

# Evacuation to Northallerton 1939-1940: a community divided?

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## Introduction

The evacuation of schoolchildren to Northallerton (North Riding of Yorkshire) in 1939-1940 was one of the most significant events to take place in the town during the Second World War, but despite the interest in local history there has been little research on the topic: Michael Riordan, in his *The History of Northallerton* (2002), gives only one paragraph to the subject based upon his own memories of his school days. A former evacuee myself, in 1939 aged 6 I went from Gateshead to the village of Nunthorpe in the North Riding. I therefore had a special interest in researching the evacuation process. I stood at Gateshead railway station in 1939 failing to appreciate why it was necessary to leave home or knowing where I was going. I lived in the Nunthorpe billet for only a few months before returning home in January 1940, like so many other evacuees at the end of the so called 'phony war'.

At home, our air-raid shelter had restricted access which made it difficult for my parents to enter—my mother had to wear protective headwear to safeguard herself from head injury. And on the nights when bombing took place on Tyneside it was either too cold or the shelter was too full of water draining from the surrounding earthworks, so a bed was made up below the dining room table. With so many disturbed nights and the absence of schooling I was evacuated a second time and secured a billet in Cumberland.

Researching the wider picture, I was fortunate to find a great deal of primary material in the North Yorkshire County Record Office and the Tyne and Wear Archives, but I needed an input from the evacuees themselves. Letters were published in the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* and the *Sunderland Echo* inviting former evacuees to describe their experiences. In total 23 responses were received from those who had been evacuated either to the Northallerton or the surrounding rural district. A high proportion of these letters were from former pupils of the Bede Collegiate Boys School in Sunderland, but unfortunately I did not receive any letters relating to the most deprived inner city schools in Gateshead, from which a large number of children were evacuated in 1939. The children from these schools were allocated to the Applegarth and East Road schools in Northallerton.

All my correspondents in 2002 were of advanced years and over 70 years of age but still able to remember vividly their evacuation experiences. After my discussions with the mayor of Northallerton they were all invited to attend a reception at the town hall in April 2002. At this event I received permission to place all their letters with the North Yorkshire County Record Office, to be made available to future local historians. All my correspondents had unique experiences. There was no such thing as a typical evacuee. They had differing educational attainment, as well as differing social class. But this could equally be applied to the hosts, in a relatively insular community in the fourth and fifth decades of the twentieth century. I was fortunate to find that W.W. Lowther, a former teacher at the Bede Collegiate School, had written about the Sunderland evacuees 14 years earlier, which provided an opportunity to make contact with many of the surviving evacuees and even some of their hosts. By 2002, because of death or infirmity, the opportunity to speak with the latter had gone.

## Evacuation

In early September 1939, hundreds of children together with their teachers, helpers, and some parents, arrived in Northallerton as part of the government's evacuation scheme. At that time Northallerton Urban District Council believed that there was a prospect of the town's population being increased by 20 per cent at a stroke.<sup>1</sup> The 1931 census showed a population of 4786, which suggested that the number of evacuees entering the town would be almost 1000, but even this figure was lower than the projected 1500 anticipated by the UDC Evacuation Sub Committee in June 1939.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless the arrival of such numbers was likely to put stress on the social fabric of the town. Additionally, there was significant doubt among some residents about the value of the evacuation scheme, a reservation shared by many of the parents of the evacuees. In this essay I examine the role of the local authorities, both in the reception and evacuation areas, in handling the evacuation of children to the Urban District and the area of Northallerton Rural District Council the response of the residents of the town and its surrounds to the arrival of the evacuees; and the feelings and experiences of the evacuees themselves, who in the main, were unaccompanied by their parents.

In the early 1920s consideration was given to the possible mass evacuation of people from high-risk areas, following the deaths of 1400 civilians in air raids during the First World War. However, not until 1938, with the establishment of the Anderson Committee, was there a formal response to anxieties about enemy bombing. No doubt the events of the Spanish Civil War were noted, with air raids on unprotected cities such as Barcelona, where the first raid began on 16 March 1937 and they continued at three-hourly intervals until 18 March. There were 17 raids in all and 1300 people were killed and 2000 injured. The most notorious air raid was on Guernica in April 1937: the population was 7000, of whom 1654 were killed and 889 wounded. The Anderson Committee was reluctant to recommend outright compulsory billeting, but proposed nevertheless that power to enforce this should be available if the need arose by way of recourse to a governmental tribunal. The Committee also recommended that Britain should be divided into 'Evacuation', 'Neutral' and 'Reception' areas. Evacuation areas were those deemed to be at high risk of raids, and children from these were to be sent to relatively safe rural regions. Neutral areas were those that neither took nor transferred out evacuees. The initial placing of Coventry and Sunderland in the 'neutral' category suggests that decisions on these matters were perhaps arbitrary or made with undue haste. Inevitably Northallerton and its surrounds became designated as reception areas although the town was bombed on one occasion in May 1941. The Committee also recommended domestic air-raid shelters for high risk areas.

