

WW2 Evacuee



Following the interview, read the full story below

After just a few weeks of planning, the first wave of child evacuations from Southend began on Sunday, June 2, 1940.

It had been announced over the wireless on Sunday May 26 that Southend children were set to be evacuated. Before then, teachers and parents had not really considered it a realistic possibility.

Parents in Southend were given 48 hours to make the momentous decision over whether their child was to go or not.

Before the war was over there would be several waves of evacuations, with more than 8,000 children from the borough being sent to live with strangers throughout rural England.

Carrying cloth bags, a gas mask and with ID tags around their necks and for the really little ones, a soft toy tucked under their arm, the little child evacuees set off from Southend in special trains, destined for a new life in the country. They didn't know what lay ahead. They didn't know how long they would be gone for.

Some saw it as a great adventure, many were inconsolable at being wrenched away from their parents' arms. For many this was the first time they would ever see the countryside. All were heading into the unknown. Evacuation was voluntary but the fear of bombing, the closure of many urban schools and the organised transportation of school groups helped persuade families to send their children away to live with strangers.

On the very first day of the evacuation trains took 1,600 youngsters' to Belper in the Amber Valley – seven miles north of Derby, while 500 were sent to Ripley and 800 to Ashbourne. Within a few weeks there were more than 6,000 children spread across the county of Derbyshire.

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The groups were made up of children aged as young as three all the way up to 15. One saving grace was the youngsters were accompanied by many of their school teachers who would be familiar faces on their journey.

The arrival of the seaside evacuees was seen as an exciting event by locals in Derbyshire and newspaper reports of the time suggest local communities were genuinely eager to offer a home and protection to the displaced children.

A local newspaper report described the scene as the children arrived at the railway station in Belper: "Omnibuses were waiting to take them to the "distributing centres" and soon they were making friends with their guardians billets in the district.

The cheerfulness of the 1,600 children — many still under school age— who arrived at Belper was infectious.

"Broad smiles and loud chatter and laughter spoke volumes for the happy spirit of the children who have been temporarily separated from their parents, elder brothers, and sisters. "Many of the children had just completed their first long train journey, and for some of the younger ones the excitement proved too much, but the enthusiastic reception on their arrival soon made them forget their troubles."

Each child arriving carried a large rucksack and a gas mask. Older children did what they could to make themselves responsible for the younger ones. Two boys from the Westcliff School eagerly arrived with fishing rods and tackle after hearing the area was renowned for its beautiful lakes. They couldn't wait to go fishing.

At Ripley the train brought 476 evacuees from Southend who were billeted across district. Most were primary school age but there were some three year olds- brought only on the condition that they were accompanied by an elder brother or sister.

The 800 children who arrived at Ashbourne were met by reception officers, doctors, nurses, boy scouts, and girl guides. Refreshments awaited them at local elementary schools. They were tired and weary after such a long journey.

Back in Southend the children were, of course, very much on the minds of the families they had left behind. Women's groups in the town immediately set about collecting donations of clothing, gifts and money to send to the evacuees.

Almost immediately upon arrival the children wrote to their parents back at home.

"The people here speak a kind of broken English," one 10-year -old-girl from Chalkwell School described in her letter.



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The children admitted they missed the 'beach and the bathing' but conceded that 'others things' in the countryside made up for it

A 10-year old girl named Patricia wrote to her family: "There is a lovely green hill." You stand on it and see what's all around you.

There are copses and woods and the woods have a lot of nature's wild animals in them Beryl aged eight added: "Mapperley has some slums but they are a bit better than London! "What I like about my new village are the fields and the cattle in them.

Another thing is the little village school which is painted green inside with vases on the window ledges with flowers in there. There are only two classrooms but they are clean and tidy." Not everyone was so content, however, and the remarkable story of a a 'small boy' from Leigh who decided to return home just a few days after arriving, soon made the headlines. The boy didn't flee because he'd been subjected to cruel or harsh treatment - but after finding out he wasn't going to be able to go to the pictures as often as he'd like.

"It appears that he was taken with the West Leigh School to a farm just outside Ashbourne, Derbyshire where he found that his pecuniary allowance would not cover the cost of travelling to the cinema and also paying for a seat.

This tragedy in a modern child's life was too much for him and his decided to return home. "Leaving the farm early on Wednesday he walked eight miles to Ashbourne where he took a train to Bedford. Hailing a lorry going to London he left the peak district behind the reached the Metropolis. "He had caught another van and arrived home at 6pm on Wednesday. In spite of his achievements his mother is in firm resolve that he must return."

By August 1942 many of the Derbyshire evacuees were deemed able to return home due to the diminishing threat of air raids. Just before leaving a Southend school headteacher named Hugh Fortescue of Hamstel School, penned a heartfelt letter to the people of Ripley to thank them for their hospitality over the past two years. "Ripley has cared for our Southend evacuees well and I am sure that in the main the children and their parents are mindful and appreciative of this," he said.

The headteacher singled out two Ripley women in particular for going above and beyond in giving homes to the Southend children. The first was a woman who took in four children of 'poor parentage'" They were not so very well clad. They were not too well fed and there was evidence they had enjoyed few home comforts," he said.



Questions

Activity:

Write up your own letter home from the perspective of an evacuee.

Think about the following:

Where did you come from before being evacuated?

Where did you evacuate to? (farm, country village etc)

What is different about the two places?

Are you away from your family?

Are you happy where you are? If yes, why? If no, why not?

