**Patricia Negin Berger**

I was six in 1939, living in London. I remember being in the school yard, then crossing a bridge with my twin brother and older brother aged 8. He carried a duffle bag with our belongings and we had gas masks. We got on a train and went to a large room in a village called Gamlingay. Fortunately, the three of us were taken in by the Justice of the Peace and his family.

After a short time we returned to London and were sent to a boarding school in Essex where the bombs came fast and furious. We wore "siren suits", and when there was a raid we went to the school basement, slept on mattresses and sang patriotic songs. We were taught that if there was a raid and we were in a field, to lie down flat until the all-clear went or go to someone's house for safety. One time we went to someone's house and were offered biscuits but I was told never to take food from strangers so didn't accept.

While there we learnt that our father had died. My mother said he had a burst appendix but there were no doctors around and it took three days of pain until he died.

We were then sent to a boarding school in Wales and only went home once from 1941 to 1945. We were very unhappy but agreed never to let our mother know. I have letters I wrote at the beginning: "I hope you are safe as I am and soon the war will be over."

Returning to London after the war the train seemed to be saying I'm going home, I'm going home." instead of "clickety clack clickety clack". It wasn't what I'd dreamed it would be: from 1939-1945 I hadn't been home nor was my mother used to having three children to deal with.

**Bill Reeds**

I was 13 when I was evacuated from Chiswick. I went with my school to a small town called Little Gadderson, between Hemel Hempstead and Berkhampstead. We walked, a long line of us, from school to the railway station, carrying our luggage and gas masks.

The train took us to Hemel Hempstead, where were all loaded into a coach and driven to a more rural area. Then the bus stopped and we all piled out. There was a crowd of people waiting, and they would select the children they liked the look of. Then the bus, with us aboard again, would go another hundred yards or so and repeat the exercise.

When it was my turn to be selected, I was very fortunate. Jackie Gilbert, a boy I knew quite well, and I were picked by the James people, who owned the local butcher's shop. Along with the husband and wife, there were three daughters, all very friendly, and we were treated exceptionally well, probably a lot better than I had been treated at home.

I had a very good time, doing things that were different from anything I had ever done before. Living in the country was wonderful. The food was quite good – including rabbit pie. It didn't seem as though we were on rations at all.

Extract from *Goodnight Children, Everywhere: Voices of the WWII Evacuees*by Monica B. Morris (The History Press)

**John Matthews**

To escape the Blitz I was sent to Devon. I was eight years old. There, between the main beach at Paignton and the next, Goodrington Sands, is a headland, which in those days had just a few large mansions on it. I and another boy, about my age, were taken by the billeting officer to one of these houses, inhabited by a wealthy widow and her servants. She refused to come to the door, and the maid who answered, a sour woman dressed in a black-and-white uniform, made it quite clear that they wanted nothing to do with scruffy urchins from the East End. But during the war there was an emergency order that made any spare bedrooms available as army billets or for evacuees, so they were forced to take us.

The result was that we were kept locked in our bedroom when not at school. It was a large room, but we had no toys, games, books or radio. Fortunately it did have a lovely polished wooden floor. We amused ourselves by sliding in our socks up and down, or giving one another rides on a rug. When the old lady had had her evening meal, we were allowed down into the kitchen, where we stood and were given a Marmite sandwich and a mug of cocoa. We never got any cooked meals. When we complained we were hungry we were told to consider ourselves lucky – there was a war on.

On one Sunday afternoon we were allowed out into the back garden, which had a croquet lawn. We had no idea what croquet was, but we bashed the balls around for some time, got bored and then discovered that in the corner was a wooden summer house on a pillar which could be turned. We found out that it could be completely rotated, so we gave one another rides to see how fast we could spin it. I think this must have been seen from the house, because we were abruptly called in and locked in the bedroom again.

After about half an hour, the maid came in and gave us each a sheet of paper and a pencil. She said we should write to our parents. We pointed out that we had no envelopes or stamps. "The mistress will take care of that," she answered. It was obvious that our letters were going to be censored. We wrote the sort of thing one should – "having a wonderful time. Wish you were here" – and then, the following morning I somehow managed to steal an envelope and stamp and wrote a rather more truthful letter home. The gist of it was that if something didn't happen quickly I was going to run away.

I received no answer but, two Saturdays later, the maid came to the bedroom and told me to pack. I threw my clothes into my suitcase and was taken downstairs. There, I found my mother standing outside in the rain. She took me by bus to Torquay, where she went up and down the streets, knocking at doors and asking if anyone would take an evacuee. Nobody was keen.

I cannot remember the name of the couple who took me in or even what they looked like, but I do remember the address: 8 Blyndwyll Road, Chelston. I think they looked after me fairly well, but I was lonely. The irony was that my brother, Peter, was living just around the corner, but I had no contact with him. He was sent to a church hall that had been turned into a school for evacuee children, while I went to a local boys' school.

It was the worst school I had ever attended. The entire staff had joined up and their places were taken by a weird bunch of elderly men and women, none of whom had any experience. My teacher looked like a gipsy. He had a mass of untidy, black hair and two large gold earrings. He told us that he had worked before the war in a circus, and kept us amused with tales of lion taming and acrobats.

I stayed in Torquay for a year, but was brought back to London in time for the doodlebug offensive – my parents evidently did not want me to miss any of the fun.

**June Carrington**

"In the event of an emergency arising ..." the letter ran. Well it did, and we who would have begun our second year at Victoria Road County Primary Schoool in September, 1939 – and almost every other youngster in Runcorn – ended up on the Fylde coast, away from the Luftwaffe's assumed targets.

As a six-year-old, I had little idea of the meaning of war, except that it would mean separation from my parents and my younger brother.

