

## **BASQUE CHILDREN REUGEES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM: THE HOXNE CONNECTION**

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1937 the SS Habana, a rather old and tired steamship, docked at Southampton. Its cargo, 4,000 Basque children, fleeing the Spanish Civil War, were given a rousing welcome from the British public as thousands thronged Southampton's Streets. This was in sharp contrast to a very negative attitude expressed by the British Government and the reporting of a very hostile right wing press eager to expose any failing in the children's behaviour. The Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, felt that refugees should not be encouraged as the children would not like the climate.

Fortunately for the children many in the United Kingdom disagreed and worked tirelessly to unravel the bureaucratic paperwork. Two of these were closely connected with Hoxne, Chloe and Hope (Poppy) Villiamy, whose father owned the Red House in Low Street.

Chloe and Poppy were hispanophiles, they both spoke Spanish and were very sympathetic to the reforms being attempted by newly elected Republican Government. When Civil War started the sisters were living on the Costa Brava but concerns about their safety forced them to return to the United Kingdom. Their aunt, Grace Vulliamy, was already involved in aiding the evacuation of children for Spain and it was not long before Chloe and Poppy were following in her footsteps. Both sisters played a pivotal role in enabling Basque children to travel to Suffolk and on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1937 100 Basque children arrived at Ipswich station to a tumultuous welcome from the public. Initially taken to Werstead Park, an empty mansion owned by Stuart Paul, the children formed what was to become known as a "colony". Once established the children were then dispersed to homes around Suffolk.

A small number were brought by Poppy to the Red House in Hoxne, Barbara Chinery (nee Hancock) was the teenage House Keeper at the Red House and remembers the family well as well as their young visitors. In the summer Poppy brought fifty of the most challenging boys to a summer camp in Oakley Park which proved a distraction for the village girls. Joan Thornett (nee Banham) together with her friend Charlotte Baldwin pushed a pram containing Joan's two youngest siblings up to the clays pits at the Banham's brickyard. Leaving the pram they made their

way over the parkland towards the camp, unfortunately Joan's father noticed the pram and then the girls and called them back, as Joan recounts "I was in disgrace and I knew I would get the stick when I got home". The two girls never got to see the exotic Spanish boys, though, apparently, there were fights between the refugees and the local boys.

Some of the Basque children only stayed in the United Kingdom for a year, others until the end of the Second World War and about four hundred remained here for the rest of their lives.