Operation Pied Piper

‘Millions of vulnerable civilians would be evacuated from the country's cities and ports for their own safety."

This was the message all the news outlets in Britain were reporting on Thursday, 31

August 1939.

Between 1st September and 3rd September 1939 over 1 .5 million civilians were

moved out of the cities. Codenamed Operation Pied Piper, children, mothers, pregnant women,

teachers, carers and disabled people were evacuated to the countryside.

Arriving in rural areas was a shock. A lot of city children had never seen cows or pigs, had

never been anywhere so green and had never breathed such clean air. When they arrived,

children lined up in village halls as foster families selected evacuees to live with them.

Some evacuees loved their temporary homes. But homesickness is a common

theme when reading evacuees’ letters home, as well as confusion, bewilderment and

often anger at being sent on a train far away from their families.

"The reality was that for children and parents alike the only way to keep a

child safe was to entrust him or her into the care of a total stranger."

Not everyone chose to be evacuated - some children were kept at home by parents and some

disabled adults decided to stay at home. But with so many people evacuated, the effects were

being felt. For example, how could the inner cities cope with hundreds of their teachers being

evacuated? How could rural communities cope with so many extra children to educate?

Although war had been declared, there were no bombs on Britain's towns and cities

for months. This first stage of the war became known as the ‘Phoney War’- not very much

happened at all. Fighting was limited and no bombing, which led many parents of evacuees to

bring their children home, against the government’s advice.

It wasn't until the summer and autumn of 1940 that Germany invaded France, and

the bombing raids on Britain began.

For thousands of children, Operation Pied Piper had helped to keep them safe during the war and they had unexpectedly grown up in the countryside.