



Letter 2: The Evacuees

Our second letter is written by Margaret Hurst who lives in Mill Lane just around the corner from the bakery. She takes great pride in her spotless kitchen, her spotless reputation, and her spotless temper — though the last of those is about to be tested.

Margaret's letter is dated 2nd September 1939. It's one day before Neville Chamberlain will announce that Britain is at war, but in preparation for that possibility the evacuation of vulnerable civilians out of towns and cities was put into action.

Margaret is writing to her cousin Betty in Somerset.

She writes:

My Dear Betty,

I hope all is well with you in Weston. Things have changed a lot here in a very short space of time. One of the biggest of those changes is that I'm no longer living on my own. They've gone and billeted three children on me — three! And all boys. I'd barely got to the Halt when the train pulled up at the platform, full of faces peering out like potatoes in a sack.

Of course, they all looked pretty bewildered when they stepped off the train but Mr Hazel did his best to give them a warm and reassuring welcome to our village. There certainly was a noticeable difference in quite a few of those faces when they saw him. They were all lined up along the platform and we waited for the train to move on before joining them. Mrs Butterworth, I found out, had been appointed as the Billeting Officer for Alton Haypun by the County Council. "You're down for three evacuees, Mrs Hurst," I told her quite clearly that my spare room only sleeps two. Then, Mr Richardson, our ARP Warden who thinks he's Winston Churchill's right hand, suddenly appeared from nowhere and said, "Good — because you've got three." Then he marched off with Mrs Butterworth before I could argue. Truth be told, with some ingenuity, the room can fit three.

Well, out they came: Stanley, ten, Harold, nine, and little Ronnie, who claims to be eight but looks more like a very determined seven. All from Stepney. Each one clutching a gas mask, a paper label, and a small suitcase. I've seen evacuees in the papers, all rosy-cheeked

and smiling. Well, as we stopped at the front door they looked like pickled onions – pale, crumpled, and quite sure they'd been sent to the Moon.

Mrs Pearson said we must "make them feel at home." I ask you, Betty, how does one make London children feel at home in Alton Haypun? The only train they'd ever seen was underground, and they didn't know what to make of the stillness of the village. It must be a huge shock to them coming here.

Still, we made a start of things. They left their cases by the scullery and I showed them where to wash up before tea. They stared at the pump handle as if it might bite. Stanley asked me where the tap was. "You're looking at it," I said. A second later He pulled the handle down like his life depended on it and poor Harold was soaked head to foot. Ronnie laughed so hard I thought his eyes were going to pop out. What a splendid start.

For tea I gave them bread and jam and a bit of sponge cake I'd been saving. You'd think I'd handed out gold dust when they saw that cake in front of them. Stanley ate it hurriedly in silence as if he was worried the other two might go after his if they finished theirs first. Harold was much more measured and ate it calmly enjoying every bit of it, and Ronnie started by breaking his piece apart and trying to build something, before giving up and rushing it all down.

Time was getting on so we went upstairs to unpack their cases. Harold had a string bag with two marbles inside, a broken yo-yo, and a photograph of his cat "Porridge." I'll ask Mr Carter to have a look at the yo-yo for me. Stanley had a letter from his Mum. He asked me to read it to them. I read it aloud but had to hold my tears back. It said, "Be brave and be good my dear boy. We will be together again very soon. Your father and I love you very much." Ronnie's note was much more direct, written in blue pencil on the back of a laundry list. It said "Mind your manners and do as you're told. Love mum."

They found bedtime very difficult. The stillness they'd felt when they first arrived hit even harder. And they've never seen so much dark in their lives. I reassured them the blackout meant safety, but Harold was convinced Hitler was hiding in the lane. Ronnie kept asking if the "bombs knew where we were." I kept a candle stub burning in their room until they fell asleep, then sat a while watching them. Poor mites. London's so far away, yet it seems to have followed them all the same.

This morning, they were up and ready for the day before seven, which was a surprise given their long day yesterday. When I came down, the kitchen looked like a blizzard had hit. There was flour on the dresser, The mixing bowl was upside down and looked like the beginnings of a snowman, and there was a perfect trail of little footprints all the way to the stairs. I nearly fainted. Stanley said proudly, "We've made you breakfast." It was half a loaf of dough and

an egg on top. Bless them! I smiled and told them we'd better start with porridge instead.

As you know, it doesn't take long for word to get round our little village and everybody now knows I've taken in three boys. Suddenly, everyone has remembered where I live. Mrs Larkin from the post office came by first thing just to see how we were getting on. She said the evacuees "bring a bit of life to the place," but she didn't have to scrub treacle off the wall, did she!

Nevermind, I can't help but find joy in having the three of them around. They follow me everywhere, like ducklings, and call me "Missus." Ronnie, being the youngest, insists on holding my hand when we go out. We popped down to the bakery this afternoon and when we passed the war memorial, Stanley stopped and said, "Did soldiers from here fight in the last one?" I told him about our father. He nodded and said, "Then people here will know what to do if war starts again."

I wanted to tell him grown-ups don't always know what to do, but instead I told him we'd all know what to do and everything will be fine. I hope I'm right.

I must close now. The boys are in bed, snoring like three steam locomotives, and I'm so tired I could sleep standing up. But before I do, I just wanted to say this: I didn't know if I'd like it much having evacuees stay in our house, but perhaps they're just what I needed. There's no room for grumbling when three small faces look at you as if you've hung the moon.

If this war's going to be long, at least it won't be lonely.

I hope to hear from you soon.

Your loving sister,

Margaret

That was Mrs Margaret Hurst, a reluctant hostess who, like so many across Britain, found her heart expanding faster than her patience.

On the 1st September 1939, 'Operation Pied Piper' the codename given to the evacuations, began. In the space of just three days, one and a half million people including children, mothers, teachers, pregnant women, carers, and people with disabilities were evacuated to reception areas – areas considered much safer against the threat of aerial attacks. Alton Haypun was one of them.

The evacuees arrived clutching gas masks, labels and small suitcases, some never having seen a cow, a field, or a dark sky before.

Many hosts were like Margaret: unprepared, nervous, and suddenly responsible for young strangers. But over time, those strangers became part of village and family life, joining the school, helping on farms, and singing in church choirs. Bonds were formed that lasted long after the war.

Margaret's flour-dusted kitchen might have been chaos, but it was the beginning of a story repeated up and down Britain: ordinary people learning how to care for one another in extraordinary times.

This is the second of our letters from Alton Haypun At War.

In our next letter, we'll hear from Mrs Pearson, the vicar's wife about how the village reacted to the news that Britain was once again at war.