

Convent of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford

1863 – 1974

Other Names:

- Abbotsford Convent
- Abbotsford Youth Training Centre

Details

The Convent of the Good Shepherd at Abbotsford was established by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in 1863. A number of different institutions operated on the site at Abbotsford on the banks of the Yarra River, including an industrial school, reformatory, orphanage, female asylum and school. In 1961, it was designated by the department as a Youth Training Centre. In the early 1970s, the Sisters converted the dormitory accommodation into separate small units. By 1974, the Youth Training Centre had closed and residential accommodation for girls and young women had ceased at Abbotsford.

The Convent of the Good Shepherd at Abbotsford was established by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in 1863. It was the first institution established by the Sisters in Australia – four Irish women travelled from France and landed at Port Melbourne on 24 June 1863, and purchased the property on the banks of the Yarra River at Abbotsford. A number of different institutions operated on the site at Abbotsford from its beginnings until 1974, when the Sisters ceased as providers of residential care. At its peak, the site accommodated more than 1,000 people.

In 1864, the Sisters established an Industrial School (consisting of a refectory, work-rooms and a laundry) and a Private Reformatory for Roman Catholic Girls on the site. The Victorian government had passed the Neglected and Criminal Children's Act in 1864, providing for the establishment of industrial schools for 'neglected children', and reformatories for 'criminal children'.

An orphanage, known as St Joseph's, opened in 1865. Another section known as St Mary's housed the 'voluntary admissions' to the Orphanage, from around 1908.

Another section of the Abbotsford Convent was the Magdalen Asylum (built in 1877). Unlike other 'female refuges' of the time, it did not admit pregnant women and their infants. (Catholic women could go to the St Joseph's Receiving Home at Broadmeadows from 1902.) Inmates of the Magdalen Asylum were housed in a building called Sacred Heart. The majority of them worked in the laundry.

In December 1883, the Reformatory relocated to Oakleigh, due to overcrowding at Abbotsford.

Like many other Good Shepherd institutions around the world, the laundry was an important facet of the operations at Abbotsford. The commercial laundry, known as the Magdalen laundry, provided income for the Sisters, and work for the girls and women in the Sisters' care. According to Alan Gill, in Australia in the 1950s there was a saying, 'Bad girls do the best sheets'.

From the early 1950s, the Good Shepherd Convent in Abbotsford housed an institution for Catholic girls and young women. It received wards of state as well as private placements. Merritt reported in 1958 that of the 300 girls housed in the Good Shepherd schools, only 18 were wards of state. The rest had been sent to the Sisters by their families, on account of their 'unmanageable, unsatisfactory moral behaviour'.

In April 1956, the Good Shepherd Convent was declared an approved children's home under the Children's Welfare Act 1954. Later in April 1956, the Convent of the Good Shepherd was declared as an approved juvenile school under the same legislation.

In 1960, the newly established Social Welfare Department designated the Good Shepherd Convents at Abbotsford and Oakleigh as Youth Training Centres to receive young offenders. These Youth Training Centres, or Juvenile Schools, run by the Sisters were the only institutions of their type in Victoria to receive 'voluntary placements'.

A building known as St Anne's housed a cooking and typing school from the 1960s, as well as accommodation for some of the Magdalen inmates.

One submission to the 2004 Senate Inquiry from a woman who was at Abbotsford in the 1950s described Sacred Heart as 'a terrible cold and frightened place'. Its occupants ranged from 13 to 80 years old, and worked every day in the laundry, as well as doing ironing and packing cane baskets with manchester from Melbourne hotels.

Physical labour in the laundry and on other duties was mentioned in several submissions about Abbotsford Convent. One woman remembered her time there between 1950 and 1954:

While I was at Abbotsford I was subjected to child labor. This took the form of domestic cleaning and because of my so-called retardation I was put to work making mattresses for most of the time ... My state ward files indicate that I did participate in pre-school activities but I have no memory of this but have powerful memories of the smell of the horsehair and the smells and texture of the ticking material.