Responsibility for the effective running of the evacuation scheme was placed upon the local authorities. Initially those in the reception areas had to carry out a census to locate 'surplus accommodation'. The North Riding County Council recorded at the time that the clerks to the housing authorities had 'to supply information as to the amount of housing accommodation in the Riding in excess of a standard per house of one per habitable room person'.<sup>3</sup> The Northallerton UDC Evacuation Sub-Committee reported that a circular letter was being sent to residents of the urban district 'drawing attention to the fact that a census will be taken'.<sup>4</sup> This property survey was to be used by the Ministry of Health to fix the total number of evacuees to be received by each council within the North Riding. Later, throughout the country, criticism arose that no checks were made regarding the suitability, or ability, of householders in reception areas to care for unaccompanied children.

A problem is revealed in the county council minutes, referring to a Board of Education circular of 29 August 1939 which stated that 'the local school and the visiting school will each retain its own individuality. This means that each Head Teacher should remain in charge of his or her own pupils'.<sup>5</sup> While this objective was praiseworthy it was unrealistic, as many rural primary schools were no more than village schools. In the rural district there were many village schools were to be faced

with Gateshead children who came from relatively large urban schools. One evacuee described how she was transferred from Shipcote School, a large elementary school in Gateshead, with about 800 pupils, to the village school at Yafforth, two miles west of Northallerton. Another Shipcote pupil went to the village school at Maunby, 7 miles south of the town, and another ended up at Appleton Wiske, the same distance to the north. Accordingly this Gateshead school, like others evacuated to the North Riding, completely lost its identity.

Within the reception areas, billeting officers were appointed with (or without) the support of local authority officials. In the Northallerton area, initially, billeting officers were volunteers and most were local councillors. Their role was stressful one: the clerk to Stokesley RDC 'had broken down under the strain'.<sup>6</sup> The volunteer billeting officer for the village of Romanby, a Northallerton RDC councillor, resigned in October 1939 because, as he later stated, he 'became an enemy to all in the Parish ... People stood on [his] doorstep day after day asking for relief from billeting'.<sup>7</sup> Only in March 1940 did the RDC agree to appoint a paid billeting officer for Romanby, because of the difficulty in obtaining a replacement volunteer.<sup>8</sup> The main job of these officers was to provide a billet for each evacuee, but they also had to make regular visits to check on the welfare of evacuees and to ensure that the householder did not make fraudulent claims for those who returned home. In small village communities it was extremely difficult for a local billeting officer to recommend legal enforcement where house owners were unwilling to accept evacuee, and the local press reported considerable hostility to the possibility of any legal powers being granted to billeting officers.

Councillor Norris was the billeting officer for Northallerton UDC and a member of the council's Evacuation Sub-Committee, which had discussions with the Women's Voluntary Services regarding reception arrangements, particularly regarding the use of appropriate premises as distribution centres 'where a hot drink be provided for evacuees'.<sup>9</sup> At the meeting of the full council in July 1939 it was resolved to establish a tribunal to deal with complaints arising from evacuation procedures.<sup>10</sup> Clearly problems were already being anticipated. In August 1939 the Evacuation Sub-Committee discussed the 'dissatisfaction by some householders' who had received letters indicating that they were expected to grant accommodation to evacuees. It was 'resolved that a meeting of volunteers who would take children to their billets to visit a number of houses allocated to them to endeavour to secure the co-operation of householders'.<sup>11</sup>

The evacuating local authorities also had responsibilities for the evacuees. They had to register the wish of parents to have their children evacuated, and to plan the mass exodus of children from schools to the railway stations. In Gateshead 'The Director reported that on investigation it was found that there was an appreciable body of children who were unsuitable (by physical or mental defect) for evacuation to normal households and whose parents had requested their evacuation' and it was agreed that he should 'go fully into the question of providing hostel type accommodation'.<sup>12</sup> At the point of departure a number of children were so badly shod that they were given extra sandshoes by the authorities,<sup>13</sup> reflecting the extreme poverty of many evacuees, particularly from Gateshead. Correspondents advised that in their experience, in certain parts of Gateshead, many children went about in bare feet. There was also the question of financial compensation for local authorities in the reception areas. A report from the Board of Education on the topic was discussed by the Gateshead Education Committee and it was resolved that it 'be accepted by the Committee as a basis for necessary action in dealing with other authorities'. The county librarian of the North Riding made an application to the Gateshead Education Committee for books for evacuated children and it was recommended 'that the grant made by the Education Committee for new school library books be used for this purpose'.<sup>14</sup>

