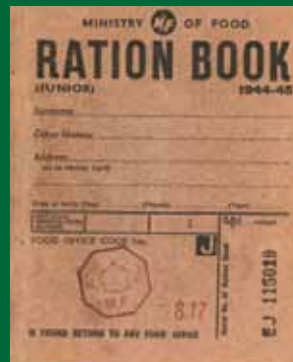




1. Evacuation



2. Gas Masks & ID Cards



3. Rationing & Memories



4. Questions & Answers

The following is Part 1 of a transcript produced from a tape recording made in 1983, when Margery Kelsey (née Chambers) spoke to a class of children at Pyrford Junior School in Surrey, about her experiences during the Second World War.

Part 1 (of 4) - Evacuation

Margery Kelsey: "I was very interested to see you all in the hall this morning, with your labels, your gas masks and your cases; and I must say it brought back lots of memories of fifty, over fifty years ago, when I was a school girl.

We knew that there was going to be a war and it had been decided that all the children should be taken away from the big cities and towns all over the country because they were expecting bombing - and you've recently seen probably on your television what bombing's like, haven't you, in the Gulf War.

So..... we were told..... to be at school at 9 o'clock, with our gas masks, with our label. On our label it was written, our name and our address and the name of our school and the schools all had a number. We were also told to bring a change of clothing in our cases. Now some children, not in my school but in the inner London cities, didn't have cases, they brought their things in paper carrier bags. However, we all assembled; oh and we were also told to have our lunch, a packed-lunch, for the day. So we waited and were told to line up with all our teachers in the forms, and we set off for the local station."

"Now I lived in a suburb of London and I went to school in Greenwich, in southeast London. So we walked about ten minutes to Greenwich station. All lined up and waited for the train and then got on it. Nobody knew where we were going - not even the teachers. We didn't have to change trains - it was arranged that, whatever happens, the train had to take you to your destination.

We ate our sandwiches and did just as you were doing in the hall just now; but we made much more noise and we played games - I-spy and all those sort of things - and finally in the afternoon we arrived at a station in Sussex; and we were all taken by coaches to different villages."

"Now there must have been about 300 girls in my school and we couldn't all go to one village, so we were split up. That didn't help very much because we couldn't have our lessons. However we started in the village hall and the billeting officer came with lots of helpers, looked down his list; this one and that one, brother and sister, where they were to go and I was taken to a very pleasant couple in a tiny house by the railway."

"Oh, and the first thing we had to do also - we were given a card. We all had to write where we were, to our parents - give them our address - gave it back to the teacher (because I expect some children would have lost it) and that was posted back to home again.

“Well, we stayed in that little village for about two weeks, but it wasn’t convenient. It didn’t have proper lessons. The teachers that were with me were the art teacher, the games mistress, so we didn’t do any English or Maths, or History or Geography. It was fun for us.”

“However we then went off two weeks later in coaches to Bexhill, which is a seaside place near Hastings. That was much better. We were all taken to the large county school and again the billeting officer came and checked us off, when your name was called by the teacher you went to..... with some of these ladies or gentlemen who took you to your home.”

“Now in your home you called your new parents, they were foster parents, your host or your hostess and I again had a very pleasant couple who had a girl of about 14 (I now was much older than you I was 15) and a little boy of 10. I thoroughly enjoyed that, I loved it and my father came to see me and my sister came to see me (my older sister).”

“When we went to school we used all the church halls in the area to have morning school and in the afternoon we were allowed to use the local county school. And the local children did the same, they had their school in the morning and they used village halls for afternoon school. And really that was great fun, we enjoyed it. I expect the little ones cried sometimes, but I was really a little more grown up. Did all the things you do at school. We joined a youth club. It was a hard winter so on the Downs we went tobogganing.”

“Then we got round to the middle of the next year 1940. Really nothing had happened; they called it a ‘Phoney War’, which meant it was a pretend war. But suddenly the enemy was coming all across from Germany through Holland and Belgium to the French coast – which as you probably remember isn’t far from the south of England; and all these children had been sent to that southeast corner of England, which was only just across the Channel from where the enemy were; and they were expecting them to invade. So as well as having hundreds of evacuees in that area, they also had all the usual local children.”

