



Send Them to Safety: The Evacuation of British Children in the Second World War

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It is estimated that over 3 million British children were affected by evacuation at one stage or another during the Second World War. They were sent on a mixture of private and government sponsored schemes to coastal towns, to the countryside, to Canada, the USA, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia. Some children spent six years living away from home. These children were in the minority. Most spent anything from a matter of weeks or months to several years in foster homes, with extended family or living with strangers abroad. They returned, not en masse in May 1945, but randomly at stages throughout the war. There is no typical evacuee. Certainly there are similarities in experiences but like the children involved, each story is unique.

From today's perspective it is almost inconceivable to imagine a situation where upwards of a million families would agree to send their children away from home, to strangers in the countryside, or even abroad, for an unknown period. In order to understand the impact of returning home after weeks, months or years away, it is necessary to understand the reasons why the children had to go away in the first place. Children in all major British cities that were considered targets for the Luftwaffe were involved. And that was just the evacuation of September 1939. There are three other evacuations, including one overseas, to consider.

The first exodus was in September 1939 when 1.5 million women and children were moved from the major cities to the countryside in the space of four days. The second came in 1940 in response to the threat of invasion after the fall of

France when over 210,000 people were moved out of danger areas, such as the coastal towns, and some 20,000 were sent to live abroad. The third wave, affecting around 1 million people came in March 1944 when flying bombs threatened London and south-east England. An almost forgotten evacuation took place in late 1941 and early 1942 in the Far East when the Japanese invaded Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore and the Dutch East Indies.

Of the three major evacuation movements in Britain during the war the first, codenamed Operation Pied Piper, is the most well-known. It took place over four days at the

beginning of September 1939.

Sir John Anderson had been appointed to head the committee who would decide on how the evacuation



'Somewhere in England' Ó Great Western Railway Magazine

should be carried out. He recommended categorising types of evacuees, he said the government should contribute towards costs and maintenance, and that billeting should be compulsory. What he did not do, however, was to propose that evacuation itself be made compulsory. This was the most far-reaching result of the Anderson Committee's report. The initial impact was that no one knew until the moment came how many families would decide to send their children away. The difference between those that registered an interest and those who actually took advantage when the moment came was great. Less than half the school children eligible for evacuation in England (47 per cent), and just over a third (38 per cent) in Scotland left home in the first wave. It was this decision that led to some of the terrible confusion in the billeting areas in the early days, when a village might expect to receive 70 expectant mothers and suddenly receive 300

unaccompanied schoolchildren. The receiving railway stations were only notified by cable of numbers and types of evacuees as the train left the city station. This did not leave much time for altering billeting arrangements.

In the purely statistical sense, Operation Pied Piper was a success. The largest single movement of civilians in the history of Britain ran relatively smoothly. Hundreds of thousands of women, children and disabled people were trained, bussed, paddle-steamed or driven out of Britain's major cities to the countryside. Over a period of three days 1,473,391 people left the cities for billets in rural areas of Britain under the government scheme. In addition to the unaccompanied schoolchildren on the official scheme there was a large number of privately evacuated people, including children who did not form part of the official statistics but whose number was estimated over the course of the whole war to be in the region of 2 million. These children were sent away to live with relatives in the country; they were evacuated with their schools en masse or they moved with their parents away from the danger zones.

Brilliant planning of the movement of the women and children masked the fact that no one had actually considered in any depth the effect that this would have either on the evacuees or their hosts. Children, who after a day's travelling, were tired, hungry, dirty and often tearful, were shepherded into school rooms, village halls, churches and waiting rooms to be looked over, picked or left to the billeting officer to place after all the other children had been taken. Family members were separated, kept together, mixed and matched; strong boys went to farms, weaker ones were not chosen, well-dressed little girls were quickly selected; siblings languished at the back of the halls, clutching each other's hands and hoping not to be split up. Hard-pressed billeting officers were still knocking on doors at ten or eleven o'clock at night in those first few days, desperately trying to persuade unwilling householders to take tired, grubby, tearful children, still clutching their suitcases, gas masks and wearing their now bedraggled luggage labels.

The choices that were made often had far-reaching consequences which few appeared to foresee. It was not enough simply to send people away from the cities and into the countryside without thinking through the implications: 'Under any circumstance such a vast scheme needed not only competent technical planning, but also competent psychological and social planning. And once begun, it needed constant supervision, objective criticism and analysis, constructing leadership, using all the channels of opinion forming and habit stabilising.'¹

When town met country the shock was intense on both sides. For the ensuing weeks and months both sides waged a propaganda war about each other. From the country came the cry of horror that the mothers and children from the cities were verminous, lousy, badly dressed for the country and ill-mannered. From the town-dwellers came the squeal of disgust at cottages with outside earthen lavatories, oil lamps and cold-water taps in sculleries.

And yet, eventually, after the first dislocating few weeks, evacuees and foster families alike found a way round any problems and settled into a routine. There is no doubt that unaccompanied school children settled more quickly and completely than mothers with toddlers or expectant women, who left the countryside in large numbers after a matter of days or a few weeks. By Christmas 1939 just over half the children who had been evacuated in September remained in their village foster homes.

Derek Marsh was evacuated with his mother, brother, aunt and cousin to Trowbridge in Devon on the official evacuation scheme but after just three weeks they asked to be moved and were sent to Oxford where they lived for a year in Marlborough Road. Derek was 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ at the time of the first evacuation and his brother, Kenneth, was six. After a year in Oxford they moved to Abingdon where they spent the rest of the war. Derek attended school in the Rectory of St

¹ Mass Observation compiled by Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge *War Begins at Home* p. 23

Helen's Church along with other evacuees. They were kept separate from the school children, not because they were undesirable or unwelcome but because their schooling was under the control of a different education authority. Derek remembers his life as an evacuee as a happy period. His father, who was in a reserved occupation in London, worked as an ARP and was in the Home Guard. He would come to visit the family about once a month. In some ways Derek's family was the perfect example of what the government wanted to achieve. Other mothers so disliked being separated from their families that they decided to run the risk of returning to the city despite the government's dire warnings.



