

Railways in Wartime

Evacuation of troops, civilians and children

As well as the day to day carrying of troops, supplies and equipment during the Second World War, Southern Railway was also involved in several mass evacuations.



Evacuation of Dunkirk

From 26 May to 3 June 1940, the railway transported the British Expeditionary Force from the English ports after their rescue from Dunkirk. This involved 186 trains, moving 335,000 soldiers over a nine day period.

Mr Steward, Marine Superintendent at Dover, said: 'A train every 20 minutes drew up, was filled with tired grimy men, each with a bun in one hand and a banana in the other...'

Evacuation of the Channel Islands

The evacuation of the Channel Islands was carried out on Southern Railway steamers, then onwards by rail. The Isle of Sark ferry was the last to leave, on 29 June 1940 while under heavy enemy air attack. The last passenger to step aboard was a Southern Railway Checker, Mr Price, in just his uniform and with nothing else.

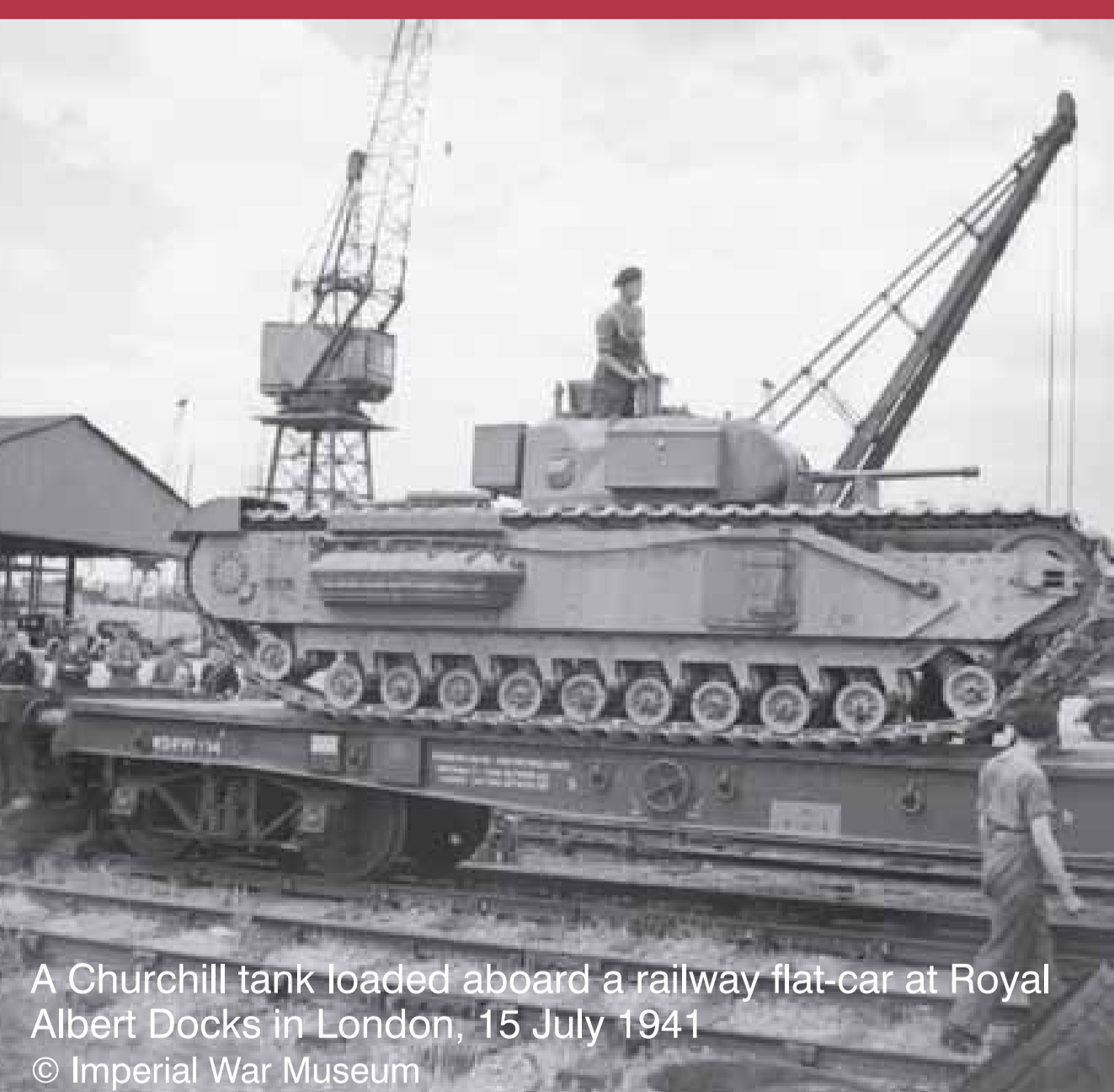
School evacuations

There were three evacuations of children from London – as soon as the war started in September 1939; when western Europe was invaded in May 1940, and in 1943 when the V1 and V2 rocket attacks started.

Southern Railway was involved in moving thousands of children away from threatened towns and cities, especially London. Supervised by teachers and volunteers, children piled onboard trains, carrying just their name tags, a small amount of luggage and their gas masks.



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A Churchill tank loaded aboard a railway flat-car at Royal Albert Docks in London, 15 July 1941
© Imperial War Museum



Unexploded bomb being removed
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Clapham Junction Carriage Shed, 1 October 1940
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Normandy Landings (D-Day)

In preparation for the Allied invasion of Normandy which began on 6 June 1944, vast numbers of troops, as well as equipment and stores, were moved to the south coast ports by rail. Many miles of extra sidings had to be laid.

Railway fleet goes to war

By 1939, the Southern Railway fleet comprised:
20 cross-channel passenger vessels (including train ferries)
9 cargo vehicles
15 Isle of Wight ferries

Some of these vessels were taken over by the Admiralty at the start of the war. Seven were converted to hospital ships. Others were used for the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940.

Twelve train ferries were lost to enemy action, including SS Paris, a hospital ship deliberately bombed by the enemy. Southern Railways' marine workshops carried out many repairs to naval ships during the war.