

## **Pastoral Spotlight**

**Week beginning 11<sup>th</sup> May 2020**

### **Evacuees in World War II**

Like many of you I am sure, I enjoyed watching programmes celebrating the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE Day on Friday evening.

The topic of child evacuees was discussed, and one thing that particularly struck me was the amount of time that some children spent away from their parents. One 9-year-old boy mentioned that over the four years that he was an evacuee, he only saw his mother twice. This was not something that I had fully taken on board prior to Friday night, and I thought that it would be interesting (with the help of BBC History resources) to reflect on what some children and their parents went through at that time.

In the first few days of September 1939, nearly two million children and around one hundred thousand teachers were evacuated from towns and cities to the countryside.

Operation Pied-Piper as it was known, was an extraordinary logistical feat. The evacuation orders were issued at 11.00 am on Thursday, 31 August 1939 and within a week, the children and teachers had new addresses.

The BBC History account reports:

'Most evacuees have a vivid recall of events on the day of their evacuation. The images are of busy train stations, shouting officials and sobbing mothers.

In London, the schoolchildren sang 'The Lambeth Walk'. Elsewhere there were choruses of 'Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Goodbye'. For most it was 'like going on an adventure': a phrase that is still uppermost in the minds of evacuees 60 years on.

'We marched to Waterloo Station behind our head teacher carrying a banner with our school's name on it,' says James Roffey, founder of the Evacuees Reunion Association. 'We all thought it was a holiday, but the only thing we couldn't work out was why the women and girls were crying.'

Parents gave instructions to their children: 'Don't complain,' 'Grin and bear it,' 'Look after your sister,' 'Write home as soon as you can.'

When the children arrived at their destinations, sources report that in many cases billeting officers would line them up against a wall or on a stage in the village hall and invite hosting parents to take their pick. The phrase 'I'll take that one' became imprinted in the memory of evacuees. Inevitably, this must have had a traumatic effect on many children, not only in the days and weeks which followed but for the rest of their lives.

There is no doubt that many children had wonderful experiences with their new hosts. In one BBC audio clip that I listened to from September 1939, boys and girls who were

evacuated from Manchester to rural Lancashire described how happy they were with their host families and friends and there was no suggestion of homesickness.

In another article, from the BBC archive, I read about Margaret Alexander who was evacuated in 1940, along with her two sisters and brother from London to Barnstable in North Devon. Margaret and her brother stayed with one family, whilst her two sisters stayed with another. She described her life in the country with her new family as 'heaven' and Margaret remained extremely close to her host parents for the rest of their lives, many years later visiting with her own husband and sons during summer holidays.

For many though the situation was nothing like as idyllic and there are reports of some children who were beaten, mistreated, and abused by families who did not want them and did not care about them.

The Headmaster's recent video message about the St Faith's boarders who were evacuated to the village of Ashburton in Devon, where they lived and were educated in the Golden Lion Hotel, reminded us about the ordeal for St Faith's pupils during the war.

Our children are currently experiencing unusual and stressful times, in isolation at home, away from school and close contact with friends and relatives. It is worth remembering however that just as the ordeal for all child evacuees and their parents ended when Germany surrendered on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1945, so the difficult times that we are encountering will also come to an end.

Mr M Critchley

Director of Pastoral Care