

Beagle Bay Mission

1895 – 1976

Details

Beagle Bay Mission was established by the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance (Trappists) in 1895. It accommodated Aboriginal babies, children and young people up to age 20. From 1901 the Pallotines were involved in running the Mission as part of the Catholic Diocese of Broome, and from 1907, the Sisters of St John of God ran the Mission school and girls' dormitory. From 1905, the head of the government departments responsible for Aboriginal welfare was the guardian of children at the Mission and from 1972 the head of the departments for child welfare was the guardian of any children deemed to be 'native wards' or 'wards of the State'. In 1976, Beagle Bay became a self-governing community.

Beagle Bay Mission, located on the Dampier Peninsula 180 kilometres north of Broome, was administered by the Catholic Diocese of Broome. The Mission was staffed initially by the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance (Trappists) and then from 1901 by the Society of the Catholic Apostolate (Pallottines). In 1907 they were joined by the Sisters of St John of God.

The 1899 report to the Protector of Aborigines showed that there were 67 children at Beagle Bay mission who were 'nourished and instructed' and 'have created a want of civilised food' and other practices that helped them, in the belief of the missionaries, give up the 'savage' way of life.

Some of the earliest published remarks about Beagle Bay Mission were included in the 1905 Roth Royal Commission. In his testimony, Pallottine Father George Walter who was in charge of Beagle Bay Mission, described the staff and activities:

I have 11 [lay brothers] and one school-master. Their various professions are carpenter, blacksmith, bricklayer, settler, [shoemaker], three farmers, and other tradesmen...[Mr Randle the school teacher] has been here since May last. He came shortly after the previous teacher (Father Reusmann) was drowned. [Randle] is a probationer at present, with a small salary [which was not paid by the government].

Walter was asked what subjects were taught ('Reading, writing, arithmetic, music, object-lessons, religious and Bible history'), how many hours of schooling per day ('Three and a half hours daily. In the morning from 8 to 10; in the evening from 2.30 to 4.') and how many children attending school ('31; 21 boys and 10 girls.').

Walter was then asked how children were kept occupied out of hours ('They help in the garden and field, and in the different trade shops'). The next series of questions shows how the royal commission felt about work:

*In other words, you keep them occupied outside school hours in order to give them technical education? – Yes.
Do you find that the best way to keep them fully occupied? – Yes.
You believe, then, in teaching them the nobility of work? – Yes. That is my principal aim.*

The children's meals were the next subject for inquiry and Walter said that the children got 'three meals a day: in the morning at 7, at noon, and in the evening at 6. Meals consist of rice, garden produce, pumpkin, sweet potatoes, fish or turtle-meat once a day. Meat means fish, turtle-meat, or beef.'

The children's clothing was discussed, with the Commissioner asking whether the children were always dressed as he had seen them on inspection. Walter answered: 'Not so well; but all except the very small ones are always clothed.'

Walter also explained that all children at Beagle Bay came from either Broome, Disaster Bay or Beagle Bay locations.

The Commission also explored some of the history of Beagle Bay, whose grant of land was originally given to the Trappist religious order. Walter's account of the history is as follows:

It seems to me that the Trappists lost heart in the work, and as Bishops Gibney and Kelly were very anxious to continue the work, Bishop Kelly applied to my Superior in Rome to send out some missionaries... The Trappists got £2,640 for the property.

The state of finances that Walter reported to the Royal Commission were debts, being £1,600 overdraft from a bank in Broome, more than £1,000 owed to 'two firms in Broome' and 'a few smaller obligations.'

In the annual report of the Aborigines Department in 1907 (pp.7-8), the Chief Protector of Aborigines described the government approach to removing Aboriginal children from their families. At this time, there were reportedly '14 half-caste boys and 22 girls' in the East Kimberley; '10 boys and four girls' in the West Kimberley and another 'four or five at Cygnet Bay'. There were also 'several full-blooded native children of each sex' in the East and West Kimberley:

Instructions have been given to the Protectors, Police, and Travelling Inspectors to try and collect these children and send them to the Beagle Bay Mission... There are now 10 sisters at this Mission. There is therefore now no reason why the girls, both half-caste and full-blooded, cannot receive the same care and attention that they do in the institutions South... Some little difficulty is experienced in getting the parents to part with these children; they cannot be forced, unless it is proved that the surroundings are likely to bring the children to lead vicious lives. However, every persuasion will be used, and I think it probable by this time next year a great many of these children will be at the Mission.

The State Solicitor's Office (2005, pp.16-17) reports that from 1908 children 'who appeared to be neglected' were transferred by authorities from 'all over the Kimberley' to Beagle Bay Mission. Choo (2001, p.298-299) writes that government reports show there were 111 children at Beagle Bay by 1909 and from 105 to 136 children each year between 1910 and 1936.

