

## Researching and remembering the Basque refugee children of 1937 in the Special Collections

In July 2019, [Dr Edward Packard](#), Lecturer in History at University of Suffolk and a trustee of [BCA'37: The Association for the UK Basque Children](#), wrote the following blog for the University of Southampton Special Collections 'user perspectives' series. He discusses his use of the University's collections relating to [Basque child refugees](#) as part of his research project on the Basque colonies that existed in Suffolk between 1937 and 1939.

“Following a turbulent crossing of the Bay of Biscay, four thousand children from the Basque Country disembarked from the overcrowded liner SS Habana at Southampton on 23 May 1937. These *niños vascos* were refugees from the Spanish Civil War and were initially accommodated in a temporary reception camp at North Stoneham, near Eastleigh, before being dispersed in groups to approximately eighty 'colonies' across England, Wales, and Scotland. The government refused to provide any financial assistance for the young refugees, who instead relied on donations and other forms of support from private individuals, groups, and organisations. Most of the *niños* had been repatriated by the start of the Second World War, but around 250 settled permanently in the UK rather than returning to the dictatorship established in Spain by General Franco following his victory in the Civil War.

The remarkable history of the Basque refugee children and the vast public effort to support them is not as well-known in the UK as the subsequent Kindertransport, or the internal migration of evacuees during the Second World War. However, since the start of the twenty-first century, public awareness of the *niños vascos* has been boosted by the activities of BCA'37: The Association for the UK Basque Children. The Association was founded in 2002 by Natalia Benjamin, whose parents taught and cared for some of the children, and Manuel Moreno, the son of a *niña vasca*, owing to their concerns that archival material related to the children was at risk of being lost. By developing a network of surviving *niños*, their family members, and others with an interest in the Basque refugees, the Association accumulated a wide range of written and visual sources about the children's experiences in the 1930s and since. These were passed to the [University of Southampton Special Collections](#) in 2016 to ensure their preservation and to facilitate access for researchers.

The archive, catalogued as MS404 (A4164 and A4171), is especially intriguing as it contains not only original and facsimile historical documents pertaining to the Basque children, many of which have not featured in published work to date, but also includes administrative papers and correspondence related to the Association's activities. Besides gathering documentation, the Association has also been involved in numerous events, including exhibitions and educational

work. Given that the memory and memorialisation of the Spanish Civil War remains controversial and contested in the present, these materials offer insights into the ways in which a specific organisation has been involved in the construction of the public memory of the *niños*.

My own research focuses on the Basque colonies that existed in the county of Suffolk between 1937 and 1939, and I am also interested in the different ways that the history of the *niños vascos* has been told, and what remains untold. It is often difficult to research local case studies connected to the Basque refugees, owing to the impermanence of the colonies and the fragmentary nature of the surviving historical record. I found that the materials held at Southampton, which include further collections of relevant papers catalogued at MS370, helped me to fill some of the gaps and add texture to the history of the Suffolk colonies and the local experiences of the *niños*. For instance, while I considered myself very familiar with the history of the Wickham Market colony, which was located in a decommissioned workhouse, file MS404 A4164/2/13 contained several photographs that I had not seen before, including the children eating a meal inside the workhouse, and a striking image of some of the Basque boys with bicycles. While these subjects might sound mundane, the photographs help to convey a sense of the children's experiences of colony life.

Among the other highlights of my visit to Special Collections was viewing an original souvenir programme for an 'All Spanish Concert by the Spanish Refugee Children from Wherstead Park, and West-End Spanish Artistes' held at Ipswich in December 1937 (MS370/8 A4110/1). Such entertainments were a crucial part of the fundraising activity required to maintain individual colonies, although the participation of 'West-End Artistes' was unusual – the songs and dances were usually performed exclusively by the children.

The enduring and poignant connection between some of the Basque refugees and those who cared for them is highlighted in a short letter, dated 1 January 1988 (MS404 A4171/2/3/1/5), by Poppy Vulliamy, then in her eighties, who had established a series of colonies, including in Suffolk and Norfolk, for a group of fifty older Basque boys in 1937 and 1938. She was writing to one of these 'boys', Rafael de Barrutia, now a man approaching retirement age, thanking him for a Christmas card. Poppy signed off 'From your friend who never forgets you.' The preservation of memory is a key theme that runs through the BCA'37 archive and influences its continuing activities in the present. These include an [undergraduate dissertation prize](#), for which the Special Collections at University of Southampton are likely to prove an important resource.

After spending much of my research trip to the Hartley Library pondering the relationship between historical experiences and the ways in which they are remembered, it seemed appropriate to head back to Southampton railway station via the Civic Centre to visit the plaque commemorating the

arrival of the Habana over eighty years ago. I also reflected again that, while the Basque refugee archive at Southampton is inevitably incomplete, it offers significant glimpses into local refugee experiences. With the number of surviving *niños vascos* declining each year, these documents will only become more valuable in preserving the memory of this crucial part of Britain's refugee history."

The original blog (with images from the archive) can be viewed at:

<https://specialcollectionsuniversityofsouthampton.wordpress.com/2019/07/16/researching-and-remembering-the-basque-refugee-children-of-1937-in-the-special-collections/>