

# Immigrants' Aid Society

1853 – c. 1902

**Other Names:**

- Immigrants' Home
- Princes Bridge

## Details

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The Immigrants' Aid Society came into being in May 1853. A non-government organisation, its initial purpose was to provide relief and information only to new arrivals, though its activities quickly expanded beyond providing aid to poor immigrants. Before the colonial government passed the Neglected and Criminal Children's Act in 1864, the Immigrants' Aid Society was responsible for the 'care' of hundreds of vulnerable children. The Immigrants' Home in St Kilda Road accommodated orphaned and 'neglected' children and also had a reformatory for children convicted of offences. In 1870, the Society changed its name to the Immigrants' Aid Society's Home for Houseless and Destitute Persons. In 1902, having become a benevolent asylum, it changed its name to the Victorian Homes for the Aged and Infirm.

The Immigrants' Aid Society came into being in May 1853, following a meeting of Melbourne's prominent citizens, concerned about the welfare of immigrants being drawn to the colony by the gold rushes. Many who came to the colony intending to seek gold found themselves stranded in Melbourne, without the funds to make the eight-day journey to the goldfields, let alone purchase the necessary equipment. A tent city on the outskirts of Melbourne, known as Canvas Town, was home for many of these impoverished immigrants. Others could not even afford the weekly rent required to pitch a tent in Canvas Town.

The initial purpose of the Immigrants' Aid Society was to provide aid only to new arrivals, however its activities quickly expanded beyond providing relief and information to poor immigrants. The Immigrants' Home was the name that early colonists gave to ramshackle buildings on either side of St Kilda Road at Princes Bridge. Over time, the Immigrants' Home came to serve a similar function to an English workhouse, operating a night shelter, convalescent hospital and providing shelter for deserted wives, single mothers, the disabled and 'neglected' children.

Victoria had no legislation relating to the 'care' of 'neglected' children until 1864. Before this date, under the Criminal Law (Infants) Act 13 Vic., No.21 1849, children could be assigned by the Supreme Court to persons willing to undertake their 'maintenance and education'. The Immigrants' Aid Society was responsible for the 'care' of hundreds of 'neglected' children before the 1864 Neglected and Criminal Children Act came into being.

In 1857, the Victorian government authorised the Immigrants' Aid Society to accept children from the courts and maintain them at the Princes Bridge institution.

The *Argus* reported in May 1860 that the government had handed over buildings to the Immigrants' Aid Society to be used as a reformatory for boys and girls. Formerly, these buildings were the barracks for soldiers of the 40th Regiment. The barracks, once repaired and added to, would provide shelter for nearly 400 people (the Society also provided accommodation for distressed persons and families). The reformatory was intended to house 200 children.

The newspaper further reported that a boys' and girls' school for 'neglected' and orphaned children was already being run by the Immigrants' Aid Society, with nearly 100 pupils.

In September 1863, it was reported that the Immigrants' Home was holding 400 children.

In 1864, when the Neglected and Criminal Children's Act came into being, 463 children were transferred from the care of the Superintendent of the Immigrants' Aid Society to the newly-established government schools, reported the Secretary of the Department for Neglected Children and Reformatory Schools in 1891.

Jaggs writes that with the passage of the Neglected and Criminal Children's Act in 1864, the two sections of the Immigrants' Home already housing children were established as industrial schools, with James Harcourt appointed as Superintendent. In the next four months, the Immigrants' Home received 190 children from the courts.

(James Harcourt was the superintendent at the Immigrants' Aid Society during the 1850s and 1860s. During this time, the Society accommodated many of Melbourne's homeless and destitute children. Formerly, Harcourt had been a Poor Law administrator in England. He served as a Member of the Victorian Parliament from 1869 to 1872.)

In 1865, 411 boys were transferred from the Immigrants' Aid Society to one of the two new institutions, the Sunbury Industrial School. By this time, conditions at the buildings at Princes Bridge were very poor and unsuitable. An Inquiry described the buildings as 'crumbling into decay, infested with bugs and so dried up that a single spark might execute a conflagration...'.

In 1870, the institution changed its name to the Immigrants' Aid Society's Home for Houseless and Destitute Persons.

By the early twentieth century, the Society had become a benevolent asylum. In 1902, to reflect this change in function, the Society altered its name to Victorian Homes for the Aged and Infirm. Its operations were transferred from St Kilda Road to Royal Park in 1914. The institution underwent several further name changes throughout its transition from a benevolent Home to a hospital, specialising in aged care. In 1979, it became known as Mount Royal Hospital. In 2005, the name changed again to the Royal Melbourne Hospital – Royal Park Campus.

## Gallery

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**St. Kilda Road**

**Description:** This image of Melbourne viewed from south side of the Yarra river shows in the foreground the Immigrants Aid Society Depot on left and Immigrants Home on right.

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## More info

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### Related Entries

#### Related Legislation

- [The Neglected and Criminal Children's Act 1864, Victoria \(1864 - 1888\)](#)

Before the passage of the Neglected and Criminal Children's Act 1864, the Immigrants' Aid Society was one non-government organisation 'caring' for neglected children.

#### Related Organisations

- [Chief Secretary's Department \(1855 - 1901\)](#)

- [Sunbury Industrial School \(1865 - 1880?\)](#)  
In 1865, some 400 boys were transferred from the Immigrants' Aid Society's industrial school to the Industrial School at Sunbury
- [Geelong Industrial School \(c. 1865 - c. 1880\)](#)  
Children were frequently transferred from the Immigrants' Aid Society Industrial School to the Geelong Industrial School
- [Royal Park Industrial School \(1875 - c. 1887\)](#)  
The site and buildings of the Royal Park Industrial School were given to the Immigrants' Aid Society in 1882.

## Resources

- Australian Heritage Council, [A thematic heritage study on Australia's benevolent and other care institutions](#), 2016
- MacFarlane, Ian & Fensham, Bronwyn, [Eliza Taylor: A mother is gaoled and her children left destitute](#), Ten Victorian Women, 1999
- Cage, R. A., *Poverty abounding, charity aplenty: the charity network in colonial Victoria*, 1992
- Victoria. Royal Commission on Penal and Prison Discipline., [Report \(No.3\) of the Royal Commission on Penal and Prison Discipline: Industrial and Reformatory Schools](#), 1872
- [The Immigrants Aid Society](#), VicFix correction campaign, 2017
- Uhl, Jean, *Mount Royal Hospital: a social history*, 1981
- Golding, Frank, [Lost & Found: State Children in Victoria](#), Frank Golding: author, researcher, historian and consultant specialising in child welfare, 27 July 2017
- [The Sanitary Condition of Industrial Schools](#), The Argus, 1 April 1872

## Records

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

### Records held by other organisations

- [Records of the Immigrants' Aid Society \(c. 1878 - c. 1902\)](#)

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You can view this page online by visiting <https://findconnect.efront.digital/entity/immigrants-aid-society/>