

Operation Pied Piper

Background: fearful memories

The memories of the First World War – horrific injuries from gas attacks in trench battles and 1400 dead in air raids on Britain – provided a powerful stimulus to the British government as it responded to the imminent threat of war in the late 1930s. Massive air raids were anticipated that would drop gas and bombs on major cities as the enemy tried to destroy the nation's will to fight. These were anxious times.

Logistics: planning for safety

Materials for constructing air raid shelters – *Anderson Shelters* – were made available, and gas masks were issued to save people from a choking death that the deadly mustard gas would bring. For city children, an exercise with the code name *Operation Pied Piper* was implemented just before war was declared. Children living in *danger zones* – cities such as London, Birmingham and Glasgow – were to



be moved by train or bus to safer *reception zones* in rural and coastal areas, or by ship to neutral countries such as Canada. The children were to take up lodgings, called *billets*, and the householders were to be paid a small sum of money for their upkeep. The plan intended for the children to stay there until the war was over.

In practice: away from home

Operation Pied Piper took place during the first three days of September in 1939, when nearly 3,000,000 children were evacuated. Babies went with their mothers, but children aged three to thirteen had to leave their parents behind. Each child carried a gas mask; a suitcase with at least one spare change of clothing; and had a label attached to their coat bearing their name, number and school. Many clung to a cuddly toy. For some children it was the first time that they had ever left home, and it was often left to the teachers who went with them to cheer them up by encouraging them to think of it all as a holiday or a great adventure.

When the children arrived at their destination, billeting was a much greater problem than had been anticipated. It was hoped that the children could be easily accommodated – turning up at welcoming homes and being warmly received – but the reality was often much less humane. Billeting officers took children to places such as village halls and invited locals to come and choose. Often children were lined up against a wall or paraded on a stage. “I’ll take that one,” was a phrase frequently used, and often remembered by the evacuees, many now in their eighties.

It was a lottery. Some children were taken into stately homes and had servants to serve them at meal times, while others in had to sleep in the servants’ quarters. Most children lived in more ordinary homes. Many were treated as part of the family and became firm friends with the children there, and carry happy memories of that time to this day. Some were not made welcome: the householders considered them scruffy or badly behaved and sometimes beat them. In some places the local children did not like them either and stole evacuees’ possessions, adding further misery to an unhappy and often fearful existence.

Aftermath: changed lives

The anticipated bombing raids did not begin as soon as war was declared in September 1939, and the gas attacks never occurred. All was quiet in Britain until April of 1940, and many people refer to this initial period as the *phoney war*. With seemingly nothing to fear mothers and their babies were the first to leave their billets. Those who had not been made welcome were the next to go, and homesickness drove many others to leave and take their chances in the danger zones.



Eventually the phoney war did come to an end and the anticipated horrors of bombing destruction commenced. Evacuation was restarted but not in the large numbers of the original Operation Pied Piper. When the war finally ended over fifty thousand evacuees were returned to the cities. Some were fortunate, and resumed their lives with their families. For 76,000 evacuees, however, there was no home or family to return to and they began their post war lives in their new home, where evacuation, and fate, had sent them.