

# St Joseph's Foundling Hospital

1901 – 1975

**Other Names:**

- St Joseph's Foundling Home
- Broadmeadows Babies' Home
- St Joseph's Babies' Home

## Details

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St Joseph's Foundling Hospital was established by the Sisters of St Joseph in May 1901 at Broadmeadows. It was also known as the Broadmeadows Babies Home. It housed babies and children up to the age of three and a half, some older children and expectant mothers. The Hospital also trained mothercraft nurses. It closed in 1975 and the Sisters established a foster care service in Glenroy, called St Joseph's Babies' Home.

St Joseph's Foundling Hospital was established by the Sisters of St Joseph in 1901 at Broadmeadows.

Abandoned babies and infanticide were the topic of much public discussion in Victoria throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Until the Catholic foundling home was founded in 1901, the Victorian Infant Asylum (founded in 1877) and the Neglected Children's Department were the only institutions to receive babies.

The Sisters of St Joseph opened the Foundling Hospital at the request of Archbishop Carr, in May 1901. The Archbishop set out the purpose of the new institution in a letter to the *Age*, stating that it was to assist 'erring but often innocent young women', and stressed that women with more than one 'illegitimate' child would only be admitted to the hospital in 'very exceptional cases'.

In the words of Barnard and Twigg, the aims of the Foundling Hospital were to "save" children from a life of vice and poverty while allowing women to "hide" their shame and then get on with a respectable life'.

The Sisters of St Joseph selected the property known as 'Kerrsland' at Broadmeadows for the new hospital. In the early years, the Sisters struggled to operate the service with very limited funds.

Infant mortality rates in the first three years of the Hospital's operation were at 34%. 61% of these deaths were from 'summer diarrhoea', gastro-enteritis contracted from contaminated bottles. In February 1903, seven babies died within fifteen days. From 1904, the infant mortality rate at St Joseph's dropped, and was reported at being below the rate for Victoria as a whole by 1908.

The St Joseph's Foundling Hospital was home not only to babies born at the institution. It had some children living there who were over the age of five, according to records from 1911, a year which saw forty-eight children placed in the home. Barnard and Twigg analysed the records from that year to demonstrate children's journeys after St Joseph's: at least 25% of these children returned to their families; 14% were placed in adoptive or foster homes; 6% went from Broadmeadows into Catholic orphanages.

During the years of World War One, an army training camp was established close to the Foundling Hospital.

By 1922, the *Advocate* reported that the Foundling Hospital was accommodating children as old as six or seven. St Anthony's Home for Little Children was opened that same year to cater for older children and relieve the

overcrowding at Broadmeadows.

In 1931, the Children's Welfare Department asked the Sisters to erect extra accommodation for sixty wards of state, and for nurses to care for the children. In the same year St Joseph's also opened a mothercraft training school.

In 1940 a Children's Welfare Department inspector noted that St Joseph's was accommodating 130 mothers and 260 children, of whom 73 were wards and 17 were Infant Life Protection babies. On top of this, the Home ran a dairy herd of thirty cows, a piggery and a large poultry farm.

In September 1956, St Joseph's Foundling Hospital was declared an approved children's home under the Children's Welfare Act 1954.

Ryszard Szablicki was in the Foundling Hospital in the 1950s. In his book, *Orphanage Boy*, he writes about the different sections of the Home:

*Upon admission I was housed in 'A' nursery for bottle-fed babies upstairs. St Teresa's ward housed breastfed babies (mothers of newborns were encouraged to 'live in' at the home for the first six months). About six months later I was moved across to 'B' nursery, also known as the Karitane nursery. At eighteen months I was moved downstairs and shared a nursery with about thirty other children, one of many such nurseries within the home (Szablicki, p.11).*

Szablicki also recalled that one of the nurses at Broadmeadows "took a liking" to him and took him on a holiday to her parents farm hundreds of kilometres from the Home. He writes that "Often nurses acquired a particular interest in some children and took them home at times or away during the day" (p.11).

