

Sunbury Industrial School

1865 – 1879

Other Names: • Industrial School for Boys

Details

The Sunbury Industrial School was established in 1865. It was located on Jacksons Hill, in Sunbury. On its closure in 1879, boys from Sunbury were transferred to the [Royal Park Industrial School](#) in Parkville.

The Sunbury Industrial School was the first purpose-built institution created by the government in 1865 in response to the *Neglected and Criminal Children's Act 1864* which provided for the establishment of industrial schools where children deemed to be neglected were to be placed.

The completion of Sunbury was scheduled for December 1865, with a proposed capacity of 650 children. It opened early, in January 1865, initially with only 3 of the 10 planned dormitories. The [Princes Bridge Industrial School](#), which opened in Melbourne in 1864, was experiencing overcrowding at this time. A total of 411 children were transferred to Sunbury from Princes Bridge between January and October 1865 (Spencer, pp.66-67).

There was also a [reformatory school for girls at Sunbury](#), about half a mile from the industrial school.

The author of a news article from 1872 gave a description of his first impressions of the schools at Sunbury:

Travellers along the Melbourne and Sandhurst line of railway cannot fail to have their attention attracted by the schools – a range of bluestone buildings, situated on the top of a hill. The buildings, which are detached and cover several acres of ground, are substantially constructed of the same material, and after the manner of our railway stations. They run north and south, and, owing to their elevated position, command a fine view of the surrounding scenery. Melbourne is only distant about 20 miles, and its tall spires and chimney-tops, half enveloped in smoke, may be descried, rising abruptly above the monotonous, dreary level of the Keilor plains.

The total area of the reserve set apart for the use of the institution is 1,100 acres. On this are situate the schools, a farm of 80 acres, kitchen garden of 15 acres, an extensive dairy, and the rest is used for grass land. Besides the establishment for boys on the crown of the hill, there is another reformatory for girls, about half a mile distant, on the eastern slope (Geelong Advertiser, 31 December 1872).

In 1867, a newspaper article stated that there were 30 boys working at tailoring and shoemaking, and they were turning out booths and clothes for its own inmates, as well as supplying other industrial schools in Geelong and Melbourne (*Herald*, 12 October 1867). The 1872 article stated that Sunbury had 9 wards, where the boys ate and slept. Each had a dormitory at one end, and a dining room at the other. In the middle there was room for stores, and accommodation for the attendants (married couples). Baths and lavatories were attached to each building. "Along one side of the buildings are large verandahs, and in front of these, open squares, intended to be used as playgrounds". The site had two hospitals, and two schoolrooms. Boys under 8 attended school regularly, those up

to the age of 12 spent half of their time at school and half at work. Those over 12 were employed during the day and attended class at night (*Geelong Advertiser*, 31 December 1872).

Spencer writes that although the Sunbury industrial school was purpose built, it “failed abysmally to meet its objectives” (Spencer, p.66). The institution was on the top of Jacksons Hill, and in 1865 water had to be carted by a horse from the Jacksons Creek. There was insufficient water to clean the wards, bedding and clothes, let alone the children. The water situation had disastrous effects for the children in the Industrial School. In September 1865, it was reported that all but 20 of the 233 children at Sunbury had scabies; 100 had eczema and 38 had ophthalmia (an eye infection that could cause blindness in the nineteenth century).

The first water tanks were built in October 1865. In 1868 the government signed a contract to install an ‘Engine and Pumps etc’ at the Industrial School. According to a heritage report for Hume City Council about the archaeological ruins of the water supply for the Industrial School (and later, the asylum), following the installation of the engine and pumps ‘conditions, health and the death rate improved’.

Overcrowding was a huge problem at Sunbury during the 1860s – at the end of 1865, there were 411 children at Sunbury when it had capacity for 150. By the end of 1868, the institution housed 651 boys, even though it was only equipped for 450.

By 1872, the industrial school at Sunbury accommodated boys aged from 6 to 10. When they reached the age of 10, they were transferred to the [Nelson](#), the industrial school on a ship in Hobsons Bay (*Geelong Advertiser*, 31 December 1872).

The report into industrial schools by the [Royal Commission on Penal and Prison Discipline](#) stated that the Sunbury site was “ill chosen”. It reported that there were 687 children at Sunbury in June 1872. The commissioners wrote that:

At Sunbury, we regret to observe, the boys present a downcast and spiritless appearance, the very opposite of that usually worn by healthy schoolboys. This is no doubt due to their being without varied and congenial out-door labor, the absence of the ordinary appliances for boyish recreation, the monotony of their lives and what has been well designated ‘the deadening influence of unexercised affections’ ... In its present state, Sunbury is in no respect an industrial school, it is at best a juvenile charitable asylum.

Following the Royal Commission, the government introduced a system for children to be boarded out rather than placed in industrial schools. However, institutions such as Sunbury continued to house children.

The Sunbury Industrial School closed in around 1880, when its male residents were transferred to Royal Park in Parkville.

After the closure of the Sunbury Industrial School, the site was used for institutions for the mentally ill and intellectually disabled. From 1894 it was known as the [Sunbury Lunatic Asylum](#). From 1968 to 1992 the site housed the Caloola Training Centre for the Intellectually Disabled.

According to the Victorian Heritage Register’s statement of significance for Caloola (Former Sunbury Mental Hospital):

The Industrial School consisted of ten basalt buildings (nine extant), designed under the direction of Public Works Department Inspector General William Wardell and constructed in 1865-66, four workrooms, kitchen, hospital, basalt farm building, road and stone wall remnants which were used to house and train neglected children in the 1860s. Boys in the Sunbury Industrial School worked on the farm and in the tailoring and shoe-making workshops to maintain themselves whilst in the institution and were given some

basic education.

In 2004, as a result of research and advocacy by local residents and family historians, a monument to commemorate the children who had died at Sunbury Industrial School was unveiled at Sunbury Cemetery.

Gallery



Sunbury Industrial School Children

Description: This is a copy of a photograph of a monument in Sunbury Cemetery, commemorating the children - buried in unmarked graves - who died at the Sunbury Industrial School between August 1865 and November 1878.

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Department of Industrial and Reformatory Schools, Colony of Victoria \(1864 - 1887\)](#)

Date: 1865 - 1880?

Related Legislation

- [The Neglected and Criminal Children's Act 1864, Victoria \(1864 - 1888\)](#)

The Industrial School for Boys was established under the provisions of the Neglected and Criminal Children's Act 1864.

Related Organisations

- [The Nelson \(1868 - 1876\)](#)
- [Princes Bridge Industrial School \(1853 - 1876\)](#)
- [Royal Park Industrial School \[Girls\] \(1875 - c.1879\)](#)

In around 1880, boys from Sunbury Industrial School were transferred to the Royal Park Industrial School.

- [Reformatory for Girls, Sunbury \(1865 - 1875\)](#)

Resources

- 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
- [Sunbury Industrial School Children](#), Monument Australia, 2010
- [Former Sunbury Industrial School](#), Victorian Heritage Database, No date
- Wilson, Elizabeth, [The Children: The Plaque: The Story](#), 2004
- [The Sanitary Condition of Industrial Schools](#), The Argus, 1 April 1872

Records

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

Records

- [Victorian Government Wardship and/or Out of Home Care Records \(1864 - current\)](#)
 - [Mental Health Photograph Collection \(1850? - 2002\)](#)
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