Beagle Bay Mission was a 'compound', referred to as a 'colony' and according to Choo (pp.152-153) children led a 'regulated and institutionalized life'. Boys and girls were segregated into separate dormitories that were locked at night and were allowed to see their parents only 'once a month, although they could see them across a fence every day'. This had a profound and lasting impact (p.164): 'Generations of Aboriginal women who lived on Beagle Bay Mission have spoken about their deep sense of loss, and their attempts as children to maintain contact with the older people in order to obtain information about the old ways. These attempts were frustrated by the missionaries. Children were not allowed to talk about their parents or enquire about them. They were forbidden from speaking their own languages, among themselves or with the older people in the colony.'

Some children did not have parents living at the mission. When Choo interviewed some of these women (p.163) she found that they recalled 'with great fondness the love and care given to them by the adults in the mission

colony, who were allocated to them as “adoptive parents”, and’ by older girls who were given the responsibility of looking after younger girls ‘as a means of maintaining some order in the dormitory’.

Choo reports (pp.159) that right up until the 1950s, there was an expectation throughout the Kimberleys that all children, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, needed only a primary-school education. However, from the 1930s (pp.160-161), some children were chosen to receive further education and were sent to Catholic boarding schools in the south of the State. From 1955, a number of teenage children were sent from Beagle Bay to the Pallottine Centre in Riverton to continue their education or other training. Schooling at Beagle Bay included subjects such as ‘spelling, reading, writing and arithmetic, and received religious education, which included catechism and hymns in Latin’.

World War II (Choo, p.178) put additional pressure on staff and children at Beagle Bay Mission when Aboriginal people, including children from the Holy Child Orphanage in Broome, were evacuated to Beagle Bay in 1942, remaining until 1945.

Reports of the Child Welfare Department (*Signposts* pp.97, 99) show that children, who included those who were wards of the State, were living in separate boys’ and girls’ dormitories until at least 1974.

The State Solicitor’s Office reported (2005, p.17) that Beagle Bay Mission, located on the Dampier Peninsula 180 kilometres north of Broome, was a Catholic mission until the mid-1970s but the Pallottine Fathers continued to run the school and hospital and look after the boys in the dormitory until 1976 when it became a self-governing Aboriginal community. Government reports (*Signposts* 2004, pp.97-99) show that children continued to be placed with foster parents at Beagle Bay after the institutionalised child ‘care’ ended.

Beagle Bay Mission was mentioned in the Bringing Them Home Report (1997) as an institution that housed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children removed from their families.

Gallery



Beagle Bay Church at Beagle Bay, Western Australia, 1974 [picture]



Beagle Bay Mission, 1953

Description: This is a digital copy of a photographic print and is part of the group of four images titled 'Beagle Bay Mission, July 1953 [picture]' held at the State Library of Western Australia. The images shows goats grazing on the grounds of Beagle Bay Mission with the buildings of the mission in the background.



Girl sewing, 1953

Description: This is a digitised copy of a photoprint and is part of the Government Photographer collection held at the State Library of Western Australia. The image shows a girl operating a sewing machine at the Beagle Bay Mission in 1953.



Girl ironing,1953

Description: This is a digitised copy of a photoprint and is part of the Government Photographer collection held at the State Library of Western Australia. The images shows girls ironing on tables at the Beagle Bay Mission in 1953.

A big photo album: the archive of the Sisters of St John of God

Description: 'A big photo album: the archive of the Sisters of St John of God' is an online news item from *ABC Kimberley*. It shows pictures of Aboriginal children and adults, and is about the collection of 34,000 photographs held by the Sisters of St John of God at the Heritage Centre in Broome, Western Australia.

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance \(Trappists\) \(1895 - current\)](#)
The Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance (Trappists) established Beagle Bay Mission.
Date: 1895 - 1901
- [Pallottines \(Society of the Catholic Apostolates\) \(1901 - current\)](#)
The Pallottines (Society of the Catholic Apostolates) were involved in running Beagle Bay Mission as part of the Catholic Diocese of Broome.
Date: 1901 - 1976

Related Events

- [Royal Commission to Enquire into and Report Upon \[inter alia\] the Administration of the Aborigines Department and the Condition of the Natives, State of Western Australia \(1904? - 1905\)](#)
The Roth Royal Commission inquired into conditions and practices at Beagle Bay Mission.
Date: 1905 -

Related Organisations

- [State Library of Western Australia \(c. 1889 - current\)](#)
The State Library of Western Australia holds many photographs and other historical information about the Beagle Bay Mission.
- [Aborigines Protection Board, Colony of Western Australia \(1890 - 1898\)](#)
The Aborigines Protection Board had responsibility for the welfare Aboriginal children housed in Beagle Bay Mission.
- [Sisters of St John of God \(1895 - current\)](#)
Sisters of St John of God ran the school and the girls' dormitory at Beagle Bay Mission.
Date: 1907 - 1970s
- [Orfelin Ecole \(Orphan School\), Broome \(1895? - 1898?\)](#)
When it closed down around 1898, some of the children from Orfelin Ecole (Orphan School) in Broome were sent to Beagle Bay Mission.
Date: 1898? -
- [Aborigines Department, State of Western Australia \(1 April 1898 - 31 December 1908\)](#)
The Aborigines Department was responsible for the Aboriginal children in Beagle Bay Mission.
Date: 1898 - 1905
- [Chief Protector of Aborigines \(1898 - 1936\)](#)
The Chief Protector of Aborigines was the legal guardian of children at Beagle Bay Mission.
Date: 1905 - 1936

