

Evacuation

Background to the national evacuation plan stems from the experiences of the Zeppelin raids of the First World War during which 1,4000 civilians were killed first by the Zeppelins and later Gotha-Giant heavy bombers in 1917. One bomb falling on a London County Council school in Poplar killed 18 children in 1917. As aircraft design developed during the 1930s it became clear that the English Channel, our traditional island defence, would no longer protect the population from direct enemy action.

The first plans for a mass evacuation of the population were laid in 1931 and were made vital following the effects on the civilian population of Barcelona bombed in 1938 and Guernica in 1937, during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the stories of shell shock after the First World War. It was assumed by the authorities that the civilian population would be similarly affected. It was not just the bombs which frightened people causing high levels of physical and mental stress but issues such as crime during the blackout the strain of rationing and the claustrophobia of the shelters.¹ The first indication of the Government Evacuation Scheme appeared in April 1939 which set out the Government plans for moving children and vulnerable adults, evacuating mothers and children first, out to the country districts and that plenty of accommodation would be available. Volunteers were requested to escort priority cases into parties and then to the rallying places.

The evacuation began on the 1st September 1939 and it was envisaged that 3,000,000 people would be moved and that it would take several days to complete. Approximately 9,000 school children were evacuated to Oxfordshire in the first four days of September 1939. Approximately 6,000 were evacuated with their teachers and were distributed among 98 schools in Oxfordshire. seventeen temporary schools being opened. Amongst the areas listed for evacuation was Barking from which St. Joseph and St. Ethelburga schools were evacuated to Chinnor. In April 1939 the Chinnor Women's Institute held a talk about forming a communal kitchen in case of evacuated children arriving in the village and a notice of another meeting relating to the evacuation of children. Billeting was hurriedly dealt with by two men in the village and the Women's Institute after a survey of possible accommodation and on Friday 1st September the first bus load arrived.² It was not always easy to find billets and Dr. Leverkus's sister spent some time going around to try to get families billeted but was unsuccessful and they had to be housed (six mothers and 12 children) in the Old British School building. On 3rd September the WI set about welcoming the evacuees and their mothers, 30 mothers, 60 children with an afternoon tea party. Avis Hulbert remembers a little girl who was billeted at their home but returned to London in 1940. Avis's next door neighbours were the headmaster and his family of the R.C. school from Barking. Avis was friends with the daughter. Much has been written about the problems of children being badly billeted particularly regarding religion or cultural customs but for this Catholic school there was St. Joseph's RC church in Thame. This school, which stayed until 1942. Not every evacuation in Chinnor was successful. When a stray bomb dropped behind the Black Boy inn in

1940, two evacuees, grandchildren of the publican, were smartly removed back home by their mother.

In November 1939 pupils from the schools were distributed to Aston Rowant, Warren Farm (temporary school) 23, Aston Rowant Junior school 11, St Andrew's School Chinnor 83, the total of evacuee school children being, 117. This resulted in the Chinnor school adopting a two shift system from 11th September, St Joseph having the second shift from 1:15 pm to 5:15 pm. The following term two classes from Chinnor school moved to the Village Hall. ³ A proposal of thanks was recorded to Dr. Leverkus and her assistants for all the work they had done in billeting the children.⁴ By Whitsun 1942 the Barking children had returned to London. At that time Chinnor had 57 evacuees. Mr. Eggleton who lived in Bledlow remembered over one hundred evacuee children being housed in the children's home (Wycombe Union School) in the village. ⁵ It was difficult to ascertain exact figures for evacuees in Chinnor as these fluctuated almost from day to day. Dr. Leverkus in her capacity as billeting officer for Chinnor commented in her memoirs that she would billet a family one evening and the next morning they would be gone, having decided that they did not like Chinnor, 'Ghastly village' and had caught the early train back to London. According to Dr. Leverkus one mother (with little understanding of the real situation) wanted to go to the seaside so that the children could play on the sand. ⁶

The 1931 census gave Chinnor's population as being 1,162 (no census in 1941) so evacuees would have an impact on the village (the figures above are for children and does not include adults) although the Absent Voters List for Henley Parish of Chinnor shows that 78 men and women left the village for war work. Nearby Thame accepted 1,552 including official and private evacuees. The number billeted in Oxfordshire in September 1939 was 11,793 and by the end of 1940 Oxfordshire's County Medical Officer of Health had 8,613 evacuee children on the books compared with 1,552 a year later.⁷ Overall, Oxfordshire had 58% more children on its books.⁸ The numbers for Princes Risborough were not known but comments in the local paper stated that neither the number nor date of arrival of evacuees was known but that accommodation was becoming acute.
