

# Northcote Farm School

1937 – 1979

**Other Names:**

- Lady Northcote Farm School
- Lady Northcote Recreation Camp
- Northcote School
- Northcote Children's Home

## Details

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The Northcote Farm School was established at Glenmore, near Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, in 1937. It was the only institution in Victoria to have been constructed specifically for child migrants. From 1937 to 1958, the Northcote Farm School received a total of 273 child migrants. From 1962, it changed its function and began to also accept local children, including wards of the state.

Northcote Farm School had accommodation for approximately 200 children. It was run by the Northcote Trust until the Social Welfare Department took over in 1976. It closed in 1979.

The Northcote Farm School was established at Glenmore, near Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, in 1937. The Farm was established as a result of a bequest by Lady Alice Northcote, wife of the Australian Governor-General and an admirer of Kingsley Fairbridge and his Farm School initiative. The Farm School was based on [Fairbridge](#) principles. Students at Northcote received farm training, as well as an education at the on-site state school. Most left the institution to work at the age of 16, but were considered to still be under the guardianship of the Trust, who would sponsor their welfare until they turned 21 (*Walkabout*, 1 July 1940).

Although the Northcote Farm was established independently of Fairbridge it soon developed a close relationship with the Fairbridge Society, with the Society agreeing to select and send children from Britain to the farm school.

The Northcote Farm School received 273 child migrants in total, between 1937 and 1958 (Senate, Lost Innocents Report, Table 3.2 Numbers of Fairbridge Child Migrants).

The first group of migrant boys arrived at Northcote Farm at Bacchus Marsh in July 1937. A group of 28 children (16 boys and 12 girls, the first girls to be placed at the farm school) arrived on the *Largs Bay* ship on 17 May 1938. The *Age* newspaper reported that many of these children were related to the first group of migrant boys.

Eric Goldspink was part of the sixth group of British child migrants to arrive at Northcote Farm School in 1939. He described a typical routine, with days starting with a cold shower at 6am, making your bed and undertaking household duties in the dorm of your cottage.

*In the morning, everyone had a job to do, whether it was cleaning the dining room, sweeping the dormitory or cleaning the bathroom – the jobs always changed.*

*Children would then rush out to a paddock to take part in military-style exercises, before eating breakfast – porridge, bread and jam -and departing for school.*

*It was more or less a seven-day week. Every day was housework; we had five days of school, sport on Saturday and Sunday School and church on Sunday. You got out of the village whenever you could, most of the time we went hunting, as we'd make money from selling rabbit skin (Moorabool News, 2017).*

The start of World War Two halted the supply of child migrants from Britain, and the program of child migration to Australia was suspended between 1939 and 1948. During the war years a number of children were sent from Northcote Farm to the [Fairbridge Farm School at Molong](#), New South Wales. Eighteen boys (including Eric Goldspink) stayed behind at Bacchus Marsh, tending to the farm.

The Northcote Farm School was originally under the control of Colonel Sydney John Heath, who had previously worked at the [Fairbridge Farm School at Pinjarra](#), Western Australia. Graeme Budd, a former resident of Northcote, described Heath as an “extraordinary person”:

*ex-British army, boxing heavyweight champion, joined the army as a 14 year old drummer boy, worked his way up through the ranks ... Lost one arm in WW1. Six foot, two inches, a personality that dominated everyone around him ... A fierce disciplinarian with a voice that could clearly be heard half a mile away. The majority of children feared him intensely, some hated him ... He was a soldier who had never known any other sort of life. Whether such a man should ever have been put in such a position is perhaps an arguable point, but the fact was he was there (“Northcote Farm School remembered – 70 years later”, 2011).*

Heath retired from his position in 1943, as a result of concerns expressed by the Northcote Trustees about his management of the farm school and the discovery that teachers at the on-site state school had sexually abused female students. In December 1942, Trustees reported back to the Fairbridge Foundation in Britain that Heath had “a complete lack of understanding of child psychology” and that the disciplinary actions taken by Heath against residents had “in certain cases gave us cause for alarm”. This had the effect of “Old Northcotians” (former residents) refusing “in no uncertain terms” to visit the Principal or the farm school on their holidays (letter from Harold Luxton to Lord Earl Grey, 29 December 1942, Records of Fairbridge Society [copies]).

