



**THE SECOND WORLD WAR EXPERIENCE CENTRE  
EDUCATION: THE HOME FRONT**

**THE SECOND WORLD WAR EXPERIENCE CENTRE  
EDUCATION  
THE HOME FRONT**

**OVERSEAS EVACUATION OF CHILDREN**



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## THE SECOND WORLD WAR EXPERIENCE CENTRE

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Even before the Second World War began in September 1939 the British government had prepared for the evacuation of over a million vulnerable people from the towns and cities to safe areas in the countryside away from the risk of enemy bombing. These evacuees included school children, pregnant women, women with small children, invalids and the blind. In the years leading up to the war it was widely believed that up to four million people could be killed by enemy attacks on British towns and cities.

In the first two years of the war maybe 10,000 children were evacuated abroad. They went either to relatives or friends or left as part of private schemes, run by businesses such as Hoover and Kodak, to evacuate the children of their British employees.

The Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, South African and American Governments offered to take in British children while the war was on. Though grateful for the generous offer the British Government felt that organising such a large scale overseas evacuation would be impractical and also feared that it might be seen as an admission that Britain was losing the war. Any evacuation overseas would also be dangerous. Evacuees would have to be transported by ship and as few warships could be spared to act as convoy escorts they would be vulnerable to German attack.



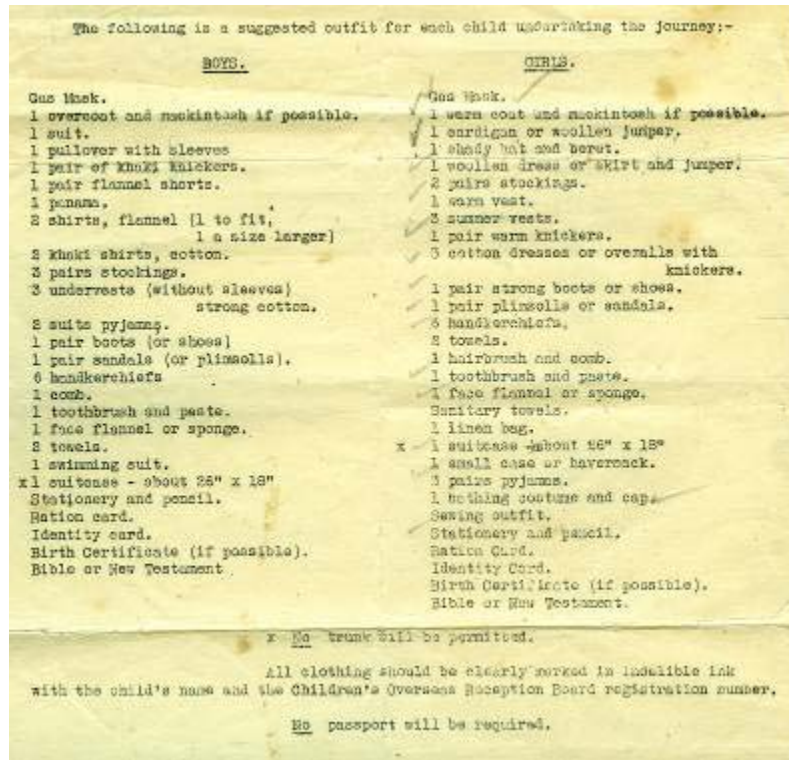
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However in June 1940 France surrendered, allowing German aircraft to begin attacking Britain in large numbers. Many thought it was only a matter of time before Germany invaded. Evacuation overseas was now seen as important, both to keep the children safe and also to reduce the demands on the limited food and resources in Britain.

The Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB) was set up to organise the evacuation. The scheme was voluntary and open to all children between five and sixteen, with the British Government paying the cost of transporting the children. Detailed instructions were issued about the need for secrecy and what clothes and toys could be taken. Parents could not go with their children so adults were provided to escort the children on their trip.

*Information letter sent to parents in 1940 regarding the evacuation of children overseas (LEEW : 2001.923.3.1.3)*



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Within two weeks of the CORB scheme being announced over 200,000 applications had been made. Many parents now faced a very difficult decision. Naturally parents wanted to protect their children and evacuation overseas meant their children could go to school without the threat of bombs or invasion. But evacuation overseas meant sending their children on a long and dangerous journey to a foreign country.

Everyone knew that once the children left Britain, they would not be returning until the war ended and no one could say when that would be.

