

Melbourne Orphan Asylum

1853 – 1926

Other Names:

- St James Orphan Asylum
- Protestant Orphan Asylum
- Melbourne Orphanage
- Melbourne Protestant Orphanage

Details

The Melbourne Orphan Asylum was established in 1853. This was the new name for St James' Orphan Asylum which dated back to 1851. Until 1853 the institution was run by the St James Orphan Asylum and Visiting Society, a Church of England organisation that established the first children's institution in the colony of Victoria. The Melbourne Orphan Asylum provided residential care for orphaned children up to the age of 14. The Orphan Asylum shifted around a number of temporary locations until the building at Emerald Hill (South Melbourne) first received children in 1856. In 1878, the orphanage moved from South Melbourne to Brighton. In 1926, its name was changed to the Melbourne Orphanage.

The Melbourne Orphan Asylum was established in 1853 to provide residential care for orphans. It evolved out of some of the first organisations established in Melbourne to care for vulnerable members of society, including the Dorcas Society, the St James' Visiting Society and the St James' Orphan Asylum and Visiting Society in 1851.

The Dorcas Society was the first women's organisation to be established in Melbourne in 1845 on the initiative of Mrs George Cooper and Mrs William Knight and the St James' Visiting Society.

The Dorcas Society aimed to assist the most vulnerable members of society by providing emergency support for families and almost unintentionally launched into residential care work with children. The St James' Visiting Society became the St James' Orphan Asylum and Visiting Society in 1851, and in 1853 the Melbourne Orphan Asylum.

In 1854 the Orphan Asylum's building in the city was deemed unsuitable and the children were moved onto government land in Kew, where they lived in tents under the supervision of Mrs Jas Simpson. During this period, the new institution was being built on 10 acres of land at South Melbourne [Emerald Hill], granted to the Orphan Asylum by the Victorian government. Musgrove writes that the Bourke Street barracks were destroyed by fire, weeks after the government granted the land to the Orphan Asylum (Musgrove, p.105)

The exact location of the site where the orphans lived in Kew is difficult to pinpoint. The site was in the vicinity of what later became the Kew Asylum. Butler described the site as "adjoining the residence of Mr and Mrs James Simpson at Kew" (Butler, 1951). In 'A sketch of Boroondara', published in 1858, it describes how the orphans lived in tents, loaned by the government, on the northern part of the Park Reserve, "in the neighbourhood of the newly erected lodges of the proposed Lunatic Asylum ... "Tents were erected on the Reserve for [the orphans'] accommodation. The numbers increased, benefactors came to the help of the foundress of the institution, and subsequently there arose on Emerald Hill the splendid establishment of the Orphan Asylum, whither the poor children were removed" (Bonwick, 'Education in Boroondara', 1858). Musgrove writes that "while this arrangement was surely uncomfortable in the depths of a Melbourne winter, only one death was recorded" during the time the children lived in the tents at Kew (Musgrove, p.195).

In 1854, the Melbourne Orphan Asylum had been granted a 10 acre site in Emerald Hill (South Melbourne), accompanied by a gift of 4500 pounds from the colonial government. There was a competition for the design of the new Orphan Asylum. The successful designer Charles Webb submitted plans for a barrack-type of building, accommodating up to 300 children. The main building was an “imposing structure with a tower” (Butler).

The foundation stone at Emerald Hill was laid in September 1855. It was not until March 1856 that the building was deemed suitably advanced for children to start living there. The Orphan Asylum received a further government grant of 3000 pounds in 1857 for extensions to the buildings to house more children. In 1859 the West Wing of the building and a school room were completed.

By 1858 there were 308 children living at Melbourne Orphan Asylum. The Asylum received children from all parts of Victoria (except Geelong and Ballarat, towns with their own orphan asylums). Children were maintained at the Orphan Asylum until they turned 14, when they were provided with ‘situations’ until the age of 17. Children remained under the guardianship of the Orphan Asylum’s committee during their time of service.

In 1866, the Annual Report described recent building work carried out: a new wing with three dormitories to house 100 children, an infant school-room, and two rooms for superintendent and matron. The Asylum had added two wards to its hospital.

The Annual Report stated that the institution had implemented a system of industrial education for its children, with training in carpentry, shoemaking, tailoring and baking. Older girls received instruction in sewing, laundry, nursery, kitchen and general house work. Some children were in training as pupil-teachers.

