

# Brookside Private Reformatory for Protestant Girls

1887 – 1903

**Other Names:**

- Girls' Protestant Reformatory, Glenfine
- Brookside Reformatory
- Brookside Private Cottage Reformatory for Girls

## Details

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The Brookside Private Reformatory for Protestant Girls was established in 1887 by Mrs Elizabeth Rowe. One of the first privately-run reformatories in Victoria, Brookside was located in the town of Cape Clear, near Scarsdale. It closed in 1903.

The Brookside Private Reformatory for Protestant Girls was established on 29 December 1887. In a visit to Brookside in 1890 reported on in the *Age*, the author 'Mem' describes Mrs Rowe as "a lady who has made it her life work to assist in the rescue of young girls whose surroundings have, almost inevitably in most cases, brought them into trouble" (*Farm life for reformatory girls*, 1890).

Brookside was a private, or 'assisted', reformatory, made possible by the [Juvenile Offenders Act 1887](#), which was assented to only weeks before the opening of Brookside. The government paid 5 shillings a week towards the maintenance of girls in the reformatory (annual report, 1887, p.9). There were also government-run reformatories for girls in Coburg, and for boys in Ballarat. A government report from 1890 stated that Mrs Rowe and the Good Shepherd Sisters (who ran reformatories at Abbotsford and Oakleigh) "have the same entire control and guardianship over their wards as that enjoyed by the Superintendent of the Boys' Reformatory, a Government institution".

The 1872 Report on Reformatory and Industrial Schools by the Royal Commission on Penal and Prison Discipline had commended the reformatory work of the Good Shepherd Sisters with Catholic girls, and stated the 'extreme desirability' of work with Protestant girls being in private, rather than government, hands. The Secretary urged the same in the Departmental Report of 1886, leading to the establishment of Brookside in 1887. The establishment of Brookside Private Reformatory was seen as a great success, and from the 1890s the department increasingly began to rely on private reformatories to house convicted young people in Victoria.

The Department saw Brookside's rural location at Cape Clear (its location was sometimes also referred to as being in Pitfield) as ideal for such an institution, being 'away from large towns, gold-fields and factories, and surrounded within moderate distances by the residences of suitable employers'. Another benefit, according to the Secretary of the Department, was the 'absolute separation from disreputable friends and relatives'. The reformatory was about giving the young women an "involuntary retirement" from the sins of city life. The Department of Industrial and Reformatory Schools considered country life to be the "most steadying of influences" for young people, and wanted all private reformatories to be situated as distant as possible from Melbourne and large towns. (annual report, 1888, p.50).

Mrs Rowe lived in an "elegant and hospitable home" at Glenfine, which was located around 9 miles away from the Brookside reformatory at Cape Clear, which was on an estate described as "80 square miles of splendid

pastoral country". The Brookside residents lived in a "modest group of cottages" (*Ballarat Star*, 9 June 1894). The 1888 annual report of the Department described Brookside's buildings as being "of a rough and homely farmlike character, consisting of a four-roomed stone cottage, with weatherboard additions and iron roof. A new iron washhouse and store had lately been erected. The buildings are on rising ground sloping down to the Western Creek, which creek is a source of unfailing interest to the girls (p.11). An account from 1890 describes 3 main buildings at Brookside, one for the older girls, one for the younger girls, and the third tenanted by the outdoor overseer and his wife (*Farm life for reformatory girls*, 1890). Another article from 1895 described the houses for the inmates as well-ventilated with a "clean, cheerful look, and to a stranger have nothing of the Reformatory type about them" (*Ballarat Star*, 28 October 1895).

When Brookside opened in 1887 it had room for 6 girls. By 1890 there was an average of 20 girls in residence. The continual increase in numbers at Brookside from its opening led to the establishment of a number of other smaller institutions, sometimes referred to as "sub-reformatories". In 1890, Mrs Rowe was given temporary access to a site at Pitfield, not far from Brookside, and "some of her wards" were accommodated there (annual report, 1894, p.13). In 1891, the department reported that Rowe had purchased a small farm at Pitfield and would establish a sub-reformatory there. Rowe wrote that she hoped to use it for 8 to 10 girls from around May 1892.

An article from 1894 stated that there was a small home at Rokewood (around 20 kilometres from Cape Clear) which housed the "physically helpless and mentally weak" of the reformatory's residents (*Ballarat Star*, 9 June 1894). The same article mentioned that Brookside had another "small establishment" at Fairhaven, for girls with more "turbulent spirits". The 1892 annual report of the department mentions a sub-reformatory at Fairhaven.

[St Ann's reformatory](#) for Protestant girls was established by Brookside in 1896, located on a farm at Heywood in western Victoria. In February 1897 St Ann's received an initial 10 girls from the approximately 40 in residence at Brookside.

