



TfL Corporate Archives Research Guides: World War II 75th Anniversary Edition

The Experience of Evacuation in World War II

What was it like to be evacuated? We use original materials from the Corporate Archives collections to give an insight into the experience.



Child evacuees wait on platform at Ealing Broadway. Archive ref num: T00030/018

Before the outbreak of war, the Government had decided that children, expectant mothers, mothers with children under 5 years old, blind persons, and the aged should be evacuated from London to the countryside.



Frank Pick, Vice-Chairman LPTB. Archive ref num: LT000030/018

In the first 4 days of September 1939, the scheme of evacuation was put into effect. 640 special underground tubes, 4,985 buses, 533 trams, and 377 trolleybuses were used to carry over 550,000 people either to main railway stations or direct to the countryside.

Frank Pick, Vice-Chairman of the London Passenger Transport Board (LPTB), was appointed Evacuation Officer for the purpose of devising the scheme of transport required. On Pick's retirement in May 1940, he was succeeded as Evacuation Officer by another LPTB figure, T E Thomas.



TE Thomas, Archive ref num: LT0001768_001 U35540

For some the experience was exciting, for some frightening, for others it was simply underwhelming. In an oral history conducted by the TfL Corporate Archives in 2017, Les Gaskin, a child evacuee in 1939 explains:

***"We're going to go away to the country, my mother told me...
And we had these little labels on us to say who you were and***

where we came from..... because my dad worked on the railways and we used to go down there and see the new trains like the Silver Link for the Silver Jubilee ... and also the Coronation Train, so I was walking down there fully expecting it to be one of these trains we were gonna go on. I was mightily disappointed when we got there and there's some old carriages, dirty old carriages and a black engine at the front to pull us away."

Official reports, perhaps unsurprisingly, claimed the evacuation a major success that had gone off very smoothly and efficiently.

Page 2 PENNYFARE OCTOBER 1939

BIGGEST OF ALL TIME

London Transport Staff help to Move 600,000

The Minister of Transport
Lord Ashfield

Captain Euan Wallace, Minister of Transport, gave thanks to the Transport Industry in connection with the evacuation.

I take the first possible opportunity of expressing appreciation of the splendid services rendered to the nation by all grades of the Main Line Railways and the Railways of the London Passenger Transport Board in the planning and carrying through successfully, and without a hitch, the evacuation movement during the past four days, and in providing at the same time for many other essential transport requirements. Equally I wish to thank all those who have planned and operated the movements by road whether as part of London Transport or in the provinces. I realize the vast amount of hard work and forethought which were given to the plans by all concerned and the skill with which they have been carried through. The unsparing service given to our country in this crisis by Rail and Road Transport, by the managements, clerical staffs and the operating grades, is beyond all praise and is in keeping with the splendid tradition of the transport services. The human understanding of porter and bus conductor was of more help to mother and child than they realize. Transport men are entitled to be proud of the blow struck in the country's cause.



Topical
Captain Euan Wallace

Mr. Herbert Morrison, M.P.

A tribute to the work of London Transport towards the evacuation of school children and adults from London, is contained in an article which appeared recently in The Times.

Mr. Herbert Morrison, M.P., the leader of the London County Council, said that between 5.30 on Friday morning (September 1) and midnight on Sunday, nearly 600,000 children and adults were moved out of the County of London and the contiguous boroughs.

In addition, 5,000 patients were evacuated from the Council's hospitals to towns 50 or 60 miles from London. The bearing and behaviour of all these thousands of Londoners was reported as "simply magnificent." In spite of trying and often really difficult circumstances all went well.

Success at the London end was made possible by what Mr. Morrison described as "the untiring efforts and generous assistance of many different organisations, and thousands of public-spirited men and women." Foremost among these were the London Passenger Transport Board and the main line railway companies, whose arrangements for transport were "simply splendid." Then there was the ready help of their staffs and the police, and the unobtrusive assistance given by the St. John Ambulance Brigade.

With the parties went nearly all the Council's teaching staff and upwards of 20,000 voluntary helpers.

To all of these Mr. Morrison tendered the grateful thanks of the Council.

On September 7, Lord Ashfield wrote the following message, which he addressed to the Officers and Staff of the Board:

The evacuation of the children, mothers, hospital patients and blind persons from the London Area has now been completed without a single mishap of any sort. The successful manner in which the evacuation was carried out has been praised on all sides, and to this success the staff of the Board made a notable contribution.

The Board are proud to have been associated with this great task and are especially proud of the way in which the staff carried out their responsibilities.

It is therefore the wish of each Member of the Board that I should ask you to accept our very warmest thanks and appreciation for this splendid record of a great task well and truly done.

—And What the Men who did it Say

A Stationmaster. We handled thousands at my three stations. Were those kids excited? I'll say they were. They crept behind my platform staff and burst paper bags. Each explosion was greeted with screams and whistling.

