

# The TUNNEL

Using **Pie Corbett's** model text and digging into local history, your class can write a powerful piece about the experience of a WWII evacuee

**H**enry had always hated the dark. At night, Miss Hill put up the blackout curtains. When the light was off, the gloom descended and you couldn't see a thing. He had to learn to feel his way to bed. The stairs were unfamiliar, so too, the creaking boards and the smell of lye soap from the metal tub that was dragged out on a Saturday for his bath.

Oakridge Lynch village was nothing like the grimy London tenement block where Henry had spent his first ten years. Here, the valleys were a lush green: not a single street lamp and, at night, the darkness was full of owls, badgers digging for worms and foxes yelping. Every morning, Henry woke to the sound of a cockerel. At home, the streets had been packed with people rushing to work, cars and buses trundling by and the air was full of street cries. Here, chickens scratched in the backyard, rows of vegetables sprouted in gardens and only the odd cart and donkey passed the little cottage.



Most exciting of all was Gertie, the pig that Miss Hill kept in a small, stone shed by the garden gate. "We're fattening her up, you and I," proclaimed Miss Hill, as she poured potato peelings and scraps into the trough. Henry scratched Gertie's back and tried not to think what hidden fate awaited the pig.

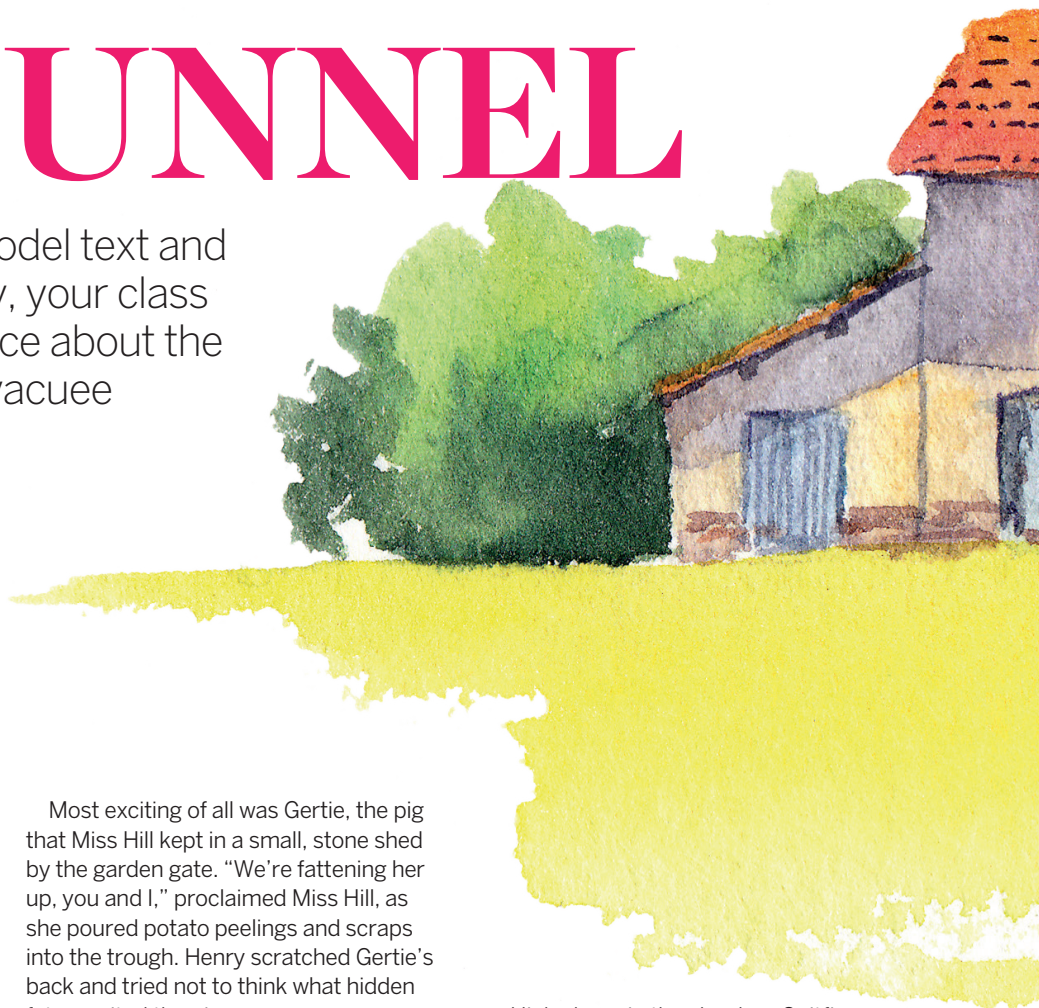
That misty morning, the 15th July 1940, Miss Hill checked that Henry had his gas mask packed and walked him up the lane to the village school. There they sang a hymn, prayed for the country and Henry sat squeezed onto a bench at the back of the schoolroom, clutching his copybook. Later, at lunchtime, he deposited himself on the grass outside and ate his bread and dripping sandwich. Miss Hill had tucked in a slice of beetroot as a treat. Some of the boys munched on turnips that they had dug up on the way to school, washed in a puddle and dried on the tufted grass at the side of the road.