In 1888, the superintendent Mrs Rowe described the work done by Brookside residents:

*The extent of ground we have at Brookside is a great advantage in the work. Live stock has many charms for young folk, and especially for those who have been shut up within brick walls, as are the girls at [Coburg](#). Hand-reared calves are the delight of their hearts. The pig-feeding, common and uninteresting as it may appear to the general mind, is a great source of gratification and honour to the girl who is, for the space of a current week, 'on the pigs,' as they insist upon terming it. We have been intensely amused at this phrase. The girl who is waiting on the parlour for the week is stated to be 'on the table,' another is 'on the kitchen'; in fact, since we added a baby to our establishment, we have been amused by hearing 'so-and-so is on the baby.'*

*Monday is devoted to washing, if moderately fine, and though the younger children are at school as usual, there is no sewing in the afternoon. Four days in the week all hands do two hours' sewing. Saturday again is devoted to cleaning up. No girls are kept washing after mid-day. At the expense of a little trouble and inconvenience, each girl washes her own clothes. When dry, the things are wrapped up and brought for inspection; if passed as really clean, they are then folded down for ironing. Before being put away they are mended by the owner, who gets a small money reward if the washing, ironing, and mending has been well done. A penny earned in this way makes its owner very happy (annual report 1888, pp.12-13).*

"The baby" referred to above was a two-year-old Aboriginal boy, "a protégé of one of Mrs Rowe's daughters, who is for the time being having a holiday stay at Brookside" (*Farm life for reformatory girls*, 1890).

By the end of 1891 there were 25 girls in residence at Brookside, and by the end of 1892, with the closing of the Coburg Government Reformatory for Girls, numbers at Brookside rose to 47.

Elizabeth Rowe's report to the department for 1893 stated that 71 girls were in service at the end of the year, leaving 43 in residence at the reformatory. Because of the falling numbers, she wrote that they were considering closing "the cottage at Rokewood", noting that the Rokewood community showed "great kindness" to the girls

there (annual report, 1893, p.12).

A second cottage, known as 'No. 2', had also opened on the Brookside estate at this time, with each Brookside cottage housing approximately 15 girls.

The 1893 annual report mentioned that Mr Rowe had died suddenly that year, "which was a great blow to the whole neighbourhood, more especially to Brookside and its inmates, in whom, from the commencement of the work, he took a quiet but thoroughly practical interest".

The president of the State Children's Council of South Australia, Mr T Rhodes, visited Brookside in 1894 and wrote an account for the newspapers about it (*Ballarat Star*, 9 June 1894). He described the work done by the Brookside residents: milking cows, making butter, baking bread, drawing and carrying water from the well, chopping and carting firewood and cultivating the gardens for both food and flowers.

It was sometimes claimed that Brookside's remote situation meant that absconding was 'practically unknown'. This was also mentioned by 'Mem' in the *Age* report:

*There is no lock and key supervision here, but liberty to scamper among the fields, full and free trust when the cows have to be brought home, hay has to be made in the paddock beyond the Creek, or the wood cart has to be loaded in the forest land still further away ... Green fields, I'm sure most people will agree, are a very much more wholesome restraint than iron bolts and bars.*

However, newspaper articles published articles about girls having run away from Brookside, and one escape in 1899 (discussed below) led to public scrutiny of the institution.

Older and younger girls were housed separately at Brookside, Mem noted with approval, so that young girls were protected from 'contamination' by the older and more worldly girls.

Punishment at Brookside was described by Mem as 'neither severe nor frequently inflicted'. She wrote that girls being punished had to perform their usual duties for three days without companionship, that is, not in solitary confinement, but not allowed to talk to the others. Newspaper articles in 1899 provided details of corporal punishment at Brookside, and claims were made by residents and a journalists that the punishments were excessive.

Girls usually went from Brookside to be placed in service in a home or on a farm. Mem wrote that demand for the girls' services from local squatters and farmers were 'more numerous than could be granted'. Ladies from Brookside continued contact with girls once they were placed in service, and records were kept of all correspondence with each girl and of their 'career' post-reformatory.

In 1893, the Government Medical Officer, Dr Shields, was preparing a report about the "future disposal" of young women in reformatories in Victoria, as there was considerable anxiety about the fates of those whose terms in the "care" of the department were about to expire, and "whose mental or physical state is such that they cannot be trusted outside". Shields visited Brookside, along with Dr McCreery, the Inspector of Lunatic Asylums. In a letter to the department, they wrote that they were considering the best course to be adopted with "those inmates and wards who, from mental or moral weakness, are unable to take care of themselves after they have passed the legal age of supervision by the State ... there are several girls who are unfit to be left to themselves when their terms expire, and whom it would be prudent and necessary, in the interests of morality and themselves, to still keep under supervision and control" (annual report 1893, pp.7-8). As Cervini (2023) has observed, primary sources overwhelmingly represent the young women in institutions like Brookside as "wayward" and immoral.

The Department for Reformatory Schools expressed less concern about the future prospects of young women after Brookside. In its 1893 annual report, it stated that a recent "careful inquiry and analysis" of the 155 girls who had been in Brookside since it was established in 1887 had failed to find one young woman who had "gone back

to street life". The department stated that this finding justified its decision to hand over responsibility for girls in reformatories to "suitable private hands".

