

St James' Orphan Asylum and Visiting Society

c. 1845 – 1853

Other Names:

- St James' Visiting Society
- St James' Dorcas Society
- St James Church of England Dorcas Society

Details

The St James' Visiting Society was established in April 1845 by parishioners of Melbourne's first Protestant Church, St James' Church of England, on the corner of William and Little Collins Streets. In June that year, some Anglican women established the St James' Dorcas Society. The Society began sheltering orphaned children in 1849, in a building in Queen Street, Melbourne. This Home, which had no formal name, was the first residential children's institution to open in the colony of Victoria. By 1851 the institution was known as St James' Orphan Asylum. That year, St James' Visiting Society changed its name to St James' Orphan Asylum and Visiting Society. The Orphan Asylum occupied different sites in Melbourne from 1851 to 1853. In 1853 the organisation decided to separate the provision of residential care from emergency support for families, and it adopted the new name, Melbourne Orphan Asylum.

Parishioners of St James Old Cathedral in Melbourne began organising charitable activities in 1845. The first placement of children began in 1849, when women from the St James Dorcas Society arranged placements for needy children in private homes with people who could provide them with care and shelter. Musgrove writes that "the origins of institutional 'care' in Melbourne lie in an emergency measure implemented by the Dorcas Society" (Musgrove, 2013, p.11)

According to Musgrove, in 1849 the Dorcas Society was asked to take charge of the children of a woman who had been murdered by her husband. Eleanor Nicholson, a philanthropist, engaged a woman to provide lodgings for the children. Following this, more and more children required shelter. In 1850, the Dorcas Society employed a widow with children to serve as matron and moved all the children in the care of the Society into a cottage behind the Royal Oak Hotel in Queen Street. This was the first residential children's institution in the colony of Victoria.

Following the establishment of the Benevolent Asylum in North Melbourne, the Society no longer needed to care for older people. A newspaper article from 1852 states that the St James' Dorcas Society had decided to change its name to the St James' Orphan Asylum and Visiting Society. Now that the St James' Visiting Society no longer was housing older people, its work had been combined with the work of the St James' Dorcas Society and been renamed the St James Orphan and Visiting Society (The Argus, 20 August 1852).

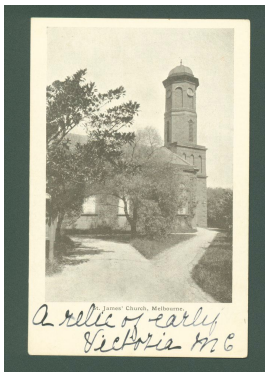
The article explained that when its orphan asylum first opened, it was provided with a house belonging to the St James Visiting Society rent-free, but "that advantage was no longer enjoyed, and we pay heavy rent for small and inconvenient premises". The Society reported that the Lieutenant-Governor had granted it permission to erect a wooden building on a piece of ground in a convenient and healthy situation and the Society was now seeking financial support from the public.

From 1851, the Orphan Asylum was based at a couple of locations in Melbourne, however it is difficult to pinpoint them. According to Butler, at some point in 1851 the Orphan Asylum was located in a “rented cottage in Little Collins Street”, and later that same year, the children were moved into a building on the corner of Bourke and King Streets (Butler, 1951). In 1852, there was a newspaper advertisement about tenders for “several works required in the erection of an Infant Orphan Asylum in Bourke-street, West” (The Argus, 11 August 1852).

Musgrove writes that life for the children was difficult at the Bourke Street barracks. During the Asylum’s time at this site, 8 children died, “a significant number for an institution which, at that time, sheltered approximately thirty-five children at once”. The location was unsanitary, and staff had trouble finding fresh vegetables and untainted milk for the children (Musgrove, p.104).

In 1853 the organisation changed its name to the Melbourne Orphan Asylum.

Gallery



St James' Church, Melbourne

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- [Melbourne Orphan Asylum \(1853 - 1926\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Anglican Diocese of Melbourne \(1847 - current\)](#)

Resources

- Nunn, H.W., [Social Services \(Chapter VIII of A Short History of the Church of England in Victoria 1847-1947\)](#), Issued by the Editorial Committee of the Centenary Celebrations, Melbourne Diocese, 1947
- Golding, Frank, [Lost & Found: State Children in Victoria](#), Frank Golding: author, researcher, historian and consultant specialising in child welfare, 27 July 2017

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