

Operation Pied Piper

An Oral History of London's Evacuees





The Project

When war was declared in September 1939 a huge operation began in Britain to relocate people from danger zones to areas of safety. To mark the 80th anniversary of the start of Operation Pied Piper, this oral history project explores the experiences of the people who were evacuated from London as children. Children from Furzedown Primary School and St Thomas' CE Primary School have worked with the Imperial War Museum, with their local archives, with historians and the people who were actually evacuated to explore this history. With training in oral history techniques and documentary film making from *digital:works* the children have filmed interviews with 24 people.

The children also met with more recent child war refugees who, like the evacuees of WW2, had to leave their families in times of conflict. The children met with Lord Alf Dubbs to talk about his experiences on the *Kindertransport* as well as his work to campaign for the United Kingdom to accept more child war refugees.

The interviews with the WW2 evacuees have been edited to make a wonderful and moving new documentary film contained in this booklet along with some of the children's writing. The full interviews, the film, as well as more of the creative and historical writing the children produced are all available to watch on the project website...

www.londonevacuees.org.uk

A historian came into the schools to give a talk on the history of the evacuations of World War 2. He spoke about the blitz and how Germany was also heavily bombed. He compared the experiences with children in the recent conflict in Syria.



The children visited the Imperial War Museum, exploring the collection and also having a talk about oral history before meeting two former evacuees who spoke about their experiences.



The children learned about oral history, interview techniques and documentary film making with *digital:works*.



A reminiscence group at the Furzedown Project brought together local people to talk about their experiences as evacuees in the war.

Both Wandsworth and Kensington and Chelsea Local Studies Centres hosted visits from the children who learned research skills using the collections and explored how the war affected their local area.



Our interviewees discuss their experiences with the children.



Conducting oral history interviews.



Workshops to discuss more recent child refugee's experiences coming to the UK, and with Lord Alf Dubbs who spoke about his experiences on the Kindertransport and his recent work campaigning for the UK to accept more child refugees.





Interviewees

We are very grateful to everyone who came into the schools to share their wonderful and moving stories with us. Unfortunately we could fit only a very small fraction of these interviews into the film.

You can listen to all of the full interviews on our project website and they have also been given to the archives in both Kensington & Chelsea and in Wandsworth. Listen to them now at www.londonevacuees.org.uk/interviews.html



History

Operation Pied Piper was the name of the plan designed to evacuate civilians from areas at risk from bombing and invasion during World War Two. It began on September 1st 1939 and officially relocated over 3.5 million people over the course of the war focusing on school aged children, mothers and young children (under 5), pregnant women, disabled people as well as teachers and other helpers.

It was a massive logistical operation to move people to areas of safety, mainly from cities to rural areas. Rural households were compelled to house evacuees depending on how much space they had and were given an allowance. Parents in danger zones faced the agonizing choice of whether to send children away to strangers in safe zones or to keep them at home. Many children were evacuated several times, at the outset of war, during the blitz, and again when the V1 and V2 rocket attacks began.



For many of our interviewees, being evacuated to the countryside was a revelation. They were introduced to a very different way of living and the sights and smells of their new homes have remained powerful and fond memories. Many missed their parents badly and it was a matter of luck if they ended up in loving homes or with adults who were at best indifferent to them or actively hostile.





Writing

The children have written creative pieces inspired by the project, by the people they have met. This booklet contains a tiny amount of the wonderful work done in class with poetry, imagined diaries, biographical pieces and also letters to the government demanding greater support for child victims in war-torn countries. Over the next few pages is a selection of this work.

Evacuate

by Oisin

Nervous and excited
Rushing for their life
Like there's no tomorrow
If only the war didn't start

The countryside
No shade, no light
The darkness keeps me awake at night
When can I come home?

The cold haunting me
Thinking I will freeze
When will this end?
Please! I want to come home

Leaving Home

By Riyaad

I am going to the country side
Mummy said to stay with my brothers
I wonder who I'll stay with
I hope they're nice
We're going by train
"Bye" I say to mother

I am on the train with my brother
We sit and chat until we are bored
In my suitcase are my teddy and my clothes

My mother said to pray to our lord



Leaving Home

By Haris

I am listening to my mother crying
She is saying to pack your bags for the train
I am choosing my toy to take
I hope I can meet my family again

Fear
I am vibrating with fright because of
gunshots
And feel intimidated by all the fighting
I am sad because I must leave my family
And I feel scared because of bombs like
boulders



War

By Aathavan

I am the planes over your head
The bombs destroying houses and
windowpanes
I am the rift of destruction within life
Can you escape this awful pain?

I am the shadow dancing on your wall,
I am the sudden nightmare that keeps
you awake at night,
I am the scream which makes your heart
start thumping,
I am the breeze which brings upcoming
fright....



Leaving Home

By Natalia

Leaving Home
I am standing on platform crying
missing my mum
And seeing other people crying missing
their mother,
I am excited but nervous leaving family,
And my dad is fighting the war with my
brother

Feelings
I am sad my foster parents are mean
They never help me and they won't
I am so mad why they sent me here
When will I go? What if I don't?



