

1939 – BRITAIN AT WAR

Government Evacuation Scheme

The Government Evacuation Scheme was developed during the summer of 1938 by the Anderson Committee and implemented by the Ministry of Health. The country was divided into zones classified as evacuation, neutral or reception with priority evacuees being moved from urban centres and billeted on available private housing in rural areas. Each zone covered roughly a third of the population although several urban areas later bombed had not been classified for evacuation.

In early 1939 the government began to publicise its plan (*Operation Pied Piper*) through local authorities. They overestimated demand, only half of school aged children were moved instead of the expected 80%. There were enormous variations, as few as 15% of children were evacuated from some urban areas while over 60% of children were evacuated from Manchester, Belfast and Liverpool. The refusal of the Government to spend larger sums on preparation also reduced the effectiveness of the scheme. However in the event over 3 million people were evacuated.

The first phase began on September 1 and in the first three days 1.5 million people were moved; 827,000 children of school age, 524,000 mothers with children (under the age of five), 13,000 pregnant women, 70,000 disabled people and

over 103,000 teachers. Many children were separated from their parents. Government functions were also evacuated under *Plan Yellow*, some 23,000 civil servants dispatched to available hotels, coastal resorts and spa towns. Also under *Plan Black Move* large numbers of hotels were requisitioned and emptied should London be destroyed or threatened by invasion.

The movement of children of all classes to unfamiliar rural locations, often without parents had a major impact. Faced with enormous upheaval and prolonged separation whole families were dislocated and uprooted. Particularly during the phoney war period many children began returning to their homes despite warnings to the contrary from the ministry of health. Of the initial evacuation phase nearly half had returned by Christmas 1939. This trend was reversed after the fall of France in June 1940 and evacuation became a policy grounded in reality.

The second phase of the scheme began In June 1940 following the over-run of Continental Europe. Between June 13 and June 18 a further 100,000 children were evacuated (in many cases re-evacuated). Efforts were also made to move children away from the vulnerable southern coastal regions that faced German occupied France. By July well over 200,000 had been re-located many sailing to ports such as Yarmouth, Felixstowe and Lowestoft. Once the blitz began in September 1940 evacuation became even more urgent, free

travel and billeting allowances were offered to those who made private arrangements. These were also available to the elderly and disabled. Eventually it became compulsory to host evacuees with host families being paid ten shillings and sixpence (53p or £26 today) for the first unaccompanied child and eight shillings and sixpence for subsequent children. This could lead to resentment for those forced to care for children against their will, compounded by the fact that many children did not want to be there; indeed many children tried to run away.

In summary, during 1939 and 1940 over 2.5 million children and families coped with the practical and emotional problems of evacuation having to make very real sacrifices in unsettling times.