In late 1866, five children died as a result of a measles epidemic in the Orphan Asylum. Seven children died overall that year.

According to the Annual Report, the average number of children in the Orphan Asylum in 1866 was 308.

The Rules of the Melbourne Orphan Asylum were published in the 1866 Annual Report. Among them were the stipulation that members of the public could visit the Asylum on Tuesdays and Thursdays between two and four o’clock in the afternoon. Relatives of connections of a child were only allowed to visit once every four weeks.

The institution’s crowded conditions were mentioned frequently in the newspapers, particularly during the period from 1869 to 1871. Butler states that during this time the Asylum housed 335 children in a building only suitable to accommodate 320.

Edwin Exon was Secretary and Superintendent of the Melbourne Orphan Asylum from 1859 to 1903. Exon’s wife Frances was Matron at the Melbourne Orphan Asylum for 34 years. She died in 1896, aged 70. Frances Exon’s grave at the St Kilda Cemetery describes how the Exons lost their own two children to illness not long after commencing work at the Asylum:

Her own children were taken from her soon after she became Matron of the orphanage and God made her for many years truly a mother to very many of the orphan children of the colony. The memory of her name and of her loving work at the orphanage will live long in the history of the institution.

Musgrove writes that the committee of the Melbourne Orphan Asylum endorsed family reunions when they were viable and the asylum’s by-laws made provision for children to be returned to any of their relatives when this was possible. However, the institution also “resisted being a provider of periodic relief to families who cycled in and out of crises. Parents who had previously removed children could apply to have them readmitted, but were scrutinised by the committee carefully” (Musgrove, p.53).

In 1877, the local council provided the Asylum with funds to build a new orphanage at Brighton, in exchange for the buildings and land in South Melbourne. The South Melbourne Town Hall was subsequently built on the site of

the first Orphan Asylum.

The children moved to the new orphanage in the seaside suburb of Brighton in April, 1878. By 1883 the Melbourne Orphan Asylum's address was 'Windermere', Butler St, Middle Brighton.

This institution was divided into five separate 'cottages' with 30 children in each under the primary care of a house mother. The complex also included an administrative building, workshops and a detached hospital. A school was also built on site for the orphanage children. The school was also open to local children. The Brighton Beach Primary School remains today.

The new orphanage complex at Brighton took only half the population of the previous institution because from 1876, the Asylum began to give financial assistance to families so that they could 'board out' their own children.

In 1891, the superintendent Edwin Exon described the system whereby 'destitute widows' were paid a weekly sum towards the maintenance of their children. Only mothers of good character and capable of exercising proper control over their children were eligible for the scheme, which cost less than boarding out children in the homes of strangers.

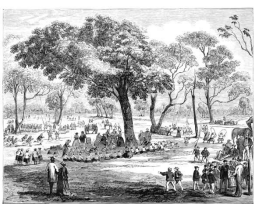
Exon reported that mothers being assisted to keep their children at home were subject to rigorous supervision by the ladies' committees, a system of 'constant visitation, reporting and reviewing'. The arrangement of paying maintenance only lasted for a year maximum. A fresh application had to be made each year and the mother had to satisfy the ladies' committee that support from the Orphan Asylum was still justified.

Children were also boarded out from the Orphan Asylum to foster parents. In a report from 1891, the Secretary of the Department stated that three-quarters of the orphanage's children were being boarded out in foster homes. Supervision of the children in foster homes was overseen by 30 local Ladies' Boarding-out Committees.

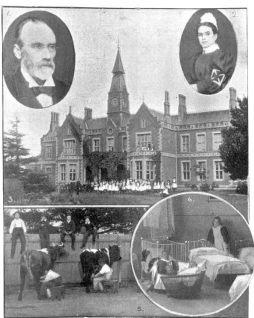
In 1893, the Melbourne Orphan Asylum had its largest number of residents on record, 453 children. Of these, 382 were boarded out and 71 were living in the cottage homes, with an additional 55 apprenticed to employers (Butler).

The cottage system, combined with boarding out, continued with modifications for some 80 years, including a name change to the Melbourne Orphanage in 1926.

Gallery

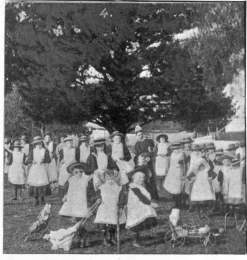


Picnic to the Children of the Emerald Hill Orphanage



The Melbourne Orphanage

Description: Image published in the *Illustrated Australian News*. Includes oval portraits of Mr. Exon, bust, to left, and Mrs. Wooton, half-length, to right; front of the building with boys and girls standing in rows; two children milking, four boys sitting on the fence behind them watching; cots, cradles, cast-iron beds in the dormitory.



