies' throughout Britain, or they returned to Spain. Six children who left the workhouse in April 1939 were given a lively and loud farewell at 8 a.m. in the morning by the remaining *niños* – with the noise awakening some of the villagers!

Quotations from *Recuerdos* used with grateful permission from BCA'37: The Association for the UK Basque Children.