

Sydney Foundling Hospital

1874 – 1877

Details

The Sydney Foundling Hospital was the new name given to the Sydney Foundling Institution in October 1874. In 1875, the Hospital moved from Darlinghurst into new premises at Port View House, Stewart Street, Paddington. In 1876, with philanthropic help, the committee purchased “Gorton”, a large house on five acres on Henry St, Ashfield. In 1877, the institution moved to Ashfield and changed its name to The Infants’ Home, Ashfield.

The Infants’ Home provided this account of the early years of its predecessor, the Sydney Foundling Hospital:

Originally established on the model of foundling hospitals in Paris and London, the committee of Sydney Foundling Hospital quickly realised that conditions in colonial Sydney were quite different, and that care must be extended to unmarried and destitute mothers, as well as the babies themselves. Challenging the approach taken by other institutions at the time whose charter was to separate mother and child, the Foundling Hospital pioneered the notion that mothers and babies must be kept together in the first instance.

By 1874, a vicious Victorian-era morality presided in the colony which saw unmarried mothers shamed and excluded from society. This resulted in the destitution of single mothers, leading many to commit infanticide and suicide. Preying on these women, the practice of “baby farming” arose – a callous business ostensibly offering private childcare but in fact a form of extortion for the mothers, while the babies were subjected to horrific neglect and abuse.

The visionary founders of the Foundling Hospital were determined to save babies and their mothers from such fates. They challenged the accepted wisdom that a refuge would condone immoral behaviour, and fought criticism from church leaders, the press and prominent citizens, to provide a safe and transparent organisation which would save the lives of babies and help mothers re-establish themselves in society (The Infants’ Home, 2017).

An article published in 1878 provides a statistical breakdown of the outcomes for the 55 infants admitted to the Sydney Foundling Hospital between June 1875 and June 1876:

In the hospital, 15; left at the door, or in places continuous to the hospital, 14; admitted on the application of their mothers, 14, and admitted with their mothers, 12; total, 55. This number is disposed of as follows: Deaths, 24; adopted by well-to-do respectable childless couples, 3; left with their mothers, 9; and present in the institution on June 1, 1876, 21: total 55 (Australian Town and Country Journal, 4 May 1878).

These figures show that not all babies at the Sydney Foundling Hospital were ‘foundlings’, or infants left by their mothers on a doorstep. The Hospital also took in children on the application of their mothers. Most notably for that period, the Foundling Hospital also admitted a number of infants together with their mothers. In the 1870s,

avoiding the separation of single mothers and their infants was an unorthodox approach for founding institutions.

In a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in August 1877, Minnie Smith, Honorary Secretary of the Foundling Hospital, explained the institution's approach to keeping mother and infant together. She wrote that if the mother was breastfeeding the child, mother and infant were admitted together to the Foundling Hospital. The mother was also given another infant to feed with her own, known as 'wet-nursing'. (*SMH*, 22 August 1877)

In the 1870s, there was one other institution in Sydney that also had the practice of keeping mother and infant together: the Sydney Female Mission Home, situated in Elizabeth Street overlooking Hyde Park. In Sydney newspapers, the administrators of the Female Mission Home were careful to distinguish their institution from the Foundling Hospital. Its Honorary Secretary Mary Cowper wrote that 'In some quarters an impression has been found to prevail that this Institution and the Foundling, recently opened, are the same. It may, therefore, be well for me to add that they are not in any way connected' (*SMH* 4 July 1874).

Another letter to the paper in August 1877 cited the lower death rate at the Sydney Female Mission Home compared with the Foundling Hospital, and attributed this to the Elizabeth Street institution's practice of enabling mothers to stay with their infants 'until some means of securing a living offers, without separating the two beings so closely united' (*SMH* 1 August 1877). The same correspondent, known only as 'Waverley' wrote to the paper again on 17 August, criticising the Sydney Foundling Hospital for separating mothers and infants and declaring:

If the ladies of the Foundling Hospital would only turn that institute into a home for destitute and forsaken young mothers, where they could go with their offspring and engage in some suitable work, until their infants were of an age to thrive independently of a mother's care, they would be doing a satisfactory and prosperous work (SMH 17 August 1877).

