

Written by Granville Bantock

Overseas Evacuation of Children 1940

In July 1940, with the German Armies poised on the continent just across the Channel, the war situation looked very grim for Britain. Noel Coward and the committee responsible for the children in the Actors' Orphanage at Chertsey (my school) decided to evacuate all those eligible as soon as possible to Hollywood in the USA. The British Government had already inaugurated an overseas evacuation scheme but the Actor's Orphanage would be evacuated privately.

Two female mistresses (teachers) would travel with the A.O Children, 54 boys and girls, but all other members of the Chertsey staff were given notice of termination of their employment which included teacher Patricia Lennon. She quickly secured another job as escort to children being evacuated overseas under the Government scheme and duly sailed for Canada with her charges in August on the Dutch liner Vollemdam. This ship was torpedoed but did not sink and all the passengers including the children and the crew were rescued. Patricia Lennon duly returned to Silverlands and told us of her experiences which of course was a little worrying for us children waiting for a ship to take us across the Atlantic. In early September the Actors Orphanage children were packed and ready to leave for Liverpool to board, we assume, the liner City of Benares but at the very last minute this was cancelled because, we believe, rescued passengers and some children from the Vollemdam were given priority for the accommodation reserved for us. The City of Benares was torpedoed and sunk on 17th September and with much loss of life. A real tragic event for those saved from the Vollemdam and a lucky escape for us.

The 54 Actors' Orphanage children left Silverlands on 15th September for Greenock and boarded the liner Empress of Australia, and reached Halifax in Canada safely on 4th October. The voyage was uneventful and on board together with us children were many wounded and ill Canadian soldiers and some of the reserved Dutch crew from the Vollemdam, who were on their way to New York to help crew the Dutch liner New Amsterdam. We mixed freely and became very friendly.

As a result of the sinking of the City of Benares the Government immediately stopped the overseas evacuation of children, but as we were a 'private' scheme we sailed, and as a result some of the younger children spent the next five years in New York, not Hollywood as originally planned. I returned home in October 1942 and quite soon joined the army, luckily surviving four years service. At the start of the war I was a child evacuee and at the end an officer in the British 14th Army in Burma.

Letter sent to a *Daily Mail* journalist seeking information for a magazine article

Lucky Orphan, January 2005

During 1992 The Imperial war Museum planned a large exhibition about the evacuation of children during the Second World War and were seeking information about the Actors Orphanage, my boarding school in Chertsey, which was evacuated in total to New York in September 1940. As there was no recorded information anywhere I was asked by a senior member of staff to write a memoir covering the years of my association 1930-1942. Also, discovering the museum possessed little information about the British Army's involvement in Siam (Thailand) immediately after the surrender of Japanese force in 1945, I was asked to include my memories of this in my memoir as well. My memoir, an illustrated manuscript / book is now in the library of the Imperial War Museum.

Last year a researcher from ITV seeking subjects for a new series of programmes under the general title 'British Social History of the Last Century' came across my book together with two very amateur films of 'us kids' taken at Chertsey and New York in the 1940s. The ITV production team were very excited with the 'find' and decided to make a programme about the Actors' Orphanage. Our lounge was turned into a film studio and I was interviewed for about two and a half hours. It was all a little embarrassing because the producer read my book cover to cover and asked questions about events I had forgotten, with me under floodlights. It was a very interesting experience. I understand that all nine programmes in the series have now been completed but a transmission date has not yet been decided upon.

Granville Bantock

All programmes transmitted Summer 2005 under the title 'The Way we Were'.