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Evacuation to Shropshire

What was it like in World War Two?

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Introduction

The Second World War broke out in 1939. The British government expected the German air force to bomb cities and their factories, and so they began a mass evacuation a few days before the start of the war. Around 3 million school children from the cities at risk were sent to live with foster families in the safety of the country until the war was over.

One safe place was Oswestry, a small town in Shropshire near the border with Wales. People in the town provided billets (homes) for evacuees (people evacuated) from Birkenhead, part of the city of Liverpool on the north-west coast. At the outbreak of war, about 3,300 children and 900 mothers were sent to Oswestry on special trains from Liverpool.

The children from the city experienced a totally new way of life in the country. For the people in the country, too, having so many outsiders coming into their area was a major event. These sources will show what each side thought of the evacuation.

Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. This is an article from Oswestry's local paper, the Oswestry and Border Counties Advertiser about the arrival of Evacuees to Oswestry.
 - a) Were the people of Oswestry proud of their role in the evacuation? What evidence do you have of this?
 - b) What does the source tell us about how the children were welcomed by the people of the town?
 - c) How well-run was the evacuation?

Look at Source 2

2. These are the memories of Margaret Corlett, who was evacuated from Birkenhead to Oswestry.
 - a) Who chose where each evacuee would stay?
 - b) How does the evacuee's account (source 2) differ from the account of the local paper (source 1)? Think about the following:
 - How were the evacuees treated?
 - How well was the evacuation organised?
 - What was the reaction of people in the town?

Look at Source 3

3. This is a letter written by Ellen Howard, an evacuee from Birkenhead aged 13.
 - a) Look at the words Ellen uses in this letter. Write a list of how she describes each of these items below for Birkenhead, then do the same for Oswestry and compare the two lists. What are the differences?
 - Noises
 - Surroundings (trees, streets etc.)
 - Atmosphere (the quality of the air)
 - Cars
 - Work
 - b) The letter was published in the local newspaper, the Oswestry and Border Counties Advertiser. Do you think the paper would have published it if Ellen had been unhappy? Give your reasons.
4. Look again at all the sources and the information on this page. Write down what you think all the good points and bad points about being an evacuee in Oswestry were.

Background

Preparations for war began in 1938, the year before war broke out. People were given gas masks and plans for evacuation were prepared. The plan for evacuating the children was called Operation Pied Piper. In September 1939, when the evacuation began, the scheme went fairly smoothly. Householders in the country who billeted (housed) city children were given money by the government. They got 10s. 6d. a week (53p in modern money) for the first child they housed and 8s. 6d. (43p in modern money) for any other evacuees they took in. That doesn't seem like much, but you could buy a pint of milk for around 4d. (2p in modern money) back then!

The evacuation meant children swapped one life for a completely new life in the country. The 1930s was a period when unemployment was high. Many of the children who came from Merseyside had been living in poverty. Some did not even have the few belongings that they were told to bring with them and some had never taken even a day's holiday away from the city. The sight of 'wild' animals (such as cows or sheep) must have been as astonishing to them as a day at a safari park is to us now. Life for evacuees was not entirely unpleasant. Although most evacuees must have been homesick, some had their mothers with them. In the case of the Oswestry evacuees, up to 1 mother was evacuated with every 3 children sent away.

Billeting evacuees was one way people in the country helped on the Home Front and the evacuees got involved in the war effort as well. The children in Oswestry learnt to knit clothes for the armed forces, helped to 'dig for victory' by planting vegetables in school playing fields, and manned stalls to collect scrap metal. In summer they helped with the harvest and even gathered acorns to feed the pigs.

Teachers Notes

The level of this activity is Key Stage 2. This lesson treats the well-known story of evacuation from the perspectives of:

- how people in the country perceived evacuees,
- and how evacuees perceived the country.

The sources on this page show that the atmosphere of evacuation was not entirely negative. Generally, the new life of evacuees was better than it had been in the cities. However, the sources show that the perspectives of evacuees and locals sometimes differed. Although some evacuees like Ellen saw the country in positive terms, others were not so happy with the evacuation. By contrast, locals (as represented through the local press) were very proud of their role. However, as source 2 shows, they were not completely altruistic and tried to cherry-pick those children they 'liked the look of'. Of course, primary evidence from evacuees and from newspapers with an agenda to report the evacuation in positive terms is sometimes slanted.

The lesson could be expanded with a final question asking pupils to do a piece of extended writing, such as writing a letter home or a diary entry describing the first week as an evacuee in Oswestry. Things they might write about include:

- What it was like to be without their family?
- Did other children have their families with them?
- How well were they received by the people of Oswestry?
- Show how life in the country was different to life in the city.

