

St Martha's Industrial Home

1888 – 1969

Other Names:

- St Martha's Industrial School
- St Martha's Industrial Home
- St Martha's Boarding School
- St Martha's Convent

Details

St Martha's Industrial Home opened at Leichhardt by the Sisters of Saint Joseph in 1888. St Martha's housed girls of school age and trained them in domestic arts and crafts. In 1923 the original building was demolished and replaced with dormitories, housing up to 120 children. In the late 1950s, St Martha's Industrial Home became St Martha's Boarding School. By 1969 there were only 27 girls remaining; they were placed with families, and the school was closed.

St Martha's Industrial Home was established at Leichhardt by the Sisters of Saint Joseph in the late 1880s. St Martha's had been a house called 'Elswick House' that was used as aged care by the Little Sisters of the Poor until 1888. The Sisters of St Joseph took over the building, which was large but barely finished. They renovated it and began taking enrolments.

It was officially opened in 1890 and was intended to be residential accommodation for girls of school age to be trained in domestic arts and crafts. It offered standard industrial school training, including laundry work, sewing, cooking, cleaning and other elements of a domestic servants life, but it did provide schooling to the girls.

Sister Kathleen Burford writes that the initial enrolments came from families who 'through adverse circumstances, welcomed the opportunity to place their daughters with the Sisters of St Joseph to be trained for employment.' Some of these families had lost a mother or father, and placed their boys in St Joseph's Orphanage, Kincumber. Sister Burford quotes Norah Carey, born 1894, who lived at St Martha's from 1903 to 1912, and who hints at disappointment at being trained for domestic service when she had other talents:

My mother died when I was 8 years of age, and my father, having read an advertisement about St Martha's, decided to take my sister Cissy and I to the sisters there. I stayed in the school until I was 12; I was good at spelling, reading and arithmetic and I could speak and write well. When Sister Aquin asked for a girl to help Sister Annette in the workroom cutting out blouses and skirts, I was chosen. But we were all trained for the laundry, the kitchen, housekeeping and dressmaking. When I left in 1912 I was employed as a domestic with Mr Green the architect, who was responsible for the renovations and alterations at the Home.

Norah also remembered Mary MacKillop, and her funeral, and how privileged she felt to iron the sisters' starched guimps and sew the hems of their habits. She also remembered the kindnesses of other nuns and singing in Leichhardt Town Hall.

By 1912 the house was at full capacity and in 1923 Sister Regis, who was the organiser of the Home, had it demolished and replaced with dormitories, housing up to 120 children.

In the late 1950s the name was changed to St Martha's Boarding School and the focus of the home became more educational, but it was still a children's home.

In 2009 the *Express Advocate* reported that Sharyn Killens had been abused in St Martha's. This led Robyn Ellis, who had entered the home as a six year old in 1947, and lived there until 1952, to recount that she felt the nuns were kind and her education in the home had been of a high standard. She reported feeling surprised, though sympathetic, to Ms Killens' story.

St Martha's still had 120 boarders in the 1960s, and although it had resisted the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau's policies of charging maintenance to parents, it was unable to keep up with the expectations of the school system. From 1966-1969 girls were required to attend nearby Catholic high schools, and the congregation ordered that boarders no longer be admitted. By 1969 there were only 27 girls remaining. These were placed with families, and the school was closed.

Gallery



The opening of St Martha's Industrial Home, Leichhardt, 1890

Description: This is a copy of an image reproduced in K.E. Burford's *Unfurrowed Fields*.

More info

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- [Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart \(1866 - current\)](#)

Resources

- 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

- [St Martha's Industrial Home Records \(1888 - 1969\)](#)

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