One common pastime for women who trained and worked as mothercraft nurses at St Joseph's was to take photos of the babies and children. In recent years, many former mothercraft nurses have realised the value of these photographs in their custody – for some people who grew up in orphanages, these albums contain the only baby or toddler photos ever taken of them. [MacKillop Family Services](#), the organisation that now has custody of records from St Joseph's Foundling Hospital, undertook a project with former mothercraft nurses where they were asked to add their photographs to MacKillop's historical records collection. The nurses' photos have now been indexed and digitised and are made available to people when they apply for their childhood records. In some instances, the person has been able to meet or make contact with the nurse (where she is still living) who looked after them.

One former nurse who worked at St Joseph's during the 1940s made a submission to the Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria, saying:

*For me it was an eye opener into how the church had power of family life and its control over its members. To me it was heart rending to hear and see babies (wrenched in one particular case) removed from their mothers in such a heartless way. I can still hear the cries of the mother knowing that she would never see the baby again (submission 91, quoted in Legislative Assembly, 2021, p.63).*

By 1956 Departmental inspectors noted that there were only six single mothers and 120 children in the home. Staff recruitment difficulties, the increasing use of foster homes and the fact that parents were being dissuaded from placing their children in institutions were cited as the causes of the downturn in numbers. As a consequence, two of the Home's nurseries were closed.

The Home closed in 1975 and the Sisters subsequently established a foster care service in Glenroy, which was called St Joseph's Babies' Home.

In 1997, records of the Sisters of St Joseph were transferred to MacKillop Family Services. These included records of the various orphanages, homes and other residences run by the Sisters of St Joseph. While custodianship of the records about people in 'care' became the responsibility of MacKillop Family Services at this point, it was formally agreed that the intellectual property in these records would not change hands.

In 2011, the Broadmeadows campus of Penola Catholic College is situated on the grounds of the original Babies Home.

St Joseph's Foundling Hospital was mentioned in the *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices* Report (2012) as an institution that was involved in forced adoption.

Giving evidence to the Senate inquiry into the Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices in April 2011, Jenny Glare of MacKillop Family Services spoke of the distressing experiences of some birth mothers at St Joseph's.

*on a number of occasions the mothers would assume that their children had been adopted only to find that, whilst they had signed consents, the adoption had not gone through ... It turned out that there were children whose mothers believed they were destined for adoption but for a variety of circumstances those children were not adopted and they ended up spending their life in institutional care. So to inform a birth mother that that is in fact what happened to her child was always an extraordinarily distressing experience for them because their child had not taken the path that they thought they were to take (Community Affairs References Committee, 20 April 2011).*

St Joseph's Foundling Hospital was also cited in the report of the Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria (2019-2021).

## Gallery



**Broadmeadows, St Joseph's Babies Home, 'Kerrsland'**



**Broadmeadows nurseries, St Joseph's**



**Toddlers' playground, St Joseph's Broadmeadows**



**Nursery, with babies and nurses, St Joseph's Broadmeadows**



**Penola Catholic College, Broadmeadows [former site of St Joseph's Foundling Hospital]**

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## More info

### Chronology

- **St Joseph's Foundling Hospital (1901 – 1975)**
  - St Joseph's Babies' Home (1975 - 1985)
    - St Joseph's Babies' and Family Service (1985 - 1997)
    - MacKillop Family Services (1997 - current)

### Related Entries

#### Run by

- [Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart \(1866 - current\)](#)  
Date: 1901 - 1975

#### Related Events

- [Inquiry into Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices, Commonwealth of Australia \(2011 - 2012\)](#)  
St Joseph's Foundling Hospital was mentioned in submissions 86, 313 and 416 to the Senate inquiry.
- [Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria \(28 May 2019 - August 2021\)](#)

#### Related Organisations

- [St Anthony's Children's Home \(c. 1921 - 1943\)](#)  
St Anthony's Children's Home was opened in 1921 to help relieve crowding at St Joseph's Foundling Hospital in Broadmeadows.  
Date: 1921 -
- [St Joseph's Receiving Home \(1902 - 1985\)](#)  
Some mothers spent the last months of their pregnancy at St Joseph's Receiving Home, then went with their babies to St Joseph's Foundling Hospital.  
Date: 1902 - ?

