

Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind

1866 – 2004

Details

The Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, which was known as The Victorian Asylum and School for the Blind until 1891, opened in Melbourne in 1866. Its aim was to provide accommodation, school and occupational training for up to 120 blind and vision impaired children and adults. It was initially located in a rented house in Prahran until the institute buildings on St Kilda Road, Melbourne, were opened in 1868. The Institute opened a residential school and nursery in Burwood in 1959, whilst the St Kilda Road site remained as the institute's factories and workshops. In 2004 the Royal Victorian Institute and the Royal Blind Society of New South Wales merged with the Vision Australia Foundation.

The Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind received many children from Victoria's Industrial Schools and Orphanages, which frequently suffered from outbreaks of ophthalmia, a contagious eye disease that was a leading cause of blindness in children at the time. The institute also received some children and young adults from Tasmania prior to the opening of the Tasmanian Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution in 1898.

The institute was run by a private committee, and managed by a superintendent and matron. The families of children privately admitted to the institute were expected to pay for their child's maintenance and education where possible, however the rate varied depending on the family's ability to pay. The Victorian Government contributed to the maintenance of those students admitted from the industrial schools, and also provided grants to the institute. The institute also received funding through charitable donations, fundraising events such as concerts, and through sales of items made by the residents in the asylum's workshops.

Children at the institute received a standard education, as well as being taught how to read raised-type systems, including braille. The school also had a music education program, including a choir, orchestra, and brass band, and students gave concerts to the public in Melbourne and across regional Victoria as a means of fundraising. Many students were also trained in piano tuning, and were employed in this role throughout Melbourne. Children were encouraged to go onto higher education and university where able, with several students from the school attending the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music.

Children and older workers (many of whom lived outside of the institute) were also taught trades and crafts, such as weaving, knitting, and making nets, brushes, baskets, mats, and mattresses. These items were produced in factories and workshops at the institute, and then either sold or used by the institute, with workers being paid piece rates for the items they produced. From 1871 members of the public were invited to watch the making of these items in the workshop. The institute undertook significant building work in the 1920s, opening several new factories and workshops onsite as well as hostels for its adult workers and apprentices in the surrounding area. From the 1950s the type of work performed in the factories and workshops shifted from making matting, brushes and baskets to more automated packaging and assembly work.

In 1934 the Institute established a nursery for blind and vision impaired babies and toddlers. Up until this point the institute had only accepted children of schooling age and above.

During World War Two the Commonwealth Government took over the school buildings and the nursery (though not the factories or the hostels) for the war effort, and the children were relocated to a holiday resort called "The Georgian" in Olinda, in the Dandenong Ranges. Many of the staff did not accompany the children to Olinda and, according to recollections published in *A History of the Royal Victorian Institute of the Blind* (Raphael Buckrich,

2004) , the children were instead cared for by older girls from the Church of England Girls' Home at Glenroy (also known as St Agnes' Girls' Home).

In 1959 the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind school was moved to a new 42 acre site in Burwood, whilst the factories and workshops remained in Melbourne. The new site, known as the Burwood Education Centre, consisted of a school, nursery, children's accommodation, gymnasium, swimming pool, and staff quarters. Not all of the students at the Burwood school lived permanently on site, with some boarding there during the week and returning home on weekends, and others only attending the school during the day. In 1963 a deaf-blind centre was also opened at the Burwood school, which was followed by a residential care program for children with multiple disabilities in the 1970s.

During the 1970s changes in the number of children living at the school meant that the large sleeping dormitories could be converted into smaller family-sized residential units. From the late 1970s these living situations again changed as the institute acquired several family group homes for students in the nearby suburbs of Box Hill South, Glen Waverley, and Ashwood. In 1989 approximately half of the Burwood site was sold, and throughout the 1990s the use of the Burwood Education Centre reduced, with St Andrew's Christian School opening on the site in 1998.

In 2004 the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind and the Royal Blind Society of New South Wales merged with the Vision Australia Foundation.

Gallery



Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, Institute Building, circa 1900

Description: This image of the the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind shows a large, three-storey bluestone building with a central tower and two-storey wings on either side. In front of the building are gardens, lawns and trees. This image is part of the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind Collection at Museums Victoria.



Blind Children Knitting, Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, Melbourne, Victoria, circa 1900s

Description: This is an image taken at the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind in Melbourne. It shows approximately 13 children and young women seated around a table knitting. This image is part of the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind Collection at Museums Victoria.



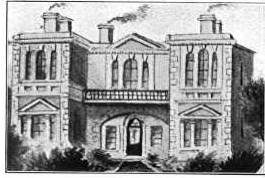
Classroom, Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, Melbourne, circa 1900

Description: This is an image of children in a classroom at the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, Melbourne. It shows approximately 20 children seated at desks in a classroom. There is a woman seated immediately in front of some of the children holding an open book in her lap, and a man standing at a lecturn at the front of the classroom. The children appear to be reading braille or another raised text type with their fingers. This image is part of the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind Collection at Museums Victoria.



Broom Making Workshop, Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, circa 1900

Description: This is an image showing eight boys and men working in the broom making workshop at the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind. The men and boys are standing at workbenches and are in the process of making brooms, with one man standing near the door, possibly supervising. This image is part of the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind Collection at Museums Victoria.



Deaf and Dumb Institute

Description: This is a sketch of "Leal House" on Commercial Road in Prahran. It shows a large two-storey stone house with gardens in front. Leal House housed the Victorian Deaf and Dumb Institute from 1864 to 1866, and the Victorian Asylum and School for the Blind from 1866 to 1868. No date was provided with this image, the dates included are an estimate.

More info

Related Entries

Related Organisations

- [St Agnes' Girls' Home \(1926 - 1963\)](#)

Older girls from St Agnes' Girls' Home looked after children from the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind when they were sent to Olinda during World War Two.

Resources

- [An Asylum and School for the Blind](#), The Age, 22 August 1866
- [An Asylum for the Blind](#), Leader, 1868
- [Victorian Asylum and School for the Blind](#), The Argus, 1 February 1869
- [Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind](#), The Age, 13 September 1892
- [Victorian Blind Institute](#), The Age, 6 August 1925
- [Blind Institute](#), Kilmore Free Press, 27 July 1939
- [Nursery for Blind Moves to New Site](#), The Age, 16 August 1951
- [Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind](#), Finding Records, 2016. *Relevance:* See the 'List of records held by the department' section for information about records relating to the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind
- Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, *The Years Between [sound recording]: an oral history of the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, 1866-1991*, 1991
- [Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind Collection](#), Museums Victoria Collections, No date
- McKinty, Judy & Tomkins, Margaret, [From the Cradle to the Grave: Sister Lindsey and the Blind Babies' Nursery](#), Communities of Memory, Journal of the Oral History Association of Australia, 2012

Records

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

Records held by other organisations

- [Voluntary Children's Homes Files \(1921 - 1989\)](#)

- [Register of Incapacitated Persons Maintained in Institutions in Other Colonies \(1873 - 1897\)](#)
Register of Incapacitated Persons Maintained in Institutions in Other Colonies lists people from Tasmania who were placed at the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind
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