

# They saw it happen

- Eyewitnesses talk about the evacuation

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*People talk about their experiences of the evacuation when they were children:*

We all thought there was going to be a full-scale war. We all got ready to go away. When they announced it – they were evacuating us to Rye – I was on Denmark Hill Station and all of us was there crying our eyes out. We'd all had to pack our bags for twelve o'clock. We were waiting to get on a train. In came the train and before we got on we heard the siren go. They thought they were going to come over right away and start bombing, so they bundled us all in the train and we didn't have time to say goodbye or anything. We were all pushed into the train and off we went. We didn't know where we were going. All the signs were all wiped out. You didn't know where you were.

*Mrs Bennett*

We were in this church, sitting down there and some official person would come round and say, "This lady's going to take you." It was like an auction sale to me. "This person will take a mother and one child. This person has enough room for a mother and three children." Or, "This person will take you if you could do her housework."

*Mrs Bennett*

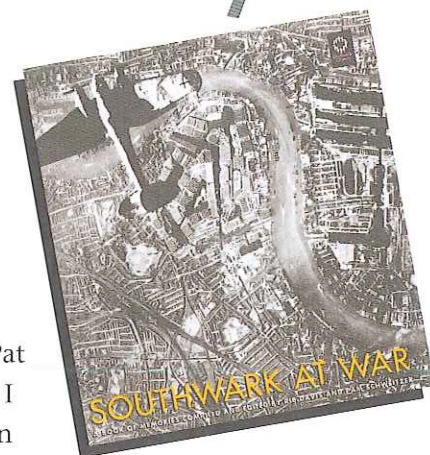
When we arrived at the station we were taken to the Town Hall – where people chose which children they would look after. My sister Pat was very attractive, whereas I was rather plain. An old man noticed Pat and asked a teacher if he could take her. She told him that she had a sister, and if he wanted her he must take me too. He went home to ask his wife if she could have two children. She agreed, so he returned to collect us. *Pensioner*

I was chosen and my brother was chosen at the same time, which left my sister. I said, "I'm not going to go until my sister's got somewhere to go." We were supposed to be kept together. But nobody wanted three children. Anyway, she was fortunate enough. She was selected by a lady, a spinster, she and her sister lived together. They came up about half an hour after we had been selected, which made it a lot easier. At least I knew I could write back home and say, "We've all got a place to go."

*Bill Winter*

The horrible thing about it was you were taken all away, all put in a school hall and they came round and picked you out. If you looked nice, you were picked out. But if you were some poor little soul with nothing you were left.

*Southwark pensioner*



I went to a place where I had the most awful old lady that anybody could ever have. It was a great big house and she wouldn't have evacuees. It was compulsory, but that was against her grain. She didn't like me and she really made my life a misery. I wasn't allowed to wind the clock up. And you would have a flannel for this, and another flannel for that. And I never knew which was which, and she always used to stand there and watch me! She said it was disgusting for a little girl to have trousers on.

*Kathleen Ash*

We used to go off into the fields. During the war, we used to get a fortnight off from school and we all had to go potato picking. We picked the potatoes and we got sixpence for that. I think it was for a week! It wasn't very much – it's quite hard work bending down picking up potatoes. Then we would get a week off for haymaking because most of the men had gone off to the war so they relied on the older children. We did haymaking and quite a bit of farm work. I loved it. I still keep to friends with people we stayed with and I still go back to see them and I phone them every three months or so. I still like the country. Although I've come back and always lived in London, I did like it. It was lovely just to be able to roam down country lanes.

*Doris Stevenson*

The place I got in, she didn't really want us. I was working like a skivvy in there – and yet they were getting paid for our keep. I was washing up, doing the dinner and everything. They were paid for our keep. There were two girls there and a father. Those girls weren't very nice to me because I was planted on them and they didn't seem to make me welcome. I said, "I'm going home." And I did.

*Pensioner at the Yalding Centre*

(From *Southwark at War*, a book of memories)

- **Read what the seven old people remember about evacuation during the war. Take notes whether they are mainly positive or mainly negative or mainly neutral about their hosts. Discuss your notes with a partner. Also discuss the reasons for being positive or negative. Say what you think about it.**
- **As you can read, many hosts were not all that kind to their little evacuees. What would you like a good evacuee host to be like? Write down 10 rules for "The good host".**

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