

Mittagong Cottage Homes

1885 – 1976

Other Names:

- Cottage Home Farm
- Mittagong Homes
- Mittagong Home
- Mittagong Cottage Home Farm
- Children's Cottage Homes

Details

Mittagong Cottage Homes were established from 1885 by the State Children's Relief Board. They were houses that each held 20 children, ranging in age from infancy to adolescence. The first were in the Mittagong township but in 1896 they moved to the Southwood Estate on Bong Bong Road, where further cottages were added. The cottages had several different functions over time, including hospitals, disability and truancy institutions, convalescent homes, transit points between foster placements and the reformatory which was located on the same site as the cottages. More than 30,000 state children passed through the cottages. In 1976, when the Mittagong Training School closed, the entire complex of buildings and farming land was renamed Renwick, a complex of cottage homes for state wards of all ages.

The first Mittagong Cottage Homes were for 'delicate and invalid children'. A cottage in rented premises in Mittagong township was opened on 21 March 1885. Within a short period six 'scattered' cottages had been established, including one for children with ophthalmia (eye disease), which was unfortunately common in children who had been taken into state care. Cottages were later established for children with skin conditions, physical disability and other illnesses, 'feeble-mindedness' and 'mental deficiency', and behaviour problems.

Children at Mittagong received a boosted diet, rich in dairy foods, oats, treacle and vegetables, to help them grow stronger and overcome the diseases and ailments they might have suffered during their early lives. Those children who were well enough attended the local school. Once children had convalesced in the Mittagong Cottages, they were sent off to placements with foster families.

Although they were most certainly institutions, Arthur Renwick, the first President of the State Children's Relief Board, argued that cottage care was an extension of the boarding-out (fostering) system, as the homes were small and were modelled on the nuclear family. Around 15 to 20 children were accommodated in each cottage. Each cottage had a matron in charge, or, in later years, house parents.

In 1886, a journalist visited the Cottage Homes, starting with a cottage located in town, where children were in the care of a 'mother (who is a widow) and her daughter, the latter being about 20 years of age'.

When the home was visited the other day, most of the children were found in the kitchen with the 'mother', just as the children of an ordinary family might be. Two of them, who were sickly, were playing – one nursing a doll; others were sitting or standing about, and one or two were working. Their ages ranged from about 3 to 12 or 14 ... The two other homes at Mittagong are a considerable distance from the town ... Each is in the care of an unmarried woman ... At the time the place was visited there were 11 children in

the home – eight boys and three girls. They were Roman Catholic children, and several of them were puny and sickly-looking, suffering, the 'mother' said, from sore eyes, general debility, hip disease, or epileptic fits (Sydney Morning Herald, 20 January 1886, p.9).

The Mittagong area was thought to be a good place to send unwell children, as it provided 'a wholesome country environment'. An article from 1901 described the site of the Cottage Homes: 'The air was beautiful, the waters highly medicinal, and the surroundings excellent'.

In 1896 the State Children's Relief Department leased 100 acres of the 'Southwood Estate'. The farm was worked by old men from the Government Asylum, and a number of cottages were built on it, while surrounding houses were converted to hold children. In 1902 the NSW Government bought the land and the cottages on the site commenced their dual role as cottages for sick or disabled children, as well as a Farm Home for 'delinquent boys'. From that point the boys took over the farm work and provided the fruit, vegetables and milk needed to run this substantial institution.

The training institution on the same site as the Cottages, Mittagong Farm Home for Boys, was officially established in 1906. The histories of the Farm Home and the Mittagong Cottage Homes are closely intertwined, with buildings on the site being used for different purposes and to house different types of children over time. To give one example, in 1947, No 7 cottage which had formerly been for delinquents at the Training School, was being used to house state wards.

In annual reports, the Department of Child Welfare reported on the Mittagong Cottages and the Farm/Training Home under separate headings, for example in 1950: 'Children in the fostering care of the State' (Cottages) and 'Wayward and problem children' (the Training School); in 1948, the Cottages were under the heading 'Depots, homes and hostels for wards' and the Training School was under the heading 'Institutions'. In 1968, the annual report distinguished between the 'Homes for dependent children' and 'Institutions for delinquent children' at Mittagong.

The 1908 annual report of the State Children's Relief Board contained details about 8 cottages that existed at that time at Mittagong. These descriptions by the President of the Board demonstrate the various ways that the children in Mittagong Cottages were put to work.