In her response to 'Waverley', Minnie Smith, Honorary Secretary of the Sydney Foundling Hospital justified the institution's separation of mothers and infants in certain circumstances. She wrote that sometimes 'it does seem advisable to separate mother and child, so that the mother may earn something towards the support of her offspring', adding that in these circumstances the Hospital took every precaution against injury to the infant's health. Smith also declared that 'to take in healthy young women, and keep them in comparative idleness (for no paying work can be got out of a woman hampered with the care of a young baby) does indeed seem like charity run mad, and would meet, I think, with fewer supporters even than the Foundling Hospital does' (*SMH* 22 August 1877).

Arguments about the best way to care for single mothers and their children were not confined to these newspaper exchanges between the Sydney Foundling Hospital and the Sydney Female Mission Home. Each time the issue of charitable grants to institutions came up in the New South Wales Parliament, its members debated the merits of the Sydney Foundling Hospital. Many politicians held the belief that institutions like the Hospital encouraged immorality and vice on the part of women, and argued against any government grants being paid to the Sydney Foundling Hospital.

In 1876, NSW member of Parliament JS Farnell opposed a grant of 1000 pounds for the institution 'because he did not believe Foundling Hospitals were in the right direction. They had a tendency to encourage immorality, and it had been proved beyond doubt that they had not reduced the number of cases of infanticide'. Another politician agreed that the institution 'would be an encouragement to unfortunates to get rid of their offspring'. Despite some argument to the contrary, and defending of the 'ladies' who ran the Foundling Hospital, the vote to omit the payment being made was passed 31 votes to 14 (*SMH*, 24 March 1876).

Again in 1877, some members of the Legislative Assembly opposed money being given to the Sydney Foundling Hospital with one member claiming the institution was 'a premium for bastardy' and another objecting that it 'relieved the fathers of illegitimate children from their natural responsibilities' (*SMH*, 25 July 1877). The parliamentarians also raised concerns about infant mortality at the Hospital and claimed that infants were dying from want of 'proper nursing and nourishment'.

Minnie Smith of the Sydney Foundling Hospital responded to these claims in another letter to the papers, which stated that the Hospital had always been open with the public about its death rate over the previous 3 years, which was 64% of the whole number of infants admitted. Smith also stated that this 'large percentage contrasts favourably with that of similar institutions in other countries where the death rate is seldom lower than 75%'.

Smith explained that many infants admitted to the Foundling Hospital were already 'often tainted with hereditary diseases' or were emaciated and unwell from ill-treatment or neglect. She also stated that epidemics of infantile cholera and typhoid fever had broken out in the institution, and there was no separate building for isolation (*SMH*, 25 July 1877).

At this time, the inner city locales of Darlinghurst and Paddington were not seen as healthy places. In 1877, the Hospital was moved out of Paddington into new premises, following Thomas Walker donating a 4.5 acre property in Henry Street, Ashfield. (A neighbour of the Ashfield hospital described it as a 'healthy suburb' in a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in August 1877.)

It was at the time of this change in location that the institution began to be known as The Infants' Home, a name which has continued to this day.

More info

Chronology

- Sydney Foundling Institution (May 1874 - October 1874)
 - **Sydney Foundling Hospital (1874 – 1877)**
 - The Infants' Home, Ashfield (1877 - current)

Related Entries

Related Organisations

- [Sydney Female Mission Home \(1873 - 1912?\)](#)

The Sydney Female Mission Home and the Sydney Foundling Hospital were institutions that admitted some infants together with their (single) mothers.

Resources

- Lorne-Johnson, Susan, *Betrayed and forsaken: the official history of the Infants' Home, Ashfield, founded in 1874 as the Sydney Foundling Institution*, 2001
- Winterson, Jeanette, [When unmarried mothers were blamed for everything](#), The Telegraph, 11 October 2015

Records

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

Records held by other organisations

- [The Infants' Home, Ashfield, Records \(1874 - 2002\)](#)

You can view this page online by visiting <https://findconnect.efront.digital/entity/sydney-foundling-hospital/>