The evacuation of children from Gateshead took place on 1-2 September 1939, each child carrying additional clothing, for their stay in their respective billets, as well as their gas masks. The North Riding CC reported that 12,000 evacuees were expected from Gateshead but only 7500 were

actually received.<sup>15</sup> This low figure was surprising as all Gateshead schools closed and no educational facilities were left in the town. It was planned that thirty trains would be laid on to transport all Gateshead evacuees to the North Riding and South West Durham and as a consequence many regular train services had to be cancelled. At the meeting of the Northallerton UDC on Thursday 7 September Councillor A.E. Skelton reported that the town had received 639 evacuees from Gateshead on the previous Friday and Saturday, and would receive a further 364 evacuees on the 10-11 September.<sup>16</sup>

Although it was not stated, these evacuees mainly came from the Bede Collegiate Boys School in Sunderland. A much higher proportion of children were evacuated from Sunderland, due largely to the evacuation of 74 per cent of the boys attending the Bede School—a total of 457 from this school were accommodated in Northallerton or the surrounding villages of Romanby, Brompton and Yafforth.<sup>17</sup> W.W. Lowther suggests that some forward planning had taken place at Bede School, with pupils and prospective hosts being linked in advance, and this was confirmed by one of the former Bede evacuees who visited Northallerton during 2002. In the case of pupils from Gateshead, however, the arbitrary selection of children by hosts often threatened to separate siblings. More than one correspondent wrote that the final words of their parents were ‘to keep together’. One twelve-year-old was told ‘she was too big’, while another evacuee recalled that ‘A lady decided to have my sister (aged six) and a child of a similar age. So at this point I told the lady that she (my sister) was not going in her house without me’. The same evacuee perceived that ‘the best dressed children were chosen first’ with others left to the end of the selection process.

The *Darlington and Stockton Times* reported on the arrival of trains carrying evacuees to Northallerton station from Gateshead on 2 September.<sup>18</sup> The first to arrive brought in 500 children of the Windmill Hill St. Mary’s Boys School and the Girls C.E. School. They were given a meal on arrival ‘at Church House School and Council School’ before going by buses to the various outlying villages of the NRDC. A later train brought in 250 children (of the 550 expected) from the Shipcote Girls and Infants School for billeting in the rural area. A train also arrived with 357 (though 600 were expected) children from the Askew Road and the High West Street Elementary Schools to be billeted in the town.

The early return of many of these evacuees is revealed in the North Riding Education Committee data shown in [Table 1](#).<sup>19</sup> There is no information about the numbers returning home in the three weeks after 1 September, but the minutes of Northallerton UDC in October referred to ‘the return of so many of the evacuees to Gateshead during the month of September’.<sup>20</sup> More positively, the North Riding CC had been fairly successful in providing education for the children remaining within the county. By 23 September full-time education was available for those attending 285 elementary schools and part-time only for 78 schools. This was partly achieved by reopening schools previously closed, although the quality of these premises may not have been of high standard.<sup>21</sup> Younger evacuees could more readily be absorbed into village primary schools, but the secondary school students required more specialised facilities. By the end of 1939 there was a further decline in the number of elementary school children remaining in the district, as shown below.<sup>22</sup>

**Table 1 Return of evacuees: numbers at elementary school**

|                          | number of evacuees on date given |                |                | returned home in period |     |                  |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------------|-----|------------------|
|                          | a) 23 Sep 1939                   | b) 20 Oct 1939 | c) 09 Jan 1940 | a-b                     | b-c | a-c (% of total) |
| <b>Northallerton UDC</b> | 293                              | 110            | 67             | 183                     | 43  | 77.13            |
| <b>Northallerton RDC</b> | 771                              | 499            | 90             | 272                     | 209 | 62.38            |

There is of course nothing surprising about these figures: throughout the country most evacuees returned home by the end of 1939 or early in 1940, during the period of the 'phony war'. There were no air raids; there was homesickness among the children; and many parents were dissatisfied with the treatment of their children. At the meeting of the Northallerton UDC Emergency Sub-Committee in November 1939 the rapid decline in the number of evacuees remaining prompted the resolution that 'the number of Gateshead helpers be now reduced to six in view of the diminishing work required by voluntary helpers'.<sup>23</sup> At the start of the evacuation process the ratio of helpers to evacuees was 1:10, and these helpers (who came from the evacuation areas) also had to be billeted within the town.