The afternoon stretched ahead; Henry's pen scratched as he tried his hand at copperplate. The schoolroom was silent as everyone worked. In the distance, they could hear planes and the sound grew closer until everyone stopped and looked up at the ceiling; the approaching engines roared and spluttered. Mr Weston yelled, "Under your desks!"

High above in the clouds, a Spitfire from Aston Down and a Hurricane from Kemble fought with a German bomber – a Junkers 88. Henry squeezed under a wooden desk next to Grace, closed his eyes and began to count. He had learned that trick in London when they sheltered in the underground. Counting backwards from a thousand kept your mind busy.

With engines screaming, the bomber shuddered overhead, scraping the school's bell tower. Mr Weston grabbed the wooden window pole and rushed outside to help capture the airman in Mrs Le Bailly's garden. Later, they heard that three of the airmen had managed to parachute down and had been taken willingly, but the pilot had stayed in the plane for too long, trying to guide it clear of the village. Miss Hill stated that the school had been missed: 'by a wing and a prayer'.

Over the next few weeks, what had been an obscure village became famous and people travelled for miles to see the wreckage. In London, bombings had been nightly but here in the sleepy valleys, dogfights were a rare sight.



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*“With engines screaming, the bomber shuddered overhead, scraping the school’s bell tower”*

Mr Weston posted Henry at the gate to Strawberry Banks where the wreckage lay, to collect money for the troops. It was there, in early August, that Henry, full of longing and loneliness, decided to head for home, back to London.

He had been standing by the gate all afternoon but no one had come to view the wreckage. A skylark fluttered up and a warm wind swept down the valley, ruffling the grass and calling to him. He daydreamed, remembering his Mum standing on Paddington station, her thin coat flapping as the train steamed out, carrying Henry and his gas mask away from everything he knew and loved.

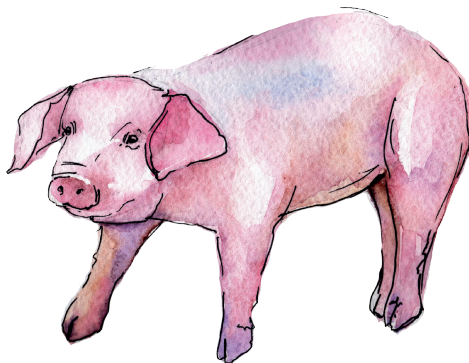
In the valley, below the village, ran the railway. Half an hour later, Henry walked along the tracks, his mind fixed on home. He could hear trains coming a long way off. The rails seemed to buzz a warning so that he could scramble up the bank and hide. The plan worked well enough until he came to Sapperton. Here, the train tracks disappeared into the dark mouth of the tunnel.

Henry stopped. To go back meant terrible trouble. School had ended a long time ago. Miss Hill would be fretting. At first, Henry didn’t feel too bad. Behind him, he had the light from the tunnel’s opening but, half way down, the tunnel curved: increasingly, the dark and cold closed round him like a poacher’s steel trap. He pulled his piece of sacking cloth to him, stood and listened: his breathing

echoed, his heart thumped and, somewhere ahead, water dripped and something scuttled. Suddenly it hit him, and it all seemed too much: the bomber screaming overhead, the school shuddering as it scraped the bell tower, the tangled, smoking wreckage and the strangeness of trees and green fields. He sat down and waited, rocking as he cried.

Thomas Restall, a railway ganger, found the little boy, crouched in the darkness. Henry had tried to walk home but his shoes, resoled with an old tyre, had worn thin and, besides, the darkness had held him fast in its shadows.

Early in the evening dusk, as the stars started to freckle the sky, Thomas brought Henry back to Winsley Cottage. To his surprise, Miss Hill drew him close and whispered, “Oh Henry,” as she gently stroked his hair. Inside, the kitchen lamp glowed.





## Let's get started

Writing a story set in the past means the writer has to do some research. This story is about an evacuee and almost all of the tale is true. I had to use my imagination to describe Miss Hall and I invented Henry, but just about everything else is based on fact. The plot pattern hangs around the simple idea of a character having to face something they fear. The opening line gives the main theme away, 'Henry had always hated the dark'. The reader immediately knows that Henry will have to face the darkness! In these sorts of stories, the main character often defeats or overcomes their fear. In my one, there is light at the end of the tunnel for Henry, even if only in a small way when he gets back to the village.