“So there was another big, massive evacuation. And again, we were told, gas masks, labels; I say overnight bag, but by now we’d all got, not just the things we took away with us, because we’d had winter - we’d got boots and oh so much more. But somehow we packed it all up, arrived at the station; lots of goodbyes because we’d all loved it by the coast; got in the train and set off on this Sunday morning at 10 o’clock. And we travelled all across England, not knowing again where we were going; county after county after county.”

“Then we went through a long, long tunnel. Someone said “it’s the River Severn, we’re going under the Severn”. There was no M4 in those days you didn’t have great motorways. So we were going under the tunnel into Wales. On we went until finally; 8 o’clock at night - that really was a long day – we arrived at a little mining village. Again, the same thing, all into coaches to – not a church hall, they’re called chapels - it was in the chapel hall. There we sat. By now I’d got my sister, little sister, who was about your age 9 or 10. She was crying, so were lots of her friends, they were tired, very tired; and irritable and of course missing their mummies and daddies.”

“Well again the billeting officer came with lots more helpers and of course sometimes we couldn’t understand them – they were speaking in Welsh. But when they spoke in English it was a lovely lilting sound – we liked that.”

“However we waited; the lists again; one child, two children. And somebody came along and said “I’ll have that little girl in the front” and that was my sister - she cried “I want to go with my sister”. I was a bit naughty I said “no, no, you’re not coming with me” I was going to stay with my, my friend, another 15 year old. So finally my sister went off with this very pleasant lady and she was happy with her. And it must have been about 10 o’clock when my friend and I were told to “come along”. Because obviously someone always had to take you because we didn’t know the area. There had to be lots of helpers to take the children to the houses.”

“We got to a little, tiny, very small cottage I suppose you’d call it, in grey, Welsh stone and it knocked and two people came – a lady and a man; and they looked, looked down first, looking for two little girls. They had said when they were going to have evacuees; they wanted two little children. They looked at these two grown-up girls and said “no, no, we can’t have them”. Well we were in tears then because we thought, 10 o’clock at night in a strange country (it wasn’t really a strange country but it was strange to us). However they agreed to take us and we went in. We stayed there two or three weeks because that wasn’t suitable. But again we went to school, in an old school. In this village the Welsh had recently built a lovely big grammar school for the local children so we had this old school; and we went there every day. It wasn’t as big as we needed, so again we went into chapel halls and we did our work there.”

“And there I stayed for..... three years, until I was no longer a schoolgirl and in 1942 I came home, but all that time we’d stayed there and you know we got on very well. We missed our parents. In fact I was – well I was going to say lucky in some respects – in September 1940 my house (my home) was bombed in London and I’d got a mother there and a father and a baby brother. So there was nowhere for them to go – so my mother then came with my baby brother and she was an evacuee. She came to Wales, she didn’t live in my house.....”

(there is a very brief interruption in the recording here)

“.....another billet – we called them billets. She again was very lucky, she stayed there with my little brother and it meant that, oh, almost every day I could go and see my mummy. Which was better; in fact lots of my friends came and said we’ll go and see your mummy because they missed their mum - which was rather nice for them.”

“We did all the things you do at school. We played games. We were taken on outings to see the countryside by our teachers, we looked upon our teachers now as, not just teachers, they had become almost family. If there were any problems we went to them. So they organised school trips. We were able to go down a coal mine. All the things we would never have done had we stayed in London.”

“Now all this happened to us in 1939 to 1942 in my case; but other towns, Liverpool and Coventry and Plymouth, all the big towns they in turn had their bombing, so all their children had to be evacuated - again to places of safety in the country. It was traumatic in lots of ways but, you know - people cope - and I’m sure if you had to do it, you’d all cope.”



Margery Chambers (right), with younger sister Valerie. (Ammanford, 1940)