Financial considerations were often involved in the reducing numbers, since evacuation potentially brought poverty home to the family. One social worker wrote: 'I have seen an unemployed father in tears because of a son's letter saying that, while he knew his father could not send the ten shillings demanded by the hostess for clothing, he would rather come home than endure the situation any longer'.<sup>24</sup> The cost of rail travel incurred to visit children was an added burden on the family budget, although there was a very disappointing take-up of vouchers made available to parents under a Governmental cheap trip' scheme. In the whole of Newcastle there were 446 applicants and in Gateshead just 103.<sup>25</sup> But when evacuees returned there were either no education facilities for the children, or the availability was quite inadequate. Some parents were encouraged to form groups to provide education in private homes but this was not widespread. Others could afford to send their children to private schools that remained open. In Gateshead there was an attempt to reopen some schools, with the Shipcote, Kelvin Grove and Low Fell schools available for part-time education after the Christmas vacation, but to deter evacuees from returning it was 'recommended that at present no child below 11 years of age be accepted for admission to these schools'.<sup>26</sup> (Low Fell was my school and I was denied re-admittance because of my age.) On 8 December 1939 Sunderland Education Committee proposed to make a grant of £250 for entertaining the children in the reception areas, and shortly afterwards the mayor, Myers Wayman, sent a letter to the parents of 5000 evacuated school children appealing to them to let their children stay in the reception areas over Christmas.<sup>27</sup>

The evacuation of secondary school children from Bede Collegiate Boys School in Sunderland provides a different dimension. The school was closed and therefore 450 boys had to be educated in the premises of Northallerton Grammar School. Because these pupils were proceeding towards school certificate examinations the percentage evacuated was exceptionally high. The boys were either accommodated within the town, or in nearby villages, in order to maintain social cohesion and effective control of teenagers, although Northallerton hosts would clearly have preferred girls to boys, possibly feeling that the former would be more compliant, and also because of the healthy appetites of young men up to fifteen years old. The evacuated Bede School retained its corporate identity, unlike the elementary schools: 'To facilitate the education of the evacuees and the local children attending the Northallerton Grammar School', wrote G.A. Bradshaw, headmaster of the Bede School, to parents in October 1939, 'a double shift system was established with each school retaining its separate identity'.<sup>28</sup> He went on to say that 'academic work was done daily from 1 to 5pm in the Northallerton Grammar School buildings and the Catholic Hall. On two mornings a week all boys do Physical Training in the Grammar School buildings and on every morning each week there are post School Certificate boys in the Catholic and Zion Halls. In these and smaller halls the corporate life of the school is carried on and there are reasonable facilities for organised games'.

In his letter Bradshaw also attempted to discourage visits home by evacuees: 'It is rather absurd to evacuate boys for safety and then encourage them to return to a danger zone whenever an opportunity presents itself'. Despite this, letters from former evacuees indicate that some boys cycled home to Sunderland to spend weekends with their parents. Bradshaw's stance was considerably undermined by the return of the majority of the elementary school children before

Christmas and also made more difficult when, in December, Sunderland's Education Committee decided to organise a temporary secondary school to meet the needs of those Bede Collegiate School children who had not been evacuated. Nevertheless, the retention of evacuated secondary school pupils in the North Riding was more successful than in the elementary sector (see Table 2).

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**Table 2                      Number of secondary children remaining**

| 23 Sep 1939 | 9 Jan 1940 | returned home |
|-------------|------------|---------------|
| 975         | 785        | 190           |

The initial relationship between the host school and Bede Collegiate appear to have been at least satisfactory and no problems are referred to in the minutes of the governors of the grammar school during 1939. On 16 October a letter from Bradshaw was read out stating that 'he would be obliged for the use of one or two rooms at the evenings for the purpose of Society meetings and for home preparation', implying that the headmaster of Bede School, and the school itself, had a status less than equality with the head of Northallerton Grammar. A meeting of the governors on 18 March 1940 revealed that all was then not well in the relationship. Under the heading 'Condition of School Premises' the headmaster reported 'that during the Autumn Term 1939, and at the beginning of the present Spring Term, during the occupation of the premises by the evacuated school, much damage was done and thefts recorded'. He went on to say 'that after further adverse reports regular and stricter form of supervision was arranged resulting in a marked decrease in offences'. At the same meeting a letter from Bradshaw, dated 8 March, was read out applying for permission to use the art room at the grammar school for two hours one evening each week next term'. This was agreed but 'If complaints are received the matter will be further considered'.<sup>30</sup>