Former resident Jenny talked in an oral history interview about working taking care of babies and infants who lived in the same dormitory as her. Her jobs included waking the younger children in the morning, assisting them to prepare for the day and doing their laundry (Murray, 2020).

Other work done by residents included working in the kitchen and cleaning. Elizabeth recalls having to kneel to polish the floors at Abbotsford, leading to serious damage to her knees in later years (Murray, 2020).

Other testimony to inquiries about the Abbotsford Convent refers to young women having their hair cut off as punishment for absconding, children receiving insufficient schooling and poor food.

A research project in 1997 established that thirteen Aboriginal girls from the Northern Territory were sent to the Abbotsford Convent in the late 1960s. The report states that "At one stage, a request was received by the Sisters to establish a house for Aboriginal girls in Darwin. This did not occur, but girls were sent to Melbourne, Queensland and South Australia and placed in institutions. In Melbourne, girls from the Northern Territory were residing with the Good Shepherd Sisters in the late 1960s. They later returned home" (Home – still waiting, 1997, p.25).

In the early 1970s, the Sisters converted the dormitory accommodation in Sacred Heart into smaller, separate units. These units hosted a program for a 'group-living situation for 20 emotionally disturbed girls', according to the Social Welfare Department annual report for 1972-73.

The Youth Training Centre at Abbotsford was closed by 1974 (however, St Margaret's Youth Training Centre at Oakleigh, remained operational).

In 2004, the site of the former Convent of the Sisters of Good Shepherd was entrusted to the Abbotsford Convent Foundation, following a seven-year campaign by activists to 'save the convent' from planned residential development.

In February 2018, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand unveiled a memorial at Abbotsford, to honour the girls, women and children who lived at Good Shepherd institutions around the country.

Gallery



Industrial School [located at the Convent of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford]

Description: This is an image of the Industrial School, built in 1868, situated at the Convent of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford.



Laundries [Magdalen Asylum, Convent of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford]

Description: This is an image of the outside of the laundries of the Magdalen Asylum, located in the Convent of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford.



Providence [editor's note: located at the Convent of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford]

Description: This is an image of the Providence building, located at the Convent of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford.



Sacred Heart [editor's note: Magdalen Asylum, Convent of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford]

Description: This is an image of the Sacred Heart building, part of the Magdalen Asylum located at the Convent of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford.



Mercator [editor's note: Magdalen Asylum, Convent of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford]

Description: This is an image of the Mercator building, part of the laundries at the Convent of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford.



Magdalen Asylum, Abbotsford



Magdalene Laundry Australia 2008 Tour of Abbotsford Convent Victoria Australia

Description: This video of a 2008 tour of the Abbotsford Convent, Victoria, was previously uploaded in 6 parts, and has since been re-uploaded as a single video. [Description taken from Youtube]: This video is a tribute to my mother, her two sisters and three brothers who were all put into Catholic Institutional care in 1921. My mother and her sisters were taken in by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd at their Abbotsford Convent. Neither my mother nor her sisters were Magdalen inmates The Magdalen inmates were in the section of the convent called Sacred Heart and my mother and sisters were in St Josephs section. Sacred Heart was known informally as the Penitentiary because it was in effect a prison with bars on windows and high cast iron gates to prevent escapes. The Magdalens were made to work up to 50 hours a week, for no pay to keep one of the biggest commercial laundries in Melbourne running. Income from the laundries made possible all the other pastoral work of the 'Mother House' that was the Abbotsford Convent and in the South Pacific region, for 100 yrs. [Former Description taken from YouTube]: This video was taken in Nov 2008 at the Good Shepherd Convent in Abbotsford, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. It is a present day guided tour with a tour guide. This first of six videos features the tour intro with a general introduction from the Arch-Bishops Office at the Abbotsford Convent. The camera work and production were undertaken by Paul Curwood, the son of a former inmate who endured this home between 1928 and 1931. In its heyday and for many decades the laundry at the convent was one of the biggest commercial laundries in Melbourne, serving many public hospitals and church clergy. It was a big money earner for the Catholic Church and the Good Shepherd nuns. As late as 1970 it was totally staffed by unpaid young women who had fallen foul of the law or the social morality of the time. These young women had the misfortune to end up enslaved by the nuns until they were eighteen years old. The girls self esteems were systematically disempowered by the nuns. All inmates became severely institutionalized. Some stayed in the nuns 'care' until their deaths. The women who were released were often crushed characters who never realized their full potential. These are the stolen generations: different types of 'stolen generation' when compared to the Australian Aborigines. These unfortunates, numbering thousands, have never been apologized to ,or compensated for, their enslavement. Who said slavery was not a twentieth century practice in the civilized Western World?

