

Convent of the Good Shepherd, Bendigo

1905 – 1984

Other Names:

- St Aidan's
- Maryfields
- St Aidan's Children's Centre
- St Aidan's Orphanage

Details

The Convent of the Good Shepherd, Bendigo was established in 1905. It was established at the request of the Bishop to cater for children in the diocese of Bendigo (although it housed children from other areas as well). It was also known as St Aidan's Orphanage, and was the only Good Shepherd Convent in Australia to care for boys. The section named St Aidan's accommodated girls aged up to around 16 years, as well as boys aged up to around 11. Another section named Maryfields housed girls and women aged from around 15 years. The Convent ceased to operate as a residential facility for children in 1981. A number of adult women residents with disabilities remained at the Convent until it closed in 1984.

Heritage Victoria describes St Aidan's Orphanage as 'landmark buildings [that] dominated the surrounding countryside, giving a high visibility to the charitable works of the Catholic Church and making a compelling statement about its authority.'

In the early 1930s the Sisters received a grant of £7000 from the state government's Unemployment Relief Fund to build a two-storey building to the east of the original building at St Aidan's. This was a major project in the Bendigo area during the Depression. The new building was opened by the Premier in 1931.

The institution comprised the children's Home as well as an institution for juvenile offenders, the St Euphrasia Juvenile School which opened in 1955. (Juvenile schools were defined by s.14 of the Children's Welfare Act 1954 institutions 'to care for juvenile offenders committed to the care of Children's Welfare Department and young persons admitted or committed to Children's Welfare Department who are in need of special supervision, social adjustment and training'.)

In April 1956, 'St Aidan's Orphanage' was declared an approved children's home under the Children's Welfare Act 1954.

According to the 'Finding Records' website:

In 1958, The Orphanage housed 100 girls aged three to 17 years; the 'Boys Block' housed 30 boys aged three to nine years; and the 'Re-education Centre' housed 110 older girls.

By 1970, St Aidan's had built self-contained units for junior section children to replace the dormitories. The number of children and young people in the institution was down to about 100.

During the early 1970s, the Order became responsible for about 150 elderly women who had been involved with the Order's institutions for most of their lives. The women had disabilities and were disabled and totally dependent on the Order for care.

In 1972, the senior section was renamed Maryfield, and the junior section was renamed St Aidan's Children's Centre. St Aidan's Children's Centre provided care for approximately 50 children aged 3 to 16, the majority of whom were wards of state. All were accommodated in separate units in groups of 10.

St Aidan's emphasised education and many older girls went into nursing at age 16-17. By 1977-78, St Aidan's had established five family group homes in the Bendigo area for 30 children from long-term residential care.

In 1981, St Aidan's terminated its involvement in residential child care. A number of women with disabilities remained in care from 1977, until the property was sold to Girton College in 1984.(DHHS, 2016)

One woman who lived at St Aidan's in the late 1960s remembers that school lessons were delivered via the Correspondence School of Victoria, and completed assignments were posted to them every week. She also described what it was like working in the laundry:

During the day I work in the laundry. It's an inferno in summer but emits comforting warmth in winter. I stand on a box to reach the mangle. The linen is scalding hot; the intense steam scorches my face if I get too close. If I am too slow to react the garment goes round the mangle a second time coming back hotter than before. It's altar linen from the local churches. Hard starched cotton. The effect is like trying to grip a pumice stone. Hard to grip and harder to hold. The knack is to pick the corners of the revolving linen quickly with your fingers tips as it comes round the mangle. The quicker the better, the girls tell me, it will save your fingers getting burnt.

As an adult, she suffers from arthritis: "Too much work as a child, living in cold harsh conditions, folding sheets, polishing and scrubbing floors has meant my hands have aged years ahead of their time" (Cuskelly, 2011).

Submissions made to the Senate inquiry into institutional care in 2003-2004 described the Convent as a harsh environment, one calling it a "prison" (submission 166), and another a "concentration camp" (submission 264). One woman's submission stated:

The inmate population was made up of women of all ages. There were girls who had become too old to stay in institutions for young children ... Some women were single mothers and others were old women with dementia. Also many young girls had been placed by the courts for protection or for criminal offences ...

I was put to work, slave labour, in the commercial laundry the nuns ran. Illness didn't interrupt the onerous and endless work day, which involved heavy physical labour (submission 166).

The Convent stopped providing residential care for children in 1981. In 1982, St Luke's Anglicare took over the management of St Aidan's Family Group Home in Bendigo. At that time, the Good Shepherd Sisters handed over the files of some residents to St Luke's.

Gallery



St Aidan's Orphanage, Bendigo



Looking Across a Lake and Lawns to the Orphanage at Bendigo

Description: From the Collection: The biggest family album in Australia.



Negative - Bendigo, Victoria, circa 1920

Description: St Aidans Orphanage. There is a car parked by the gate.



St Aidan's Orphanage

Description: There are several images of St Aidan's on its entry in the Victorian Heritage Database.



St Aidan's House

Description: The former St Aidan's Orphanage was classified by the National Trust in 2000.



Bendigo Orphanage, West Elevation

Description: This is a copy of a plan in the Bates, Smart, McCutcheon collection at the University of Melbourne Archives, for Bendigo Orphanage (Convent of the Good Shepherd, Bendigo).

More info

Related Entries

Run by

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

Date: 1905 - 1982

Related Organisations

- [St Luke's Anglicare \(1979 - 2014\)](#)
St Luke's Anglicare took over the management of St Aidan's Family Group Home from Convent of the Good Shepherd, Bendigo, in 1982.
- [Family Group Homes and Residential care run by St Luke's, Victoria \(c. 1977 - 2000s\)](#)

Resources

- James Jenkinson Consulting, [Guide to out-of-home care services 1940-2000 - Volume One: Agency Descriptions](#), November 2001
- 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
- Davis, Donna with Amy Willesee, *Sins of the mothers: a memoir of abandonment, love and redemption*, 2006
- Robertson, Ethel, [Submission no 522 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- 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
- Gamble, Sandi, *Broken - An extraordinary story of survival by one of Australia's forgotten children*, 2013
- Savidis, Penny, [Sex abuse Royal Commission urged to hold public meetings in regional Victoria](#), Ryan Carlisle Thomas Lawyers, 2014
- Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission and the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes, *A piece of the story : national directory of records of Catholic organisations caring for children separated from families*, November 1999
- [The slaves of Magdalene](#), Sydney Morning Herald, 21 December 2013
- Murray, Suellen, [Remembering, honouring and acknowledging former residents of Good Shepherd Homes: an oral history research study](#), 2020

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 \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
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