What reception did the evacuees receive on arrival in Northallerton? Many had a warm welcome. One urban district councillor providing billets for Gateshead children said that 'I am trying to learn a new dialect under the tutelage of the two young men from Gateshead billeted upon me. I shall be able to speak Tyneside'. However some weeks later there was public criticism of evacuees by the chairman of Northallerton RDC, relating to the frequent changing of billets. He said that 'The persons billeted are unreasonable and unthankful. We have done our best and we have found them really good homes and still they are not thankful. We have had enough of it'.<sup>31</sup> These changes of billets were probably to enable evacuees to live in close proximity to friends or because they felt unhappy with their hosts. However, some evacuees experienced unusual situations. One, from a leafy suburb of Gateshead wrote of 'outside dry closet, twin ones, and the tin bath in front of the kitchen fire'. Another, in a billet in Market Row, Northallerton, wrote of 'a tap on the wall opposite the front door for fresh water and the toilet at the bottom of the lane. As I remember it was a large old fashioned wash house - bit frightening'.

Reference to frequent changes of billets is contained in most of the letters received by the writer from former evacuees. Householders themselves often forced these changes, despite the comments of the chairman of Northallerton RDC. The reasons for terminating billets by the hosts included the inability to cope any longer, illness, and that the accommodation was required for visiting friends. One factor could be social class, but sometimes of course the evacuee did not get on with the family of the householder. This did little to assist those seeking to obtain good grades at school certificate level. One former evacuee from the Bede School wrote that he had five different billets from September 1939 to May 1940, when his parents decided he should return home. Concerns about health and the poor condition of evacuees were heightened by the increased incidence of infectious diseases. The *Darlington and Stockton Times* reported that two evacuees in Bedale (7miles west of Northallerton) had contracted diphtheria.<sup>32</sup> Lowther writes of

many children being 'verminous' and that in Northallerton small-tooth combs were unobtainable due to demand.<sup>33</sup> Cases of impetigo were common and one disturbing case relating to a twelve-year-old girl was reported in the *Darlington and Stockton Times*. An investigating male clerk, employed by the Unemployment Assistance Board, insisted on physically examining the evacuee alone in a separate room away from the female host, who had already told the officer that the girl did not have impetigo. Following a complaint by the girl the magistrates accepted that the clerk had been over-zealous and he was fined £10,<sup>34</sup> but his appeal against conviction was later upheld by the quarter sessions.

A common complaint by the hosts was the perceived inadequacy of the allowances paid to them: in at least one instance, the host wrote to the parents of the evacuee asking for increased financial support. Hosts were paid 10s 6d a week for a single evacuee but where there was more than one the rate was 8s 6d. Dissatisfaction with the allowance resulted in one host in Northallerton denying electric light to a pupil revising for his school certificate. The young man concerned had to resort to torchlight under his bed clothes. To appreciate the value in real terms of the evacuee allowance, it is necessary to understand the relationship between the allowance and typical weekly wages. Typical in 1939 are shown in the table below. While the allowance was not particularly generous, many working class parents would regard the sum as being quite adequate. If there was more than one child in the family it is difficult to see how a meaningful contribution could be made, since the parents had to finance the purchase of clothing and footwear.

**Table 3** typical weekly earnings in 1939<sup>35</sup>

|                   |                 |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| coalminer         | 59s 6d (£2.95)  |
| fitter and turner | 113s 0d (£5.65) |
| farm worker       | 39s 5d (£1.95)  |

Increasing opposition to evacuation emerged at the end of 1939. Councillor Norris raised objections to children being prevented from going home at weekends, saying that householders were being deprived of a 'weekend of privacy', while in January 1940 he referred to vandalism caused by the evacuees in Northallerton. Later in January the Urban District Council resolved that 'where boys were unmanageable it was not practicable to find fresh accommodation', so they had to return to the evacuating area. There was continuing dissatisfaction with the billeting allowance during February and March,<sup>36</sup> including that by Councillor Norris towards the evacuation scheme, as revealed in his letter to the *Northern Echo* of 17 January 1940 (see appendix 1). Was Norris aware that this letter would have been read by many Sunderland parents, since the *Northern Echo* was their principal local daily newspaper? Earlier in the year Norris had stated that 'he did not think the scheme was by any means successful. In his opinion not worth it ... [he] did not want the evacuation scheme to fail but there had not been assistance from Sunderland Education Committee'.<sup>37</sup>