*Kitty Levey and her sister. 'This picture was taken just before we left for Liverpool. You will notice that my sister and I are carrying our gas masks and labels fastened on our coats. The labels carried our numbers.'* (LEEWW : 2000.784.4.1)



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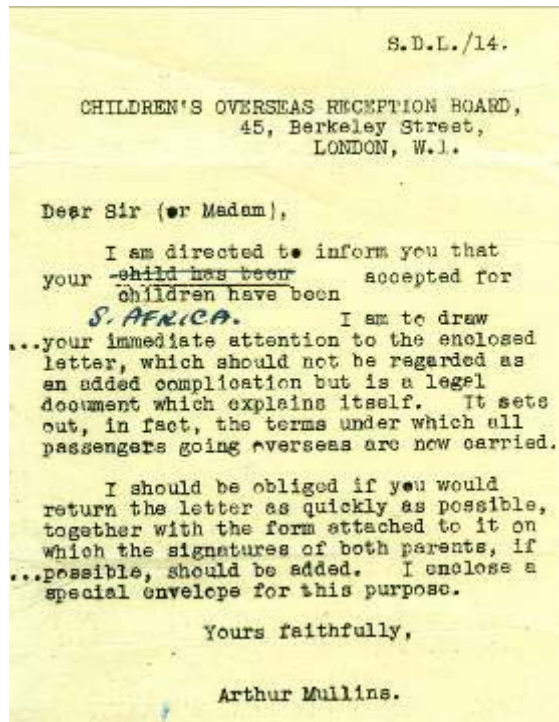
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For many of the children selected for the CORB evacuation scheme the idea of going to live in another country was a huge adventure and very exciting. Their parents, however, must have been very sad and worried about letting their children go off into the unknown. Many children must also have wondered if their parents would still be alive when they returned home at the end of the war. Security around the evacuation convoys meant that families were only told where their children were going a few days beforehand and were then under strict instructions not to tell anyone else.

*Letter confirming evacuees destination as South Africa (LEEWW : 2001.923.3.2)*



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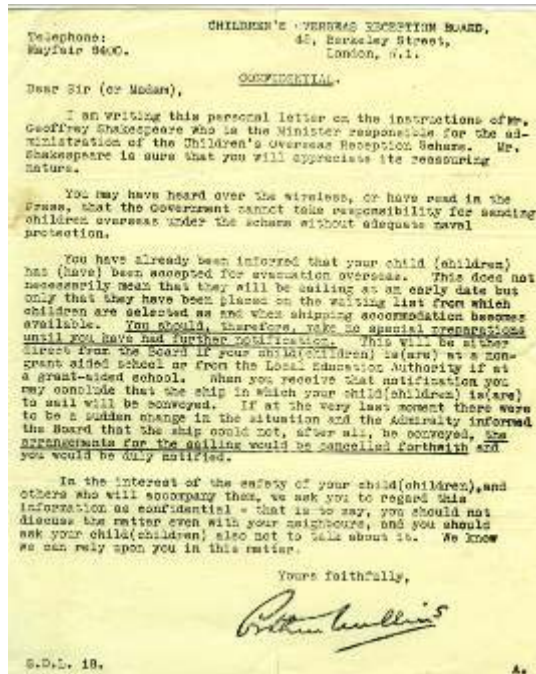


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*Letter from CORB confirming evacuation – do not talk of sailing details (LEEW: 2001.923.3.3)*



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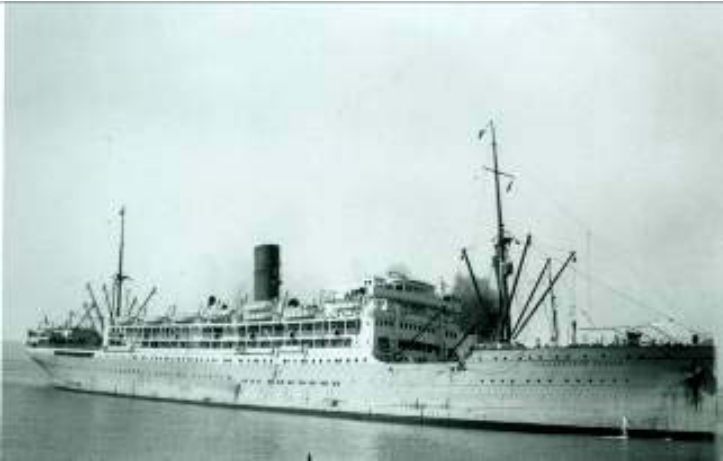


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The story of the children evacuated on the SS 'Llanstephan Castle' is typical. The evacuee children reported to their nearest railway station, meeting up with the other evacuee children and the adults who would look after them on their journey. Escort Madge Wear recalls the excitement when she met her group for the first time at the station.

