

Orphanage

1830s – 1950s

Other Names: • Orphan Asylum

Details

Orphanages or orphan asylums were a prominent feature of Australian urban landscapes from the early nineteenth through to the mid-twentieth centuries. Orphanages founded in both Britain and the United States from the late 18th century were voluntary organisations designed to rescue the children of the 'deserving' poor from being admitted to the workhouse. In Australia, which had no workhouses, these institutions took on a particular local form. The earliest orphanages were founded by colonial governments, primarily but not exclusively to deal with the children of convicts. Over time, the management was devolved to local committees ensuring that these institutions equated more closely to British models.

In Queensland, the government established the Diamantina Orphanage in 1865, while Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia's first orphanages were run by religious and charitable organisations (who also received some assistance from government grants). The Catholic Church established its own orphanages so that Catholic children were not brought up in a Protestant institution.

Australian nineteenth century orphanages modelled themselves after similar institutions in Britain which provided large dormitory style accommodation for the children. These institutions sheltered, fed and clothed the children under their 'care', but daily life was dull, heavily regulated, and with little scope for personal attention. Their impressive buildings were an important assertion of civic pride, a sign that a community honoured its obligations to children in need.

Orphanages were intended to provide for the 'innocent victims of misfortune', meaning abandoned children, single orphans (whose fathers were deceased) and double orphans (who had lost both parents). Where it was possible, guardians or other relatives were expected to make a contribution towards the cost of the children's care, and were, in turn, entitled to see the children on visiting days. (Most institutions had fixed visiting days. In the nineteenth century, these could be as seldom as once a month, but became more frequent in later decades. Although this rule was rarely explicit, a parent or relative who was in arrears in their payments was at risk of being reminded of their debt if they arrived to visit their child.)

Children could also be 'voluntarily' placed in orphanages, when their family requested children to be admitted. Many families who placed their children in orphanages had few other alternatives; in the nineteenth century there were few sources of relief for impoverished families, and mothers who needed to earn a living could rarely find employment which allowed them to keep their children with them. Sometimes placing children in an orphanage was the only viable alternative, and often families hoped they would be able to reunite their families in the future.

Most orphanages preferred to admit school-age children, rather than infants and toddlers whose care demands were high and survival rates lower.

Orphanages, unlike industrial schools and reformatories, were not supposed to be correctional institutions, but they did impose a disciplinary regime of religious observation, basic education and training, which was designed to prepare children for life as servants and labourers. In most orphanages children were expected to spend

several hours each day contributing their labour to the running of the institution. Older boys were often required to work in the orphanage's garden, or to tend livestock. Girls and younger boys typically performed domestic chores.

The Catholic Church, which relied on members of religious orders to staff its institutions, favoured single-sex institutions. Those that accepted both genders generally removed the boys to male-only institutions at adolescence. Most orphanages were self-contained institutions, where the children were educated at internal schools, and did the bulk of the everyday work. Girls were generally occupied with inside domestic duties; boys working both inside their own quarters and outside in the gardens and farms which provided much of their food, or in external cleaning and maintenance.

Once they reached school leaving age, children who had no family to return to were 'apprenticed out' – most commonly, boys as farm labourers and girls as domestic servants. The advantage of such employment was that it provided the young people with accommodation as well as wages, a proportion of which was usually remitted to the orphanage to be saved on the child's behalf. The ability of children to claim such savings relied on their being in good standing with the orphanage when they reached adulthood.

Some orphanages were short-lived, but most had a continuing presence into the twentieth century, often with very little change in the way they operated until well into the post-war period. Some orphanages became known as 'children's homes' in the twentieth century. A number of orphanages experimented with different models, such as cottage care, which aimed to provide a more personal and 'family-like' atmosphere for the children. Those that survived the move to deinstitutionalisation in the 1970s form the basis of many of the dominant agencies providing support for children and their families today.

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