

Pirra Girls' Home

1961 – c. 1980

Other Names: • Pirra Children's Home

Details

The Pirra Girls' Home was established in 1961 by the Social Welfare Branch at Lara, near Geelong. It accommodated girls who were otherwise 'unplaceable' within the Victorian system. It had a capacity for around 27 girls aged from 11 and 15. In later years, it housed girls from 3 to 18. Pirra was closed by the Department in about 1980.

Pirra was located in one of Victoria's oldest mansions at Lara, near Geelong. The Fairbairn family of pastoralists owned it until 1907 when they sold it to the state government. It operated as the Lara Inebriates Institution from 1907 until 1930. This was a government sanatorium for the treatment of those suffering from alcoholism.

The Pirra Girls' Home received its first three girls in April 1961. By June 1962, it was almost at capacity, with 27 girls in residence.

The girls and young women at Pirra attended community focused programs and many were later placed in foster care or returned to their family. In 1962, the annual report described the successful placement of Pirra girls in private homes as 'really amazing ... in view of the former mode of living of these girls'.

However, girls who were not able to return home or be placed in foster care were transferred to Youth Training Centres.

Pirra's first superintendent was Miss C. Ross Morrison (later Mrs H. Rudduck). In March 1965, Miss L.M. Dodgshun (a former matron at Bethany Babies' Home) took over as superintendent. Pirra had an Auxiliary, led in the early 1960s by Mr Dick Austin, which organised garden parties to raise funds.

Nancy McDonald became Superintendent in 1968, and remained in the position until her retirement in 1979. In her memoirs, McDonald described her interview for the position at Pirra:

Albert Booth [Director of Social Welfare] ... asked me, 'If you had a child who refused to get out of bed in the morning, how would you deal with it?' I replied, 'How many children are there?' When he said, 'Twenty-four', I responded, 'Then there are twenty-four different ways.' At that he told me, 'You've got the job. It's yours if you want it'.

According to the Social Welfare Department's annual report from 1962, the girls at Pirra had 'a pony, sheep, dogs, guinea pigs, and numerous other pets'.

The Department's annual report for 1966 described Pirra as an 'open' institution, where girls used the ordinary community resources. It went on, 'Generally, they settle in very well, but there are occasional break-downs

necessitating transfers to youth training centres where they can be more easily controlled.’ (This same statement also appeared in the annual reports for 1967 and 1968.)

It is difficult to find accounts of Pirra from the perspective of the girls themselves. One submission to the Forgotten Australians enquiry described how she was sent to Pirra at age 12, only to run away a few weeks later (which led to her placement at Winlaton, a youth training centre). This woman’s testimony painted a grim picture of Victoria’s state-run institutions for girls and young women.

Another former resident wrote about Pirra: ‘the only freedom we had was going to school, we were never allowed to go to friend’s houses or excursions. When casual day came I always wagged because we never had decent enough clothes to wear.’ This woman remembers being ‘locked in the dormitory for the whole weekend’ after being caught leaving Pirra to try and visit her sister in another Home.

In 1968, during a period when there was a ‘temporary shortage of older girls’, a family of four children aged from 3 to 7 lived at Pirra, while their mother re-established their family home. The annual report stated that it was a ‘most worthwhile experiment ... it created an interest for the older girls and appeared to result in an improvement in their behaviour and it also helped to improve the image of Pirra in the local community’.

In 1968, there were plans to improve the standard of treatment at Pirra, by providing a ‘more therapeutic atmosphere’ for the girls. This would involve staff members writing weekly reports about the four or five girls in her immediate care. The report rated each girl according to four personality and six behaviour factors. The annual report stated, ‘It is hoped that this plan will encourage staff to think more about the girls and give the Superintendent a basis for discussion with both staff and girls’.

In 1969, the rate of absconding at Pirra was ‘unusually high’. The Department attributed this to the high number of new admissions that year (28) as well as high staff turnover – in that year, only one member of the child care staff had been there longer than 12 months. This report also mentioned the problems many Pirra girls experienced at the schools they attended in the Geelong and Corio area – due to gaps in their schooling, lack of motivation and behavioural problems.

Some former ‘Pirra girls’ involved in a research study about the education experiences of people who had been in children’s homes expressed their view that some teachers in the local schools were prejudiced against ‘home kids’. (One young woman who was failed by a teacher managed to successfully appeal to the Education Department.)

By 1970, Pirra was accommodating girls and young women aged between 11 and 18. The annual report mentioned that five young women had finished school that year, and gone on to obtain work. It also stated that ‘nine very severely disturbed girls who could not be contained in an “open” institution were transferred to “closed” institutions during the year’.

In 1971, the annual report again referred to the Department’s difficulties with ‘very disturbed older girls’ at Pirra: ‘It has become evident that a special unit for this type of girl is a very great need’.

In 1979, the Department reported that the Illoura and Pirra Homes were ‘in a process of review and change’, with the number of children accommodated in both homes declining significantly.

Pirra was closed by the Department in around 1980.

Gallery



'Pirra' Girls' Home, Lara

Description: This image appeared on page 26 of the Social Welfare Department's annual report for the year ending 30 June 1964.

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Social Welfare Branch, State Government of Victoria \(1960 - 1970\)](#)
Date: 1961 - 1970
- [Social Welfare Department, State Government of Victoria \(1970 - 1978\)](#)
Date: 1970 - 1978
- [Department of Community Welfare Services, State Government of Victoria \(1978 - 1985\)](#)
Date: 1978 - 1980

Related Organisations

- [Winlaton \(1956 - c. 1991\)](#)
Pirra Children's Home for Girls was opened by the Victorian Government in c.1960 to help ease overcrowding at Winlaton. Some girls were sent from Pirra to Winlaton, where they could be 'more easily controlled', according to the Department.
Date: 1960 - 1980
- [St Mary's Hostel \(1945 - current\)](#)

Resources

- Gaffney, Kate, [Submission no 207 to the Senate Inquiry into Institutional Care](#), August 2003
- Spivey, Margaret, *Defying the gatekeeper: one girl's true story of resistance and rebellion*, 2010
- 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
- Peceli, Wendy, [Geelong Visual Diary](#), Pirra, 2013
- Care Leavers Australia Network, [Geelong and District Orphanages](#), No date
- [Pirra Girls' Home \(1961- around 1980\)](#), Finding Records, No date. *Relevance:* See the 'List of records held by the department' section for information about records relating to Pirra Girls' Home

Other Resources

Title: Pirra Children's Home - Winter Menu - 1970

Type: Image

Date: 1970

[Details](#)

Records

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

Records

- [Victorian Government Wardship and/or Out of Home Care Records \(1864 - current\)](#)
 - [Departmental Children's Homes Files \(1955 - 1987\)](#)
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