A letter from July 1942 to Gordon Green, the General Secretary of Fairbridge Farm Schools Inc in England, stated that “in spite of the previous corres. we have had with Northcote and Col. Heath, some of the children, especially the girls, are still being sent out before their 15th birthday”, before they were of legal working age (Image 50, Records of Fairbridge Society [copies]).

Most seriously, in 1942 it was discovered that the Headmaster and a Senior Assistant at the school had sexually abused 2 female students between January and December 1941. The two men were charged, pleaded not guilty and were both acquitted (*Bacchus Marsh Express*, 9 January 1943, 23 January 1943, 17 July 1943).

A letter from England to the Northcote Trustees mentions that a sense of loyalty to Heath (as an “old colleague”) led to delays in taking action against concerns about Heath’s leadership. It also stated: “The school incident, alas, would have been impossible if Heath had been up to his job. We hope no lasting harm was done to the poor victims. It is much better that we should not know anything about it at this end. It could only put Green in a difficult position” (Image 64, Letter to Sir Harold Luxton, 29 March 1943, Records of Fairbridge Society [copies]).

Following the resignation of Heath, the Trustees appointed a new principal for Northcote Farm School, VK Brown. Brown was 30 years old and a former staff member at Wesley College. In 1944, Brown was sent on a research trip to Britain, Canada and the United States, in anticipation of child migration to Australia recommencing after the Second World War.

The [Child Migration Programmes Investigation](#) report (2018) which came out of the British Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse indicates that authorities still had some concerns about Northcote Farm School after Heath's departure. The UK High Commissioner in Australia visited Northcote in May 1943 after receiving a "disturbing" letter from a cottage mother and prepared a report to the Dominions Office in June 1943. It referred to the offending of the school staff in 1941 and also noted that no one from the Victorian Children's Welfare Department had visited Northcote. The report said that because the child migrants at Northcote were not in the care of the state they had no legal power over the institution. The High Commissioner inspected Northcote again in May 1944, with the Australian government's Chief Migration Officer. They concluded that the "the supervision and character training in the past have left much to be desired", and suggested that Northcote should be closed and the children transferred to the Fairbridge school at Molong. The CMO's view was that institutions like Northcote should be inspected at least once a year on behalf of the Australian and British governments (pp.50-53).

After the end of the war, the Northcote Trustees looked to receiving more groups of child migrants from Britain. However, attitudes towards child migration were starting to change in Britain. According to *Good British Stock*, one sending organisation, National Children's Homes, was "turning against child migration in principle as a placement option for deprived child" (pp.89-90). In an interim report about his research trip, the Northcote principal Mr Brown referred to "a strong group of recognised social workers very much opposed on humanitarian grounds to such emigration, for they say the children in the past have been exploited in the Colonies". Despite this, Brown concluded that "it is highly desirable that a *limited* amount of child emigration to Australia should take place" (Image 102, VK Brown's report to the English Trustees, December 1946, Records of Fairbridge Society [copies]).

It turned out that thousands of child migrants came to Australia from Britain and Malta during the post-World War Two period. From 1948 until 1958, 17 more groups of child migrants were brought to what was called at that time the Lady Northcote Children's Village.

A document in the Records of the Fairbridge Society [copies] collection describes how post-war child migrants came to Northcote. Children in Britain were chosen by Vera Grenfell, secretary to the English Trustees. Eligible children were to be aged between four and a half and eight. Children up to the age of 12 could be considered in the case of a family unit, as long as there was at least one child under 8. Prospective child migrants had to visit a child guidance clinic to have their IQ assessed, as well as their "suitability for community life".