A visit to Northallerton on 20 February by the Sunderland Education Sub-Committee resulted in a confrontation between them and Councillor Norris. The meeting opened with the chairman of the Northallerton UDC Evacuation Sub-Committee, Captain Woodhead, stating that although there were some difficulties relating to discipline within billets, as well as costs to householders, there was nothing seriously wrong with the billeting of the Bede boys to Northallerton. Norris disagreed, saying that householders who had accommodated evacuees since the outbreak of the war should now have a rest and that the evacuees should all return to Sunderland as no German bombing had taken place. He did concede that they could return to Northallerton if Sunderland was subject to bombing. This statement was repudiated by his colleagues. Furthermore, when Norris was condemned by the Sunderland deputation for his 'attitude having caused much discontent than

anything else connected with evacuation', he was not defended by his council colleagues. The Director of Education for Sunderland concluded by saying that 'If Councillor Norris would refrain from press correspondence and publicity it would be possible for both sides to work with a very much greater degree of harmony'.<sup>38</sup> As Norris's position was now untenable he resigned as billeting officer for Northallerton on 7 March 1940.<sup>39</sup>

Despite his comments and opinions being rejected by his immediate colleagues there appeared to be some sympathy for his views within the UDC and RDC. The *Darlington and Stockton Times* reported a Northallerton UDC councillor as stating that the evacuees were guilty of extreme cruelty, providing examples of misbehaviour with catapults resulting in 'pullets with broken legs' and also 'shooting at a sow in a field',<sup>40</sup> the implication being that local youths would not stoop to such things. Opposition to the evacuees was further expressed in Northallerton RDC meetings: at one there was reference to 'great opposition to billeting in Romanby where the Education Committee desired the Bede boys to be billeted'.<sup>41</sup> Of another, in March 1940, the *Darlington and Stockton Times* reported an off the record question from an Osmotherley (a RDC village) councillor; 'Was it true that the Bede boys were going away soon?'. One of his colleagues replied that 'this was hoped to be true but there was nothing definite'.<sup>42</sup> In the wider community Councillor Norris probably had greater support among those disenchanted with the evacuation process, perhaps because fewer than the expected numbers of evacuees remained in the town so some hosts felt they were shouldering more than their fair share of the burden. This discontent was shown in March when the Evacuation Sub Committee of Northallerton UDC advised that almost all the Bede boys had returned home for the Easter vacation and 'many householders were not prepared to accept them on return to Northallerton'. It was recommended 'that some boys delay their return to Northallerton in order that new billets be found'.<sup>43</sup> Some evacuees only became aware that they had lost their billets when their families received letters from their Northallerton hosts. Lowther writes that as many as seventy boys had to stay in Sunderland because of the closure of their billets.<sup>44</sup> It is significant in this connection that the headmistress of the Bede Girls' School, evacuated to Richmond, received much adverse criticism when she appealed before the Christmas vacation for the girls' billets to remain available for their return after the holidays. These anxieties were shared by the headteacher of the Boys' School, when 300 boys went home for Christmas despite the attempts by Mr Thompson, Sunderland's Director of Education to prevent this. He made the comment that 'Northallerton was the only area where the matter of returning scholars to their own homes has been raised',<sup>45</sup> responding to an opinion that the boys should have a two-week holiday in Sunderland at Christmas.

In view of the frequent, and often unsubstantiated, complaints about the evacuees it is necessary to give their side of the story. Not all had unhappy stories about their stay in Northallerton: some had relatively uneventful experiences, others had a rewarding time, and some did not want to return home (see appendix 2: contributions by the Bede boys to the school magazine). Each evacuee had a unique experience; none was 'typical'. Many were homesick, some bullied by local children, and they had frequent changes in billets. Three correspondents had at least five different billets. Siblings were separated to meet the convenience of hosts rather than the best interests of the children. Two unhappy evacuees planned 'to escape' from Northallerton by boarding a railway wagon at night. Children were made aware of the dissatisfaction felt by the hosts about the allowances received. In at least one instance boys had to cycle from Sunderland to Northallerton and back in one day to retrieve their belongings, after being told they would not be accepted on return from the Easter holidays of 1940. The appearance and dress of an evacuee often played a major part in his acceptability by the host when the children arrived in Northallerton.