A Porter. On the District Line there's a remnant of a farm. Its hayrick startled a Mile End boy, who cried, "Joe! Don't the 'ay grow in big lumps 'ere!"

Another Porter. Does the Publicity Officer need some more artists? On Evacuation Day many posters on my station were pencilled and crayoned out of recognition.

A Ticket Collector. When the mothers with the little 'uns arrived, we used the escalators. The tots enjoyed the ride so much that they wanted a continuous performance of it, up and down.

A Guard. The alarm-signal warning (five quid for improper use) meant nothing to the rascals on my train. They climbed on each other's backs and scrambled by hand-over-hand in their efforts to reach the handle. Springing from seat to seat was another stunt. That journey added to my grey hairs, and that's putting it mildly.

A Trolleybus Conductor. The inside of my bus was lined with excited kids, kneeling on seats, noses pressed against the windows. Others held obstacle races over the seats, some did physical jerks on the strap-hangers. It was bedlam.

An Inspector. I was impressed by the orderliness and discipline of the youngsters. They set an excellent example which grown-ups would do well to follow in rush-hours.

A Bus Conductor (sad with disappointment). "It was just an ordinary journey to me. No, they didn't ring the bell. No, they didn't run up and down the stairs. No, they —"

Another Bus Conductor. Last year's songs, I heard 'em all again. "Let's have a Tiddley at the old Milk Bar," was the favourite. It did me good to hear 'em.

A Bus Driver. Most of the boys wanted to travel in my driver's cabin. They scrambled over the bonnet, poked heads through windows, and tried to move the controls. When I "shushed" them away, one lad astride the radiator barked back: "Be a sport, gunvor, we're on evaporation." He was—nearly!

Another Bus Driver. My load was a bit noisy, but I saw one small, shy lad hugging an empty jam jar. "Going to send dad some blackberries from the country," he whispered, cupping his fingers to his mouth.

[Pictures in Back Page]

Article from Pennyfare the staff magazine, October 1939. Archive ref num: T000030/018

LPTB staff painted a slightly more chaotic picture!

"It was bedlam", was the summary of one trolleybus conductor, mirroring his colleague's tales of excited children, inappropriate use of train alarms, obstacle races over seats, and repeated requests to drive in the driver's cabin!

A Guard. The alarm-signal warning (five quid for improper use) meant nothing to the rascals on my train. They climbed on each other's backs and scrambled up hand-over-hand in their efforts to reach the handle. Springing from seat to seat was another stunt. That journey added to my grey hairs, and that's putting it mildly.

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Article from Pennyfare the staff magazine, November 1939. Archive ref num: LT000030/018

This article, published in November 1939, explains the logistics involved in moving thousands of evacuees out of London in four days. The company even operated a refreshment service at six change-over stations, free for passengers with no money.

You Helped 380,000 To Leave London

THE numbers of schoolchildren, "under-fives" and grown-ups who were evacuated from the London Area on the four days 1st to 4th September have now been totted up.

London Transport carried, either the whole way or part of it, 379,780, yet not one mishap of any kind is reported.

The lion's share was borne by the Underground: in four days it took 198,680 evacuees (or shall we say vaccies now?), all between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. They needed 605 special trains: 452 ran on the first two days and carried 155,000.

The busiest station was Ealing Broadway: no fewer than 101,000 rode there from Underground stations and changed into G.W.R. trains.

Buses moved many thousands of evacuees, taking some to the railway stations, collecting others after a railway journey or taking passengers all the way to their new homes. The figures are 4,170 buses, 130,550 passengers.

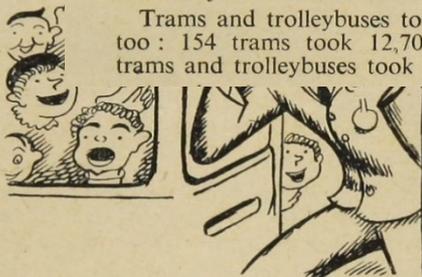
At two Underground stations, Edgware and Enfield West, buses picked up 39,000 evacuees and took them on to main line stations, either Mill Hill (L.M.S.) or New Barnet. For this job we ran 68 buses each day.

Trams and trolleybuses to the tune of 900 did their bit, too: 154 trams took 12,700 evacuees to Waterloo, 111 trams and trolleybuses took 9,100 to Clapham Junction.

At six change-over stations London Transport introduced a refreshment service. It was well used. Those few passengers with no money received food and drink free.

And what of the staff, the men who helped to conduct this great exodus? Some duties had to be changed at a moment's notice.

