

The Victorian Infant Asylum

1877 – 1902

Details

The Victorian Infant Asylum was established in 1877. Its stated aims were: to prevent infanticide, save infant life from the 'evils of baby farming', and to rescue mothers of illegitimate children from further degradation. In 1902, its name changed to the Victorian Infant Asylum and Foundling Hospital.

The Victorian Infant Asylum was established in 1877. A group of women concerned about the welfare of 'unfortunates' – infants and unmarried pregnant young women – met in Melbourne on 15 June 1877.

This group of 'ladies' came together under the patronage of Lady Bowen, the wife of the Governor. With money collected, a house at 35 Hanover Street, Fitzroy was leased and the first 'inmate' was admitted to the Victorian Infant Asylum on 9 November 1877.

The stated aims of the Victorian Infant Asylum were:

- The prevention of infanticide
- The saving of infant life from the evils of baby farming
- The rescuing of mothers of illegitimate children from further degradation.

The 'ladies' of Melbourne were a driving force behind the establishment of the Victorian Infant Asylum, and its activities depended on the philanthropic and awareness-raising efforts of its women supporters.

Mrs J.G. Francis spoke at the first annual meeting of the Victorian Infant Asylum on 26 September 1878, at the Melbourne Town Hall:

For some time we have had strong convictions that an institution of the nature of the one whose claims I advocate was urgently required, and the period of the past 12 months has shown us that in this we were perfectly correct, and that we perform one of woman's highest missions in thus saving many who are not irredeemably bad, and in preventing the destruction of human life. We respectfully and cordially invite our sisters in the colony to inspect the institutions at Wills-house, Hanover Street, Fitzroy, see the little saved ones, and we then ask no other argument, or any stronger support than the inward workings of a womanly heart.

By 30 June 1878, the Victorian Infant Asylum had admitted 32 infants and 20 mothers. Eight infants had been discharged to the care of their mothers. Another 14 infants remained at the home in Fitzroy. The Asylum reported that in its first year, nine infants had been boarded out, and another five had been 'assisted'.

The 'honorary physicians' who made up the institution's medical staff in 1878 were Dr Motherwell, Dr Shields and Dr Youl.

The secretary, Mrs C.E. Bright reported on the mothers:

Some are in the house acting as nurses, others have obtained situations, and are thereby enabled to assist in maintaining their children, and all have so far conducted themselves well, and exhibited gratitude for the assistance afforded them.

She also reported that police had seen a drop in infanticide in the past six months.

The Victorian Infant Asylum used its first annual meeting to appeal for funds, so that infants could be moved to accommodation in the country to prevent overcrowding and allow for new admissions.

The meeting reported that the committee was anxious to commence building a permanent home for the Asylum, on land reserved by the government for this purpose, on 'Eastern-hill'.

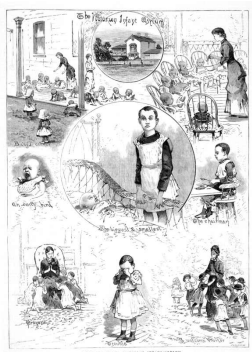
Building never took place on this parcel of land (adjacent to the Eye and Ear Hospital in East Melbourne). The Victorian Infant Asylum purchased land in 1881, on the corner of Vale and Berry Streets. In 1882, the government granted it more land, alongside the land already purchased in Berry Street. A building was completed by 1882 and was receiving infants and mothers.

By 1892, overcrowding had become such a problem at the Victorian Infant Asylum that physicians were having to turn away admissions. The committee appealed to the government and the public for urgent help, so that the Asylum could be extended.

In 1902, its name changed to the Victorian Infant Asylum and Foundling Hospital. That year, the Annual Report stated that a 'Foundling Wing' was being built at Berry Street.

Berry Street Victoria is the custodian of records from the Victorian Infant Asylum.

Gallery



Sketches at the Victorian Infant Asylum

Description: This engraving appeared in the *Illustrated Australian News*.



House in Hanover Street (now number 35)

Description: This is a copy of an image of the building that was the first location of the Victorian Infant Asylum in Hanover Street, Fitzroy.



Berry Street Babies' Home and Hospital, East Melbourne

Description: This is a copy of a photograph of the Berry Street Babies' Home and Hospital. There is a sign that reads: 'Help the Berry Street Babies' Home & Hospital. Donations please.'

More info

Chronology

- **The Victorian Infant Asylum (1877 – 1902)**
 - The Victorian Infant Asylum and Foundling Hospital (1902 - 1906)
 - The Foundling Hospital and Infants' Home (1906 - 1964)
 - Berry Street Babies' Home and Hospital (1964 - 1975)
 - Berry Street - Child and Family Care (1975 - 1992)
 - Berry Street Incorporated (1992 - 1994)

Related Entries

Related Legislation

- [Public Health Amendment Statute 1883, Victoria \(1883 - 1890\)](#)

Resources

- [Home for foundlings - the proposed hospital - claims of the Infant Asylum - can it meet the want?](#), The Argus, 10 June 1899
- Laster, Kathy, [Infanticide](#), eMelbourne: the city past and present, 2008
- [The Victorian Infant Asylum \(1877-1902\) later known as Berry Street](#), Finding Records, No date. *Relevance:* See the 'List of records held by the department' section for information about records relating to The Victorian Infant Asylum

Other Resources



Title: 'Conditions and rules for adopting children by the Victorian Infant Asylum'

Type: Image

Date: 1890s

[Details](#)

Records

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

Records

- [Berry Street Heritage Collection \(c. 1877 - current\)](#)
-

You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/the-victorian-infant-asylum/>