

Princes Bridge Industrial School

1853 – 1876

Other Names:

- Immigrants' Home
- Princes Bridge
- Melbourne Industrial School

Details

The Princes Bridge Industrial School came into being in 1864, following the passage of the *Neglected and Criminal Children's Act*. An announcement in the Government Gazette of 12 August 1864 stated that the two sections of the Immigrants' Home already housing children were established as industrial schools. (The Immigrants' Aid Society had been accommodating hundreds of children in its Home in St Kilda Road for years prior to 1864.) The new industrial school took over responsibility for 463 children who were formerly in the care of the Superintendent of the Immigrants' Aid Society, James Harcourt, who was appointed as the industrial school's superintendent (Jaggs).

The 1864 legislation did not stipulate a minimum age for children admitted to industrial schools, the result being severe overcrowding at Princes Bridge. Spencer states that "This school was inadequate in every sense, and the situation was aggravated by the fact that [Sunbury](#) was not yet open", and that the idea was for Princes Bridge to be an industrial school only temporarily, until the purpose-built institution at Sunbury was ready (Spencer, 2023, p.60, 64).

He writes:

On 5 September 1864, a newspaper report described the Princes Bridge school buildings as being 'ugly barn-like constructions' located in the Botanical Gardens on the south side of Princes Bridge ... The buildings were whitewashed, sanitary, without pests and each dormitory had a bath. The children appeared clean, contented and attentive except for one boy who, for punishment, was chained to a log on the floor. Four and half months after opening, the school housed 590 children aged between one month and fourteen years, 190 children above its capacity, with further arrivals daily. Twelve months later, it was reported that numerous children were suffering from whooping cough, ophthalmia, chilblains and cutaneous disease. Following its opening, the limitations of Princes Bridge were quickly recognised, foreshadowing the dire health problems that plagued industrial schools throughout their existence (p.64).

Between January and October 1865, 411 boys were transferred from the Immigrants' Aid Society to the new Sunbury Industrial School. By this time, conditions at the buildings at Princes Bridge were very poor and unsuitable. An Inquiry described the buildings as "crumbling into decay, infested with bugs and so dried up that a single spark might execute a conflagration ...". A newspaper article in 1864 described the Immigrants' Home (part of which was the Industrial School) as an "extraordinary conglomeration of iron, wooden and brick sheds" (*The Age*, 20 July 1864). At the end of 1865 there were 450 children at Princes Bridge, an institution with capacity for only 400 (Spencer, p.67).

The dire conditions in Victoria's industrial schools were investigated by the [Royal Commission on Penal and Prison Discipline](#) (1870 to 1872). Its report on Industrial and Reformatory Schools stated that the Melbourne industrial school (Princes Bridge) was for boys and girls under the age of 6. As there was no minimum age in the Act, they were aged "from infants at the breast upwards". At the age of 6, boys were transferred to the industrial school at Sunbury, and girls to one of the institutions at Geelong, Ballarat, Abbotsford and Sandhurst.

The Royal Commission described the industrial school buildings at Princes Bridge as "in all respects unsuitable for the purpose". The site was on the edge of a swamp, and there was no land set aside for the children's recreation. Being part of the military barracks, another portion of the building was occupied by the local military force – "such a situation for a school of several hundred girls is so obviously unsuitable that it needs not to be enlarged upon".

50 of the boys at Princes Bridge were employed at the Botanical Gardens.

The Royal Commission 1872 report declared that the 1864 legislation had been misapplied, and used as a "juvenile poor law". Many of the children in industrial schools like Princes Bridge were neither neglected nor criminal, just destitute. They wrote that destitution should be recognised as being only accidental and temporary: "Children may in numerous instances be rescued from sinking into pauperism by administering a little temporary relief in a judicious manner until their friends should again be in a position to take charge of and maintain them". Instead, the system in the colony of Victoria meant that most children who came into industrial schools remained in the system for their whole childhood. Following the release of the report, the Department established a system to board out children rather than place them in institutions. The number of children in industrial schools decreased by 600 in the year 1873. Despite this shift, several government industrial schools continued to exist throughout the 1870s and 1880s.

The Department's annual report for 1873 stated that the "Melbourne school" was where "nearly all the female children and infants are received". It reported that the government was building another industrial school at Royal Park, anticipating that 700 or 800 boys, and as many girls, will require to be maintained within the schools for a long time yet. The [Royal Park Industrial School](#) opened in 1875.

It would seem that from 1875, the placement of children at the industrial school at Princes Bridge was being phased out. An [article from July 1875](#) refers to the "temporary school at Prince's Bridge". The last children, all boys, were transferred from Princes Bridge sometime after March 1876. According to the *Argus*:

Arrangements have been made for the removal of the Industrial School children now located at the Prince's-bridge barracks. Half of the boys will be sent to the Sandhurst school, and the other half will be sent on board the Nelson. The girls in the Sandhurst school will be transferred to Geelong. By these changes a saving of 3500 pounds will be effected. The Prince's-bridge buildings will be vacant, and may be utilised for the purposes of the Immigrants' Home if considered desirable (Argus, 21 March 1876).

Gallery



St. Kilda Road

Description: This image of Melbourne viewed from south side of the Yarra river shows in the foreground the Immigrants Aid Society Depot on left and Immigrants Home on right.



Immigrants' Home, and swamp near Princes Bridge

Description: This is a copy of a drawing showing the Immigrants' Home in Melbourne, dated 1883.

More info

Related Entries

Run by

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

Related Legislation

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

Before the passage of the Neglected and Criminal Children's Act 1864, the Immigrants' Aid Society was one non-government organisation 'caring' for neglected children.

Related Organisations

- [Sunbury Industrial School \(1865 - 1879\)](#)
- [Geelong Industrial School \(c. 1865 - c. 1880\)](#)
Children were frequently transferred from the Princes Bridge Industrial School to the Geelong Industrial School
- [Immigrants' Home \(c.1853 - 1902\)](#)
The Immigrants' Home and the Princes Bridge Industrial School were located on the same site

Resources

- Australian Heritage Council, [A thematic heritage study on Australia's benevolent and other care institutions](#), 2016
- MacFarlane, Ian & Fensham, Bronwyn, [Eliza Taylor: A mother is gaoled and her children left destitute](#), Ten Victorian Women, 1999
- Cage, R. A., *Poverty abounding, charity aplenty: the charity network in colonial Victoria*, 1992
- [The Immigrants Aid Society](#), VicFix correction campaign, 2017
- Uhl, Jean, *Mount Royal Hospital: a social history*, 1981
- Golding, Frank, [Lost & Found: State Children in Victoria](#), Frank Golding: author, researcher, historian and consultant specialising in child welfare, 27 July 2017
- [The Sanitary Condition of Industrial Schools](#), The Argus, 1 April 1872

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