

The Try Society

c. 1883 –

Other Names:

- TRY Youth and Community Services
- TRY Australia
- Sparkways
- The Try Boys' Society
- William Forster Try Boys' Society

Details

The Try Society came into being in the early 1880s, when William Mark Foster and William Groom formed a number of 'Try Excelsior' groups in different suburbs around Melbourne. The clubs established by the Try Boys' Societies aimed to lead boys away from the path that led to 'larrikinism'.

The Try Society emerged as a result of the work of William Mark Forster with boys in Melbourne from the early 1880s. The name reflected Forster's belief that if a boy tried, he could succeed in whatever he attempted.

Along with William Groom, Forster formed a number of 'Try Excelsior' groups in different suburbs around Melbourne, where boys met and took part in classes such as gymnastics, games, reading and singing.

An article published in the *Spectator* in 1899 purported to depict the genesis of the Try Society:

Mr Forster had been for long impressed with the conviction that something should be done for the boys in the streets. Their homes are close and narrow; they cannot be expected to spend their evenings there. Yet the streets are the school of larrikinism and crime. What could be done? He was thinking of this problem one evening as he strolled near the Melbourne Hospital, when he saw a boy going home from his work in a very dirty condition. He went up to him and said, 'Now, my lad, where do you work?' 'You shut up and mind your own business'

Mr Forster tried again. 'Come now, I don't see why we shouldn't talk. Suppose I asked you to come every evening after your work to a good room where you could play at dominoes and look at pictures, and have gymnastics, and -'

'Look here, I work at the jam factory.' 'All right. Well, what do you do in the evenings?'

'Oh, I get out in the street with some other chaps'. 'Is there a good deal of cursing and swearing?' 'Oh, stacks of that, sir.'

There was the idea then in the bud, and Mr Foster first tried to bring it to fruit in his own house.

The Try Society soon received a gift of land from 'a lady', allowing them to erect new buildings and move out of Forster's home.

Boys paid a membership fee to join the Try Society, which entitled them to a range of classes (including gymnastics, carpentering, boot-repairing, printing, writing, shorthand, book-keeping and singing). The Society also had a savings bank, a Band of Hope, and a Children's Church. Most members of the Try Society were employed in factories or workshops.

In 1887, the Toorak and South Yarra Try Boys Society opened in a building in South Yarra [Hawksburn]. In 1888, a farm in Lilydale was lent to the Society.

By 1892, the Try Society was offering classes in carpentry, boot repairing, shorthand, book-keeping, reading and writing, singing and elocution. It also had a lending library, games rooms, swimming pool and cricket and football clubs.

Clubs were situated in the central and inner city, at South Yarra, Richmond, Camberwell, Malvern, Windsor, St Kilda, Brighton, Carlton, Yarraville, East Melbourne and the city. The 1890 annual report of the Toorak and South Yarra Try Boys' Society described its club as:

a place of evening resort, affording innocent and recreative amusement for the lads who mostly are accustomed to frequent our streets ... and where they are brought under moral, religious and educational influences.

Boys rescued by the Try Society were to be reformed through hard work, thrift and a new environment away from the city: quoting the *Try Excelsior News* 1893, Swain writes that 'The boys should be placed in "true homes" in the "clean, fresh air of the country" where they would be surrounded by "sympathy, kindness and love".

The Try Society published the *Australian Boys' Paper* until 1907. From 1907, it published the monthly *Try Boys' Gazette*.

As the enterprise grew, Forster also established the City Newsboys' Try Society, and the Girls' Try Society. The City Newsboys' Try Society grew out of a Newsboys' Try Excelsior Class, established by Forster in 1886 (in 1899, this became part of the Gordon Institute for Boys). Forster believed that children working as newsboys had their own particular circumstances, requiring their own society. From 1895, the City Newsboys' Try Society was situated in a store-room at 192 Little Collins Street.

[The newsboy] lives during the day in the streets. His hours of labour commence with the issue of the evening papers, and for the greater part of the day, if uncared for, he would resort to the alleys and by-ways.

Then there is the army of waifs, too often the children of drunken and dissolute parents, who gain a precarious livelihood by selling matches and other trifling commodities. All these are reached by the City Newsboys' Try Society ...

On a cold, wet day, the little scantily-clad newsboy, who wears the Society's badge, knows where he can obtain food, rest and shelter at a nominal charge, if he can pay it, and for nothing if he has not the penny asked for, while hot baths are fitted up for his use (The Spectator, 23 June 1899).

The Newsboys' rooms in Little Collins Street provided boys with games, a library and a day school. Newsboys could also attend classes at the Hawksburn Try Society halls.

[The Melbourne Newsboys Club Foundation was established in 1973 and in 2009 the Newsboys Foundation continues to provide services for young people of a similar age to the newsboys helped by Forster in the nineteenth century.]

The Girls' Try Society was situated in Motherwell Street, Hawksburn. In the late 1890s, Vida Goldstein was a key figure. Girls could attend classes in singing, writing, elocution and calisthenics. The Girls' Try Society also had a library. The Society found 'situations' in the country for girls needing them.

In 2009, Try Youth and Community Services operated a number of programs with young people, including Big Brothers Big Sisters.

The Try Society has undergone a number of name changes. In 1991 it changed its name to TRY Youth and Community Services, and in 2011 it was changed to TRY Australia. In 2021 the name was changed to Sparkways.

Gallery



Try Society Halls, South Yarra [Hawksburn]

Description: Black and white photoprint of the impressive two-storey buildings (since demolished) owned by the Try Society in Cromwell Road. A horse and jinker stands in the foreground. The Society was founded and managed by Mr William Forster.

More info

Related Entries

Ran

- [Melrose Training Farm for Boys \(1938 - 1957\)](#)
- [Forster Lodge \(1951 - 1991?\)](#)
- [Clifden Farm and Try Boys Home \(1923 - 1938\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Gordon Institute \(1886 - 1951\)](#)
The Try Society and the Gordon Institute were both established in part due to the efforts of W. M. Forster.
- [Seaside Garden Home for Boys \(1921? - 1934\)](#)
In 1926, it was reported that the city office of the Seaside Garden Home for Boys was located in the City Newsboys' Hall.
- [Excelsior Boys' Home \(1886 - 1915?\)](#)
William Groom, the founder of the Excelsior Boys' Home, was involved with the Try Excelsior classes organised by the Try Society.
Date: 1883 -
- [Wandin Yallock Reformatory School \(1886 - 1905\)](#)
The first boys to arrive at Wandin Yallock Reformatory School had come from The Try Society's Try Excelsior Class.

Resources

- Hoban, Ruth, [Forster, William Mark \(1846 - 1921\)](#), Australian Dictionary of Biography Online Edition, 2006
- Duff, G.B., *Social work of the Church: child rescue agencies of Melbourne*, The Spectator, 23 June 1899
- [Wards of the State. An astonishing number. How are they dealt with?](#), The Argus, 13 January 1911
- [Try Youth Hostel](#), Finding Records, No date. *Relevance:* See the 'List of records held by the department' section for information about records relating to The Try Society

Records

Records

- [William Forster Try Boys' Society Records \(1887 - 1986\)](#)
 - [Private and Professional Papers of Leonard Tierney \(1933 - 1992\)](#)
 - [Try Boys Society Collection \(c. 1890 - c. 1969\)](#)
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