

Refugee Week 2021: Talking to Chelmsford Amnesty International about the Basque Refugee Children

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As part of Refugee Week 2021, on 17 June I spoke to the Amnesty International Chelmsford Group about the Basque children who went to the Cambridge, Oakley Park, and Rollesby colonies in East Anglia. The talk was started and concluded by Dr Jeannette Baxter (Anglia Ruskin University), who was the driving force behind last year's Heritage Lottery funded project 'Havens East'. This project undertook a wide range of activities, including establishing community research groups in Cambridge and Norwich, to find out about and disseminate stories of the *niños* who ended up both in Cambridgeshire and on the Norfolk-Suffolk border. Dr Baxter spoke about the project's aims and continuing outcomes: these included a Covid-secure digital exhibition which replaced a planned travelling exhibition, as well as various schools-related materials and events. A key part of the project was an ambition to draw meaningful connections between refugees in the past and present, and this was a powerful theme of the discussion that followed our presentation.

As a researcher of the Suffolk Basque colonies, I was also involved in the Havens East project and have good memories of the Norwich research group meetings in the early months of 2020 before the first lockdown: it is always encouraging to see new people become interested in the story of the Basque children! Adrian Bell, the author of *Only for three months*, also lent considerable support (and invaluable archival materials) to the Norwich group. Among other friends of the Basque Children's Association, Karen Robson at the University of Southampton Special Collections was also a great help.

My section of the presentation to the Chelmsford Amnesty group attempted to weave together the wider story of the Basque children with the story of the specific 'Havens East' colonies, while also mentioning some of the interesting findings and methodologies of the project. Maria Luisa Toole, a *niña* from the Cambridge colony, was in the virtual audience along with members of her family: it was moving to show a photograph of Maria back in 1937 while simultaneously seeing her watching the talk at home in 2021! By coincidence, 17 June was the 84th anniversary of Maria Luisa, and other children, arriving at Pampisford vicarage in Cambridge. I also pointed out that Poppy Vulliamy, who cared for Basque boys at Oakley Park and Rollesby, was a keen member of Amnesty International in her later life, and that Chelmsford's Conservative MP in 1937 – Captain John Macnamara – was deeply involved with the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief and the Basque Children's Committee.

Despite being online, the event was well-attended and warmly received – with considerable discussion afterwards! As a trustee of the Basque Children's Association, and a contributor to Havens East, it was highly satisfying to see a public audience respond so positively to both the project and the wider story of the Basque children.

If you would like to watch the talk, a recording is available here:

<https://web.microsoftstream.com/video/b2a75494-26df-4bd9-8dcc-43c5ef66d165>

The Havens East online exhibition is here: <https://havenseast.org/>

My article on the Oakley Park colony is here: <https://www.hoxnehistory.org.uk/Basques.php>