A bus driver found himself bound for Eastbourne instead of for a journey near his depot. Some of his mates who had a country outing could not get back to their depots before the next morning, the black-out was so complete. But it was all in the day's work, and cheerful co-operation between all ranks on top of months of detailed planning produced an achievement which the Minister of Transport, the Leader of the L.C.C., and the Chairman of London Transport were quick to praise and which few of us will forget.

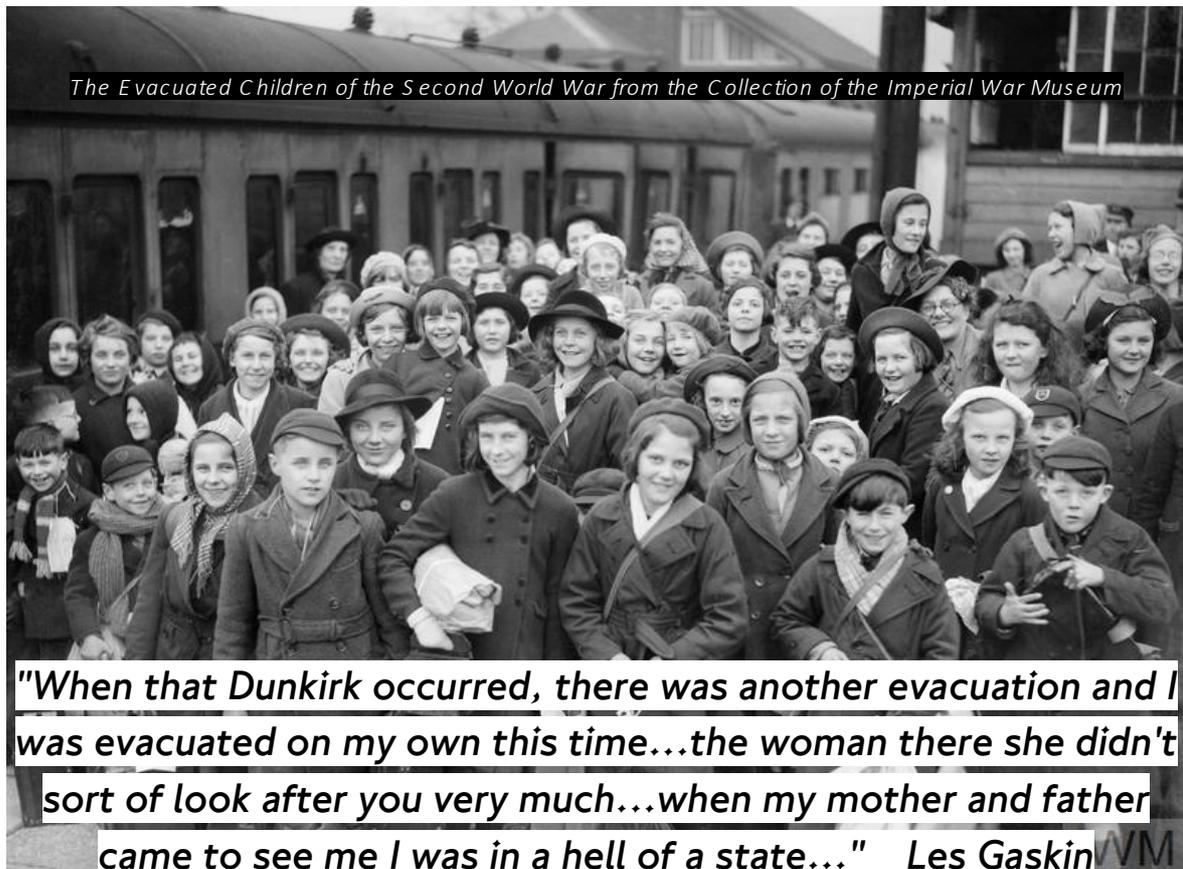


No early attack occurred and by mid-January 1940 it was estimated that 34% of the people evacuated had returned to London and the return was continuing due to a perceived lack of threat or because they were unhappy away from their families and their homes.

In an oral history conducted by the TfL Corporate Archives in 2018, Theresa Griffin, a child evacuee in 1939 explained why she returned:

"My brother managed to get home before me because he was that much older, and I followed because...I was unhappy. So my sister and my brother came down to pick me up."

After the invasion of Holland and Belgium, in May 1940, a further evacuation took place: 102,806 children and 9,100 adults were taken from London to the countryside in 6 days from 13 June 1940.



Around 1.5 million people were carried by the LPTB under the various evacuation schemes. The successful fulfilment depended on the close co-operation between the Ministry of Health, Ministry of War Transport, local authorities, Metropolitan Police, and railways.

This story has been compiled using information in records at the Transport for London Corporate Archives. The Corporate Archives seeks to preserve and make accessible records, not to interpret them. A wider range of material is available for physical consultation.

This story has been enhanced using some material from the photographic collection of the Imperial War Museum.

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