By 1908 there were 8 cottages at Mittagong for invalid and sick children, and 1 more 'established to deal with feeble-minded children'. No 1 Home accommodated from 18 to 22 boys with physical disabilities or epilepsy, as well as boys recovering from cases of chronic ophthalmia. These boys worked at tailoring, bootmaking and on the farm.

No 2 Home was occupied by 15 girls 'under the supervision of a Mother'. The President of the State Children's Relief Board reported that: 'these girls are all more or less of weak intellect and troublesome, requiring special care. They are strong enough physically and do the washing and mending for 69 boys in the different Cottage Homes'.

In 1908, No 3 Cottage was the Ophthalmic Home for Children. No 5 was another cottage for girls, all with physical disabilities ('Yet they are able to perform all the darning and the laundry work for the children in the other Homes' according to the SCRB). No 6 Cottage accommodated 25 girls, who worked 'under the personal supervision of the Mother, making all underclothing and dresses, underflannels, shirts &c for the boys. The girls turn out hundreds of garments weekly.'

No 7 was the cottage where very young children were sent, if necessary. The President reported in 1908 that 'many cases of "new admissions" go to this Home, in which preliminary Training is given'.

In 1908, the Cottage Home Farm supplied milk, eggs, poultry and fruit and vegetables to the 280 children in the different Homes at Mittagong. The Cottages were surrounded by an orchard.

A journalist who visited the Cottages in November 1914 described how the children were divided on sectarian lines: Catholics were cared for by Catholic house parents and Protestants were cared for by Protestant parents, and all children learned to say their prayers, to say grace and walked into Mittagong every Sunday to attend their own churches.

In 1914, the State Children's Relief Board reported that the Ophthalmic Cottage had been relocated from Mittagong that year to a location closer to Sydney.

In 1916 and 1917 two NSW Parliamentary inquiries looked into the discipline provided at Mittagong, as part of a broader inquiry into the boarding out system. Girls who had lived in the homes in the 1890s told the inquiry that they were brutalised while in the care of matrons at the Mittagong Homes, and suffered the indignity of having their heads shaved and being beaten for failings like dropping clothes pegs. The inquiries dismissed the complaints, stating that they had occurred long ago and Mittagong was much improved.

The annual report for 1918 described Mittagong as the 'Cottage Homes for Invalid, Delicate and Feeble-Minded Children'. There were 11 cottages in use at that time. There were about 230 children resident, some going to school & others involved in training programs. These programs included orcharding, dairying, general farming, tailoring, bootmaking, carpentry, poultry and pig farming. In the 1920s, there was a toy factory on the site, where boys worked.

Throughout this period the cottages in the township remained in use as institutions, but townspeople eventually pressured the government to centralise the cottages on the 'Southwood Estate'. This led to the buying of 'Rotherwood estate', a ten acre property, in April 1930. The house on the property was used as the hospital cottage until 1976. The two cottages located in the town of Mittagong were retained and used to house state wards.

In the years following the end of World War Two, the Department of Child Welfare reported that there was a shortage of suitable foster homes. As a result, it established a number of Departmental Homes for state wards, including new cottage homes at Mittagong. The Department took over cottages that were formerly housing boys from the Farm Home at Mittagong, to accommodate state wards.

A submission to the 'Forgotten Australians' Senate inquiry described what it was like living at Mittagong Cottages in the 1950s:

I was sent to Mittagong. Mittagong was a large property Federation style buildings with contemporary add-on schoolrooms and a relatively modern building for small children. Mittagong was a horror show. How can I tell you about Mittagong?

The management of these facilities was quite often left in the hands of couples. ... I cannot remember the name of this institution, (it could be Sutter Cottage), but I know there was more than one facility in the Mittagong area so I'm not sure. The facility that I do remember was an old federation building with add-ons and development at the front that would be described as a Kindergarten or pre school facility.

The woman in charge of this facility was the most sadistic woman I have ever known. A common practice was polishing the floorboards of the building. Five or six boys, five or six years old maybe more, would polish the front entrance hall ... Mittagong was a painful and humiliating episode in my life. I felt despair there.

Whilst at Mittagong the local bank manager came once a month, and we all went through a ritual of banking a small amount of money, probably sixpence? What happened to that money? I never received it. Did anyone? Individually it would not have amounted to much; collectively it could have been quite a lot of money at the time (Submission 321).