*Black and white photograph of SS Llanstephan Castle (LEEW : 2001.1331.4.8)*



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*Madge Wear and boys on deck (LEEWW : 2001.1331.4.2)*



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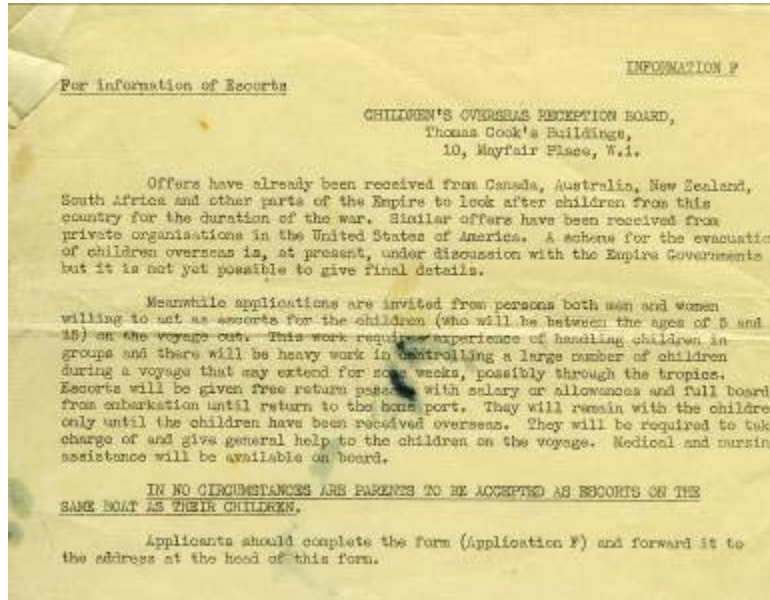
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*Information letter issued by the Children's Overseas Reception Board to adult escorts of evacuee children, 'For Information of Escorts' (LEWW : 2001.923.2.6)*



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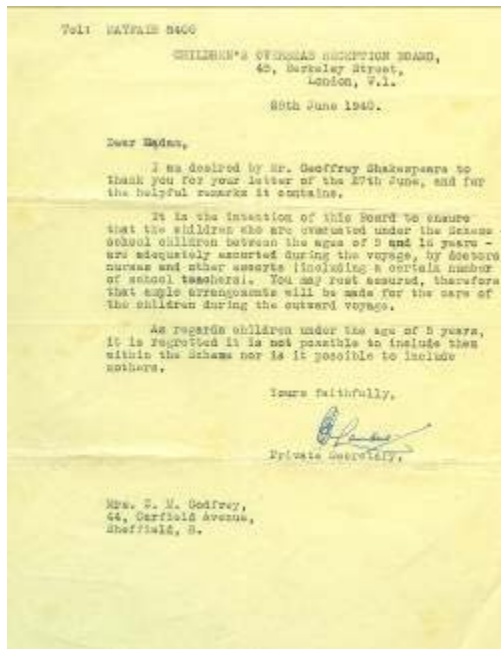
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*Letter outlining care of children on voyage (LEEWW : 2001.923.3.4)*



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Arriving at the port from which their ship would sail there might be a delay as the convoy formed and the ships waited for the safest time to sail. The children then faced a dangerous journey of several weeks at sea, depending on where they were. Those travelling to South Africa on the SS 'Llanstephan Castle', which sailed from Liverpool on 24 August 1940, recall how much fun they had during the voyage, despite the danger.

*Children in swimming pool on the deck of the SS Llanstephan Castle (LEEWW : 2001.1331.4.5)*



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In fact the children were in a great deal of danger during their voyage. U-Boats (German submarines) were attacking and sinking British ships wherever they could. Only a few weeks before the SS 'Llanstephan Castle' sailed a U-Boat had sunk the Dutch ship 'Volendam' carrying 320 children. Luckily no one was killed. Travelling in convoy the SS 'Llanstephan Castle' made great efforts to avoid U-Boats, but at the same time practised emergency lifeboat drills.

*Children on the deck of the SS 'Llanstephan Castle' wearing life jackets (LEEWW : 2001.1331.4.6)*



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At sea at the same time as the SS 'Llanstephan Castle' the evacuee ship SS 'City of Benares' was sunk on the night of the 17<sup>th</sup> September 1940 by submarine U-48. Of the ninety children on board heading for safety in Canada only thirteen survived. This news was kept from the children, but Madge Wear and the other escorts on the SS 'Llanstephan Castle' were told of the sinking and of the grave danger they were in.

In Britain news of the sinking of the SS 'City of Benares' was greeted with shock. Plans to evacuate more children overseas were immediately cancelled, with the children waiting to sail kept on their ships in port. It was several anxious days before parents found out that their children were safe and sound. The entire CORB scheme was cancelled soon after.



