



# A Need to Learn from the Past

Just recently, we have been seeing a lot of children's non-fiction which carries the endorsement of the Imperial War Museum. The study of war is part of the National Curriculum and the 5-14 Scottish Curriculum so if you want authentic material, whether in book form or actual artefacts, The Imperial War Museum (IWM) is an obvious resource. It is not quite like a military museum; its focus has always been the personal experience of war and consequently what it offers is not principally the hardware of warfare (although that is certainly there, from floor to ceiling) but rather the story of human beings caught up in conflict.

The IWM works with a series of publishers to authenticate a wide range of books but, if you can get to one of their bases, you can benefit from the work of their Education Department. The sites are in London, Salford and at Duxford, near Cambridge. Sarah Ballard, an Education Officer in London, explains that the team's remit is to deliver in two areas: Services to Schools and Family and Informal Learning.

Any school in the country can book a school visit. They see 90,000 children a year and are set up to receive groups. They have reception facilities, a lunch room and four class rooms. In the primary classroom, they base their work mainly on the Home Front. In the secondary, they look at particular aspects of wartime, such as women's work or trench warfare but this room is a flexible space where they can have drama, wartime dancing and even cookery. The other two rooms are devoted to Holocaust education. Mostly they are teaching history but, increasingly, they are contributing to citizenship and art lessons. Even if you can't get there, you can download support materials and worksheets.



The Family and Informal Learning programme offers changing events, from special exhibitions to quizzes and competitions, as well as the permanent exhibition. Entrance is free and any family can arrive and join in. You will have the opportunity to visit many thoughtful exhibitions, whether "The Blitz Experience" or "The Secret War" or something based on more recent conflicts. One exhibition specifically aimed at children has proved to be so popular that it will now run at least until 2010. This is "The Children's War".

It starts quietly but powerfully with a series of projected photographs, without commentary, of children in wartime. We see them in the shattered streets, we see filthy children with labels on them, and we see injured children. These images prompted a whispered question from a boy. The father replied, "Yes, even children. There was bombing, you see." The child was silent and one wondered whether this was the first time he had realised that war was not about exploding tanks in the distance and trained armies but about people like him.



*Mickey Mouse gas mask issued to younger children. Manufactured in bright colours this type of mask was intended to be less sinister and more attractive than adult versions.*  
© IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM LONDON

Passing into a corridor, on the wall are a series of closed boxes. Open them and discover the little possessions brought by children who came to Britain through the *Kindertransport*. There is a tiny dog; a farewell gift from a father never seen again. There is a pair of spectacles: a small worn case and little round specs. These are some of the most poignant exhibits. Further on, there are three models of children wearing gasmasks, the baby entirely enveloped in his. Next, a set of small brown leather suitcases. You are allowed to open one, and find it neatly packed for we are about to be evacuated.

The story of the evacuation is told through letters, exercise books, posters and photographs. There's a diary where the lines of small writing are interrupted by a sentence in large capitals: "BUCKINGHAM PALACE BOMBED TODAY." A photo album, surrounded by toy farm animals speaks of a happy evacuation to Devon. A quote from another evacuee, beginning "Lady Pym came into the servants' kitchen" tells of something less happy, the children confined to the servants' quarters. A video of a Ministry

*Three-year-old Eileen Dunne in the Hospital for Sick Children, 1940, photographed by Cecil Beaton.* © IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM LONDON

film, robustly called *Westward Ho!* plays and one realises that children were sent much further than Devon. The film shows mothers wiping away tears and strangely composed or bewildered children, whether they were bound for the south coast or Australia. Variety in the exhibition is provided by eye witness accounts which you can hear by lifting a phone or active participation. You can dress up, go through the Anderson Shelter, open desks in the school, watch films current then. You can even set off the air raid siren. There are volunteers, too; people who lived through the war and who will answer questions with stories of their own experiences. This aspect is being further developed. Soon, a handling box for children with impaired vision is to be introduced.



