

EVACUATION – EXTRACT

After the First World War, there was heightened interest in how to defend the 'home front.' In 1924, the influential Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) formed a sub-committee, led by Sir John Anderson (later associated with air-raid shelters).

Their task was to consider practical responses that could preserve human life during air attacks, from gas masks to underground shelters. In 1931, the ARP Committee appointed its own sub-committee on evacuation.

It was deemed better value for evacuees to be billeted in private homes in safer, 'reception' areas of the country, rather than building special camps.

The government divided the country into three zones: evacuation, neutral, and reception. Evacuation zones consisted of high-risk areas, such as London and other densely populated cities.

In total, Operation Pied Piper resulted in the evacuation of approximately 3.5 million people, including over 1.5 million children, throughout the course of the war.

Each evacuee was issued a gas mask and a cardboard box containing essential items like soap, a toothbrush, and a change of clothes. They were given an identification card, which included their name, age, and evacuation group number.

Evacuees were transported to reception areas via buses, trains, and other modes of transport. The government coordinated with railway companies to allocate special trains and carriages to accommodate the large numbers of evacuees.

Upon arriving in reception areas, evacuees were taken to local billeting centres, such as schools, churches, or community halls, where they were registered and assigned to host families.

For some, living in a rural setting was an adventure, enjoyed and remembered fondly; they met people with whom they retained contact for the rest of their lives.

Others suffered at the hands of cruel or indifferent hosts. For the hosts, some were appalled at the children's health and personal hygiene.

Some 17,000 members of the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) provided practical assistance, looking after tired and apprehensive evacuees at railway stations, providing refreshments in reception areas and billeting halls. Volunteers were also needed to host evacuees.

Between July and September 1940, a further three thousand were sponsored by the government to travel to the Dominions, particularly to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, before the risk from torpedo attack at sea was deemed too great.

Evacuation helped to change attitudes because it meant that working class children mixed with more affluent families. It highlighted the severe poverty that still existed in cities after the reforms of the early 1900s.

Sometimes the evacuees were assigned a family to live with. In other cases, the host families chose the children they would take with them.

Evacuees and their hosts were often astonished to see how each other lived. Some evacuees flourished in their new surroundings. Others endured a miserable time away from home.

Many evacuees from inner-city areas had never seen farm animals before or eaten vegetables. In many instances a child's upbringing in urban poverty was misinterpreted as parental neglect.

For some children, the end of the war brought an end to a prolonged period of fear, confusion, and separation.

For others, it brought considerable upheaval, as they had found happiness and excitement in their new lives in the countryside and were now expected to return to the cities and to families they barely remembered.

End.

