

THE GUEST ROOM

Safe as Houses

Author **Caroline Shenton** investigates the role played by historic properties on the heritage front against Hitler

When we hear the phrase 'wartime evacuation', we typically envisage dazed schoolchildren disembarking steam trains with parcel labels tied to their coats. That was *Operation Pied Piper*, which moved some one-and-a-half million evacuees out of London and other major cities to the countryside on 1 September 1939, the day that Hitler's forces marched into Poland. But there is another mass evacuation story that needs to be told: what happened to the collections of London's major museums and galleries when they too were evacuated to safety out of the city. It's a tale in which a number of today's Historic Houses member places played a prominent part.

Since 1933, Whitehall had been planning what should happen to the country's most precious art treasures in the event of war. Men and women who had survived the First World War were obsessed with the prospect of immediate bombings of poison gas over London if another conflict broke out, which would result in the instant incineration of paintings, decorative arts, and antiquities. Just as worrying was the prospect of invasion followed by looting, the confiscation of works back

to Germany, or their destruction as 'degenerate art'.

The solution was to send our most precious national collections to safehouses of various kinds: basements, London Underground tunnels, mines and quarries, and stately homes.

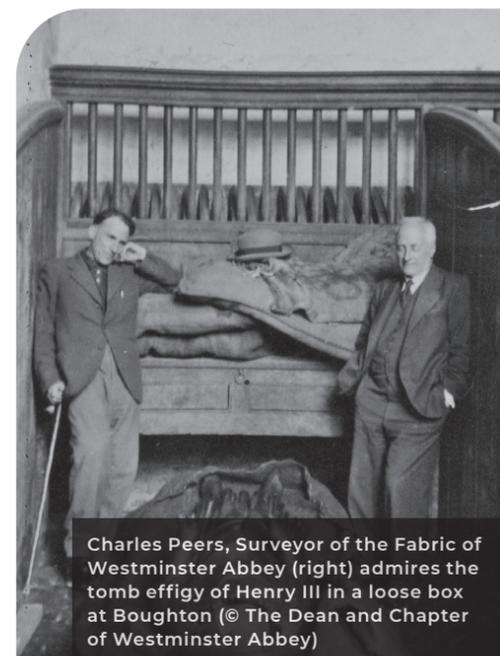
When the starting gun for the exercise fired on the evening of 23 August 1939, triggered by the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union earlier that day, London's curators began a massive and covert packing exercise.

Owners of country houses had long been aware that their buildings and grounds were likely to be requisitioned for war use. A number had offered up their properties to the government during the late 1930s for museum and gallery storage, in the hope of pre-empting billeting by the military or schools, both of which they thought would lead to even more disruption and damage than the storage of fine and decorative art, rare books or archives.

But storage of heritage items was not without its own challenges. Collections were bulky and often filled whole rooms on the ground floor, pushing out the

families to smaller rooms or guest quarters. Relations between evacuated staff and the onsite servants were often tense. And room temperatures and humidity had to be controlled to prevent damage to delicate objects and vulnerable items, leading to an increase in heating bills.

At **Waddesdon Manor** in Buckinghamshire, the dangers became evident very quickly when the Rothschilds' own canvases, consigned to wooden crates in the cellars, were inspected a fortnight into their dingy sojourn. They were covered with a 'blue haze'



Charles Peers, Surveyor of the Fabric of Westminster Abbey (right) admires the tomb effigy of Henry III in a loose box at Boughton (© The Dean and Chapter of Westminster Abbey)

of mould and had to be rehoused above ground in well-aired racks in a spare drawing room. The Reynolds, Gainsboroughs, and Romneys were restored, but permanent damage was done to three paintings by Watteau. In the wake of that episode, Dorothy Rothschild took the pragmatic view that, 'the danger of Hitler's bombs falling on Waddesdon was less than the known peril of Waddesdon damp'.

The British Museum sent some of its collections to **Boughton House** in Northamptonshire. The great hall and the appropriately named Egyptian Hall became completely choked with large wooden crates of Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities, while the butler's pantry was packed with numerous trays of coins and medals. The stables provided lodging for a number of the brass tomb monuments of medieval kings from Westminster Abbey, while the abbey's medieval paintings and muniments were stacked up in the main house. The housekeeper and head housemaid became exhausted trying to supply the British Museum warders with four meals a day (high tea as well as supper), cleaning their accommodation, and obtaining enough firewood from the estate for much-needed fuel. Overenthusiastic ARP exercises by the museum's staff on the roof led to a water leak through a painted ceiling below.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when the British Museum moved out in 1941, due to the construction of the military aerodrome at nearby Grafton Underwood. The museum instead headed for an underground quarry at Westwood, in the Mendips, for the rest of the war. The Duke

of Buccleuch himself admitted to being vastly relieved to be rid of them because, 'in the blackout one stumbled over mummies of incredible rarity.' Even then, the estate roads suffered from all the removal trucks trundling to and fro, and rust from the metal rivets of the storage crates permanently marked the marble floors. Despite this, Boughton still got away lightly with damage from its evacuees: **Drumlanrig** and **Bowhill**, the Duke's other houses, in Scotland, both suffered much worse from military occupation.

The Public Record Office (today the National Archives) shifted an astonishing 575 tons of historic records from its headquarters in Chancery Lane to properties of the Duke of Rutland — **Haddon Hall** in Derbyshire, and **Belvoir Castle**, Leicestershire. In order to maintain an unbroken chain of official custody for the legal records of the kingdom, the Duke himself — a keen antiquarian — was made an honorary curator of public records, enabling him to act as resident custodian in his own properties, where they spent a happy and uneventful war.

Meanwhile, **Muncaster Castle** in Ravenglass, Cumberland, took on about a third of the Tate Gallery's paintings. The building was largely closed up, with just a skeleton staff in residence, and the only real problem there was the erratic ballcocks of the water supply. Evacuated there in disgrace with his collections was the gallery's Senior Assistant, David Fincham.



Evacuated public records piled high at Haddon Hall (© The National Archives)

After a series of incidents at the Tate, he had finally pushed his boss too far by claiming that his frequent absences from the gallery in London were due to him working for Military Intelligence, allegedly 'keeping fascists under observation in Chelsea public houses'. When the Tate's relationship with the owners of its other two billets elsewhere collapsed in disarray in 1941, those paintings were moved to **Sudeley Castle** in Winchcombe, Gloucestershire, where arrangements became much more satisfactory.

Amazingly, despite their many and complex moves, barely any art was damaged and all works emerged blinking, unscathed, into the sunlight in 1945. They made their way back home to London, where the process of repairing the bombed-out gallery and museum buildings they came from began. The role of English country houses in this remarkable episode reminds us that even the most unlikely people and places have a part to play in wartime. To paraphrase Milton, 'they also serve, who only store and wait.'

National Treasures. Saving the Nation's Art in World War Two by Caroline Shenton will be published on 11 November by John Murray Press. 