Education

Many of the children who lived in the Mittagong Cottage Homes attended the local public school, while children deemed to have intellectual disabilities were taught on site in the Montessori Method.

In 1908, the State Children's Relief Board reported that there was a school on the site 'at which 25 girls from Nos. 2, 6 and 7 Homes attend for three half-days during the week'.

There was also the Turner Special School for Truants on the site of the cottages (1938 to 1946). In 1950, the Department reported that boys from Suttor and Turner Cottage now attended the school which was formerly for truants. Later, the former truant school was used to educate girls from Linden Cottage. At the end of 1973, when the girls from Linden had all been integrated into the Mittagong Public School, the school closed.

In 1966, at a time when the Department began to house more wards of states in the Mittagong Cottages, another new school was opened on the site, called Southwood. Boys from Renwick and Suttor cottage attended this new school, while boys from Turner Cottage attended the local Mittagong public school. Southwood became co-educational in around 1969.

The Southwood school closed at the end of 1976. The Berrima Sub Normal Children's Association moved its home Tangara to Southwood at the beginning of 1977. In 2018 Tangara School is still located on the site.

The Cottages, 1940s to 1970s

During the early years of Mittagong Cottage Homes, the cottages were simply numbered, from 1 to 12. Sometimes the Department's annual reports mention an unofficial title such as 'Home for Feeble-Minded Girls' or 'Ophthalmic Home' or 'Home for Boys'. From around the late 1930s, the cottages were given names. The names were usually those of people who had been significant in the history of the Child Welfare Department.

Turner Cottage

Turner Cottage was located in Mittagong township, built on the Lindens Estate in 1915. It originally was used to house girls with intellectual disabilities. According to Leeallison Downie (2013), later it was used as the Cottage Hospital.

In around 1936, it was described as a vacant cottage, being prepared for the housing of truants. Turner Cottage was proclaimed a special school for truants in May 1938. New South Wales established a number of schools for truants in the twentieth century, for children who were persistently absent from school, under sentence from the Children's Court.

Turner Cottage accommodated around 25 boys, all committed to the Turner Cottage School for Truants by the Children's Court. The teacher in charge, Arthur Beasley, lived at Turner Cottage, and according to Boyle, Beasley 'had his own room and free board in return for four nights of supervision and construction/activity for the 18 boys then in residence'. There was also a married couple who ran Turner Cottage.

When Anglewood (another special school for truants, located at Burradoo near Bowral) opened, boys from Turner Cottage were transferred there. The final transfer took place in May 1946.

From this period, male state wards lived at Turner Cottage. A group of boys who had been living in 'No 5 Cottage' were transferred to Turner Cottage in June 1946. These boys attended the school adjacent to Turner Cottage.

By the 1960s, the school adjacent to Turner Cottage was vacant. At this time, Turner Cottage housed school aged boys, who attended the local school in Mittagong. The Department's annual report for 1962 stated that Turner accommodated 27 boys (older than the 'lads' who lived at Mittagong's Suttor Cottage).

A former resident of Turner Cottage recalled group punishments being handed down. After wetting himself at the cinema (he'd been given a drink before the film), he was punished by not being allowed to eat for two days, but having to stand at the meal table. Also, playtime for the entire group of children was abolished for the same period (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September 2004).

Linden and Waverley Cottages were located in the same grounds at Turner. The 1968 annual report stated that 'fraternization between the homes is encouraged'. That year, all the boys in Turner Cottage (who were aged between 7 to 13 years) were placed in temporary foster homes over the Christmas vacation and in their absence extensive renovations and extensions were made to the bathing and toilet facilities, smaller dormitories and to the staff accommodation.

Waverley Cottage

Waverley Cottage got its name in around 1946, when it was used to house boys and girls of preschool age. In the mid 1960s, its purpose changed and it provided accommodation for children with disabilities. In 1971, the Department's annual report stated that Waverley Cottage had undergone extensive renovations, and that it housed 'intellectually handicapped preschool aged children'.

Suttor Cottage

The cottage later known as Suttor Cottage was originally, in the 1930s, used to house 'mentally defective' boys (Downie, 2013). It was named Suttor Cottage in around 1949, and housed school-aged boys. The 1949 annual report remarked on the 'friendly rivalry' between boys from Suttor and Turner Cottages, which the institution encouraged by monthly Conduct Competitions.