In her superintendent's report for 1893, Rowe concluded with an admission that "the work might be better done than we are doing it. We have to learn in some cases through our failures ..." Some of these failures were outlined in critical newspaper articles about Brookside in 1899. This coverage resulted from the claims of a group of girls who had absconded from the Reformatory, about their harsh treatment. The girls told police about punishments including floggings, having their hair cut, being confined to bed, and bread-and-water diets. However, while making these claims, the girls also "were unanimous in exonerating Mrs Rowe" (*The Argus*, 17 July 1899). The girls said their reason for running away was they had been forced to cut firewood with a heavy cross-cut saw, and were severely beaten when they had failed to cut the prescribed quantity. A letter to the editor from "Aggrieved" of Colac supported the girls and described Brookside as a "detestable institution, the inmates of which were there evidently for the purpose of gain to the owner and not for the reform of the girls" (*The Colac Herald*, 18 July 1899).

A "special reporter" for the *Argus* subsequently published an article claiming that Brookside was "managed on wrong principles". Of the girls and young woman at Brookside, the article declared that they were probably some of the Department's 'hardest cases', almost all of them 'grossly immoral'. The reporter observed that neither Mrs Rowe and another staff member, Miss King, "had the remotest conception of the psychological aspect of their work, of the long preparation, of the thorough training necessary, of the breadth of view to which she must attain who would venture into a field like this". He found the recordkeeping and accounting to be "informal and unconfirmed". The reporter described Brookside's punishment book as a "sickening record". It showed that canings of the girls were frequent, and that after absconding, girls had their hair cut off. One entry showed a girl having to do 3 hours' exercise, walking around the house in sight of all wearing a straitjacket. The reporter concluded that "the authorities at Brookside are untrained and unsuitable for their difficult task; that the system pursued is antiquated and non-reformatory in its effects; and that the inspection is so inefficient and casual as to be practically a negligible quantity" (*The Argus*, 2 August 1899). An editorial in the *Argus* on 4 August 1899 declared, "It is a growing scandal in Australia that the vast state contributions to charitable institutions are unaccompanied by adequate state supervision".

The Department for Reformatory Schools held a subsequent inquiry into these claims. On 10 August 1899 in the Legislative Assembly, the Under-Secretary Mr CA Topp made his rejoinder to claims published in *The Argus* about Brookside and private reformatories in general, defending the Department's management and oversight of the institution. He addressed each of the charges made by the *Argus* special reporter and found no wrongdoing or grounds for complaint about Brookside. Rather than being "ugly and uninteresting", the under-secretary found Brookside to be "prettily situated". The young women's work was not "rough and unsexing": its purpose was to reform their characters and "to fit them for service on farms and stations, and to be wives of selectors or station or farm hands". He found that there was ample provision for the girls' leisure and there was no need for further accounting for the sums paid to Brookside. As to allegations of excessive punishment, he had carefully gone through the punishment-book and "beyond noticing that on a few occasions the limit provided by the regulations had been slightly exceeded, the corporal punishments were never excessive".

He reported that there were 16 or 17 girls at Brookside, and the staff comprised Mrs Rowe, a farm foreman and his wife, and three ladies in charge. An inspection of Brookside in 1894 had found that "the wisest plans for the reclamation of these fallen girls appear to be adopted, and the results are encouraging" (*The Argus*, 14 August 1899).

The department's annual report for 1898 referred to the "very serious breakdown" of Elizabeth Rowe's health and reported that she was contemplating stepping down from running Brookside (p.6). That year, No 1 cottage closed, and its residents were distributed between No. 2 and the St Ann's sub-reformatory at Heywood (annual report, p.13).

In August 1900, following the death of Mrs Rowe, the matron, Miss King, purchased the Brookside Estate upon which the Reformatory was situated. Brookside closed in 1903, with the Department's annual report for that year citing unsatisfactory accommodation and management as the reason for the closure. The remaining girls at Brookfield were sent to [Mintaro Reformatory](#) at Lancefield Junction, another private girls' reformatory.

# More info

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## Related Entries

### Ran

- [St Ann's Reformatory for Protestant Girls \(1896 - c. 1905\)](#)  
St Ann's was established as a sub-reformatory of Brookside  
Date: 1896 - 1899

### Related Legislation

- [The Juvenile Offenders' Act 1887, Victoria \(1888 - 1890\)](#)  
The Brookside Private Reformatory was established under the provisions of the Juvenile Offenders' Act 1887.

### Related Organisations

- [Government Reformatory for Girls, Coburg \(1875 - 1893\)](#)
- [Mintaro Reformatory Home for Girls \(1903 - 1912\)](#)  
Following the closure of Brookside the remaining girls in residence were sent to Mintaro.

## Resources

- Golding, Frank, *Orphanages in Ballarat - brief historical notes (draft)*, 2009
- Victoria. Children's Welfare Department and Reformatory Schools, [Report of the Secretary / Department for Neglected Children and Reformatory Schools](#), 1887 - 1895
- Maunders, David, *Two different worlds: cultural and political conflict in a 19th century boys reformatory*, 1987
- Cervini, Erica, [‘Wayward’, ‘immoral’ and ‘evil’: dispelling myths about Brookside Reformatory girls](#), Provenance, 2024

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