

EVACUATION – SCRIPT

Preamble and first screen:

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.

Members noted that any evacuation should be voluntary rather than enforced, as the latter might cause more problems and panic in a wartime situation.

Picture 02 – Evacuation poster.



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.

Hosts in these areas could be fined if they refused to take an evacuee. Railway staff, local police and teachers all helped to shape these plans, which were ready by the summer of 1939.

Contrary to popular memory, these evacuees did not just come from London or England, but cities like Manchester, Birmingham, and Glasgow.

Picture 03 – Operation Pied Piper.



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.

Neutral zones were areas that would neither send nor receive evacuees. Reception zones were rural and coastal areas considered safe from bombings, where the evacuated children and other vulnerable civilians would be relocated.

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.

Picture 04 – How did the evacuation work?



The process can be broken down into several key steps:

Registration

Families in high-risk areas were required to register their children for the operation. Local authorities, schools, and community organizations assisted in registering and identifying evacuees.

Labelling and Identification.

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.

Children were required to wear a label with their name and evacuation details to ensure they could be properly identified and tracked throughout the process.

Assembly Points

On the day of evacuation, children and accompanying adults gathered at designated assembly points, typically local schools, or community centres. From there, they were organized into groups based on age, school, or family connections.

Transportation

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.

Traveling often took several hours, and in some cases, the final destination was kept secret to prevent any potential sabotage or interception.

Arrival and Billeting

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.

Billeting officers played a crucial role in matching evacuees with suitable hosts, considering factors such as family size, age, and any special needs.

Picture 05 – The first wave of evacuations.



The schoolchildren in this photograph assembled at Myrdle School in Stepney at 5am on 1st September 1939. The adults accompanying them are wearing arm bands, as volunteer marshals.

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.

Lice and enuresis (bed-wetting) were seen as symptoms of neglect, poor mothering and even 'problem families' in working-class communities.

But it was argued, the 'louse is not a political creature' and the apparent infestation of urban children might well have originated in the evacuation aggravated by travelling conditions, rather than due to social factors.

Bed wetting also might have originated in the psychological shock of moving. Prejudice might have played a role in the circulation of these stories, which were sometimes exaggerated by the popular press.

Picture 06 – Volunteers.



Evacuation was a huge logistical exercise which required thousands of volunteer helpers.

The first stage of the process began on 1st September involved teachers, local authority officials, and railway staff.

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.

Picture 07 – Leaving the Cities.



Parents were issued with a list detailing what their children should take with them when evacuated.

These items included a gas mask in case, a change of underclothes, night clothes, plimsolls (or slippers), spare stockings or socks, toothbrush, comb, towel, soap, face cloth, handkerchiefs, and a warm coat.

Other children travelled further than rural reception areas. Before 1940 about 11,000 children were privately funded to travel overseas, many to the United States.

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.

This comparatively short-lived and voluntary scheme was one of many twentieth-century child migration schemes some were voluntary, others enforced.

Picture 08 – At the station.



Children gathered at their local schools and had a label attached to themselves, their siblings, and their suitcases. They were taken to railway stations by their teachers and volunteers not knowing where they were going.

Those living in the countryside saw an influx of women and children. Many of these children would stay with middle and upper-class families.

Many were surprised and shocked by the conditions of the people arriving from the industrial cities, especially the children.

City children often had poor clothing and were sometimes dressed in rags. They suffered from development illnesses such as polio and rickets. They were often poorly educated and had suffered from a lack of clean air.

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.

Picture 09 – Upon arrival.



From the railway stations, their teachers would take them to the village hall, where they would be met by a billeting officer (the person in charge of finding them homes).

Host families would then come into the village hall and choose the children that they wanted to take. Often, families haggled and argued over the most presentable children, whilst the sick and unkempt children were left until last.

Picture 10 – A garden in Plymouth.



A nurse with child evacuees in the garden of the Chaim Weizmann's Home at Tapley Park, Instow, North Devon, October 1942.

Chaim Azriel Weizmann (1874 – 1952) was a Russian-born biochemist, Zionist leader and Israeli statesman who served as president of the Zionist Organization and later as the first president of Israel.

Picture 11 – Life in the countryside.



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

Children had to get used to a whole new way of life. They would eat food that they had never eaten. They had to attend new schools and fit in with their new families' rules.

Although some children were very homesick and found life hard, others enjoyed the fresh air of the countryside and were placed with kind families who looked after them well.

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.

Picture 12 – Farm animals.



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.

Equally, some city dwellers were bored by the countryside, or were even used for tiring agricultural work.

Some evacuees made their own arrangements outside the official scheme if they could afford lodgings in areas regarded as safe or had friends or family to stay with.



Picture 13 – Returning home against advice.

By January 1940, a significant minority of the evacuees had returned to their homes in the city, despite the danger.

The government produced posters that urged parents to leave evacuees where they were while the threat of bombing remained high.

Picture 14 – The Second and third waves of evacuation.



The German army had completed its invasion of France in May-June and had started to bomb British cities with the start of The Blitz in September 1939.

Evacuation was once again voluntary, and many children remained in the cities. Some stayed to help, care for, or support their families.

V- (Vergeltungswaffen) (Vengeance) weapon attacks.

The German V-weapon attacks, later more commonly known as the Doodlebug or Buzz Bomb, on cities in the east and south-east of England, which began in June 1944, prompted another wave of evacuations from these areas.

Picture 15 - End of the evacuation - returning home.



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.

After the end of the War, thousands of East End families streamed eastward to make a better life for themselves in Basildon and Southend. They shared a common community background in the London streets, but they also shared an experience. **They had lived through the Blitz!**

Everyone had their Blitz story.

A Wickford man recalled seeing his father stick his head out of the entrance of the family's Anderson shelter, only to have it promptly blown off.

A Basildon lady recalled seeing her friends crushed to death a few feet from her in the Bethnal Green tube disaster – the result of panic caused by a new type of

antiaircraft gun – 144 people died in the crush. Jammed alive in a pile of upright bodies, all she could do for relief was close her eyes until rescue came.

Yet while tragedies like these continued, people carried on with their lives in the rubble and flames.

One Southend lady recalled walking home from a party during the Blitz. “There were buildings on fire all round us, but we just made our way back between the fire engines, and stepped over the fire hoses, laughing, and chatting all the time.

We were young. We weren’t going to let the Blitz stop us having fun when we could.”

Picture 16 – Any questions?



End.