

Brookside Private Reformatory for Protestant Girls

1887 – 1903

Other Names:

- Girls' Protestant Reformatory, Glenfine
- Brookside Reformatory

Details

The Brookside Private Reformatory for Protestant Girls was established in 1887 by Mrs W. T. Rowe. It was located at Glenfine, and later in the town of Cape Clear, near Scarsdale. Many girls ended up in Brookside after unsuccessful boarding out or foster care placements. It closed in 1903.

The Brookside Private Reformatory for Protestant Girls was established on 29 December 1887 by Mrs W. T. Rowe. It was initially established at Glenfine, and soon moved to more extensive premises in the town of Cape Clear, near Scarsdale. The establishment of private reformatories had been made possible by *The Juvenile Offenders' Act 1887*, which was assented to only weeks before the opening of Brookside.

When Brookside opened at Glenfine in 1887 it had room for 6 girls. By 1890 the Brookside Reformatory had moved to Cape Clear and had an average of 20 girls in residence. The continual increase in numbers at Brookside from its opening led to the establishment of a number of sub-reformatorys at nearby Pitfield, Fairhaven, Rokewood, and Heywood. By the end of 1891 there were 25 girls in residence at Brookside, and by the end of 1892, with the closing of the Coburg Government Reformatory for Girls, numbers at Brookside had risen to 47.

In the Department's annual report for 1893 it was reported that numbers of girls in residence at Brookside had fallen slightly to 43, and as a consequence the matron was considering closing the sub-reformatory at Rokewood. However in February 1897 another sub-reformatory, St Ann's at Heywood, had opened, receiving an initial 10 girls from the approximately 40 in residence at Brookside. A second cottage, known as 'No. 2', had also opened on the Brookside estate at this time, with each Brookside cottage housing approximately 15 girls.

In a visit to Brookside in 1890 reported on in the *Age*, the author 'Mem' describes Mrs Rowe as 'a lady who has made it her life work to assist in the rescue of young girls whose surroundings have, almost inevitably in most cases, brought them into trouble'.

Brookside was a private, or 'assisted', reformatory, made possible by the Juvenile Offenders Act 1887, where the government paid 5 shillings a week towards the maintenance of girls in the reformatory. (The government also ran a reformatory for girls in Coburg, and one for boys in Ballarat.) A government report from 1890 stated that Mrs Rowe and the Good Shepherd Sisters (who ran reformatories at Abbotsford and Oakleigh) 'have the same entire control and guardianship over their wards as that enjoyed by the Superintendent of the Boys' Reformatory, a Government institution'.

The 1872 Report of the Royal Commission on Reformatory and Industrial Schools had commended the reformatory work of the Good Shepherd Sisters with Catholic girls, and stated the 'extreme desirability' of work with Protestant girls being in private, rather than government, hands. The Secretary urged the same in the

Departmental Report of 1886, leading to the establishment of Brookside in 1887.

The Department saw Brookside's rural location as ideal for such an institution, being 'away from large towns, gold-fields and factories, and surrounded within moderate distances by the residences of suitable employers'. Another benefit, according to the Secretary of the Department, was the 'absolute separation from disreputable friends and relatives'.

Brookside's remote situation also meant that absconding was 'practically unknown'. This was also mentioned by 'Mem' in the *Age* report:

There is no lock and key supervision here, but liberty to scamper among the fields, full and free trust when the cows have to be brought home, hay has to be made in the paddock beyond the Creek, or the wood cart has to be loaded in the forest land still further away ... Green fields, I'm sure most people will agree, are a very much more wholesome restraint than iron bolts and bars.

Older and younger girls were housed separately at Brookside, Mem noted with approval, so that young girls were protected from 'contamination' by the older and more worldly girls.

Mem reported that one duty the Brookside girls performed was looking after 'the baby', who turned out to be a two-year-old Aboriginal boy, 'a protégé of one of Mrs Rowe's daughters, who is for the time being having a holiday stay at Brookside'.

