

St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage

1874 – 1962

Details

The St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage opened in 1874 and was run by the Sisters of Mercy. The Orphanage was created following the split of the St Vincent de Paul Orphanage into a boys' and a girls' orphanage. It housed girls aged between 5 and 15. In 1962, the name changed to St Vincent de Paul's Children's Home. Since closing, the St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage has been the subject of many submissions where former residents' have outlined their experiences of physical, psychological and sexual abuse in the Home.

The St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage operated from a two-storey Gothic bluestone convent on Napier Street, South Melbourne. The building had been designed specifically for the Orphanage and had been completed in 1867. Girls at the former St Vincent de Paul Orphanage had already moved into the building, however the establishment of the girls' Orphanage did not formally occur until 1874.

The building had dormitories, school rooms and a dining room. The wings included a chapel and accommodation for the Sisters, and accommodation and schoolrooms for boarders. The Sisters also erected 'shelter sheds' outside to protect the girls from the rain, sun or dust when outside.

Girls at the Orphanage lived according to a highly structured daily timetable, with key tenets being religious education and training for domestic service. They said daily prayers, the Rosary, Angelus, and attended mass. Girls were taught to make and mend clothes and knit stockings.

The average age for girls to be apprenticed out for domestic service was 12. However, girls were also transferred to the Sisters of Mercy Domestic Training Institute (in their former House of Mercy) in Fitzroy to continue training, and some stayed at the Orphanage into their late teens.

When running an orphanage, the Sisters of Mercy were discouraged from creating an emotional tie with the girls, and there were few Sisters to look after many girls. In 1891, *Holding onto Hope* stated that there were nine Sisters responsible for 142 girls.

The girls were provided with uniforms to wear during school times which consisted of a blue dress and a white pinafore. Later, children were given a school uniform and a public uniform to wear. Day clothes were traditionally second hand, and often very dated, with the girls continuing to wear pinafores into the mid-1950s. Girls were provided with lockers to store things in, however nothing was very secure and it was hard for girls to keep anything privately.

The Orphanage was supported through bequests and donations, with fundraising events including bazaars and concerts held regularly.

From the 1890s, events were arranged for the girls including an annual garden party at Sacre Coeur school, and a trip to the zoo. Later, outings included beach visits and picnics. At Christmas it was common for girls in the Orphanage to be provided with a Christmas lunch, games, entertainment and presents.

Over the years many alterations and additions were made to the building. In 1899, an infirmary was built so unwell children could be isolated from other girls. In 1919, when the influenza pandemic infected all but one child at the St Vincent de Paul Orphanage for Boys, the St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage experienced no infections. The Sisters refused to admit new girls from February 1919 and their general isolation is believed to have kept them safe from the pandemic.

In 1924, the seventieth anniversary of St Vincent's Orphanages was celebrated with a big fundraising campaign by the Sisters. This included a garden fete, dance, concert, charity ball, and grand bazaar. Funds were used to build a new laundry, upgrade bathrooms and the kitchen, and renovate the children's refectory and install a sleep-out verandah.

The school at the Orphanage merged with Our Lady's School in 1927, with the Orphanage school being turned into a recreation hall. For the first time, girls attended school with local children. They attended school until year eight, attaining their Merit Certificate, with only a few girls supported to stay in school longer than that.

In 1929 the *Advocate* reported that there were 133 girls living in the Orphanage, and "during the year 74 were handed over to friends or placed in employment."

In 1936, a Domestic Arts Block was built at the Orphanage and in 1939, the St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage holiday home and convent was built at Black Rock. It was designed to be used all year around, with some Sisters moving there permanently. A small group of girls were sent to Black Rock for two to three weeks at a time. A more relaxed environment existed at the holiday home, with less structure, and more recreation time, including trips to the beach and time to spend in the paddocks. Children could also be sent to holiday hosts, which was intended to be an experience of home life.

In 1942, along with St Catherine's Orphanage, the St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage established McAuley House as a hostel for working girls. This provided girls with a place to live when entering the workforce after living at the Orphanages.

One former resident, Dorothy recounted her experiences in the Home during the late 1930s and 1940s in *Holding onto Hope*.

There were plenty of times I was hungry...We used to go to the Zoo and Wirth's Circus once a year. And we used to go to Wattle Park and Eltham for picnics. Everyone got a bag of lollies and a brown paper bag of broken biscuits...Once a month we have pictures, and every second Sunday we had a concert...We had no toys. I never even owned such a thing as a doll.

Another former resident Emily described in *Holding onto Hope* how there were swings and a merry-go-round at the Orphanage, but they were only allowed to use them when there were visitors. A more common activity was a Sunday walk, and other activities included choir, dancing, and preparation for the annual musical and dramatic concerts.

Girls who wet the bed were often humiliated. This included being made to wear their wet sheets around, and girls being summoned as "bed-wetters" for an early evening drink of cocoa, instead of having it with the other girls later.

Corporal punishment also occurred at the Orphanage, including the use of the strap, and smacking. Other punishment methods included removing privileges, being made to sleep in the babies' dormitory, or being confined in a cupboard or small room. It is known that some residents were transferred to the Good Shepherd Convent for ongoing misbehaviour.