- [Drysdale River Mission \(1908 - 1937\)](#)
Children were transferred between Drysdale River Mission and Beagle Bay Mission.
- [Moola Bulla Station \(1910 - 1955\)](#)
When Moola Bulla Station closed, many of the children were transferred to Beagle Bay Mission.
Date: 1955 -
- [Derby Leprosarium \(c. 1936 - 1986\)](#)
- [Holy Child Orphanage \(1941 - 1962\)](#)
Girls, young women and Sisters from the Holy Child Orphanage at Broome were evacuated to Beagle Bay Mission during World War II.
Date: 1942 - 1945
- [Pallottine Mission Centre \(1955 - 1991\)](#)
After Beagle Bay Mission closed children continued to be sent from that community to Pallottine Mission Centre.
- [Department for Community Welfare, State of Western Australia \(1972 - 1985\)](#)
The Chief Executive Officer of the Department for Community Welfare was the guardian of children at Beagle Bay Mission who were deemed to be 'native wards' or 'wards of the State'.
Date: 1972 - 1976

Related Concepts

- [Aboriginal Protection in Western Australia \(c. 1832 - c. 1972\)](#)
- [Commissioner for Native Affairs \(1936 - 1954\)](#)
Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of children at Beagle Bay Mission.
- [Commissioner of Native Welfare \(1954 - 1972\)](#)
Commissioner of Native Welfare was the legal guardian of children at Beagle Bay Mission until 1963 when he could regulate the 'care' of Aboriginal children.
Date: 1954 - 1972

Resources

- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, [Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families](#), 1997. *Relevance:* Beagle Bay Mission was mentioned in the Bringing Them Home Report (1997) as an institution that housed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children removed from their families
- Stolen Generations' Testimonies Foundation, [Stolen Generations' Testimonies](#), 2009. *Relevance:* See testimonies of Frank Byrne, Keith Kitchener and Ernie Sarah
- [Bruno Dann and Cynthia Maree Winawarl interviewed by Marnie Richardson in the Bringing them home oral history project \(2001\)](#), 2001
- [Cynthia Edwards interviewed by Marnie Richardson in the Bringing them home oral history project \(2001\)](#), 2001
- [Rudolph Newman interviewed by Colleen Hattersley in the Bringing them home oral history project \(2000\)](#), 24 November 2000
- State Records Taskforce, Government of Western Australia, [Looking West: A Guide to Aboriginal Sources in Western Australia](#), 2004
- 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
- [The Aborigines Question](#), Western Mail, 18 February 1905
- [Society of the Catholic Apostolate \(Pallottine Fathers and Brothers\)](#), No date
- Battye, JS, [The Cyclopedia of Western Australia \(1912\)](#), 1912. *Relevance:* p.62
- [The Daily News \[Christmas Cheer Fund\]](#), The Daily News, 2 December 1916
- Aborigines Department, Western Australia, [Collection of typed copies of annual and other reports by and to the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia dated 1910 and 1911](#), 1910 - 1911
- Heritage Council of Western Australia, [St John of God Convent \(fmr\), Broome](#), inHerit: our heritage places, 8 February 2015. *Relevance:* There is some history of the Sisters of St John of God's activities in the Kimberleys in the 'Register of Heritage Places' (pp.4-10) including work at Beagle Bay, Bidyadanga and Wirrumanu Missions and the Holy Child Orphanage
- Lockyer, Betty (Elizabeth), [Last Truck Out](#), 2009

- Batty, David & McMahon, Jeni, [Sisters, Pearls and Mission Girls](#), 2004
- Johnson, Darlene, [Stolen Generations](#), 2000

Records

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

Records held by other organisations

- [Department of Aboriginal Affairs \[predecessors\], Records \(1886 - 2004\)](#)
 - [Sisters of St John of God, Kimberley, Records \(1895 - current\)](#)
 - [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
Item B77 PT1 of the Child Endowment correspondence files relates to Beagle Bay Mission.
 - [Files - Community Welfare \("A" Series\), State Records Office of Western Australia \(25 August 1908 - 23 December 1990\)](#)
 - [Files - Aborigines Departments \(1 January 1926 - 16 June 1972\)](#)
 - [Correspondence Files, Colonial Secretary's Office, Chief Secretary's Department \(1883 - 1983\)](#)
 - [Files - Department of Aborigines and Fisheries \(1909 - 1920\)](#)
 - [Files - Departmental \[Education Department\] \(1 January 1885 - 31 December 2000\)](#)
 - [Files \(Aboriginal Matters\) - Department of the North West \[1\] \(1915 - 1949\)](#)
 - [Reports - Aboriginal Missions \(1906 - 1918\)](#)
 - [Files - Chief Protector of Aborigines \(1898 - 1908\)](#)
 - [Administration Files - Northern District Office \[N.D.G Sequence\] \(1950 - 1974\)](#)
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