#### Related Concepts

- [Medical experiments \(1803 - 1970s\)](#)  
Medical experiments were conducted on babies and children at St Joseph's from the mid 1940s to the early 1960s.  
Date: 1945 - 1961

### Resources

- Senate Community Affairs References Committee, [Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices](#), 29 February 2012
- Swain, Shurlee, [Broadmeadows Babies Home](#), eMelbourne: the city past and present, 2008
- Donnelly, Joan, [Submission no 264 to the Senate Inquiry Into Institutional Care](#), 18 October 2003
- Murray, Suellen, John Murphy, Elizabeth Branigan, Jenny Malone, *After the orphanage: life beyond the children's home*, 2009
- Flanagan, Maureen, *Along the way*, 2002
- Davis, Donna with Amy Willesee, *Sins of the mothers: a memoir of abandonment, love and redemption*, 2006
- *Peace for the babies of Will Will Rook*, The Age, 15 August 1996
- Hughes, Gary, [Polio vaccine tested at orphanages](#), The Age, 25 October 2004
- Milliken, Robert, [Vaccines tested on Australian orphans](#), The Independent, 11 June 1997
- Shortkids Downunder, [Submission no 121 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- Name withheld, [Submission no 166 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- Sheedy, Anthony James, [Submission no 283 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- Ewing, Tania, [Claims of sexual abuse by intellectually disabled](#), The Age, 23 May 1998
- Walker, Charlie, *Charlie, the ratbag orphan : an orphan survivor in Australia*, 2010
- *Orphanage cemeteries in Broadmeadows*, The Age, 16 August 1996
- *Babies' Home Assured - No Close Down*, The Sun News-Pictorial, 23 November 1953
- *Home Moves Its Babies*, The Sun News-Pictorial, 1953
- *Heat Wave Dries Up Foundling Home's Water Supply, So Babies Move Out*, The Sun News-Pictorial, 22 December 1953
- Short, Gabrielle, [Transcript of Gabrielle Short's presentation to the Family and Community Development Committee: Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations](#), 26 March 2013
- Higgs, Sandra, [Transcript of Sandra Higgs' presentation to the Family and Community Development Committee: Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations](#), 15 February 2013
- Walker, Alan Charlie, [Transcript of Alan Charlie Walker's presentation to the Family and Community Development Committee: Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations](#), 18 February 2013
- [Heritage Display](#), MacKillop Family Services website, 2013
- O'Neill, Cate, [The importance of photos](#), Find & Connect web resource blog, 17 June 2015
- [St Joseph's Foundling Hospital \(1901-75\); Babies' Home \(1976-97\)](#), Finding Records, No date. *Relevance:* See the 'List of records held by the department' section for information about records relating to St Joseph's Foundling Hospital
- [A Mistaken View](#), The Advocate, 27 November 1941
- [Charlie Walker interviewed by Rob Willis in the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project \[sound recording\]](#), 23 February 2010
- [Valda Hogan interviewed by Suellen Murray in the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project \[sound recording\]](#), 9 February 2010
- O'Neill, Cate, [More photographs unearthed](#), Find & Connect web resource blog, 19 January 2016

## Records

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

### Records

- [MacKillop Family Services Records, Victorian institutions \(1857 - current\)](#)
  - [Voluntary Children's Homes Files \(1921 - 1989\)](#)
  - ['Closed' Agency and General Correspondence Files \[Charities Board of Victoria\] \(1923 - 1983\)](#)
  - [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
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