

Operation Pied Piper: Evacuating London's Children – Transcript and Links

The mass evacuation campaign of World War Two was a dramatic event in the lives of London's children. During the course of the war, hundreds of thousands left the city to escape the threat of enemy bombers, leaving their families behind and facing an uncertain future. This is the story of London's evacuees.

In 1939, as war loomed, 'Operation Pied Piper' was drawn up by the British Government. This plan to evacuate children from London was put into action just days before Britain declared war on Germany. Children assembled in school playgrounds early on the morning of 1st September. Each child had a luggage tag attached to their coat. Regulations specified that children should take the following: gas mask, underwear, night clothes, plimsolls, toothbrush, comb, soap, face flannel and warm coat. There was no Government help to meet the cost of these items; therefore, many poorer families were unable to afford everything.

Over half a million children were evacuated from London during September 1939. They were marched onto buses, tubes, taxis and trams to transport them to railway stations. Youngsters from Dagenham were sent to East Anglia by boat. Assistance was provided by teachers, members of the Women's Voluntary Service and the Girl Guides, but the level of organisation of the operation varied from place to place. Some evacuee groups found themselves packed onto trains out of London with no pre-arranged destination, enduring long journeys with little food and no toilets. On arrival in the countryside, siblings and friends were often separated and children faced going to live with strangers in an unfamiliar environment.

Evacuation threw the extent of poverty in the capital into sharp relief. Purpose-built camps for evacuees were rare, and most children were placed in private homes. This meant that middle class children could find themselves billeted with agricultural labourers and living in more modest circumstances

than they were used to. Meanwhile, country families were often shocked by the poor inner city children with head lice and scabies that they were expected to house. These children benefited from better living conditions, experiencing modern conveniences for the first time and discovering the countryside in the glorious weather of autumn 1939.

Evacuees were involved in the war effort just like everyone else, contributing to the 'Dig for Victory' campaign by planting vegetables and helping farmers with the harvest. Although they were kept busy, many suffered psychological trauma from being separated from their families, with only infrequent contact by letter. In response to this, one of the pioneers of child psychoanalysis, Anna Freud, set up nurseries in London for children affected by the trauma of evacuation and bombing.

After the initial evacuation of 1939, some children returned to London during the 'Phoney War', when no bombing took place. But the Blitz of 1940, and the horrific 'V' weapon attacks of 1944 saw two further waves of mass evacuation from London. As the war finally came to an end children began to return. Leaving the countryside often proved bittersweet as many children had been away from their parents so long that they didn't recognise each other. Others had lost loved ones in the bombing or fighting overseas. Having left home as children, many were returning as young adults with broader horizons.






Recovering from the trauma of war was not easy and former evacuees often suffered feelings of insecurity as adults. For London's wartime evacuees, the experience of leaving the city as children varied immensely. Some found happiness and a new sense of freedom in the countryside, while others suffered great loneliness and hardship. All were left with memories that would stay with them for the rest of their lives.









The audio slideshow was curated by Jim Gledhill, Edited by Sophia Deboick, produced by Jason Webber and Narrated by Daniele Singer.









Useful links:






- The Second World War: <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conInformationRecord.202>
- The Blitz: <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conInformationRecord.87>
- Children: <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conInformationRecord.324>
- Coming of Age: <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conInformationRecord.7>
- VE & VJ Days: <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conInformationRecord.255>
- Eating In During WW2: <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conInformationRecord.37>
- Slums: <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=ConInformationRecord.527>
- V1 & V2 Bombing Campaigns: <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=ConInformationRecord.428>
- Abercrombie Plan, 1944: <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conInformationRecord.286>

Further information on images:

	<p>'Leave this to us sonny' - poster</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.3452</p>
	<p>Government Evacuation Scheme - form</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.6103</p>
	<p>Beal Modern Girls' School, 1940</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.10224</p>
	<p>Evacuation label</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.5261</p>
	<p>Gas mask</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.6110</p>

 <p><small>Digital Image © Museum of London</small></p>	<p>Suitcase</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.5291</p>
 <p><small>Digital Image © London's Transport Museum</small></p>	<p>Schoolgirls being evacuated at the start of the Second World War</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.2201</p>
 <p><small>Digital Image © Museum of London</small></p>	<p>Women Wanted For Evacuation Service - poster</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.7575</p>
 <p><small>Digital Image © Museum of London</small></p>	<p>Armband</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.6150</p>
 <p><small>Digital Image © Keele Edge Museum Service</small></p>	<p>Beal High School, Ilford at Kennylands Evacuee Camp, Oxfordshire - Boys Playing Cricket</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.10151</p>
 <p><small>Digital Image © London of 1940s</small></p>	<p>Men, women and children socialise in an unidentified street - Photograph</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.7054</p>
 <p><small>Digital Image © Museum of London</small></p>	<p>Two children at Caledonian Market - photograph</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.6996</p>
 <p><small>Digital Image © London Transport Museum</small></p>	<p>A 'land girl' planting potatoes at London Transport gardens in Brockley Hill - photograph</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.813</p>

	<p>Mr Mix and his children in poplar</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.7011</p>
	<p>Poster</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.5221</p>
	<p>Beal High School, Ilford at Kennylands Evacuee Camp, Oxfordshire - Boys Sowing in Fields</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.10152</p>
	<p>War Nursery. Children wearing gas masks - Photograph</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.10396</p>
	<p>Letter from Grete Glauber to Olive Rudkin</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.3552</p>
	<p>War Nursery. Children on bunk beds - Photograph</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.10395</p>
	<p>Air raid shelter</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.5276</p>
	<p>Photograph of Dorniers Over India Rubber Factory in Canning Town During Raid</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.9395</p>

	<p>Shrapnel from a V1 flying bomb - bomb case fragment</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.4451</p>
	<p>Evacuees Returning Home</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.9658</p>
	<p>Photograph of Burial of 44 People Killed in the Bombing of a School</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.9382</p>
	<p>Peace - poster artwork</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.2818</p>
	<p>Baby's gas helmet</p>	<p>http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.6109</p>