Many girls ended up in Brookside after unsuccessful boarding out or foster care placements.

Punishment at Brookside was described by Mem as 'neither severe nor frequently inflicted'. Girls being punished had to perform their usual duties for three days without companionship, that is, not in solitary confinement, but not allowed to talk to the others.

Girls usually went from Brookside to a 'service home'. Mem wrote that demand for the girls' services from local squatters and farmers were 'more numerous than could be granted'. Ladies from Brookside continued contact with girls once they were placed in service, and records were kept of all correspondence with each girl and of their 'career' post-reformatory.

Mem reflected that the barracks system operating at the Boys' Reformatory at Ballarat would not be suitable for girls, as training in domestic service cannot be provided in such conditions.

In 1899, newspaper articles criticised the conditions at Brookside Reformatory. This coverage resulted from the claims of a group of girls who had absconded from the Reformatory, about their harsh treatment at Brookside. The girls told police about punishments including floggings, having their hair cut, being confined to bed, and bread-and-water diets. However, an article in the *Argus* reported that all the girls unanimously exonerated Mrs Rowe.

Staff from the Department of Industrial Schools held a subsequent inquiry into the girls' claims.

A newspaper article from August 1899 stated that Mrs Rowe was superintendent of Brookside, but that she lived at Glenfine, eight miles away. Miss King and Miss Hamilton managed the girls at Brookside. Nine girls were living in one cottage, and four in another cottage.

The journalist discussed Miss King's qualifications as a matron at Brookside. Despite having the 'best of motives', he doubted that Miss King's past experiences as a machinist in Ballarat, and working as a biblewoman with the Wesleyan mission qualified her to 'venture into a field like this'.

Miss Hamilton, although also untrained, was described as 'in every way a better stamp of woman', being more intelligent and kindly than Miss King.

Of the girls and young woman at Brookside, the article declared that they were probably some of the Department's 'hardest cases', almost all of them 'grossly immoral'.

The 'Special Reporter' concluded that:

the authorities at Brookside are untrained and unsuitable for their difficult task; that the system pursued is antiquated and non-reformatory in its effects; and that the inspection is so inefficient and casual as to be practically a negligible quantity.

An editorial in the *Argus* on 4 August 1899 declared, 'It is a growing scandal in Australia that the vast state contributions to charitable institutions are unaccompanied by adequate state supervision'.

On 10 August 1899 in the Legislative Assembly, the Under-Secretary made his rejoinder to claims published in *The Argus* about Brookside and private reformatories in general, defending the Department's management and oversight of the institution.

In August 1900, the matron, Miss King, purchased the Brookside Estate upon which the Reformatory was situated. Brookside closed in 1903, with the Department's annual report for that year citing unsatisfactory accommodation and management as the reason for the closure. The remaining girls at Brookfield were sent to Mintaro Reformatory at Lancefield Junction.

More info

Related Entries

Ran

- [St Ann's Reformatory for Protestant Girls \(1896 - c. 1905\)](#)
St Ann's was established as a sub-reformatory of Brookside
Date: 1896 - 1899

Related Legislation

- [The Juvenile Offenders' Act 1887, Victoria \(1888 - 1890\)](#)
The Brookside Private Reformatory was established under the provisions of the Juvenile Offenders' Act 1887.

Related Organisations

- [Government Reformatory for Protestant Girls \(1864? - 1893\)](#)
- [Mintaro Reformatory Home for Girls \(1903 - 1912\)](#)
Following the closure of Brookside the remaining girls in residence were sent to Mintaro.

Resources

- Golding, Frank, *Orphanages in Ballarat - brief historical notes (draft)*, 2009
- Victoria. Children's Welfare Department and Reformatory Schools, [Report of the Secretary / Department for Neglected Children and Reformatory Schools](#), 1887 - 1895
- Maunders, David, *Two different worlds: cultural and political conflict in a 19th century boys reformatory*, 1987