

INTRODUCTION

"The story of the arrivals in Oswestry within a few hours of the scheme becoming operative has now entered realms from which local historians of the future will draw a rich store of reminiscences. Doubtless they will touch upon Oswestry's transformation from the peacetime scene of a steadily progressive market town, and will mention the purposeful, ordered haste with which the inhabitants and those that directed their activities, marshalled their resources in the endeavour to meet the needs of the hour. They will recall the gamut of emotions aroused by the plight of youngsters removed from their homes by forces of circumstances. Humour, that unfailing emollient, will have its place in this chronicle of the future - the native humour of the young city dweller brought in close contact with the countryside for the first time."

The Oswestry and Welsh Border Counties Advertiser
October 11th 1939

As you will read evacuation was an experience in which those who were involved, will never forget. It was a peculiar phenomenon only ever experienced during World War Two. The idea to remove civilians from cities under threat from bombing, certainly saved lives during the worst Blitzes.

Propaganda urged parents to send their children to safety. The war was anticipated by more than 2 days to give time for evacuation to start. The first evacuee's moved out of the cities in the morning of Friday 1st September 1939 and by the evening of the 3rd, 1,473,391, people had been evacuated into safe areas; (The Evacuees, edited by B.S. Johnson, 1968). Most of these were children, with some mothers, teachers and W.V.S. as escorts; (previously to the outbreak at least 2 million people had privately evacuated themselves to friends and family).

The allocation to billets was totally random. Children were either put into halls or marched through the streets in a humiliating and chaotic practise; which allowed foster parents the free choice and a real sense of urgency was felt.

By January 1940 over half of the evacuees had returned home because no bombing had occurred.

The second wave of evacuation after the start of the bombings in 1940 was a different experience. Those involved were smaller in number and travelled alone rather than as whole schools and classes.

To many by the end of the war returning home to their parents was like evacuation all over again.

The warmest of welcomes for 'invaders'

The outbreak of war in 1939 affected the ordinary people of the country in different ways.

For those living in the city it meant learning to live with the constant threat of a bomb attack, but for rural areas the fight was to give you evacuees the chance to live in relative peace and to make them welcome in the countryside that many had never seen.

The reception of the children and mothers was at Oswestry station, and one of the chief officers of the town's evacuation committee was the town clerk, Mr Hugh Bird-Jones.

Mr Bird Jones, now 85, of Sunnyside, Queens Park, Oswestry, can still remember the scenes as the first of the evacuees — some 600 children and 60 adults — arrived in the town.

"We enlisted the help of just about every organisation to help transfer the children to the surrounding villages," he said. "The response was terrific with people volunteering their private cars as taxis.

No easy task

"People came forward in their hundreds offering their homes for refuge.

"Our biggest problem was trying to match the ages of the children to the ages of the people they were to live with — obviously an elderly woman wouldn't have been able to cope with very young children.

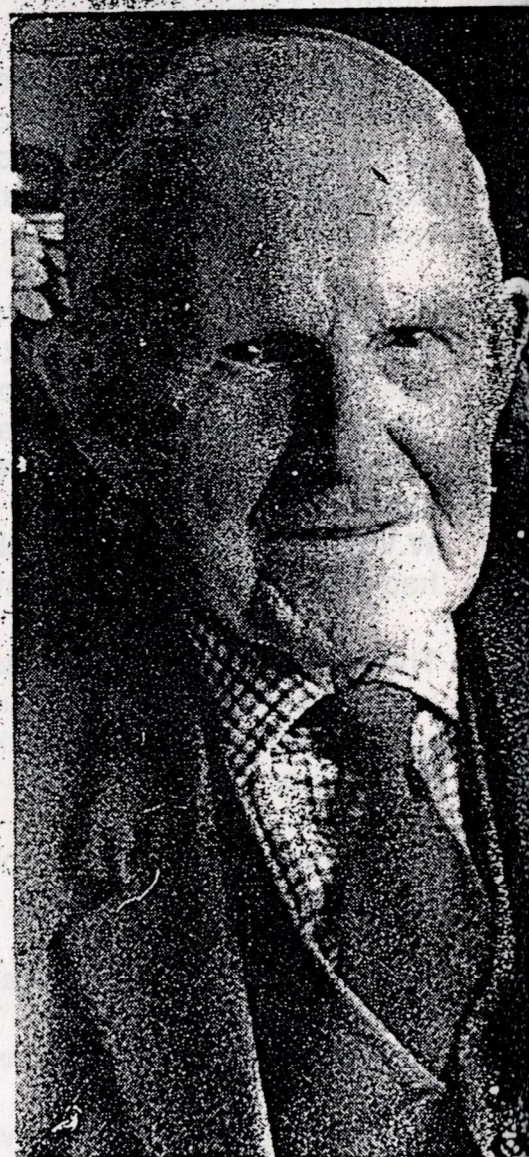
The billeting officers had no easy task to provide accommodation. In the autumn of 1939 work on Park hall Camp was still going on and the town was flooded with labourers seeking a temporary home.

