



FACTSHEET 2

Maria's Big Adventure as a World War II Evacuee

Evacuation = moving people to a safe place, usually out of big towns and cities.

Read the story about Maria Davis's wartime adventure and fill in the gaps, using the following words.

poor - buses - emergency - bonfire - military - volunteer - mask - noise - bombers - railway - countryside - Luftwaffe - identity - haversack - rural - Blitz - ceremony - evacuated - recruited - lavatory

On 1 September 1939 Germany invaded Poland. Two days later Britain declared war on Germany. Operation Pied Piper immediately began to evacuate children from big cities threatened by German , particularly London, Liverpool, Glasgow and Sheffield.

The government's evacuation scheme moved 1.5 million people to the safety of the during World War II. Why the countryside? Because German leader Adolf Hitler wanted to bomb factories and targets, not farms and cows!

The first stage of the evacuation was by train. The eventual destination of children from London depended on which of the main stations was nearest to their homes. In Maria Davis's case, that meant Liverpool Street Station, from where she was evacuated eastward to the small village of Wivenhoe in Essex.

Evacuation could be a frightening experience for children like six-year-old Maria. As a first-year schoolgirl, she was one of the youngest children to be without her mother.

When Maria put on her Sunday best clothes to go to the station with her mum Beryl, it all seemed like a big adventure, but when they arrived at Liverpool Street the and confusion was terrible. Some children were even put on the wrong train.

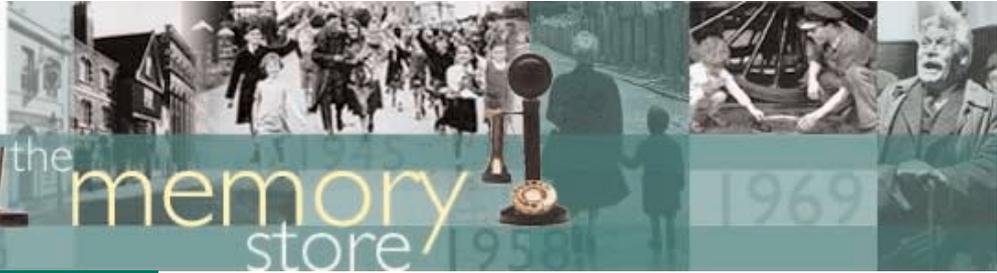
"I was heavily loaded like a soldier in full marching kit," remembers Maria. "I had my gas in a white tin box and a stuffed with sandwiches, apples and sticking plasters. Brown paper parcels hung from my belt like grenades – filled with sandwiches, spare socks in case my feet got wet and a mackintosh cape. In my pockets were labels displaying my school, home address and destination."

Luckily, Maria and a group of friends from her school in Stepney got on the right train, and arrived safely at Colchester station after a two-hour journey. At Colchester, the children were picked up by and taken to their destination in nearby Wivenhoe. Maria cried as her friends were dropped off one by one, but calmed down when she saw the smiling faces of Mr and Mrs Richards, the couple who were going to take her in.

Like Maria, most of the evacuees were from areas like London's East End. Children sometimes arrived dirty, hungry and homesick to discover that posh families would only accept children who were neat and tidy. As the Richards were farmers, they didn't mind another mucky face!

"Everything was so clean in my room," says Maria. "I was even given flannels and toothbrushes - I'd never cleaned my teeth until then. Hot water came from the tap and there was a upstairs. At home in London, the only toilet was in the garden! When I first arrived, Mrs Richards would read me Famous Five stories by Enid Blyton to help me drop off to sleep."

Maria stayed in Wivenhoe for nearly six years until the war finally ended. Her parents missed her dearly but they were happy she was far away from German bombs, especially



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Maria's Big Adventure as a World War II Evacuee (continued)

during the , a terrible period beginning in September 1940 when the German bombed London non-stop.

Maria's father Fred was working as a night watchman when the war broke out, but as a former miner he was soon to work in the Kent minefields as younger miners went off to war.

As for Beryl, she held on to her day job as a cleaner at John Lewis, but in the evenings she did her part for the war effort as a for the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS).

During the Blitz, she was asked to run a tea car for soldiers on Platform 1 at Liverpool Street Station. She was supplied with a tin hat, a gas mask and an card. Gradually this service was taken over by volunteers – some using a saucepan lid as protection because tin hats were running out.

On 8 May 1945 children in Britain celebrated the end of the war against Germany with massive street parties. Maria helped the villagers of Wivenhoe build a and burn a model of Adolf Hitler.

In 1945, Maria returned home to Bethnal Green, now a twelve-year-old not-quite-so-little girl. She would never forget her childhood years spent in

Wivenhoe, and would always keep in touch with Mr and Mrs Richards, her second "mum and dad".

As a grown-up, she would regularly take summer holidays with her partner Bobby and daughter Shelley at a caravan park in Clacton, just up the road from Wivenhoe.

And it was with great pride that 71-year-old Maria attended her granddaughter Angie Gibson's graduation in 2004, not just because Angie was the first member of the family to study at university, but because she did so at Essex University in Wivenhoe, the village that was home from home for a little city girl from London all those years ago.