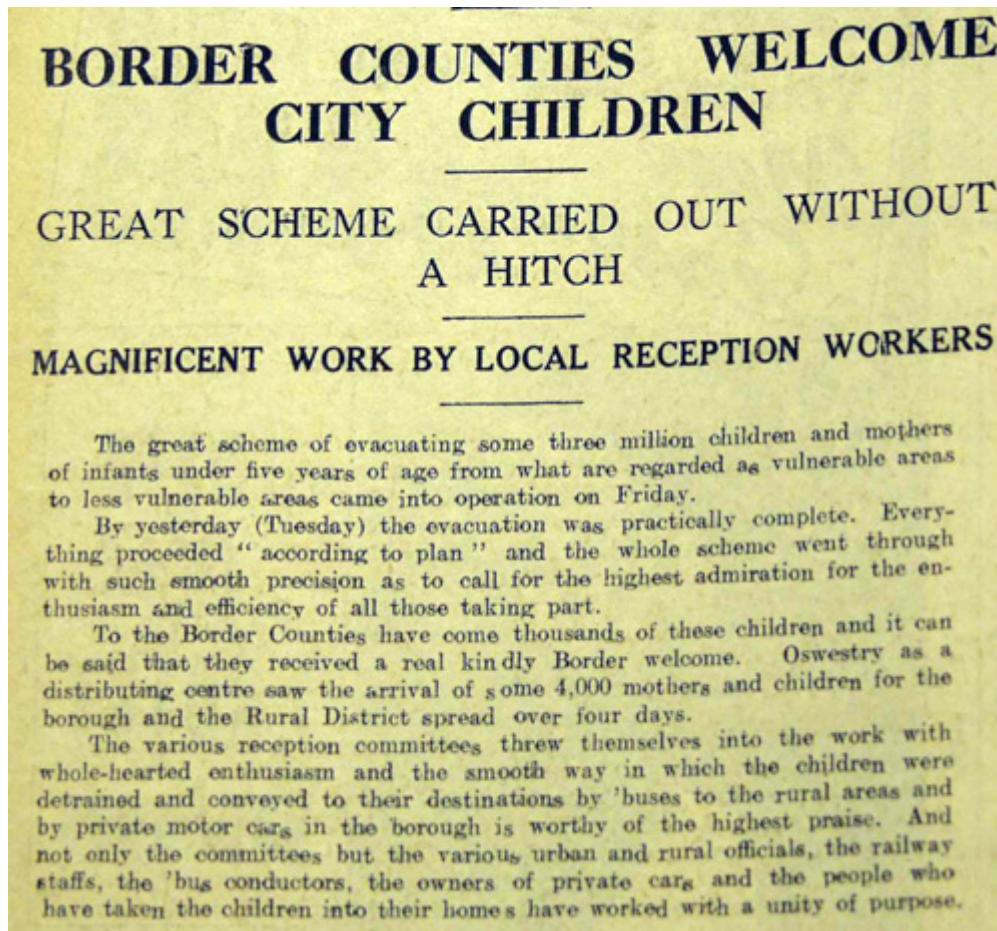
The lesson could also be used to teach citizenship issues in relation to 'Unit 04: Britain - a diverse society?' The lesson shows how the lives of people living in the town and country were once quite distanced. Today, increased access means people from towns can easily visit the countryside, whilst people from rural areas also experience the cultural and leisure facilities of cities. Thus, although lifestyles in both are still different, the gap between town and country is narrower than it once was.

Schemes of Work

Hot war, cold war why did the major twentieth-century conflicts affect so many people?

Key Stage 3, Unit 18.

Source 1 : Article from Oswestry's local paper, the Oswestry and Border Counties Advertiser



Source 1 : Transcript of Article from Oswestry's local paper, the Oswestry and Border Counties Advertiser

BORDER COUNTIES WELCOME CITY CHILDREN

GREAT SCHEME CARRIED OFF WITHOUT A HITCH

MAGNIFICENT WORK BY LOCAL RECEPTION WORKERS

The great scheme of evacuating some three million children and mother of infants under five years of age from what are regarded as vulnerable areas to less vulnerable areas came into operation on Friday. By yesterday (Tuesday) the evacuation was practically complete. Everything proceeded "according to plan" and the whole scheme went

through with such smooth precision as to call for the highest admiration for the enthusiasm and efficiency of all those taking part. To the Border Counties have come thousands of these children and it can be said that they received a real kindly Border welcome. Oswestry as a distributing centre the arrival of some 4, 000 mothers and children for the borough and the Rural District spread over four days. The various reception committees threw themselves into the work with whole-hearted enthusiasm and the smooth way in which the children were detrained and conveyed to their destinations by buses to the rural areas and by private motor cars in the borough is worthy of the highest praise. And not only the committees but the various urban and rural officials, the railway staffs, the bus conductors, the owners of private cars and the people who have taken the children into their homes have worked with a unity of purpose.

Source 2 : Memories of an evacuee, from 'Our Evacuee', a collection of memories compiled by Oswestry Heritage Centre

"We were herded like cattle around the streets of Oswestry, officials knocking on the doors of those who had put their names down as wanting an evacuee. That person come out of his house and chose whom they like the look of. It was total chaos. Some children were still being walked around the streets at midnight".

[This memory is from Margaret Corlett. Margaret and her brother, Harold, were evacuated from Birkenhead. Margaret remembers that she "was billeted by 9pm", so she was lucky compared to some other children. She stayed with Mr and Mrs Cyril Brayne and their son, John, who was aged 7 when she arrived. Margaret went back home to Birkenhead in 1942.]

Source 3 : Letter written by Ellen Howard, an evacuee from Birkenhead aged 13

MY IMPRESSIONS OF LIFE IN THE COUNTRY.

Life in the country impresses me as being very peaceful. One can sit in a field under a shady tree in complete quietness except for the singing of the birds and the rustle of the swaying boughs overhead. In the country there is not the smoky atmosphere of the city and it is much pleasanter to walk in fields with cows mooing and grazing on each side, than to walk along a grey dirty looking street, with litter thrown about the ground, and smoky houses for surroundings. It is lovely to wake up in the morning to feel the cool keen fresh air on one's face. In the autumn it is such fun to gather in the harvests and it is interesting to see the trees changing into their autumn dresses. There are not many heavy motor vehicles, and speeding motor cars in the country and one can walk freely along the country roads without having any cars hooting behind. The countryside population is very scattered but the people work very hard in order to produce vegetables, fruit and all kinds of other foodstuffs which they take to town and sell on market days.

—Sent by **Ellen Howard**, aged 13 years,
39, Ivy Street, Birkenhead, billeted
at 37, Orchard Street, Oswestry.

Source 3 : Transcript of Letter written by Ellen Howard, an evacuee from Birkenhead aged 13

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