



Introduction

The prospect of war had been brewing for most of 1939, and the evacuation of children from the large cities to places of safety was the first step in protecting Britons from the expected onslaught from Germany.

The British Government had split Britain into three types of areas, called *Evacuation*, *Neutral* and *Reception*. The first evacuation areas included places like Greater London, Birmingham and Glasgow, where the perceived risk from bombing was greatest.

Reception areas were rural areas such as Sussex, Kent, East Anglia and Wales. In the beginning, neutral areas would not send or receive evacuees, but the arrangements were subject to change according to circumstances.

The list of the *evacuable* areas under the government scheme was extensive. Everybody affected was told by word of mouth or via leaflet distribution or announcements in schools, some two months before World War II started: (a) London as well as the County boroughs of West Ham, East Ham, the boroughs of Walthamstow, Leyton, Ilford and Barking in Essex, the boroughs of Tottenham, Hornsey, Willesden, Acton and Edmonton in Middlesex, (b) the Medway towns of Chatham, Gillingham and Rochester, (c) Portsmouth, Gosport and Southampton, (d) Birmingham and Smethwick, (e) Liverpool, Bootle, Birkenhead and Wallasey, (f) Manchester and Salford, (g) Sheffield, Leeds, Bradford and Hull, (h) Newcastle and Gateshead, and (i) Edinburgh, Rosyth, Glasgow, Clydebank and Dundee.



Picture Credit: Southern Railways poster for services evacuating women and children, September 1939 © The Rightsholder (Art. IWM PST 3362)

World War II: The First Wave of Evacuations, 1 September 1939

Haywards Heath & District Probus Club



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. The schoolchildren in this photograph assembled at Myrdle School in Stepney at 5 am on 1 September 1939. The adults accompanying them are wearing armbands, which identify them as volunteer marshals.

(Evacuation scheme, 1939 © D 1939A)
Schoolchildren who had assembled for evacuation at Myrdle School in Stepney at 5 am on 1 September 1939. © IWM (D 1939A)

Recruiting Volunteers

Evacuation was a massive logistical exercise that required thousands of volunteer helpers. The first stage of the process began on 1 September 1939 and involved teachers, local authority officials, railway staff, and 17,000 members of the **Women's Voluntary Service (WVS)**.

The WVS provided practical assistance, looking after tired and apprehensive evacuees at railway stations, and providing refreshments in reception areas and billeting halls.

Volunteers were also needed to host the evacuees.



Women Wanted for Evacuation Service poster
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(Art.IWM PST 15092)

Leaving The Cities

Children were evacuated from cities across Britain. The children in the photograph (right) are evacuees from Bristol who have arrived at Brent railway station near Kingsbridge in Devon, 1940. Parents were issued with a list detailing what their children should take with them when evacuated. These items included a gas mask in its case, a change of underclothes, nightclothes, plimsolls (or slippers), spare stockings or socks, toothbrush, comb, towel, soap, facecloth, handkerchiefs and a warm coat. The children pictured here seem well-equipped for their journey, but many families struggled to provide their children with all of the items listed.



(IWM (D 2587)) A group of evacuees from Bristol arriving at Brent railway station near Kingsbridge in Devon, 1940. © IWM (D 2587)

Life in the Countryside



Evacuees on a nature walk through the countryside surrounding the Dartington estate in Devon. © IWM (D 3101)

Evacuees and their hosts were often astonished to see how each other lived. Some evacuees flourished in their new surroundings. Others endured a miserable time away from home. Many evacuees from inner-city areas had never seen farm animals before or eaten vegetables. In many instances, a child's upbringing in urban poverty was misinterpreted as parental neglect.

Equally, some city dwellers were bored by the countryside or were even used for arduous agricultural work. Some evacuees made their own arrangements outside the official scheme if they could afford lodgings in areas regarded as safe or had friends or family where they could stay.

Nursery School

Many stately homes in the English countryside were given over for use as nursery schools or homes for young children evacuated from cities across the country.

The lithograph print (right) is from a series of five entitled 'Children in Wartime' by artist Ethel Gabain. This work was commissioned in 1940 by the War Artists Advisory Committee, which wanted a record of the civilian evacuation scheme.



A Nursery School: Watington Park, by Ethel Gabain. © IWM (Art.IWM ART LD 263)



Returning Home Against Advice

By the end of 1939, when the widely expected bombing raids on cities had failed to materialise, many parents whose children had been evacuated in September decided to bring them home again. By January 1940, almost half of the evacuees returned home. The government produced posters ('Don't do it, Mother') like the picture (left), urging parents to leave evacuees where they were while the threat of bombing remained likely.

Don't Do it, Mother - Leave the Children Where They Are, issued by The Ministry of Health © IWM (Art. IWM PST 3095)

Another Wave of Evacuations

Additional rounds of official evacuation occurred nationwide in the summer and autumn of 1940, following the German invasion of France in May-June and the beginning of **the Blitz** in September of that year.

Again, evacuation was voluntary, and many children remained in the cities. Some stayed to help, care for or support their families.



(© IWM LN 6194) A policeman helps young evacuees and the nun escorting them at a London station on 18 May 1940.

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