A former resident of Suttor Cottage in the early 1970s, Wayne, shared his memories with the Find & Connect web resource, describing an environment that was decidedly institutional, despite the Department's description of the 'home-like' atmosphere in the Mittagong Cottages.

He described a typical day at Suttor Cottage:

6am a matron walked around blowing a whistle. You then had to make your bed hospital style folded corners. Dress in darkness, then line up at the end of your bed for inspection by the matron.

Your locker was inspected and all clothes had to be folded as they came from the store. Anything out of place was ordered to be rectified, too many infraction was rewarded with a menial task.

Bed inspection. Bounce the coin on the made bed. Dress in khaki and go work in a garden or orchard or clean up some area on the property.

Then return to the house in single file, line up for roll call and inspection. Those who had injuries were to go to the doctor on the property, you left your shoes at the door sit down for breakfast say grace, then your name was called and up off you go.

Upon return from the doctor the cook would give you some toast and tea knowing you didn't have breakfast. Breakfast was toast and porridge, tea. (All meals were the same everyday except Friday and Sunday, fish on Friday and lamb roast on Sunday dinner.)

Then get changed into grey school uniform and go to school. One of the older boys would carry a large Hessian bag of fruit for tea break.

Upon morning tea my house would march to some area and have the fruit we carried earlier.

Lunch was single file back at the house, soup and sandwiches. Then back to school.

The afternoons were change into khakis again and go out to some area and do maintenance or clean up duty.

Then back to the house, change again and have dinner, then bed. Except Fridays was tv night where we would get 2 lollies (we called them gubbo's).

Saturdays were same routine just work detail. Sundays we wear our Sunday bests, all sit on a bleacher seat and wait for a foster parent to come and pick you up and take you out for the day. Those who weren't taken out for the day remained at the house to play and run around.

At night those who were taken for a day trip would return usually with gifts from the potential foster parent, those gifts would be 'put away for later' never to be seen again.

Another former resident described the process through which children were selected for foster care placements as demeaning, calling it "pick a kid" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September 2004).

Renwick Cottage

Renwick Cottage opened in 1966 to provide additional accommodation for around 20 school aged boys (other Mittagong Cottages for boys were Suttor and Turner). The primary school aged boys at Renwick attended the Southwood School on the site.

Linden Cottage

Linden Cottage opened in 1968, and it accommodated 24 school aged female state wards. Linden was located in the same grounds at Turner and Waverley Cottages. Girls attended a school in what was formerly the Turner Cottage school.

In 1968, the Department reported that having Linden had greatly relieved numbers at Bidura. Girls at Linden apparently responded well having a married couple in charge, as opposed to Bidura which had all female staff.

The girls at Linden were 'encouraged to fraternize' with children living at Turner and Waverley cottages, which were on the same grounds. This arrangement made it possible for siblings to be placed in adjacent cottages. By 1976, Linden had boys and girls living there, who attended the local school in Mittagong.

One submission to the 'Forgotten Australians' Senate inquiry described life as a resident at Linden Cottage:

After leaving Bidura aged eleven I was taken to Mittagong girls home where my bad memories continued. The house parents were abusive and cruel. I remember talking in bed at night and being dragged out of bed and made to scrub the hallway with a toothbrush through the night until the early hours of the morning. I remember peeling buckets of potatoes and pumpkin for twenty-five girls and ten staff, and if I objected because I had cuts on my hands I was given kitchen duties for a week and one week of early nights (Submission 271).

Garran Cottage

Garran Cottage was another home for primary school aged girls, established in around 1971. In 1976, the Department reported that 24 girls lived at Garran.

Rotherwood Cottage

In 1969, the Department reported that Rotherwood Cottage accommodated 24 boys. The cottage was built on land in the Rotherwood Estate, purchased by the Department in the 1930s. In 1976, Rotherwood began to house boys and girls.

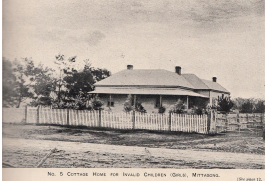
In 1976, following the closure of the Mittagong Training School for Boys, the complex of cottages was renamed Renwick. From this time, the Mittagong site housed state wards (also known as 'dependent children') of all ages.