The "Daily Life" section shows a day's rations and gives economy tips. Older readers may remember a nasty creature called the Squanderbug which was always tempting us into careless waste. Apart from the posters, they have a large three-dimensional Squanderbug which someone had used for target practice. Clothing coupons are explained and the fashions speak of careful improvisation. There are children wearing 'hand-me-downs' and garments fashioned from curtains and blankets. They even have a blouse and skirt made of silk escape maps. In the "Play" exhibition there is Jilly Cooper's dolls' house, copies of *The Boys' Own Paper* and *The Magnet* and of the Biggles and Worralls books. There are even patterns for making your own dolls in the uniforms of the women's services. Presumably, you could knit your own Worralls. The centre of the exhibition, however, is the 1940s house. It is two storeys high and you walk through it, starting with the gasmask on the hallstand in the entrance. The kitchen has a big Belfast sink and criss-crossed tape on the windows. In the living room, there is the *Monster Book for Boys* on the three piece suite and the news playing quietly on the large wireless. The dining room has been given over to the Morrison Shelter, like a large reinforced cage. Upstairs, are the children's beds and toys and the parents' bedroom with the silk eiderdown and blacked out windows. So much is recognisable but not familiar, in the sense that there is little colour and few of the electrical items we now take for granted. We come at last to "Victory", with film of the celebrations and a case showing a fine waistcoat made for the occasion with Britain on one side of it and rows of tasteful Vs on the other. It doesn't quite stop there, however; the effects of war linger. There's a prefab, part of the rehousing programme, and even the happy pictures of the 1951 Festival of Britain show children in the background, playing on bombsites.

One striking factor, somehow less expected, but particularly interesting, is the art. First of all, the Museum holds the work of the war artists, often moving and as shocking as the films. The work of Edward Ardizzone is there, immediately recognisable even if you have only met his work previously in children's books. There are also all the posters, from travel posters current at the time to

the propaganda posters which would have been so familiar. Most were exhortations about the new rules about lighting, shopping or wastefulness. Others were more thrilling. The "Careless talk costs lives" series warns against spies everywhere. These posters were certainly of their era. One warns "Be like Dad. Keep Mum!" In another, a wonderfully silky female is draped across a sofa while adoring males gather around. It says "Keep mum. She's not so dumb!" Nowhere was safe, it seems, though one wonders if there were many spies sitting in tea shops and listening to housewives in hats. If there were, no doubt they were disappointed.

There is much more to see, of course, and the museum website [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk) will guide you through. The children there were engaged but those who learnt most must have been those with adults who mediated the exhibition as the children asked incredulous questions. And when you've finished, there is a café and, of course, a shop. Observing and listening to the visitors, this did seem to be an experience genuinely for all the family.

Pat Thomson

These books have all been produced in association with the Imperial War Museum, and full use has been made of its unique archive of 120 million feet of cine film, 6,500 hours of video tape, 6 million photographs, and 32,000 recorded hours of historical sound recordings.

### Forgotten Voices of the Second World War

Written by Max Arthur

Ebury Press ISBN: 978-0091917746 hardback £12.99

This is particularly valuable as testimony from the Second World War, moving from farce to poignancy in the space of a few lines. While there are some accounts from the German perspective, nearly all the evidence comes from British and Allied combatants and civilians - remarkable stories from those who survived and were marked by their experiences.



### World War II - the events and their impact on real people

Written by Reg Grant

Dorling Kindersley ISBN: 978-1405328715 hardback £17.99

This lavishly illustrated book tells the story of the key events of the Second World War, with testimony from the "real people" of the title. Well set out, this is an ideal title for browsing. The book comes with a DVD showing dramatic archive footage and newsreel reports which is a valuable classroom resource.



### The World Wars:

Written by Paul Dowswell, Ruth Brocklehurst & Henry Brook  
Usborne ISBN: 978-0746087886 hardback £19.99

This comprehensive guide to the two major conflicts of the twentieth century is well illustrated, with plenty of written narrative and explanations. It covers all aspects of both wars, including causes and effects, major battles, and the grim realities of life on the front line and home front with internet links to recommended websites provided for further research.



Paul Golightly & Jean Allen