

Erith Evacuees and the 'Saturday Penny'

Operation Pied Piper

In the summer of 1938 the Ministry of Health began plans to evacuate schoolchildren and other 'priority classes' from large crowded urban areas that were at risk from air attack. Britain was divided into 'evacuation,' 'neutral' and 'reception' areas. On the 1st September, two days before the declaration of War, the Government's evacuation scheme, 'Operation Pied Piper' commenced.



Aerial Photograph of Erith, 1947 (BLSAC Photographic Collection)

Evacuating Erith

Despite many months of protest by Erith Borough Council, the Ministry of Health designated the Erith district as a 'neutral' area. The Ministry argued that there was "insufficient accommodation to deal with children ...from certain vulnerable areas not now included for evacuation." Finally, on the 2nd August 1939, the Ministry relented and decided to include Erith in their plans for evacuation. On Monday 4th September Erith schoolchildren, accompanied by their teachers, were transported by train to various reception areas in villages in Kent.

Borough of Erith Government evacuation scheme notice, 1939 (JWW Collection)



Ministry of Health evacuation poster, 1939 (BLSAC Poster Collection)

School children evacuees

By 20th September 1939 a total of 1,774 Erith school children had been evacuated. Some parents chose not to evacuate their children rather than return to Erith, which according the Council was in imminent danger of being bombed.



List of reception areas for Erith schools, 1939 (JWW collection)



Bedonwell school evacuees, 1939 (BLSAC Photographic Collection)



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The Saturday Penny

On the Saturday following the evacuation of Erith schoolchildren, the Mayor of Erith, Reverend John Wells Wilkinson paid for each child to receive a penny to spend on what they wished.



Letter by Head Teacher of West Street Junior Girls School to Mayor John Wells Wilkinson (JWW Collection)



John Wells Wilkinson, Erith Borough Mayor 1938 (BLSAC Photographic Collection)

Letters of Appreciation

In appreciation for their 'Saturday Penny', the Mayor received many 'thank you' letters from evacuated children and teachers. In contrast to the teacher's reports on the difficulties they were experiencing in the small village schools, the children's letters are upbeat and describe the happy time they enjoyed in rural Kent.



'Thank you' letters by Erith School Children to Mayor John Wells Wilkinson, 1939 (JWW Collection)

Education

The small village schools could not accommodate both the local children and the Erith evacuees. Therefore, classrooms had to be shared. The Head of Northumberland Infants School wrote in the school log book on 25th September 1939, "Half time attendance began, the local children attending the morning session, the evacuees during the afternoon, and activities out of doors being carried on during the morning."



Bedonwell School evacuees at West Malling School, 1939 (BLSAC Photographic Collection)



Bedonwell Junior School evacuees at Ditton, 1939 (BLSAC Photographic Collection)

Returning to Erith

Within weeks of being evacuated to rural Kent, Erith Council received "numerous applications" from families asking for the return of their children. Erith's Education Committee believed this was due to the fact that there was "no hostile action" and that there were "certain difficulties" in billeting children in the reception areas. Not wanting any children to return home, the Government refused to let local Councils open schools. Schools did not officially re-open until 1st April 1940.



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