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The children on the SS 'Llanstephan Castle' finally arrived safely in Cape Town. They were warmly welcomed treated like celebrities. Food was plentiful, if sometimes strange, compared to Britain where nearly everything seemed to be rationed or in short supply. The children even got to see animals they had only ever seen before in books or in a zoo. However after the initial excitement of arriving in a new country it could take time for the children to get used to their new foster homes but most adapted happily to their new homes.

*Kitty Levey, her sister and a friend at their foster home in South Africa. 'Margaret and I with Pam Wills on the stoop of the family's cottage at Isipingo. We used to live the simple life there away from the bright lights of Durban.'* (LEEWW : 2000.784.4.4)



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*Children on the deck of the SS 'Llanstephan Castle', behind them Simonstown, South Africa (LEEWW : 2001.1331.4.7)*



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*Kitty Levey and her sister arrive in Cape Town. 'As you may image, we were all very excited at the prospect of reaching the end of our sea journey.'* (LEEWW : 2000.784.4.2)



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About 3000 children were evacuated overseas as part of the CORB scheme. Most children were evacuated to Canada and America but over a thousand were sent to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. At the end of the war in 1945 most evacuee children returned home to a Britain very different from the one they had left in 1940. Many had not seen their parents in five years and both they and their parents had changed a lot in that time. Most children went happily back to their old lives, but for some things had changed too much. John Beswetherick, for example, felt more South African than British and as soon as he could he returned to live in South Africa. All of the children evacuated abroad were affected by their time overseas with memories that would stay with them for the rest of their lives.



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We had a lot of air raid shelters then. There was one near London Bridge and that was bombed and there were a lot of people killed there ... When I took those children out to South Africa ... I was half in favour of them doing it and half thinking that it was a very silly thing to do. The children were away 5 years. They never saw their parents. They came back different children ... Although I would have preferred them going somewhere in the British Isles. Where at least the parents could keep in touch with them."

**Brief Biography**

Born in Streatham in London Madge Wear worked in publishing before the war. In 1940 she served as an escort to evacuee children sent to South Africa on board the SS 'Llanstephan Castle' as part of the Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB) scheme. Returning to London she worked as a welfare officer helping to re-house people made homeless by bombing.

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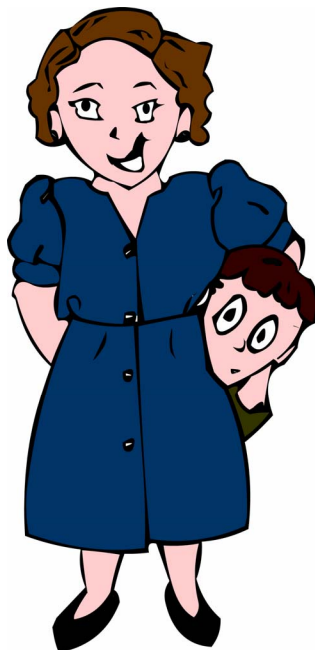


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"The four Dominions (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa) had asked our Royal Family and Government to send them any of our children, who lived in vulnerable places, to be taken care of by them for the duration, in safety. In two weeks over 21,000 had applied. It must have been a nightmare who or who should not go. Schools had to be notified."

"The buses and coaches came from all directions, disgorging children clutching suitcases, gas masks, a special toy with the little ones, odd parcels, and all the smaller ones looking a bit bewildered. The older ones trying to look confident. I was allocated 14 boys aged 5 to 14, and we all got to our respective places in the dormitory. I had to check they'd brought all the necessary items. Anything omitted I rushed out the next day to purchase."

#### Brief Biography

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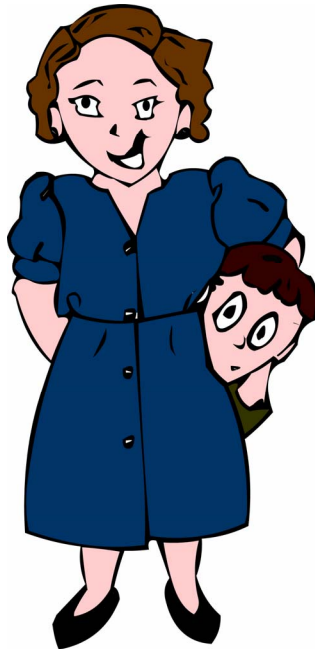
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[On sailing to South Africa on the Llanstephan Castle] "We started to go up through Greenland to get us out of the way of the U boats and then we started to go over to Canada and of course we zigzagged, which the boys all came rushing in and asked me why we were zigzagging and I didn't want to worry them. I made up the most ridiculous stories about why we were zigzagging and they looked at me rather pitifully. As though they knew I was pulling their leg."

