

St Catherine's Orphanage

1931 – 1990

Other Names:

- St Catherine's Home, Brooklyn
- St Catherine's School
- St Catherine's Children's Home
- St Catherine's Home
- St Catherine's Brooklyn
- St Catherine's

Details

St Catherine's Orphanage was a children's home run by the Sisters of Mercy at Brooklyn, on the Hawkesbury River.

St Catherine's Orphanage had been St Carthage's College for Young Ladies. It was primarily a girls' home, although some of the girls' brothers lived in the home while they were young. It closed in 1990.

St Catherine's Orphanage began in the former Lineham (Brooklyn) Hotel, which was inherited by a member of the Sisters of Mercy's North Sydney Congregation and converted to a Convent of Mercy in 1907. St Carthage's College for Young Ladies, a boarding school licensed for 40 children, had begun in the same building. The Sisters of Mercy also conducted services and entertainments and activities in a hall building near the hotel. The arrival of the Sisters of Mercy rather changed the character of Brooklyn, a small fishing village that was an important stopping point for road and rail traffic.

By 1931 the unemployment and poverty of the Depression had led to a large increase in the number of children taken into Catholic babies' homes and children's homes. The Sisters of Mercy decided to focus on providing residential care for children, and renamed St Carthage's as St Catherine's. The name change also honoured the centenary of the foundation of the Sisters of Mercy and the order's founder Catherine McAuley.

In 1956 a new building that provided more privacy, comfort and better facilities was opened for the children. An old run-down cottage on land adjacent, which had been purchased by the Congregation, was renovated in 1959 to provide two classrooms for primary students who had previously had to cross an increasingly busy road to get to school. The old wooden hotel remained in use as the Convent until 1968 when it was demolished to make way for a new Convent, a Chapel (built large enough to serve as a Parish Church) and a laundry. St Catherine's now dominated the landscape at Brooklyn.

However, child care methods changed in the 1970s, to favour small family group homes. St Catherine's responded, greatly reducing the number of children in the home after 1972. The school, which had functioned for over sixty years, was closed to comply with changes in education, and children were sent to various local schools. St Catherine's also began to place children in T.AF.E., Business College or University courses before they left care. The Home building was converted to three self-contained units for family groups and the children were cared for by Direct Care workers. The school building was redesigned to provide accommodation for four older girls and prepare them for independent living. These changes were supported by government funding.

The school building (an old cottage) on the premises was also redesigned to provide accommodation for four residents. This enabled the girls to be better equipped, so as to function independently before leaving St Catherine's.

In the 1980s the old fenced swimming pool in the river was replaced by an in-built pool which was made possible by the fees paid by a TV company who used the site to film 'The Rovers'. Government funding and fund-raising enabled the building of a half-court. At this time, according to the Sisters of Mercy, St Catherine's was considered to be a 'model' Home and was often visited by Teams from non-government and government departments who were developing new institutions.

The Sisters of Mercy report that government funding introduced many progressive changes to St Catherine's, but at the same time, imposed obligations that were not funded, such as an increase in paid staff. The workload of staff and Sisters increased dramatically, owing to meetings and reporting requirements. In May 1990 the Trustees of the Sisters of Mercy invited a committee to evaluate the future options for St Catherine's and it was decided to close the home in August of that year. The remaining 10 young people were placed in alternative care. Sister Joanne Kirk, Congregational Leader at the time, acknowledged the efforts of staff to provide a warm, caring environment.

Former residents of St Catherine's Orphanage made submissions to the 2004 Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry into Institutional Care, alleging that they were beaten with canes by the nuns.

Gallery



Hotel that became St Carthage's College and Convent of Mercy

Description: This is a copy of an image from the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney Congregation archives collection.



Brooklyn Hotel, 1890s

Description: This is a copy of an image from the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney Congregation archives collection. The image shows the Brooklyn Hotel in the 1890s, which later became St Carthage's College for Young Ladies and St Catherine's Orphanage.



Image of St Catherine's Orphanage Brooklyn, viewed from the water

Description: This is a copy of an image from the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney Congregation archives collection. The image shows the buildings of St Catherine's Orphanage.



Image of St Catherine's Brooklyn (Convent of Mercy)

Description: This is a copy of an image from the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney Congregation archives collection. The image shows the outside of St Catherine's Orphanage.



St Catherine's Brooklyn, black and white photograph (Convent of Mercy)

Description: This is a copy of an image from the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney Congregation archives collection. The image shows the outside of St Catherine's Orphanage.



St Catherine's Brooklyn, view of full site from the water

Description: This is a copy of an image from the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney Congregation archives collection. The image shows the outside of St Catherine's Orphanage.



Classroom on the premises, St Catherine's Brooklyn

Description: This is a copy of an image from the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney Congregation archives collection. The image shows a classroom with a teacher and children at St Catherine's Orphanage.



'Fun in the sun', St Catherine's Brooklyn

Description: This is a copy of an image from the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney Congregation archives collection. The image shows children playing outside at St Catherine's Orphanage.



Lunch in the fresh air, St Catherine's Brooklyn

Description: This is a copy of an image from the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney Congregation archives collection. The image shows children eating their lunch outside at St Catherine's Orphanage.



Sister Anne O'Brien with pupils, St Catherine's Brooklyn

Description: This is a copy of an image from the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney Congregation archives collection. The image shows children being taught how to play tennis by a teacher at St Catherine's Orphanage.



St Catherine's Brooklyn School

Description: This is a copy of an image from the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney Congregation archives collection. This image shows the outside of St Catherine's Orphanage with children on the balcony and verandah.



Bobby Limb in action at one of the St Catherine's' Brooklyn fetes

Description: This is a copy of an image from the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney Congregation archives collection. This image shows adults at the St Catherine's Orphanage fete.



Brooklyn school children 1936

Description: This is a copy of an image from the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney Congregation archives collection. This image shows children at St Catherine's Orphanage in 1936, posing for a group photo outside on the lawn.

More info

Chronology

- St Carthage's College for Young Ladies (24 September 1907 - 1931)
 - **St Catherine's Orphanage (1931 – 1990)**

Related Entries

Run by

- [Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney Congregation \(1865 - current\)](#)
Date: 1931 - 1990

Related Organisations

- [Catholic Children's Homes Enquiry Service \(1994 - current\)](#)
Catholic Children's Homes Enquiry Services holds copies of some records relating to St Catherine's Orphanage.
Date: 1957 - 1990

Resources

- Carroll, Caroline, [Finally, we Forgotten Australians are believed](#), 16 November 2009
- Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission and the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes, [A piece of the story : national directory of records of Catholic organisations caring for children separated from families](#), November 1999

Records

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

Records held by other organisations

- [Records of St Catherine's Orphanage \(1961 - 1990\)](#)
 - [Records of institutions run by the Sisters of Mercy \(North Sydney\) \(1903? - 1990?\)](#)
 - [Catholic Children's Homes Registers \(c. 1888 - c. 1990\)](#)
 - [Sisters of Mercy \(North Sydney\) Historical Records \(1898? - 2001?\)](#)
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