Fig 2 Ó Imperial War Museum

The government ran advertising campaigns in 1940 warning mothers of the danger of bringing their children back to the cities (Fig 2) but with limited success. By May 1940 only one householder in five registered an interest in sending their children away from the cities if heavy raids began. The campaign was stepped up when the German invasion seemed imminent. The evacuation of 1940 was significant in number, although not as large as the 1939 exodus from the big cities. Almost 213,000 children were on the move. They travelled by train and bus in all directions, criss-crossing the country as they made their way to their new areas. Children who had returned to the cities were sent back to safety and by the time the Blitz reached its high point in September 1941 the official figures for evacuees away from home totalled 1.3 million.

It was not surprising that people felt anxious about the prospect of Britain's future. The overwhelming reaction of parents to the perceived threat of Nazification of Britain was to put their children beyond the reach of the Germans by sending them as far away as possible. Middle-class families and those with

independent means flocked to take up the generous offers from America and Canada to offer safe-housing for their children, either on a one to one basis, or as part of a school evacuation scheme, or as part of a group scheme, often set up privately by bodies.

Ann Spokes Symonds was evacuated as one of a group of over a hundred children of Oxford University academics and affiliated families who were offered homes by fellow academics at Yale University in the United States. A group was set up with the descriptive title: 'The Yale Faculty Committee for receiving Oxford and Cambridge University Children'. A general invitation had been issued to both universities to send their children to Yale; then John Fulton, Professor of Physiology at Yale, who had been a Rhodes Scholar and later a Fellow of Magdalen College, cabled friends and colleagues at both universities on 6 June 1940. This two pronged approach received a particularly warm response from Oxford and a group of 125 children and 25 mothers were booked on the SS *Antonia* due to sail in early July.

Ann and her twelve-year-old brother, Peter, were fostered by a couple in New Haven called C.C. and Beecher Hogan. He was a Fellow at one of the colleges at Yale and she was a very competent pianist. Ann in fact completed her school education in America although she had been keen to get home before the war was over. In her book *Havens Across the Sea*, published in 1990 at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of their evacuation, she wrote: 'As one of the older girls – I was fourteen when we left England in 1940 – it was perhaps natural that I would suffer a sense of guilt because in wartime I had left my country for another. But I was intensely happy with my foster-parents and hated the idea of leaving my school before graduation. However I was equally anxious to return to England before the war was over.'²

² Spokes Symonds, Ann *Havens Across the Sea* p. 83

She returned to Oxford in August 1944 where she met, for the first time, her baby brother, who had been born while she was away. She needed to bond with her younger siblings as well as settle in Oxford once again. Her sister, who had been very close to her brother Peter – they were just eighteen months apart and people often thought they were twins – was very disappointed that he hadn't returned with Ann but stayed in the United States. He was eventually adopted by the Hogans in New Haven. 'Peter was twelve when we left Britain and sixteen when I came home. He became American soon after he set foot on US soil and settled very quickly. He has remained there ever since and now lives in Minneapolis. I think my parents were very sad he chose not to come home. It must have been very hard for them to accept.'

The experience of living in America had been a wholly positive one for Ann. She wrote later: 'The only thing that troubled me in all those four years was a feeling of guilt that I had been lucky enough to get away from the war to safety while my younger siblings, my family and all my friends who stayed in Oxford had to put up with wartime deprivations. Luckily Oxford was not bombed and of course the invasion that my parents and other adults so feared never happened either but no one could have foreseen that. However, I was intensely happy in America and equally happy to be home, so the outcome of the whole experience was a very good one indeed for me.'

A fourth evacuation in Britain came in 1944 and this was in some ways the most real in the sense of being an emergency evacuation because people were fleeing from a new and deadly enemy – the V1 bombs, the Vergeltungswaffen, the vengeance weapons. These Buzz Bombs or Doodlebugs were unmanned cruise missiles that flew day and night, raining terror onto the south-east. The real fear came not from their droning noise but from the silence that came as the engine cut out and the bomb tipped and fell. Between July and September 1944 over 500,000 mothers and children or expectant mothers left the Metropolitan area on the government's assisted private evacuation scheme. This time there was no

organisation of billets in rural areas, the government merely helped to finance travel out of the capital. In addition, 100,000 unaccompanied children were sent from the Metropolitan area to the country in the last government-backed evacuation scheme of the war, so that the total number of official evacuees accommodated in rural Britain in September 1944 was only 200,000 fewer than during the Blitz in 1940–1.

There is no doubt that the evacuation programmes during the Second World War helped to save the lives of a significant number of children but the after effect of those experiences of living away from home for months or even years was not always understood. There were many children who found it difficult to adjust to home-life, for it was no longer what they were familiar with nor what they thought they remembered from their past. The disruption this caused was felt for years, decades and for some a lifetime. One woman who had been evacuated wrote to her cousin in 1999: 'You know, they are always talking about giving kids counselling these days but who bothered about the traumas the wartime children went through? Heart breaking when you think of the poor kids all being evacuated, not knowing where they were going. Looking back you felt like a refugee in your own country.'

A longer version of this article can be found in the *Bugle and Sabre* 'Children and War' Special Edition, obtainable through the SOFO shop on www.sof.org.uk.