**Brief Biography**

Born in Streatham in London Madge Wear worked in publishing before the war. In 1940 she served as an escort to evacuee children sent to South Africa on board the SS 'Llanstephan Castle' as part of the Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB) scheme. Returning to London she worked as a welfare officer helping to re-house people made homeless by bombing.

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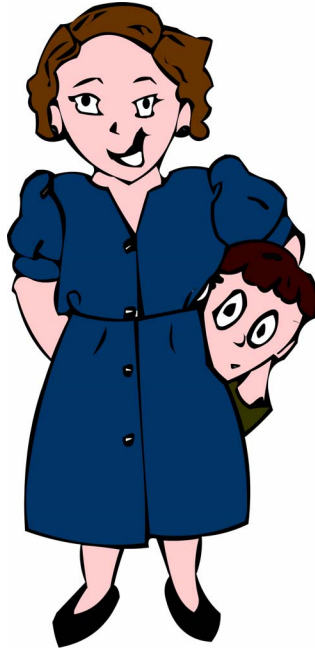


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"Anyway, we were in the mid-Atlantic when the Captain called all the escorts to his cabin and he said, "I have got some very serious news for you. We are surrounded by U boats and 'The City of Benares' has just been sunk off Canada with the loss of so many children and so many escorts."

"He [the Captain] said the children must know and he said we have got to put them in life jackets all day and we are going to have lifeboat drill every morning. We had to get them into the lifeboats and we were allocated a member of the crew and an officer to each boat and we managed it in the end in 3 minutes and we did it for quite a while. The children thought it was wonderful but it was a very awesome thought."

#### Brief Biography

Born in Streatham in London Madge Wear worked in publishing before the war. In 1940 she served as an escort to evacuee children sent to South Africa on board the SS 'Llanstephan Castle' as part of the Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB) scheme. Returning to London she worked as a welfare officer helping to re-house people made homeless by bombing.

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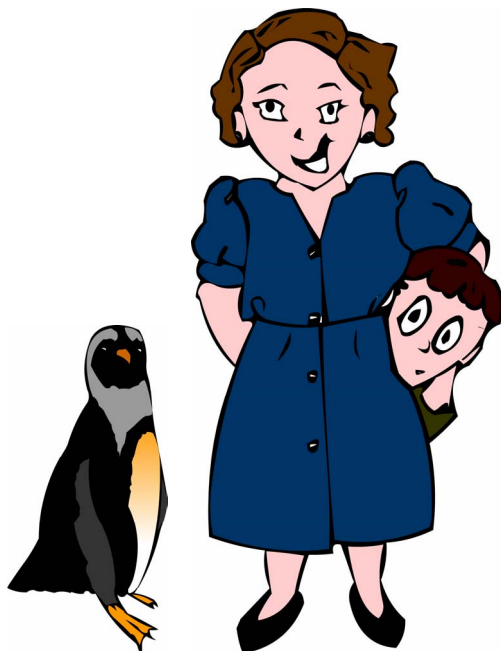


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"We arrived in Cape Town to a magnificent welcome. People were all shouting and lining the docks and all the ships were tooting ... we were taken to the Town Hall and had a speech by the mayor and so on. All the dignitaries and the children were allowed to go and pick some fruit in the garden which the children thought was absolutely marvellous. They hadn't seen fruit like this all the war. It was wonderful for them and then some of them were taken to a Jewish orphanage but there were quite a few who didn't know to whom they were going and this bothered me dreadfully."

"I remember taking a few children for a walk on the beach whilst they were waiting allocation, and to their joy a penguin came out of the sea, and waddled up the beach. They were thrilled, as I was, and held its flippers."

#### Brief Biography

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“Our parents were concerned for our safety and as the Overseas Evacuation Scheme was advertised in the local paper, they applied for the four older children to join. Only children aged 5-16 were eligible, Heather was too young. At the time I was nine, Noelle was eleven, Felicity thirteen and Michael fifteen. We were given a list of required clothing. This list seems to require very few clothes by today's standards but we still had to have some new things. Everything had to have our family evacuation code number on, A14389. We used up an awful lot of marking ink and stitching on the tapes was very boring. Interestingly, there were no boy's underpants listed, they were considered to be an unnecessary luxury. I remember showing off at school telling my friends that I was going to South Africa, and at the time I thought it was quite exciting. We were not allowed to tell anyone when we would be going, and no-one had any idea of the port of embarkation. Remember, *Walls have Ears* said the posters.”

