

The *Sir Harry Smith*

1865 – 1873

Details

The *Sir Harry Smith*, was a hulk (ship) anchored off Fishermans Bend, near Hobson's Bay. From 1865, it housed mostly older boys sentenced under the Neglected and Criminal Children's Act of 1864.

The *Sir Harry Smith* was anchored off Fishermans Bend in the River Yarra before it flowed into Hobson's Bay. It was one of four ships used as industrial schools and reformatories in Hobson's Bay, Victoria: the *Sir Harry Smith*, the *Nelson*, the *Deborah* and the *Success*, eventually housed approximately 500 boys.

It accepted its first draft of 20 boys in May 1865 (from the other reformatory on a ship, the [Deborah](#)), with its numbers increasing to 125 by June 1872. By February 1866 it became the main accommodation for the older, 'tougher' boys, with the younger boys re-located to Geelong or Point Nepean.

The *Sir Harry Smith* was anchored nearby to another ship called the *Success* which had been used to house an "overflow" of children from the Department of Industrial Schools. Later, the *Success* was used as sleeping quarters for the more "difficult" boys on the reformatory ship.

In April 1870, two boys who had been on the *Harry Smith* were charged with deserting the vessel at the Sandridge Police Court. The pair, with another boy, had "slipped off the barque in the middle of the night, and swam all the way to the Sandridge jetty. The other boy, however, became exhausted, and when he was passing the [Deborah](#) called out to the parties on board, who took him out of the water". The two boys had made it to land, but gave themselves up when they became too cold and hungry (*The Australasian*, 23 April 1870).

Accommodating children on ships was criticised in hindsight as unsuitable for young boys. In 1872 at the Royal Commission on Penal and Prison Discipline, Duncan, in answer to specific questions, provided the following information about the conditions on board *Sir Harry Smith*. One hundred and thirty boys, aged between ten and sixteen, who were convicted of an offence, were housed on it. They spent most of their time on the ship, including sleeping.

They slept in separate cells to avoid the boys becoming 'too intimate'. A large number of the boys made sails, their own boots and clothing, and assisted the carpenter on board the ship. Punishment involved 'no more than twelve stripes on the hand or breech, in the presence of an officer'. Before their sentence was served, some of the boys worked on shore, while the others merely served out their time on board the ship.

Some 'difficult' boys living on the *Sir Harry Smith* in its later years sometimes used the *Success*, anchored next to it, as a sleeping quarters.

On leaving the ship the boys were given a small sum of money, but no supervision. Duncan considered that the boys on the ship did 'not get a steady aptitude for work to fit them for shore life' and that supervision was 'not so good between decks on a ship as it is on shore in a large room'.

Duncan had expressed the view that 'a ship is not a fitting place for reformatory purposes if the boys be not expressly designed for a seafaring life.' It was clear to him that 'immoral practices of the worst kind spring up

amongst them which can never be effectually suppressed'. He recommended the ship be abandoned as soon as 'a fitting building for the boys can be provided', as most boys were not going to become sailors.

In December 1872, *The Argus* newspaper declared that the *Sir Harry Smith* had proven to be an unfit place for the detention of boys. At that time, it housed around 120 boys, aged between 12 and 18 (*The Argus*, 23 December 1872). Boys were moved to the new reformatory in Coburg from January 1873.

By 1873, the *Sir Harry Smith* was no longer required as a reformatory. Boarding out was beginning to be introduced in Victoria, easing the strain on industrial schools and reformatories, and the government also had opened the Jika Reformatory for Boys in Coburg. Newspapers reported that about 50 boys were moved from the ship to the new reformatory at Coburg in two police vans, and "were apparently delighted at the prospect of a change of residence" (*The Age*, 31 January 1873).

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 \(1864 - 1888\)](#)
The *Sir Harry Smith* was established under the provisions of the Neglected and Criminal Children's Act 1864.

Resources

- Guillaume, George; Connor, Edward C., [The Development and Working of the Reformatory and Preventive Systems in the Colony of Victoria, Australia, 1864-1890](#), 1891
- Swain, Shurlee, *The Victorian Charity Network in the 1890s*, 1976
- Jaggs, Donella, *Neglected and criminal: foundations of child welfare legislation in Victoria*, 1986
- Golding, Frank, [Lost & Found: State Children in Victoria](#), Frank Golding: author, researcher, historian and consultant specialising in child welfare, 27 July 2017

Records

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

Records

- [Victorian Government Wardship and/or Out of Home Care Records \(1864 - current\)](#)
- [Victorian Naval Logs \(1865 - 1876\)](#)

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