The letters and label reproduced – I cherish particularly the label, still complete with its original string, which was hung around my neck during the eventful journey to Blackpool – are undated. But my late mother, Mrs Mark Darlington, believed that it was some time in late August, 1939.

I certainly remember walking with my father, the late Mr John Darlington, over Runcorn Railway Bridge to Widnes Central Station. He carried my white cotton kit-bag containing clothing. My gas-mask was slung over my shoulders. Some mums came along as helpers. Those with younger, pre-school age children followed us to Blackpool a few days later. So, there were tearful farewells before we set off on our great adventure.

When we arrived at Blackpool we were taken to a school and given a carrier-bag of "iron rations". There was chocolate among the goodies, and it began to take on something of a party atmosphere. But then began what proved to be the most traumatic part of the experience: finding a bed for the night.

It had been impressed upon me that whatever happened I must stay with my closest friend and his older sister. It could never have occurred to our respective parents what a problem this would create.

We had all been herded on to buses, and were driven around the side-streets, stopping here and there while landladies came aboard and "selected" their diminutive boarders. Most would, albeit reluctantly, take one. Some would take two, but three proved a problem. Each time one or two of our trio was "picked", the others(s) set up a howl of protest. So, it was quite dark and we were the last on the bus when one landlady took pity on us and we were offloaded.

A few days later, my mother and young brother Robin arrived in Blackpool and tracked us down. Rather against her better judgement, I think, my landlady said she could take them in. For a little while, three-quarters of my family was together again. But it did not work out well.

Eventually, our reluctant hostess declared, with a total lack of subtlety: "I don't mind the kids, it's the mothers…" We had every sympathy with her. After all, it was still the high holiday season, and instead of receiving more affluent boarders, they had to put up with a load of evacuees.

Eventually, mum found us more spacious accommodation with two old ladies, whom we later came to call Arsenic and Old Lace – though if anyone deserved medals they did. They lived in a very splendiferous house. Maiden ladies, and sisters as alike as peas in a pod, they had a number of life-size dolls around the house, beautifully dressed, and obviously looked upon as the children they never had. There was also a huge case of butterflies at the top of the first flight of stairs. It was hardly the ideal setting for two lively youngsters and a mum pining for home.

As time dragged on, and Runcorn was neither invaded nor, at that time, bombed, and we and many other families returned home. We had been away less than three months, but it seemed like a lifetime.

**Michael Henderson**

My life was turned upside down by evacuation, not in 1939 but in 1940. My horizons were narrow, just those of a patriotic young boy at a boarding school in Surrey. Then suddenly a voyage on an ocean liner over the Atlantic in a convoy with other ships, guarded by a battleship and five destroyers and being received by an unknown American family. We were some of the 3,000 British children who enjoyed the amazing generosity freely given by American families.

From school blazer and cap and gartered long stockings to corduroy knickerbockers, dungarees and baseball cap, from boys-only to co-education, from pounds, shillings and pence to the decimal system – there were abrupt changes. But American schools were welcoming. Every morning, American children salute the flag and recite the pledge of allegiance; for us, they thoughtfully placed a Union Jack that we could face. We were soon caught up in American rituals such as Halloween and Thanksgiving and quickly accepted hamburgers and hot dogs.

After three years, my father came on a mission to Washington and phoned up. My comment as I put down the phone was: "Gee, he talks just like in the movies." I can still recite American poetry and sing the college songs we learnt around the campfire in the summer. We returned home on an escort aircraft carrier, and on arrival walked past our mother without recognising her.

Not every overseas evacuee looks back on the time with pleasure. But my younger brother and I, despite the five years family separation, regard the experience as a blessing for which we have always been grateful.

Michael Henderson is the author of *See You After the Duration – the Evacuation of British Children to North America*(PublishAmerica)

**Pam Hobbs**

I was 10 when the order came through for us to evacuate. It was just after Dunkirk in June 1940, and we were living in Leigh-on-Sea, 60 miles across the Channel from occupied France. My older sister Iris had brought a letter home from school saying that all local schools were closed, and urging parents to evacuate their children. We had packed our belongings – a change of clothes, a toothbrush and not much else – in a sandbag. In case we got lost, we had a label around our neck.

We were put on a train to Derbyshire, heading for Charbury. When we arrived, we were taken to the village school, and given hot chocolate and biscuits.

I was a nervous child to start with, but the selection process was humiliating, and that stuck with me in later life. We were asked to stand up and turn around for the locals, who had lined up against a wall to inspect us. I looked a mess. I had fallen down a hill during a stop-off in the train journey and had bandages on my legs.

The pretty girls who looked like Shirley Temple and the strongest boys who would be handy on the farms were taken first. My sister and I were among the last four to be chosen. One little boy had a club foot with a built-up boot, and the other had very thick glasses and a shaven head, presumably because he'd had fleas.

We were chosen by the Simpsons, a stern and religious couple. Joe was a miner, and had been working in the pits since he was 12, and Cissy was a good soul at heart. We had to read the Bible and go to church two or even three times on Sunday.

For all the hardship, I loved being in the countryside. There was a farm next door where I went for milk and would look in on the hens. We used to watch piglets being born. I hadn't seen such things before.

The worst time was at Christmas. We received loads of presents from our parents, things such as snakes and ladders, but Mrs Simpson was rather put out that we had so many. She let us open them but not play with them. Uncle Joe had secretly made us a sleigh, too, and he was thrilled with it. I never saw him smile so much.

I was away for two years, and stayed with three other families before returning home in July 1942. I was scared stiff. After the first wail of the siren, I was off down the Anderson shelter. Because I'd been away for the Blitz, I hadn't adapted to life in the war.