#### Brief Biography

The fourth of five children Janet C Frost (née Godfrey) grew up in Sheffield, South Yorkshire. During the war her father, a veteran of the First World War, served as a Special Constable. In September 1940 Janet and her brothers and sisters were due to be evacuated to South Africa but this was cancelled at the last minute.

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"We were all ready to go on 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1940 (our parents had been given four days notice of this), when they received a letter that morning, telling them that we would after all be departing on 14<sup>th</sup> and that they would be told which station, and at what time later. ... Somehow they were told to get us to the LMS station for 8.45am, on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1940, duly labelled with a tie-on label attached to each one of us. The final sentence of the letter states IT IS VERY UNDERSIRABLE TO TALK ABOUT THESE DETAILED ARRANGEMENTS IN PUBLIC."

**Brief Biography**

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"We were handed over to our escort at the station with the other Sheffield children. There were only eight of us altogether. We said goodbye to our parents and to Heather, and the train steamed out of the station. At the time neither we nor our parents knew where we were going. It turned out we were heading for Glasgow. That was the moment when I got worried. It had been fun up till then, now it was for real that we were leaving behind everything we knew and loved, our parents, our baby sister, our home, our school, our friends. We were off to South Africa not just over the Pennines to visit relatives. I can remember thinking "If we are going away to prevent us being killed, what would happen to us if our parents and Heather were killed? Would we ever come back to England? And who would look after us then?"

**Brief Biography**

The fourth of five children Janet C Frost (née Godfrey) grew up in Sheffield, South Yorkshire. During the war her father, a veteran of the First World War, served as a Special Constable. In September 1940 Janet and her brothers and sisters were due to be evacuated to South Africa but this was cancelled at the last minute.

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**THE SECOND WORLD WAR EXPERIENCE CENTRE**  
**EDUCATION: THE HOME FRONT**

**Overseas Evacuation of Children: Janet Frost**

**Biography Page 4 of 4**



"We were ten days in Glasgow camping in a school, before we boarded the ship, the SS Llandaff Castle. For two days, to our surprise, we were still in harbour. We had Lifeboat drill again, and explored the ship again, finding a minute swimming pool, which was completely dry, and a play room. Our cabin steward made our beds and brought us clean towels. This was indeed a new experience. On the third day we were assembled in the ballroom to be addressed by a man from London. I believe it was Mr. Geoffrey Shakespeare. He told us that the government had decided that no more children were to be sent overseas and that we were to return home. We were not told that only that week a ship of evacuees going to Canada had been sunk. I believe our parents heard on the radio that a ship with evacuees had been sunk, but it did not give the destination of that ship. They had no idea that we were still in Glasgow."

**Brief Biography**

The fourth of five children Janet C Frost (née Godfrey) grew up in Sheffield, South Yorkshire. During the war her father, a veteran of the First World War, served as a Special Constable. In September 1940 Janet and her brothers and sisters were due to be evacuated to South Africa but this was cancelled at the last minute.

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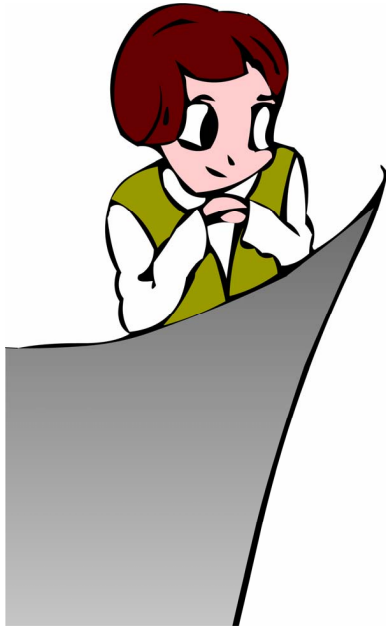


## THE SECOND WORLD WAR EXPERIENCE CENTRE

### EDUCATION: THE HOME FRONT

#### Overseas Evacuation of Children: Kitty Levey

Biography Page 1 of 3



“Before long we heard of a scheme to send children from Britain to the Dominions and the USA. After much heart-searching our parents decided to let us go though none of us thought for a moment that we would be chosen. When we heard that we were our parents had second thoughts but my sister and I persuaded them to let us go. I had always longed to travel far afield and was very excited at the thought of going to South Africa. Now, I feel slightly shocked that I felt that way and I am very much aware of parents’ feelings. I think it would have broken my heart to have let my own children go, yet the feeling of adventure and excitement was quite common among evacuees so I was by no means alone in feeling the way I did.”