*The aim of Northcote School is to provide a home life and education in keeping with the interests, character and vocational ability and aptitude of the selected boys and girls, so that may develop spiritually, mentally and physically to the maximum of their capabilities and become worthy citizens of Australia.*

*The children live in groups of 10 in self-contained cottages with modern conveniences, under the care of cottage mothers. Breakfast and luncheon are taken centrally in the Northcote Hall, tea and/or supper being taken in the cottages.*

*The cottages together with the hospital, central hall, main kitchen, staff homes, farm and farm buildings library etc form a community. To further provide for the atmosphere of real home life, which is so important to children, as well as to provide a goal for them in the future, a plan is in operation whereby the children spend their school holidays away from Northcote with carefully selected Australian families, returning as far as possible to the same family holiday after holiday.*

*In all cases brothers reside in the same cottage and the same with sisters. In some cases it has been possible for brothers and sisters to be in the same cottage, and the policy of mixed cottages is being promoted, it is hoped as these develop to have married couples in charge (Image 219, no date, Records of Fairbridge Society [copies]).*

Some children who were accommodated at Northcote Farm School post-war came under the Fairbridge Society's family migration scheme, which was introduced in the late 1950s when child migration numbers were dwindling.

The scheme brought children from Britain to Fairbridge institutions (as well as to Northcote Farm School), and they were later joined by and reunited with their parent or parents. At the end of 1960 arrangements were being made for 40 children to come to Northcote under the Fairbridge “two parent” scheme. A letter from the Director of the Fairbridge Society from December 1960 states that Fairbridge’s family plan was to send “somewhat large families, with both parents” to Victoria:

*Fairbridge will be responsible for the maintenance of any school-age boys and girls who will remain at Northcote until such time as the parents can provide a suitable home for them. This plan enables both parents and any wage earning members of the family to go to a Government Hostel and go out to work from there, with the ultimate object of the family being re-united as soon as this is possible (Image 232, 19 December 1960, Records of Fairbridge Society [copies]).*

Under the two parent scheme, parents were expected to contribute a sum towards the maintenance of their children while they were at Northcote, to provide them with adequate clothing and meet their medical expenses. The child endowment payments from the Australian government were paid directly to Northcote. A document in the National Archives of Australia records the numbers of children at Northcote Farm in 1967 who had come under Fairbridge’s family migration scheme. As at 4 May 1967 there were 3 children from the One Parent Scheme and 22 from the Two Parent scheme living at the institution in Bacchus Marsh.

A 1959 report by an inspector for the Child Endowment scheme noted that Northcote Farm School had accommodation for 200 children. However, it stated that due to the changes in policy in England and the reduction in numbers of child migrants being sent to Australia, there were only 140 children at the Home at that time, and there had been no new admissions since August 1957. The report also stated that after they had been admitted to the Home, very few children were discharged or transferred to other Homes before their 16th birthday. The majority of those that did leave prior to this time were either discharged to foster parents or returned to England.

In September 1960, the English Trustees met with the Chairman of the Australian Trustees in London. The Premier of Victoria had been “pressing the Trustees” to allow Victorian wards of state to be accommodated at Northcote Farm School, to relieve Victorian children’s institutions of serious overcrowding. The Victorian government offered to pay the Trustees the usual boarding out allowances for any children, and to meet any extra deficit incurred by Northcote. The Trustees agreed to give the Victorian government use of certain cottages at Northcote for state wards. The meeting notes recorded that Trustees were keen that the state wards be selected by the Australian Trustees, and that they were “underprivileged children NOT delinquents”. The institution would reserve 60 places for child migrants from Britain, and would ensure that no British child be deprived of a place at Northcote because of the state wards (Image 226, Notes from a meeting of the English Trustees with Sir Arthur Coles, Chairman of the Australian Trustees at Grosvenor House on September 30th 1960, Records of Fairbridge Society [copies]).

