

B) THE EVACUATION

As soon as war broke out in September 1939 the government began evacuating British children from cities such as London, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield. The government name for this evacuation was 'Operation Pied Piper'.

Evacuating children was a priority because the government feared that Germany would immediately begin massive air raids on British cities, Evacuation was voluntary, but the government's poster campaign played on parents' fear of what their children might suffer if they stayed in the cities.

Over 800,000 children were evacuated, accompanied by 100,000 teachers (the first wave). For the first 6 months of war no bombing raids actually happened, so many children returned home.

But the German Blitz on British cities (7 September 1940-May 1941) prompted a second phase of evacuation. British intelligence knew the Blitz was coming. **On 1 September 1940, all children up to age 15, expectant mothers, hospital patients and the disabled were all evacuated from London. A few thousand children were also sent overseas to countries such as Canada, Australia and South Africa.**

The children evacuated from working-class cities often lived in real squalor (poverty). Many had no bathroom or inside plumbing, had skin diseases such as scabies or lice (singular = louse = pou), were malnourished and had only the ragged clothes they stood up in. Most people in the country had no experience of such poverty and were shocked that people in 20th century Britain lived this way. The government received many letters, reports and recommendations from organisations and individuals concerned about the health of city children. **For the children, the experience of life in the country, with fresh vegetables and fresh air was just as big a culture shock. The realisation of poverty created public support for welfare reforms and prompted the government to order the Beveridge report.**

Taking in evacuees was voluntary at first, but became compulsory when there were no more volunteers. Unbelievably, the government didn't check that the children were happy and safe with **their foster families** in the country. So the children's experience of evacuation depended on the home they went to. Whilst most foster families simply wanted to help, some children ended up in placements where the foster family didn't care about them, or just wanted them as unpaid labour around the house or on the farm. The government paid about 75p per child to the host families (per week) and, of course, the family also received the child's rations.

In April 1945 the government began planning for the official return of evacuees. By 12 July 1945, 54,317 evacuees had returned to London. However, some children were very young when they were evacuated. These children had been separated from their families for the whole six years of war. They saw their family as strangers and didn't want to go home. Moreover, the Blitz of 7 September 1940 and 11 May 1941 killed 40,000 British people (over half of these in London) and 1.4m lost their home. Consequently, many evacuees returned to find no parents and/or home to go to. As a result of these two issues, by August 1945, there were still 76,000 children in reception areas. The majority were sent to government or church-run orphanages in Britain or overseas.

Beveridge report. *The need to improve the welfare of British people motivated the government to publish the Beveridge report on 1 December 1942. Looking ahead to the end of the war, Beveridge identified what became known as **the 'five giants on the road to recovery'**: want (poverty = le besoin), disease, ignorance (lack of education), squalor (poor housing) and idleness (unemployment).*