“We sailed in convoy for a few days then one morning I went on deck to find that we were alone with no other ship in sight. While we were at sea and unknown to us at the time, a ship taking evacuees to North America was torpedoed with great loss of life. Later we were told of this disaster and I remember one of the ship’s officers telling me that it had been a ‘near thing’ for us. I have often thought of those poor children and told myself ‘there but for the grace of God.’”

#### Brief Biography

Kitty Levey (née Mather) was evacuated as a child from Lancashire to South Africa on board the SS 'Llanstephan Castle' in 1940, as part of the Commonwealth Overseas Reception Board (CORB) scheme. She lived in Durban, South Africa, before joining the WRNS (Women’s Royal Naval Service) and serving as a meteorologist at Cape Town and Simonstown.

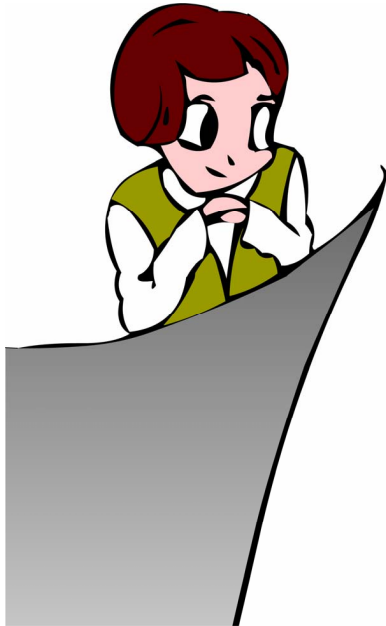


## THE SECOND WORLD WAR EXPERIENCE CENTRE

### EDUCATION: THE HOME FRONT

#### Overseas Evacuation of Children: Kitty Levey

Biography Page 2 of 3



“We had a wonderful time on the ‘Llanstephan Castle’. There were parties and concerts and all the fun of ‘crossing the line.’ We even had a few lessons and were taught some Afrikaans words ... My happiest memories are of the peaceful hours sitting at the stern of the ship talking and watching the water. I have only to shut my eyes to feel I am there all over again. I found my first boy friend on the ‘Llanstephan’ though I felt slightly guilty as my grandmother in her last letter before I left had told me to be a good girl and not go out with boys!”

“My group was taken to the Cape Jewish Orphanage where we were given a very kind and warm welcome. I remember the wonderful party at Westbrooke and being taken on drives to see the sights of Cape Town and the surrounding countryside. We were interviewed by the press and our photographs appeared in local papers. We felt like celebrities.”

#### Brief Biography

Kitty Levey (née Mather) was evacuated as a child from Lancashire to South Africa on board the SS 'Llanstephan Castle' in 1940, as part of the Commonwealth Overseas Reception Board (CORB) scheme. She lived in Durban, South Africa, before joining the WRNS (Women's Royal Naval Service) and serving as a meteorologist at Cape Town and Simonstown.

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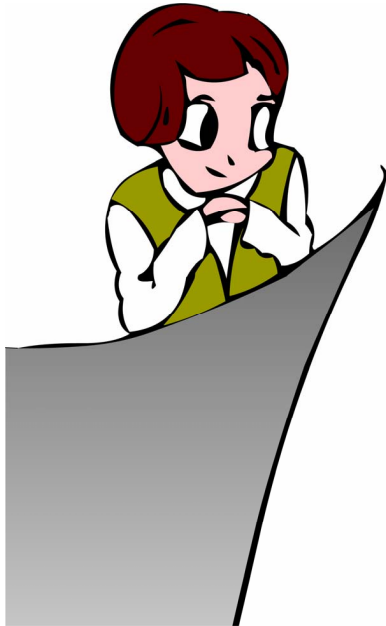


## THE SECOND WORLD WAR EXPERIENCE CENTRE

### EDUCATION: THE HOME FRONT

#### Overseas Evacuation of Children: Kitty Levey

Biography Page 3 of 3



“Unfortunately we did not settle well with the family chosen to take us in. Eventually we were moved, much to our relief, and no doubt the relief of our foster parents. We went to live with Marty and Pop Wills and they gave us the security we needed, treating us as their own children. They lived in a lovely large old fashioned house surrounded by gardens and a tennis court.

In some ways it was an unconventional background. Life was never dull or humdrum. Though I was to experience periods of stress, I feel I owe that family a good deal and my guardians in particular had a lasting influence on my life. We kept in touch until they died some years back.”

“My time as an evacuee had changed my life completely. Such was the impression it created I might have been in South Africa for much longer than the six years I was there.”