The Northcote School Act was passed in 1960, making it possible for other children, including Victorian wards of state, to be placed at the Home. According to the preamble of the Act:

- the Northcote School can provide accommodation for at least one hundred children;
- the English trustees have recently been unable to secure sufficient children from Great Britain qualified under the trust for education and upbringing at the Northcote School
- there are now not more than 20 English children at the School
- the Australian trustees have resolved to disband the School at the end of 1960 unless additional children can be admitted.

Despite this change that led to state wards being accommodated at Northcote Farm School, the institution continued to be run by the Northcote Trust. In the mid 1970s, the Northcote Trustees sold part of the farm school site at Bacchus Marsh in Victoria and gifted the village to the Victorian Government (the terms of this sale were set out in the Northcote Trust Fund Act 1975).

From 1976, Northcote School was run by the Victorian government as a departmental children's home. Children were housed in cottages in a campus setting. It was government-run until it was closed in 1979. Funds were redirected to replacement family group homes and to support other regional family service programs. The property was transferred to the Department of Sport and Recreation to be used as the Lady Northcote Recreation Camp.

Since 1997, the site has been known as the Lady Northcote Discovery Camp, and is owned by Sport and Recreation Victoria. It is managed by the YMCA who use it for adventure and recreation camps.

One of its remaining buildings, House 12, was granted to the 'Old Northcotians', the former residents' society, along with a financial grant to assist in the repair of the building.

In October 2008 the Lady Northcote Recreation Camp was included in Victoria's Heritage Register for its cultural heritage significance. It is the only institution in Victoria to have been constructed specifically for child migrants.

## National Redress Scheme for people who have experienced institutional child sexual abuse

In 2021, the Commonwealth and Victorian governments have agreed to be a funder of last resort for this institution. This means that although the institution is now defunct, it is participating in the National Redress Scheme, and the government has agreed to pay the institution's share of costs of providing redress to a person (as long as the government is found to be equally responsible for the abuse a person experienced).

## Gallery

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**Boys at Northcote Training Farm school at Glenmore near Bacchus Marsh - holding piglets**

**Description:** This photograph was taken at Northcote Training Farm school, Glenmore, Victoria. It shows two boys (presumably residents of the training farm) each holding two piglets.

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**Boys mustering cattle at Northcote Training Farm school, Glenmore, near Bacchus Marsh**

**Description:** This photograph was taken at Northcote Training Farm school, Glenmore, Victoria. It shows a boy (presumably a resident of the training farm) on horseback with cattle on a farm.

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**Boys at Northcote Training Farm school, Glenmore, forking hay into a cart**

**Description:** This photograph was taken at Northcote Training Farm school, Glenmore, Victoria. It shows two boys in overalls (presumably residents of the training farm) forking hay onto a small cart.

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### Boys making hay at the Northcote Training Farm, Glenmore, near Bacchus Marsh, Vic

**Description:** This photograph was taken at Northcote Training Farm school, Glenmore, Victoria. It shows three boys in overalls (presumably residents of the training farm) forking hay onto a small cart.

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### Immigration - Northcote Farm, 40 miles from Melbourne, Vic



### Immigration - Northcote Farm, 40 miles from Melbourne, Vic



### Boys for farm school

**Description:** This is a copy of the photograph of a group of boys destined for the Northcote Children's Farm. It appeared in *The Age* on 27 July 1938, p.8 The original caption reads: 'The principal of the Northcote Farm School, Bacchus Marsh (Col. S. J. Heath) and his wife, with the 28 English boys who arrived yesterday by the Orford. They left shortly afterwards for their new home, where they will gain farming experience.'

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### Northcote Farm School children disembarking

**Description:** This is a copy of an image that was part of the 'On their own - Britain's child migrants' exhibition at the Immigration Museum in Melbourne from October 2011 to May 2012.

