

Overseas Children Scheme

1940 – c. 1945

Other Names: • Children's Overseas Reception Board Scheme

Details

The Overseas Children Scheme (Australian terminology), also known as the Children's Overseas Reception Board Scheme (British terminology), was a program to evacuate children from Britain to various Commonwealth countries so that they could escape the German bombing during World War Two. A total of 577 children came to Australia as evacuees under this scheme. They were placed in private homes with Australian families, not in children's institutions.

The British Secretary of the Dominions Office introduced the Overseas Children's Scheme in 1940. In order to win the British War Cabinet's approval he told them that many wealthy people had already sent their children away and that he wanted to give poor people the opportunity to do the same. He also suggested that it would mean fewer people in Britain to feed.

The Secretary envisaged sending many thousands of children overseas but in the end only 3000 went, 577 of them to Australia. The British government cut the Scheme short after two ships carrying British children were torpedoed. The *SS Volendam* was torpedoed by a German U-boat on 30 August 1940, and all passengers were rescued. But another ship on the way to Canada, the *City of Benares*, sank on 17 September 1940, and 77 children and over 200 adults died.

The Scheme was run by the Children's Overseas Reception Board, which was established by Winston Churchill in June 1940 in Britain, and had an Australian representative in Sydney (source VPRS 10093). The Board delegated the working of the Scheme to the Australian states. Regulations were passed under the Australian National Security Act, vesting guardianship of these children in various state authorities (for example, in Victoria, the guardian was the Secretary of the Children's Welfare Department).

The Scheme required children evacuated from Britain to be placed in private homes, not institutions. It also stated that all children must be returned to their homes in Britain after the war. Although most children returned to Britain, some stayed. Others migrated back to Australia after their return home.

Many Australian households offered to take in children evacuated from Britain, including in many cases, relatives they already knew. A report in 1943 stated that approximately 70% of the children were sent to relatives or friends of the family (General Report on the Children's Overseas Reception Scheme, Sept 1943, NAA A659, 1942/1/5516).

Other principles of the Scheme were that no payment was expected for the maintenance and education of the child evacuees, and that their living arrangements were to be inspected to ensure suitability. In Victoria, the arrangements for inspection was that a social worker visited homes with child evacuees for around an hour (Hyslop, 1941).

The 577 children who came to Australia arrived in 3 parties in 1940, on the *MS Batory*, the *TSS Nestor* and the *SS Diomed*. The majority of the children were sent to families in Victoria and New South Wales, with smaller

numbers of children also going to Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania and Queensland.

After the war, some children who had been in Australia under the Scheme decided to return. An article in *The Age* in 1947 reported that a scheme had been prepared for young English women who wished to return to Australia. If their parents and their former foster parents in Australia agreed, they would be given priority passages to Australia, at the cost of only 5 pounds. The Australian government would contribute to the costs of their migration. This scheme was an initiative of the Overseas League's London and Australian branches (*The Age*, 16 May 1947).

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- [Overseas Childrens Reception Committee - Correspondence Concerning Children Brought to Tasmania under the Auspices of the Overseas Childrens Reception Committee \(1940 - 1945\)](#)
- [Correspondence files, class 1 \(general, passports\) \(1892 - 1970\)](#)
- [Correspondence files, Class 5 \(British Migrants\) \(1920 - 1957\)](#)

Resources

- [Child Migration and the Overseas Reception Board](#), Finding Records, 2016
- House of Commons Health Committee, [Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Health Committee on 11 June 1998 \(Health - Third Report\)](#), 11 June 1998
- [Children from Britain Safeguards for Well-Being](#), *The Argus*, 18 September 1940

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