The Melbourne Orphanage

Description: Image published in the *Illustrated Australian News*. Shows group of young girls, wearing white smocks and straw hats, playing with dolls and prams.



The Melbourne Orphanage

Description: Image published in the *Illustrated Australian News*. Shows group of young girls in smocks, others dressed for travelling, standing at the entrance to the orphanage.



The Orphanage, Brighton



Melbourne Orphanage, Brighton

Description: This is a panoramic photograph of the Melbourne Orphanage site at Brighton. It shows the main orphanage building in the center of the image, with two further buildings on each side. All buildings are two-storey bluestone buildings. The central building is the most ornate, with a central spire and many large windows. There are ornate gardens and paths in the foreground. This photograph is undated. The date included is an estimate.



Melbourne Orphanage, Brighton, Vic.

Description: View from driveway of front facade of orphanage



Melbourne Protestant Orphan Asylum, Emerald Hill

Description: This image is an engraving of the Melbourne Protestant Orphan Asylum created by Arthur Willmore in 1862. It shows a large number of children accompanied by several adults sitting and standing in front of a large, ornate, stone building.

More info

Chronology

- **Melbourne Orphan Asylum (1853 – 1926)**
 - Melbourne Orphanage (1926 - 1965)
 - Melbourne Family Care Organisation (1965 - 1987)
 - Family Action (1987 - 1993)

- OzChild (1993 - current)

Related Entries

Run by

- [St James' Orphan Asylum and Visiting Society \(c. 1845 - 1853\)](#)

Related Legislation

- [Children's Maintenance Act 1919, Victoria \(1919 - 1929\)](#)

The Melbourne Orphan Asylum was one institution that had been making maintenance payments to some mothers so that they could support their children, before the passage of the Children's Maintenance Act regularised this practice.

Related Organisations

- [Melbourne Benevolent Asylum \(1851 - 1970\)](#)

Resources

- Australian Heritage Council, [A thematic heritage study on Australia's benevolent and other care institutions](#), 2016
- [Christmas Appeals: special need for help](#), The Argus, 14 December 1916
- Cornish, Jennie, [Melbourne Orphanage Reunion: 'priceless'](#), OzChild website, 2007
- Duff, G.B., *Social work of the Church: child rescue agencies of Melbourne*, The Spectator, 23 June 1899
- Musgrove, Nell, *'The Scars Remain': A Long History of Forgotten Australians and Children's Institutions*, 2013
- [St James' Orphan Asylum and Visiting Society \(1877-1902\)](#), Finding Records, No date. *Relevance*: See the 'List of records held by the department' section for information about records relating to Melbourne Orphan Asylum
- Golding, Frank, [Lost & Found: State Children in Victoria](#), Frank Golding: author, researcher, historian and consultant specialising in child welfare, 27 July 2017
- Griffiths, Ciara and Gilkerson, Darcy, [Foster Care Westernport: a legacy of generosity](#), 2017
- [Parliament of Victoria - Legislative Assembly](#), Bendigo Advertiser, 3 December 1858

Other Resources

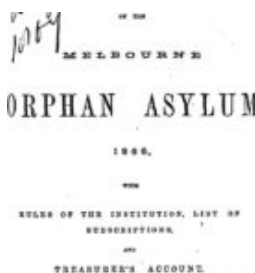


Title: Melbourne Orphan Asylum

Type: Image

Date: 1897

[Details](#)



Title: Melbourne Orphan Asylum, Fifteenth Annual Report

Type: Image

Date: 1866

[Details](#)

Records

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

Records

- [OzChild Records \(c. 1956 - current\)](#)
 - [Miscellaneous papers, 1857-1867, William Edwards, Melbourne Orphan Asylum \(1857 - 1867\)](#)
 - [Victorian Children's Aid Society Records \(1893 - 1993\)](#)
 - [Melbourne Orphan Asylum Records \(1845 - 1986\)](#)
 - [Anne's Story \(1974 - 1974\)](#)
 - [Voluntary Children's Homes Files \(1921 - 1989\)](#)
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You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/melbourne-orphan-asylum-2/>