#### Brief Biography

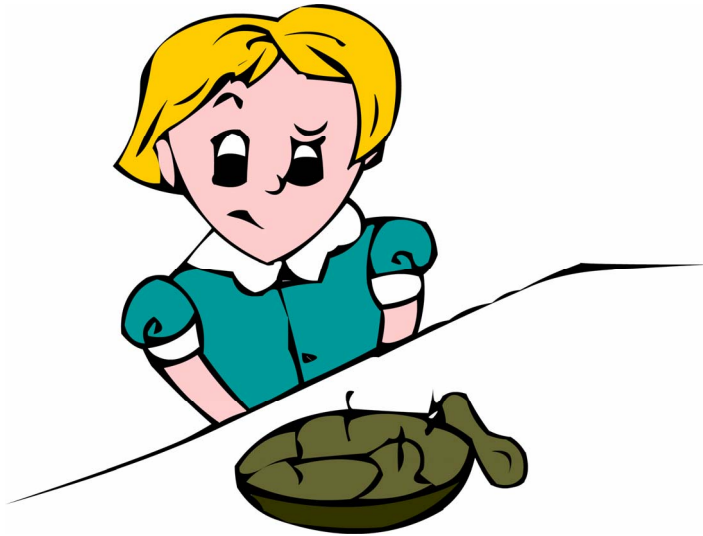
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**THE SECOND WORLD WAR EXPERIENCE CENTRE**  
**EDUCATION: THE HOME FRONT**

**Overseas Evacuation of Children: Elizabeth Glynn**

**Biography Page 1 of 1**



“I don’t think the fear of air raids was the deciding factor for my parents. Mother had been a nurse in London during the First World War, and had nursed the French and Belgian female refugees who had been brutally assaulted by German soldiers. She was determined that this wouldn’t happen to her daughters.”

“Never a dull moment ... We had frequent concerts, the chief ‘act’ being songs by The Lancashire Lasses who gave us renderings of ‘On Ilkely Moor Ba Tat’ and ‘A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square.’”

“We were served stewed guavas for supper on one occasion. We looked at them askance until the bravest tried them, after which they met with enthusiastic approval.”

**Brief Biography**

Elizabeth Glynn (née Cook) was evacuated from New Maldon to South Africa as part of the British governments Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB) in 1940. Living with her foster family in Brakpan in the Transvaal she left school and trained as a secretary, before enlisting in the South African WAAF in 1943 as a meteorologist. She returned to England after the end of the war in 1945.



**THE SECOND WORLD WAR EXPERIENCE CENTRE**  
**EDUCATION: THE HOME FRONT**

**Overseas Evacuation of Children: John Beswetherick**

**Biography Page 1 of 2**



“At Brentwood school notice was given of an overseas evacuation scheme for children of 15 years and under. My immediate thoughts were “Johnny boy, this is your overseas trip.” To me, being an immature schoolboy, this was to be a 6 months jolly. Which turned out to be 10 years before I returned to England.

“With the papers in hand I approached my parents who were a little doubtful at the idea, but as my father had been a teacher in Durban (South Africa) before the First World War and had joined the South African Army on the outbreak of war I was determined to see what South Africa was all about. Eventually the documents were signed and notice came to leave the country in 8 days, in 5 days we were on the water to South Africa.”

“It was emotional for the family but I was too excited to feel it.”

**Brief Biography**

John Beswetherick was evacuated to Bloemfontein, South Africa from his school in Brentwood, Essex, in 1940. He joined the South African Air Force (SAAF) in 1943, shuttling troops to North Africa and spraying Tsetse flies in North Zululand. After the war he studied pharmacy and remained a member of the South African Auxiliary Air force until 1983.

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## THE SECOND WORLD WAR EXPERIENCE CENTRE

### EDUCATION: THE HOME FRONT

#### Overseas Evacuation of Children: John Beswetherick

Biography Page 2 of 2



“After 3 days woke up to find ourselves alone, not a pleasant thought as our old tub was only making 9 knots and 84 kids were drowned on the way to Canada. Submarines could make 9 knots under water.”

“The South African government offered me a passage back to England but as my parents by then had split up and I was now familiar with the South African scene, plus having made many friends, I decided to remain in South Africa. The years between 14 and 20 are very impressive in a man’s life and this may have influenced my decision ...”

#### **Brief Biography**

John Beswetherick was evacuated to Bloemfontein, South Africa from his school in Brentwood, Essex, in 1940. He joined the South African Air Force (SAAF) in 1943, shuttling troops to North Africa and spraying Tsetse flies in North Zululand. After the war he studied pharmacy and remained a member of the South African Auxiliary Air force until 1983.

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