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### Northcote Farm School - Victoria - Australia

**Description:** This is historical footage of the Northcote Farm School

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## More info

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### Related Entries

#### Run by

- [Social Welfare Department, State Government of Victoria \(1970 - 1978\)](#)  
In 1976, the Social Welfare Department took over the administration of the Northcote Farm School from its non-denominational committee of management.  
Date: 1976 - 1978
- [Department of Community Welfare Services, State Government of Victoria \(1978 - 1985\)](#)  
Date: 1978 - 1979

- [Northcote Trust \(1936 - current\)](#)

Date: 1937 - 1976

### Related Events

- [Fact-Finding Mission on Child Migration \(1956\)](#)
- [Child Migration Programmes Investigation, UK Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse \(2017 - 2018\)](#)

### Related Organisations

- [Fairbridge Farm School, Molong \(1938 - 1973\)](#)
- [The Children's Society, United Kingdom \(1881 - current\)](#)

Child migrants from The Children's Society homes were sent to Northcote Farm School

### Related Legislation

- [Northcote School Act 1960, Victoria \(1960 - current\)](#)
- [Northcote Trust Fund Act 1975, Victoria \(1975 - current\)](#)
- [Northcote Children's Home Act 1976, Victoria \(1976 - current\)](#)

### Related Concepts

- [Child Migration \(1800s - 1970s\)](#)

## Resources

- Immigration Museum, [Stolen childhoods](#), 2012
- *The Old Northcotian: magazine of the Old Northcotians' Association, Northcote Farm, Bacchus Marsh, Victoria*, 1949 - 1951
- [On their own: Britain's child migrants](#), Australian National Maritime Museum website, 2010
- Owen, Nigel, ["Stolen innocence": memoirs of a child migrant](#), 2018
- Clough, L. M., *Northcote: our heritage an account of the Northcote Children's Home, formerly Northcote Farm School at Rowsley, via Bacchus Marsh, Vic.*, 1987
- Stocker, John B., [The Lady Northcote Farm School, Glenmore, Bacchus Marsh, Victoria: a home and training farm for British child migrants 1937-1976, as experienced by one of them](#), 1990
- [Happy Reunions](#), The Argus, 7 January 1939
- [Learning the Art of Farming](#), The Argus, 18 September 1937
- [Beginning a New Life](#), The Argus, 18 May 1938
- [The first English boys for the new Northcote Farm School](#), The Argus, 7 July 1937
- [\[A big smile\]](#), Albany Advertiser, 16 August 1937
- [Lady Northcote Children's Farm School \(1937-79\)](#), Finding Records, No date. *Relevance:* See the 'List of records held by the department' section for information about records relating to Northcote Farm School
- Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse, [Child Migration Programmes Investigation Report](#), March 2018
- [Training of Young Migrants: Funds from Lady Northcote Trust](#), Melbourne Leader, 30 March 1935
- Langfield, Michele, [More people imperative: immigration to Australia 1901-1939](#), 1999
- gervo1865\_2 - LJ Gervasoni, [Lady Northcote Children's Farm](#), 2015
- ["I am only a tramp"](#), Bacchus Marsh Express, 5 June 1943
- [Col. Heath's Farewell](#), Melton Express, 9 January 1943
- [Acquittals for Two Men](#), The Sun News-Pictorial, 14 July 1943
- [School teacher acquitted](#), The Sun News-Pictorial, 22 July 1943

## Records

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

### Records

- [Records of the Northcote Trust Fund \(c. 1924 - c. 2010\)](#)

- [Victorian Government Wardship and/or Out of Home Care Records \(1864 - current\)](#)
  - [Records of Fairbridge Society \[copies\] \(1912 - 1976\)](#)
  - [Samuel MacMahon Wadham Papers \(1926 - 1969\)](#)
  - [Commonwealth Child and Youth Migration Records \(1901 - 1983\)](#)
  - [Visit to Australia of Major-General Hawthorn, director and secretary of Fairbridge Society \(1964 - 1968\)](#)
  - [Autobiography, 1983. \[manuscript\], Graham Budd \(1983 - 1983\)](#)
  - [Correspondence files, multiple number series \(policy matters\) \(1922 - 1968\)](#)
  - [Correspondence files, Class 5 \(British Migrants\) \(1920 - 1957\)](#)
  - [Departmental Children's Homes Files \(1955 - 1987\)](#)
  - [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
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