The Year 6 class at St Thomas' CE Primary School read *Goodnight Mr Tom* by Michelle Magorian, a story about a grumpy but loving old widower who takes in a nine year old evacuee during the war. The children wrote imagined diaries inspired by the story.

Dear Diary

By Sara

To be honest I can't remember much of the journey. I slept most of the way. All I can remember is my mum staring hard at me whilst other mums were hugging and crying. She said - 'be good or else' and stuff like God will punish me if I'm bad. Then, she just walked away.

When the train stopped, all the kids made a huge racket then we all got off. I felt nervous! There was this lady waiting for me and the other kids. I didn't know who she was! My heart was racing. I didn't know who I was gonna end up with! No one was talking, we were all frightened. We then found out the lady was called a billeting officer. The billeting officer, dropped the kids off to random people's houses. I was last. Finally, the lady dropped me off at a man's house. I just stood there.

I could sense he didn't like kids, it was obvious. He was towering over me. I was scared at first. Although, he didn't like kids, he had to take me in because my mum had said I had to be looked after by someone religious or who lives next to a Church. He looked grumpy. I stood in the doorway wondering what was gonna happen next.

When I did go in he told me to take my bag off and sit at the table. He gave me a cup of cocoa and some bacon then told me his name was Mister Tom. Didn't eat much, I wasn't that hungry. We were sitting in silence. Suddenly, I saw a dog! I



remembered what my mum had said about dogs - that they have diseases. All of a sudden I couldn't swallow my food. I have always been afraid of dogs. It was obvious it wanted to eat me! Mister Tom introduced the dog to me and said his name was Sammy.

After that, Mister Tom took me to the fire for me to get warm. He was heating up the poker! I knew he was gonna burn me with it! Can't remember what happened next, all I can remember is that I woke up in a weird room. I looked for a burn mark. I couldn't find one! Perhaps he was waiting till morning, I know I'm gonna get it sooner or later. If I'm good will he treat me differently? Will I ever get a beating from him?

Lotte's War

Lotte was born in Maida Vale 1936. Soon after she moved to Essex . She loved to go to a farm and see the animals. The farmers always sang lovely songs but when the war was about to break out Lotte had a funny feeling suddenly. She heard the word *war* and asked her parents what does war even mean. Her dad replied “it’s when people well... fight each other.” Lotte was confused..



Lotte was evacuated in a different way from other children. Her mother and father drove her and dropped her off at a boarding school in Herefordshire because they wanted to make sure she was in a safe place. She was only four years old, when she got evacuated and did not want to go. She only took her gas mask and a suitcase with a doll and a book. She was in Herefordshire and did not see her parents for two whole years.

When she arrived, she was shocked to find hundreds of children just standing there crying. Her new home had refugee children evacuated from Europe. At first Lotte didn't feel comfortable at her new boarding school but as she grew, she had lots of fun playing with other children; got up to mischief, played dare games. They didn't have a lot of lessons, but a lot of singing, walks in the woods, swimming in lakes, looking after animals and lots of freedom. Lotte didn't like the school food that they gave her (tapioca looked like frogspawn). When her little brother broke his arm he had to go back to his parents in Essex; she wanted to break her arms too so that she could go back home to be with her family.

Lotte has written a book about her experiences and visits schools.

The children met Soli Ahmed and Temor Alkai who told them about their own experiences leaving their families to find safety with strangers.

Temor left his family in Iraq as a teenager after he was kidnapped as the security in this war-torn country deteriorated.

Soli left Sudan aged 12 to find a better life to provide for his family, his father having been badly injured during the war in neighbouring Eritrea. He told the children how he walked across Africa, the harrowing journey by sea to Italy on a ramshackle boat and then how he came to the UK by stowing away on a truck. Both have found new lives of safety in the UK.



Far From Home

By Sidney

The rocking of the boat
makes me miss my home.
Why did this have to happen?
I don't really know
What to do now?
Jump onto land.
That's impossible.
Not even a glimpse of sand.
The waves all around
Make me just want to cry
The creaking of the boat
Makes me wonder why
My tummy rumbling
Nothing to eat
My throat so dry
Nothing to drink
My family is gone
My brother is dead
So is my sister
My heart feels like lead

This project was developed and produced by *digital:works* and funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and City Living Local Life.

Thanks to:

All of the Year 6 children at Furzedown and St Thomas' Primary Schools.

The staff at Furzedown and St Thomas' Primary Schools

The Imperial War Museum

Emma Anthony at Wandsworth Local Studies

Dave Walker at RBKC Local Studies

The Furzedown Project

The Migration Museum

Alf Dubbs, Temor Alkaisi and Soli Ahmed

Andrew Smart at Hyper Heritage

Maggie Tyler

The Island History Group

The British Film Institute

and all of the interviewees who generously shared their time and stories

Image credits:

The Imperial War Museum

Personal images from the interviewees

Various photos taken throughout the project by children and staff

You can listen to all of the wonderful interviews in their entirety , see the film, and find out more about the project here...

www.londonevacuees.org.uk

For more oral history projects about London please visit
www.digital-works.co.uk





www.londonevacuees.org.uk | www.digital-works.co.uk