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Sisters of the Good Shepherd \(1863 - current\)](#)

Related Events

- [Interstate movement of Northern Territory children \(1930s - 1970s\)](#)
In the late 1960s, 13 girls were sent from the Northern Territory to the Convent of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford.
- [Royal Commission into Charitable Institutions, Victoria \(18 March 1890 - 12 August 1895\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Convent of the Good Shepherd, Albert Park \(1892 - c. 1973\)](#)
The Convent at Albert Park was established due to overcrowding at the Abbotsford Convent.
- [Convent of the Good Shepherd, Oakleigh \(1883 - 1981\)](#)
The Convent at Oakleigh was established due to overcrowding at the Reformatory and Convent at Abbotsford.

Resources

- Australian Heritage Council, [A thematic heritage study on Australia's benevolent and other care institutions](#), 2016
- Kovesi, Catherine, *Pitch Your Tents on Distant Shores: a history of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Tahiti*, 2006
- Murray, Suellen, John Murphy, Elizabeth Branigan, Jenny Malone, *After the orphanage: life beyond the children's home*, 2009
- Biggs, Barbara, *In moral danger: a true story*, 2003
- Jones, Jan, *Set free: a journey from hopelessness to hope*, 1989
- Biggs, Barbara, *The road home: what price redemption?*, 2004
- Department for Neglected Children and Reformatory Schools, [Report of the Secretary and Inspector for the year ... / Department for Neglected Children and Reformatory Schools.](#), 1896 - 1924. *Relevance:* Mentioned in reports dated 1896-1924
- Hogan, Valda, [Submission no 146 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- Goodall, Gaye, [Submission no 316 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- [Memories of Abbotsford Convent on an eBay discussion forum](#), Abbotsford Blog, 31 March 2007
- [Christmas is party time ...](#), The Argus, 15 December 1952
- Spivey, Margaret, *Defying the gatekeeper: one girl's true story of resistance and rebellion*, 2010
- [The Abbotsford Asylum](#), Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers, 13 June 1868
- Turner, Laurence, [Victoria's Unwanted Children - 6: Willing Hearts Handicapped by Lack of Cash](#), The Herald, 31 October 1952
- Victoria. Royal Commission on Penal and Prison Discipline., [Report \(No.3\) of the Royal Commission on Penal and Prison Discipline: Industrial and Reformatory Schools](#), 1872
- Victoria. Children's Welfare Department and Reformatory Schools, [Report of the Secretary / Department for Neglected Children and Reformatory Schools](#), 1887 - 1895. *Relevance:* Mentioned in reports dated 1887-1895
- [Valda Hogan interviewed by Suellen Murray in the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project \[sound recording\]](#), 9 February 2010
- [The slaves of Magdalene](#), Sydney Morning Herald, 21 December 2013

Records

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

Records

- [Good Shepherd Archive collection of records of provision of residential care in Victoria \(1863 - c. 1981\)](#)
- [Bates, Smart and McCutcheon Pty Ltd \(1858 - 1995\)](#)
- ['Closed' Agency and General Correspondence Files \[Charities Board of Victoria\] \(1923 - 1983\)](#)
- [Voluntary Children's Homes Files \(1921 - 1989\)](#)
- [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)

You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/convent-of-the-good-shepherd-abbotsford/>