**Evacuees in World War Two - the True Story**

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## **Operation Pied Piper**

(1)The evacuation of Britain's cities at the start of World War Two was the biggest and most concentrated mass movement of people in Britain's history. In the first four days of September 1939, nearly 3,000,000 people were transported from towns and cities in danger from enemy bombers to places of safety in the countryside.

(2)Most were schoolchildren, who had been labelled like pieces of luggage, separated from their parents and accompanied instead by a small army of guardians - 100,000 teachers. By any measure it was an astonishing event, a logistical nightmare of co-ordination and control beginning with the terse order to 'Evacuate forthwith,' issued at 11.07am on Thursday, 31 August 1939. Few realized that within a week, a quarter of the population of Britain would have a new address.

(3)Talking to evacuees now about the events of those days in 1939 recalls painful memories that have been deeply hidden for 60 years, exposing the trauma of separation and isolation and the tensions of fear and anger. Most were unaware of where they were going, what they would be doing and all were wholly ignorant of when they would be coming back.

(4)The fear of air attack from German bombers at the start of hostilities encouraged parents to send their children to safety. There were predictions of 4,000,000 civilian casualties in London alone, and, as early as 1922 - after the air threat from Zeppelins - Lord Balfour had spoken of 'unremitting bombardment of a kind that no other city has ever had to endure'.

(5)The Government had stockpiled coffins, erected masses of barrage balloons and planned, at least in outline, for the mass evacuation of British cities before 1939. But it is now revealed that these plans were hopelessly flawed.

(6)In the first place, the estimates of casualties were grossly over-exaggerated and the subsequent Government propaganda caused near panic rather than controlled movement. In addition, the man in charge of evacuation, Sir John Anderson, was a cold, inhuman character with little understanding of the emotional upheaval that might be created by evacuation.

**The day of evacuation**

(7) For some children used to city life, the countryside proved to be a revelation.   Most evacuees have a vivid recall of events on the day of their evacuation. The images are of busy train stations, shouting officials and sobbing mothers.

(8) In London, the schoolchildren sang 'The Lambeth Walk'. Elsewhere there were choruses of 'Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Goodbye'. For most it was 'like going on an adventure': a phrase that is still uppermost in the minds of evacuees 60 years on.

(9)'We marched to Waterloo Station behind our head teacher carrying a banner with our school's name on it,' says James Roffey, founder of the Evacuees Reunion Association. 'We all thought it was a holiday, but the only thing we couldn't work out was why the women and girls were crying.'

(10) For the newspapers the evacuation represented an irresistible human story. An upper-class Englishwoman, Mollie Panter-Downes, described the scene in her fortnightly piece for the New Yorker and remarked on the 'cheerful little cockneys who could hardly believe the luck that was sending them to the countryside'.

(11) The stereotypical images were already forming in people's minds.

(12) Parents gave instructions to their children: 'Don't complain,' 'Grin and bear it,' 'Look after your sister,' 'Write home as soon as you can.'

(13) Broadly speaking the four-day official exodus worked surprisingly well. The real problems came in the reception areas where the Government had left arrangements for the children's arrival and care to local authorities, with little more than an injunction to do their best.

(14)The result can only be described as a typically British wartime shamble. Hundreds of children arrived in the wrong area with insufficient rations. And, more worryingly, there were not enough homes in which to put them.

(15) Twelve months earlier, the Government had surveyed available housing, but what they had not taken into account was the extent to which middle-class and well-to-do families would be making their own private arrangements. Consequently, those households who had previously offered to take in evacuees were now full.

(16) Keeping control of the whole thing became a joyless task. 'The trains were coming in thick and fast,' says Geoffrey Barfoot who had been seconded from the town hall to act as a billeting officer in Weston Super Mare. 'It was soon obvious that we just didn't have the bed space.'

**I'll Take that One**

(17) As a result of the mismatches, selection was made according to rudimentary principles. Billeting officers simply lined the children up against a wall or on a stage in the village hall, and invited potential hosts to take their pick. Thus the phrase 'I'll take that one' became etched on the memory of our evacuees.

(18) Steve Davis, a clinical psychologist specializing in the study of war trauma, says this was the first of many moments that caused upset and humiliation for the evacuees and put their welfare under serious threat….

(19) For him the current anniversary marks a watershed. 'Surveys show that childhood memories lie dormant for a period of around 60 years and now they are returning to haunt people in a big way.'

(20) Understandably perhaps, those with only good evacuations cherish their memories, and are irritated by those who seem only to recall the gloomier side. The unhappiness of others somehow besmirches their own idyllic picture.

(21) However, contrasting experiences have stayed with the evacuees and what is left can only be described as the best of times and the worst of times.

(22) Rita Glenister, from North London, stayed with a working-class family in Somerset and was treated like a member of the family, given love and affection and secured friendships to last a lifetime. Norma Reeve, from a lowly background in the East End, was taken in by a titled lady with servants and a butler who served Norma her meals.

(23)Little things, like going to the pictures, learning to bake bread, walks in the woods and the generosity of those who took evacuated children into their homes, have remained constant in the minds of evacuees. For many it was a life-enhancing, mind-broadening experience, leaving them with memories they treasure to this day.

(24) Others, however, were beaten, mistreated and abused by families who didn't want them and didn't care about them. The painful experience of John Abbot, evacuated from Bristol, reflects the darker side. His rations were stolen by his host family, who enjoyed good food whilst John was given a diet of nothing more than mashed potatoes.

(25) He was horsewhipped for speaking out and, with a bruised and bleeding body, was eventually taken in by the police. Then there was Terri McNeil who was locked in a birdcage and left with a chunk of bread and a bowl of water.

(26) Of course, it would be wrong to suppose that evacuation under the government scheme was one long misery for most of those involved. Clearly it was only a minority that were ill-treated, but it did happen. The present writer spoke directly to nearly 450 ex-evacuees, and of these 12 percent say they suffered some sort of mental, physical or specifically sexual abuse, as defined by the children's welfare organizations of today. Naturally, and sadly, deep scars lie just below the surface for that minority.

As bombing raids attacking Britain's cities increased during World War Two, thousands of children were uprooted from their families and sent to the safety of the countryside. Many found, however, that life away from home was no picnic.