In addition many of the larger families refused to be split up, with the result that some householders took in four or even five evacuees.

Around the villages most of the children were sent to local parish centres. The organisers in these

areas were hampered firstly by torrential rain on the first and second of September, and secondly by the late arrival of trains. Despite this most families were allocated lodgings the night they arrived.

In Ellesmere the evacuation officer for the rural district was Mr W. Gough Thomas, who was responsible for billeting 620 people. The first of these were enrolled in the market hall on Friday, September 1, when 472 children, aged between five and 14, arrived by bus.



Mr. Hugh Bird-Jones, one of the evacuation organisers in Oswestry.

THE ADVERTISER, AUGUST 15th 1979

An eye witness account of the scenes in the town told of "Those little figures loaded with luggage, coats, and gas masks, their faces stamped with bewilderment.

"I noticed one small boy tightly clutching a ha'penny and another holding a tablet of soap (which many needed after their long journey).

"There were no tears but faces showed definite signs of what had happened on the way and I know that everyone was moved with something more than sympathy towards these brave young hearts.

"Soon the hall was filled with hundreds of small voices and helpers were kept busy supplying the demands for lemonade."

The response in the Ellesmere urban area was so overwhelming that many locals complained that there weren't enough evacuees to go round. Mr F. Horton was chief evacuation officer.

In Chirk the numbers absorbed were 109 adults and 258 children. Refreshments in the parish hall were served by a band of lady helpers under the supervision of Mrs C. E. Salt. The billeting officer was parish clerk, Mr Tom Davies.

The Ellesmere correspondent for the Advertiser reported on the reaction to the city children.

"I have visited several houses where children have been adopted into the family and are being treated as part of the home circle. I sincerely hope this is the case in every instance.

"I know here are some who find their

freedom in the country exciting, but I appeal to all householders to consider the unusual and sad circumstances.

"I know that some of the children are having the time of their lives on farms. Many have never been to the country before and were amazed that apples grew on trees. One little fellow was resentful of eating a potatoes after he saw it had been dug up out of the ground. Others I have spoken to say they are quite happy and do not want to go back."

It took only two hours in Weston Rhyn for the 220 children who arrived on September 3 to be found homes. The local headmaster, Mr E. Wood, organised the operation along with Messrs Ed Williams and J. W. Roberts.

On the arrival of the evacuees ladies from the village provided hot drinks, and many of the children were given cooked meals at their new homes. The mothers of these youngsters arrived a day later and were served with hot malted milk, tea, and biscuits at the school.

Gobowen were made by a committee consisting of Mr Martin Lawford, the chairman of Oswestry Rural Parish Council, Mr C. Hughes, the headmaster of the primary school, and Messrs T. Lovett and Chas Hammond.

The 160 children taken in by villagers were later educated at Gobowen Council School, and the Selatyn and Pantglas C. of E. Schools.

The billeting officers at St. Martins - Messrs P. Morris, G. Rogers, F. Morris and S. W. Bridgewater - catered for 191 children, seven teachers and nine helpers from the Birkenhead area.

