Operation Pied Piper

"ln the coming days, millions of vulnerable civilians would be evacuated

from the country's centres of industry and shipping for their own safety."

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

August 1 939.

Between 01 September and 03 September 1939 over 1 .5 million civilians were

moved out of the cities. Codenamed Operation Pied Piper, evacuating vulnerable

individuals had been planned meticulously: children, mothers, pregnant women,

teachers, carers and disabled people had started to be successfully evacuated in

their droves.

Arriving in rural areas was a shock for many of those evacuated, particularly the

children. A lot of inner-city children had never seen cows or pigs, had never been

anywhere so green and had never breathed air free of pollutants. Upon arrival,

evacuated children would often be lined up in village halls as potential foster families

selected those evacuees that they could house. Some evacuees thrived in their

temporary homes. Others, however, didn't fare as well. Homesickness is a common

theme when reading evacuee letters home, as well as confusion, bewilderment and

often anger at being placed on a train and shipped to a mystery location, 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 eligible to be evacuated left the cities- some children were kept at

home by parents and some vulnerable adults elected to stay at home. Within weeks,

the effects on infrastructure were being felt. How, for example, could the inner cities

cope with hundreds of its teachers being evacuated? How could rural communities

cope with a sudden influx of children to educate?

The wait lasted longer than anyone expected. Britain's towns and cities remained

untouched by German bombs for months. ln fact, during this first stage of the war the

period which came to be known as the Phoney War, not very much happened at

all. Fighting was limited and bombing non-existent, leading many of the parents of

evacuees - against the advice of the government - to bring their children

home.

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

the bombing raids arrived. A number of the parents who had brought their children

home sparked a second, voluntary wave of evacuation, but many children remained

at home throughout the war, having travelled back during the Phoney War. For those

who stayed through the months of relative inactivity, Operation Pied Piper had

helped to ensure that they were out of harm's way for the duration of the war.

**Exploring further**

No central record of who was evacuated, or where they were evacuated to, exists.

* The 1939 Register, created 30 September, is a national document that often

identified if an individual was an evacuee in the occupation column. Under

100 year privacy rules some of the information is redacted or pages are not

freely available.

* Documents exist in county archives, such as Dorset History Centre, that help explain

what happened during Operation Pied Piper locally, such as:

**The diary of Norman Edwin GALE** (b.1927) records the air raids over Poole

and that school was usually only a half day. (D12931113-6)

* A schedule showing how many Southampton children were evacuated by

school and which Poole school they were teamed up with. (DC PL)

Local newspapers reported on the arrival of evacuees and their billeting as

well as support that was available for the evacuees and those who offered

them a home.