The final stage of the first wave of evacuation, which began in September 1939, was the decision to recall the headmaster and staff of the Bede Collegiate School in September 1940.<sup>46</sup> This was inevitable, following the reopening of the Bede School in January 1940 as well as the decision on 1 April to permit students attending the school in Sunderland to proceed to school certificate

examinations. After September 1940, with ever-reducing numbers of Bede boys remaining, a process began which would eventually lead to their integration into the Northallerton Grammar School. The opposition to the evacuation scheme in Northallerton, and the disquiet among the Sunderland parents, must have been significant considerations. The earlier return of the elementary school children could not have helped: some families then had children at home but others still in reception areas. This opposition was contrary to the wishes of the government, which desired all evacuees to remain within the reception areas. Nevertheless, most were aware that the evacuation scheme had been a failure despite the efforts of the government to discourage evacuees from returning home.

Throughout the evacuation period there was frequent press comment about the possibility of compulsory billeting. In the Northallerton UDC minutes in January 1940 there was reference to this, and to the possible role of the police in enforcement if compulsory billeting was ever entertained, but in practice it was never seriously an option.<sup>47</sup> Councillor Norris did refer to it but this was a further attempt to increase opposition to the scheme. Because of his status as billeting officer, and his close contact with discontented householders, evacuation became a very divisive issue in Northallerton, putting the urban and rural district councils on the defensive.

During the early part of 1940 the need for a second wave of evacuation was created by with the German invasion of the Low Countries and France. There was opposition to further evacuees and the arguments put forward were that there was a lack of facilities for full-time education; a shortage of billets for nurses attached to the local hospital; and a reduction in available accommodation since the original survey was made. The minutes of Northallerton UDC in February 1940 reveal an attempt to reduce the number of evacuees from 600 to 300.<sup>48</sup> Eventually the figure was to be 400, including Sunderland children from James William Street, St Mary's, Hudson Street and Moor Board schools, many of these children having been evacuated previously to the mining communities of Country Durham. At a meeting in April the provision of a hostel for evacuees was discussed and in July, after talks with Northallerton RDC, it was agreed that a property at Mill Hill, Brompton be taken over to provide hostel facilities for sick children.<sup>49</sup> In practice, however, a letter from a former evacuee showed that this hostel was used to provide accommodation for children for whom billets could not be found.<sup>50</sup>

## **Appendix 1: letter from Councillor Norris to the *Northern Echo* (17 January 1940)**

### SUNDERLAND EVACUEES AT NORTHALLERTON

Sir, I understand the mothers of the Bede Collegiate School Boys, Sunderland are submitting a resolution to the Sunderland Educational [sic] Committee that their boys should be educated in their own school. As one with intimate experience now of the operation of evacuation to the reception area and the arrant failure it is its purpose, coupled with the adverse effect it is having on the educational life of the boys, I hope the resolution of the Sunderland mothers will receive serious consideration in the light of present events and not from the standpoint of how it was hoped that evacuation would work.

The Sunderland Educational Committee have already accepted a report from its officials stating that "evacuation is voluntary" yet the same authority tell the parents: If you do not send your boys to Northallerton they will be deprived of secondary education for 12 months". This is about as voluntary as Austria was when made to give up the country to Germans.

As a Sunderland mother is reported to have said in your report headed "Evacuee girls becoming nervous wrecks," in Monday's Northern Echo, statements of this kind are like a pistol held at their heads. But threats do not make cases good, or might right.

Let me give the Sunderland Educational Committee some reasons why they should admit the claims of mothers of these scholars that they should be allowed to return to Sunderland and a real safety scheme provided for them together with a rational education scheme. Evacuation has failed because:-

It has distressed the parents of children evacuated and dislocated their home life.

It has completely desecrated the home life of the billeting homes in the reception areas where billeting is compulsory and not voluntary.

Lack home influence is adversely affecting the character and future of the children and increasing so longer they are parted from parents.

It is causing greater and greater hardship financially as the cost of living rises to the billeting householder.

Creating discontent in evacuating and reception areas.

It has resulted in a complete dislocation of educational facilities for these secondary school children and for the secondary school children in the reception areas.

Wasteful in expenditure to ratepayer and taxpayer without ameliorating the lot of the evacuees themselves.

The scheme in its present form has no hope of success by reason of the number of returned evacuees and the drift continues aggravates still further educational difficulties at the reception and vulnerable ends.