In Llanymynech priority had to be given to the young evacuees after the village was swamped with requests for lodgings from their relations.

Mr W. R. Williams, billeting officer for the Carreghofa parish, was assisted in his duties by the Women's Auxiliary Committee under the supervision of Mrs Jasper Moon.

reporter of the time spoke to the headmaster of St. Werburghs School, Birkenhead - where the children were educated - who said he would like to express his appreciation of the splendid local organisation in Llanymynech and other villages.

The reporter also quoted a 'funny little incident strange to our country senses' in which one young evacuee refused to eat a french bean cooked in its 'long state' because he felt sure it was terrible kind of snake or country animal.

The number of evacuees sent to other local villages were:

Glyn Ceirlog: 67 schoolchildren, seven teachers, 24 mothers and 36 under-fives; Tregeirlog: 8 mothers, 12 under fives; Llanarmon D.C.: 18 schoolchildren, two teachers, 12 mothers and 18 under fives; Llangedwyn: 12 mothers, 18 under fives; Llansilin: 36 schoolchildren, four teachers; and Llanrhaeadr: 64 schoolchildren, seven teachers, six mothers, and ten under fives.

EVACUATION PROBLEMS

Why Children Should Not Be Brought Home

THE MAYOR SATISFIED.

(From a "Birkenhead News" Representative).

SOMEWHERE IN NORTH WALES.

WAR will always bring its penalties and parings.

In previous wars we knew that the able-bodied menfolk would have to leave their homes. Now, even the children have, for safety's sake, had to go.

The hearths, the streets, the cinemas, the public vehicles, the parks of Birkenhead, cannot be the same now. But Birkenhead will carry on; and I want to assure you that Birkenhead children, scattered over the land in mountainous Wales, are carrying on, too.

The Mayor (Alderman Deverill) assured me that he was extremely satisfied with all he had seen. The children, he said, were obviously settling in well in their new surroundings. Alderman Deverill has toured all the reception areas.

It was not a stodgy, stilted, "official" tour. The Mayor visited several schools personally. He chatted to the teachers, spoke to the children, and inspected their new surroundings. His report is, in effect, "all in order."

"VERY FOOLISH."

Many Birkenhead parents have been down to North Wales to see for themselves. There are divided opinions about these family excursions. Parents naturally want to see their little ones; and the children want to see Mum, Dad, Brother, Sister and the rest—but, these brief reunions have an unsettling effect. The short reunion is followed by a long parting. Some of the parents have taken their children home—despite the Government's repeated warnings. They are very foolish, and that is putting it rather bluntly—but, as a highly-placed North Wales evacuation official told me: "Very soon billets will not be available, for thousands of 'private evacuees' are pouring into North Wales at this very moment." They are paying their own way, and one cannot refuse them. If mothers, at a time of real stress, clamour for the children to be re-registered, it may be impossible to deal with them."

This is exactly what the Government warning indicated.

Wealthy Mr. Stockbroker, of London, is sending Mrs. Stockbroker and the children to North Wales.

The moral for Birkenhead parents—your child's safety comes first.

BIRKENHEAD NEWS—October 4, 1939

We settled back at home quite well, my brother had been very homesick, although his host family were very loving and caring, as mine were also.

Mayor's Tribute to Evacuation Workers

APPRECIATION of the "kindly welcome" which has been accorded to Birkenhead evacuees is voiced in a letter which has been circularised to those concerned by the Mayor of the borough (Ald. H. Deverill). The letter states:—

My dear Sir,—A fortnight ago several thousands of mothers and children left Birkenhead under the threat of war for districts in the country less exposed to danger.

They left, under conditions without parallel in our history, for destinations quite unknown to most of them, unhappy at the thought of separation from their homes and families and uncertain as to what the change would mean to them.

During the last fortnight, however, letters have been received in Birkenhead from children, mothers and teachers in the reception areas which show how quickly these fears and uncertainties were dispelled by the kindly welcome with which they were received by householders and by the arrangements made by the reception officials and voluntary helpers to enable them to settle down quickly and contentedly in their new surroundings.