In the 1950s more significant changes occurred at the Orphanage. Daily mass was no longer compulsory, more state wards were admitted, and for the first time the number of girls dropped below 100. Girls were also admitted

from Bonegilla Migrant Reception and Training Centre. Girls coming from Bonegilla often could not speak English and had arrived recently in Australia.

Mixed experiences have been recorded on what life was like in the Orphanage. Some former residents have spoken about being lonely, not knowing why they were there, and other children, their friends, leaving without warning or being able to say goodbye. Some others spoke fondly of those who cared for them, and the benefit of knowing they would get fed, and had access to a bed and an education.

Very little health and sex education was provided, with even romantic scenes in films censored. When their periods came girls were provided a bag with sanitary products and a book with diagrams. In *Holding onto Hope* one girl explained how she thought she was dying when she started her period.

In 1957, changes began to be made at the Orphanage including dividing the dining room, replacing large tables with smaller ones, modernising and heating the recreation room, giving the girls individual cubicles to sleep in. Groups of twelve girls were placed in the care of one Sister, and they were encouraged to join social groups outside the Orphanage. Baths were installed and locks were put on bathroom doors. A mothercraft nurse was also employed to care for younger children, which now included boys so family groups could be kept together.

Conversation was encouraged at mealtimes (previously children had been expected to sit and eat in silence) and children were offered more food choices. In an interview with ABC Radio in 1990, Sister Agatha reflected:

For breakfast they had four kinds of cereal and fruit, if they wanted it – a boiled egg, hard or soft – two pieces of toast, four spreads ... Doesn't cost any more but ... it shows you care.

In 1959, part of the Black Rock holiday home was converted into a family group home for children aged between two and ten. It was named Coolock. Children were cared for by two lay women and assisted by a domestic worker. The children at Black Rock attended local schools.

In 1961, the Orphanage established its first 'scattered' family group home in Bentleigh for 7 children with two lay house mothers. It was called Assunta.

In 1962, St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage was renamed St Vincent de Paul Children's Home.

The St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage is the subject of many submissions to several inquiries. The submissions outline former residents' experiences and detail physical, psychological and sexual abuse.

Gallery



St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage, chapel



St Vincent de Paul's Girls' Orphanage, dining room



St Vincent de Paul's Girls' Orphanage, girls assembled



St Vincent de Paul's Girls' Orphanage, communion portrait



Girls at St. Vincent De Paul's Orphanage during a religious parade



St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage, exterior view



St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage, chapel



St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage, dining room



St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage, kitchen



St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage, girls in quadrangle



Former St. Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage

Description: Orphanage located at 179-197 Napier St and 114-128 Raglan St and 25 Church St, South Melbourne. This image is one of a series of images available from the Victorian Heritage Register.



[St. Vincent de Paul's Girls Orphanage]

More info

Chronology

- St Vincent de Paul Orphanage (1857 - 1874)
 - **St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage (1874 – 1962)**
 - St Vincent de Paul Children's Home (1962 - 1992)

Related Entries

Run by

- [Sisters of Mercy, Melbourne Congregation \(1857 - 2011\)](#)
Date: 1864 - 1962

Related Events

- [Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care, Parliament of Australia \(2003 - 2005\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [McAuley House \(1942 - 1965\)](#)
McAuley House was a hostel for girls who had formerly lived at St Vincent de Paul's Girls' Orphanage.

Resources

- Twigg, Karen, [St Vincent de Paul Orphanage](#), eMelbourne: the city past and present, 2008
- Murray, Suellen, John Murphy, Elizabeth Branigan, Jenny Malone, *After the orphanage: life beyond the children's home*, 2009
- Hollander, Robyn and Margaret Jacobs, *Life lines, stories by women in the western suburbs of Melbourne*, 1985
- O'Sullivan, Sister Mary Ignatius, *The wheel of time: a brief survey of the ninety-six years' work of the Sisters of Mercy in Victoria, 1857-1953*, 1954
- [An appealing and urgent Christmas](#), The Argus, 7 December 1954
- Robertson, Ethel, [Submission no 522 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- [Christmas is party time ...](#), The Argus, 15 December 1952
- Heritage Victoria, [Former St Vincent de Paul Girls' Orphanage: Victorian Heritage Register \(VHR\) Number H0212](#), 20 December 2011
- Armit, Michael, [One Hundred Years Ago it Was Very, Very Different: New Era for Our Orphans](#), The Argus: Supplement: The Argus Weekender, 11 December 1954
- Grogan, Robert, [From green to red and white: a chronicle of the Parish of St Peter and Paul's from its origins in Emerald Hill to the present day in South Melbourne.](#), 2009

- [Heritage Display](#), MacKillop Family Services website, 2013
- Gough, Deborah, [Hidden orphanage lives](#), The Age, 20 October 2004

Records

For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

Records held by other organisations

- [MacKillop Family Services Records, Victorian institutions \(1857 - current\)](#)
 - [Voluntary Children's Homes Files \(1921 - 1989\)](#)
 - ['Closed' Agency and General Correspondence Files \[Charities Board of Victoria\] \(1923 - 1983\)](#)
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