### Hook in the class

This story will be better appreciated if it is tied into some historical work on the evacuees so that children know what happened. Many schools will also have children whose families have moved to find a better life; some may have left members of their families behind. Excellent novels to read alongside this would be *Friend or Foe* by Michael Morpurgo, *Carrie's War* by Nina Dawden, *Fireweed* by Jill Paton Walsh or *Blitzcat* by Robert Westall who also collected letters from evacuees in *Children of the Blitz*. Film clips that provide the context are easily available through the internet, e.g. from BBC Bitesize [tinyurl.com/WWIclips](http://tinyurl.com/WWIclips)

### Expand vocabulary

Read the story through, underline difficult vocabulary and discuss any words or expressions that might present a barrier to understanding. Some of the words and phrases will be related to historical information whilst other will be turns of phrase that are still currently used.

Historical	Current
blackout curtains, lye soap, metal tub, tenement block, street lamps, cart and donkey, gas mask, copybook, bread and dripping, copperplate, dogfight, sacking cloth, railway ganger, poacher's steel trap	grimy, lush, cockerel, badgers, owls, foxes, yelping, trundle, sprout, trough, fate, beetroot, treat, turnip, the underground, pilot, skylark, ruffle, obscure, longing, fret, echo, scuttle, resoled, tire, freckle

Children will also be interested in knowing about the three types of plane mentioned and time could be spent with maps as well as using Google Earth to locate the different places.

### Oral comprehension

Read the story through and explore it by taking initial responses. What do they like or not like about the story? What interests or surprises them? What questions does it suggest? Then read it through again, ensuring that the vocabulary is in place and that everyone can read the text. Try repeating any tricky lines, using expression and have the children copy how you read aloud. Tease away at developing and deepening understanding through questioning:

- Give two reasons why can't Henry see a thing and has to 'feel his way to bed'?
- Explain what the reader learns from being told that the stairs were 'unfamiliar'.
- Use a chart to compare life in the tenement block and life in the village. Which would you prefer and why? Are there clues that suggest what Henry thinks?
- What were the possible benefits for an evacuee and what might be the disadvantages?
- What 'fate' awaited the pig and why did most families keep one?
- Find three clues that suggest how Miss Hall treated Henry.
- Why during the afternoon lesson did everyone look at the ceiling?
- Explain Henry's trick and why he used it?
- Explain what the expression 'a wing and a prayer' might mean.
- Why did the crash make the village famous?
- Give three reasons why Henry decided to run away.

- What does the phrase 'thin coat' suggest about Henry's mum?
- Why do you think his dad had not been there to say goodbye?
- Why did Henry need to hide from the trains?
- Why did he pull a piece of sacking cloth to himself?
- Search for any references to 'darkness', in any form, and discuss the theme of dark and light.
- Explain the final two lines.
- Why do you think the story is called *The Tunnel*?

### Explore through drama

- Write a letter from Henry to his mother describing his new life.
- In role as a journalist, interview Mr Watson and Grace about what happened and then write a newspaper article about the plane crash. The pilot was buried with full military honours, possibly recognising his attempt to steer the plane clear of the village.
- In role as Thomas Restall, tell the story of how you found Henry in the tunnel.
- Role play the moment when Thomas brought Henry back to Winsley Cottage.
- Miss Hall took on six children to help her run a smallholding. In role as Henry, what would you say, or write in a letter, to any new child coming to stay.
- In role as children in the playground, gossip about what Henry did.
- What would Miss Hall say to Henry's mother in a phone conversation?



*“The train tracks disappeared into the dark mouth of the tunnel. Henry stopped. To go back meant trouble.”*

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### **Research for writing**

This makes an ideal history based project as there may be older members of the community who are willing to share memories of being evacuated or discuss their memories of the evacuees. A ten year-old child who was alive at the time of the evacuation would now be about 88 years old. Many had a wonderful time but there were also plenty of children who were treated badly and were miserable.

To set about writing a story set in your locality, begin by using a search engine to find local information. The local library or historical group should be able to provide you with books charting the history of the surrounding area. Facts need to be listed and drawn upon to bring a story alive. I was lucky to find the story of the boy who was found trying to make his way home. The skill is to weave the information into the story. As well as looking for memories about evacuees coming to the village, I made lists of any facts that I could find about the school, home life, what people wore and ate. I then wrote 'tale of fear', weaving the facts in to provide detail that might make the story seem real.



**PIE CORBETT** is an author and former headteacher.