We recognise that with this first phase of evacuation over there will remain many problems for the reception areas; problems which, during the coming months, will call for much forbearance and mutual consideration.

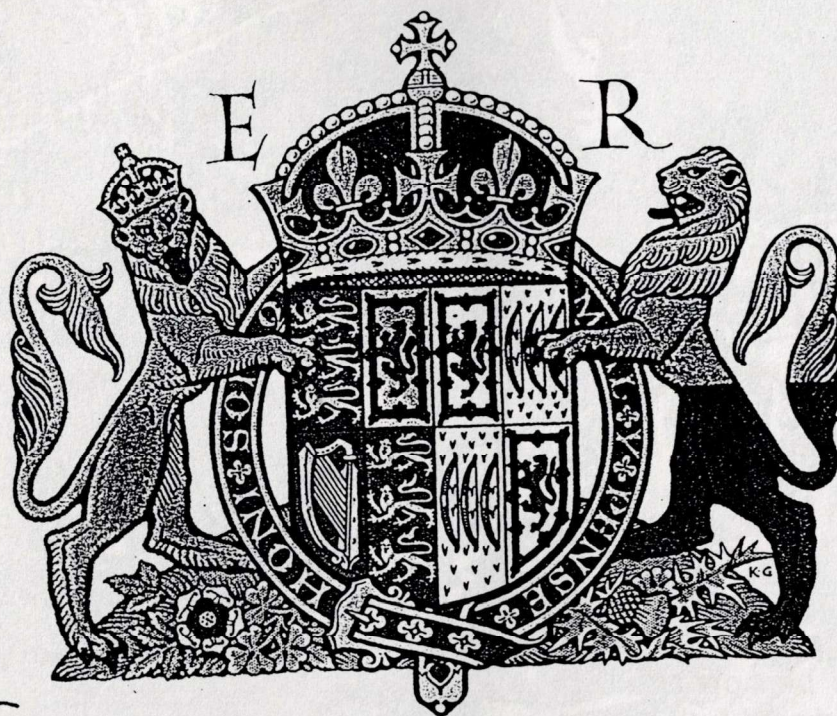
I am confident that our friends in the reception areas, to whose patience and generosity the success of the Government evacuation scheme so far has been mainly due, will deal with and overcome these difficulties with the same understanding and in the same spirit which marked their reception of our people.

On behalf of the Town Council of Birkenhead I have been asked to convey to them through you our thanks to all concerned in the reception areas for what has been done for Birkenhead inhabitants.

I hope to be able to visit some of the larger centres in the reception areas during the next few days.—Your, etc.,

H. DEVERILL,

Mayor.



I WISH TO MARK, BY THIS PERSONAL MESSAGE,
my appreciation of the service you have rendered to your
Country in 1939-

In the early days of the War you opened your door to strangers
who were in need of shelter, & offered to share your home with
them.

I know that to this unselfish task you have sacrificed much
of your own comfort, & that it could not have been achieved
without the loyal co-operation of all in your household.
By your sympathy you have earned the gratitude of those to
whom you have shown hospitality, & by your readiness to
serve you have helped the State in a work of great value.

Elizabeth R

Mrs. Barrett.



NICK CHESHIRE ARRIVING AT OSWESTRY RAILWAY STATION

BOY BRIGADE RAILWAY MAP

CONCLUSION

The experience of evacuation seems to have instilled a deep love for the countryside on most of those involved. A love which still indures; infact one lady while visiting the Heritage Centre actually walked from Gobowen Railway Station.

Most evacuees seem to have worried about their families back in the Wirral and to have known even at the tender age of 5 that the aeroplanes that they could hear passing over Oswestry were on their way to bomb Liverpool. This fear and seperation of families must have had a deep psychological effect which either made them yearn to be home or cling to their foster families.

We hope that reading these accounts has given some insight into what evacuation really meant to those children who were involved. Perhaps we may even encourage others to write and talk about evacuation. Anyone still wanting to contribute can still contact the Heritage Centre who may perhaps produce Volume 2!!