In the case of Bede Collegiate School scholars, the above factors are patent to all who will trouble to face facts. Parents are justly entitled to have these facts admitted and appreciated by the Sunderland Education Committee and the Government, and educational opportunities provided and different measures taken instead of the bolstering, patching up and botching that we have at present.

## **Appendix 2: Extracts from *Bedam*, the Bede Collegiate Boys School magazine (January 1940)**

### **Bede School in Northallerton (p.6)**

Bede School left Sunderland on Sunday September 10<sup>th</sup>, for Northallerton, in the North Riding of Yorkshire, and so began an unprecedented period in the School's history. War was never a respecter [*sic*] of persons: modern warfare, even before the expected horrors have materialised, has uprooted a school from its accustomed surroundings. Such a radical change has had a profound effect upon the life of the School, corporate as well as individual.

Northallerton is a small town of some 5,000 inhabitants, of considerable importance, a market centre, and possessing interesting historical traditions; its connection with Durham is not a modern one only. Boys accustomed to town life have been able to settle here more easily than if they had been in a more isolated part of the country.

Most of us have become accustomed to the change; the people of Northallerton, with few exceptions, have taken the sudden invasion in good spirit, have accepted it as their part in the national drive against Germany. Evacuation from the start as a difficult proposition, a necessary expedient in threatening circumstances; no glorification can hide the fact that some incompatibilities were bound to arise. However, members of the Staff have spent much of their time attending to the troubles of boys and householders alike, and the great majority of the hosts and hostesses have been unstinting in their efforts to make their boys comfortable in their temporary homes.

Some members of the School have been billeted in small villages outside Northallerton, and have had bicycles sent from Sunderland. Three masters have had the unusual experience of living in a public house during the term time, the "Three Horseshoes" at Brompton.

### **Romanby Colony (p.16)**

There are approximately one hundred boys billeted in Romanby, on the South side of Northallerton. All have very kind hosts and hostesses and are housed in modern houses, most of which have gardens which produce apples in plenty.

Thanks are due to Mrs Place for the loan of the field where the boys play in the mornings when the ground and weather are suitable; to Mr Sunter for the use of the hut for games of various kinds on wet mornings, and to the Vicar of Northallerton for chairs and trestle for furnishing the hut.

When the field is unfit for play, the boys go for walks. Perhaps in the spring they may be able to organise a cycling club and extend the radius of their activities.

There are few troubles in Romanby. The level-crossing gates are always shut when one is in a hurry, and the road home after darks is rather difficult. We don't worry about these, however, but keep our eyes on the bright side of things and do our best.

### **Yafforth Colony (p.17)**

When the first party arrived from Sunderland, ten young Bedams were taken to the pretty little village of Yafforth about two miles West of Northallerton. Four boys found billets on farms on the outskirts of the village and immediately entered fully into the delightful country life of Yorkshire in September.

Cycles were soon summoned from home and the journeys into the town done easily. While the evenings were light there was no lack of occupation for boys new to life in the country. As the days darkened we held our Club on a Monday night and every Friday there was a whist drive. At other times we paid visits to the Old Hall, for games.

On December 19<sup>th</sup>, the Annual Christmas Party was held in the village school and we were kindly invited.

Although we may be regarded as the pioneer colonists, furthest West, we have thoroughly enjoyed our term at Yafforth.

### **Brompton Colony (p.17)**

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of September the Brompton Colony of Bede Boys was founded. After arrival in Northallerton we were taken to the Elementary School at Brompton and thence to our new homes. Boys soon settled down and treated the change as an adventure and holiday away from the noisy, smoky town of Sunderland. We had a week in which to find our feet and we spent it looking round and exploring the countryside in the neighbourhood of this small but picturesque village. Soon, however, we tired of walking and exploring and looked to the masters for suggestions. They found us a football ground on which numerous games were played. The willing villagers gave us extra facilities by offering a few halls in which indoor activities could be carried on. Among these is the Village Institute, where ping-pong, chess, darts and card games are played on wet mornings. Thus we are never idle, whatever the weather may be.

However, occupation in the morning was not our only trouble. At night we soon grew tired of doing nothing and again our masters solved the problem. At nights in one of the halls, the boys gathered, happy to be able to be active and together. Then two kind ladies from Sunderland arrived and soon helped the masters with the business of keeping us occupied. They had taken a cottage in the village and generously offered the use of one of the rooms to us at night. Occasionally no less than thirty of us turned up for these happy little meetings which we thoroughly enjoyed. Here we practised rug-making, weaving and other arts.

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