Gallery



Mittagong Cottage Home

Description: This is a digital copy of an image in the collection of Leonie Knapman, made 21 June 2012.



No 5 Cottage Home for Invalid Children (Girls), Mittagong

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the State Children Relief Board Report for year ended 5 April, 1907. It shows a building of the Mittagong Cottage Homes.



Houseparents at Garran and other cottages share hobbies and other interests with the children in a warm family atmosphere (Mittagong Cottage Homes)

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the Child Welfare Department of New South Wales Annual Report of 1970.



Recreation activities outdoors at Garran Cottage play an important part in the girls' social development (Mittagong Cottage Homes)

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the Child Welfare Department of New South Wales Annual Report of 1970.



Cottage Home for Girls, Mittagong

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the State Children Relief Board Report of year ended 5 April, 1916.



Mittagong No 3 Cottage Home for Invalid Children, Mittagong

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the State Children Relief Board Report of year ending 5 April, 1907.



Mittagong No 7 Cottage Home for Invalid Children (Girls), Mittagong

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the State Children Relief Board Report of year ending 5 April, 1907.



Mittagong Cottage Home Farm

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the State Children Relief Board Report of year ending 5 April, 1907.



Nos 4 and 8 Cottage Homes for Boys (Mittagong)

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the State Children Relief Board Report of year ending 5 April, 1908.



Suttor Cottage

Description: This is a copy of an image of Suttor Cottage (also known as Suttor House) which is published on the NSW Office of Environment & Heritage website.



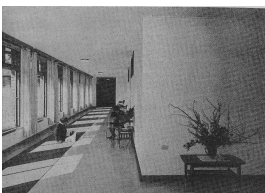
The dining room at Linden Cottage [Mittagong]

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the Child Welfare Department of New South Wales Annual Report of 1968.



Linden Dormitory [Mittagong Cottages]

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the Child Welfare Department of New South Wales Annual Report of 1968.



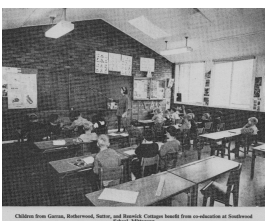
The spacious hallway in Linden Cottage is designed as a sun trap [Mittagong]

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the Child Welfare Department of New South Wales Annual Report of 1968.



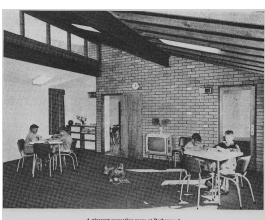
Facing the starter at Waverley Cottage, Mittagong

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the Child Welfare Department of New South Wales Annual Report of 1959.



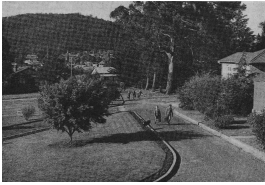
Children from Garran, Rotherwood, Suttor and Renwick Cottages benefit from co-education at Southwood School, Mittagong

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the Child Welfare Department of New South Wales Annual Report of 1970.



A pleasant recreation room at Rotherwood

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the Child Welfare Department of New South Wales Annual Report of 1969.



Turner Cottage boys returning home from school (Mittagong Cottage Homes)

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the Child Welfare Department of New South Wales Annual Report of 1966.



Turner Cottage. Attractive spacious grounds are a feature of the ward cottages at Mittagong

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the Child Welfare Department of New South Wales Annual Report of 1963.



Rotherwood has been designed to provide a number of sun traps against the Mittagong winter. This patio is conducive to relaxed family living.

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared in the Child Welfare Department of New South Wales Annual Report of 1969.

More info

Chronology

- **Mittagong Cottage Homes (1885 – 1976)**
 - Renwick (1976 - 1994)

Related Entries

Run by

- [Department of Youth, Ethnic and Community Affairs, State Government of New South Wales \(1975 - 1976\)](#)
- [Department of Child Welfare and Social Welfare, State Government of New South Wales \(1970 - 1973\)](#)
- [State Children's Relief Board \(1881 - 1923\)](#)
- [Child Welfare Department, State Government of New South Wales \(1923 - 1970\)](#)

Related Events

- [Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care, Parliament of Australia \(2003 - 2005\)](#)

Mittagong Cottage Homes was mentioned in Submission 271 to the Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care

Related Organisations

- [Renwick Association Inc \(15 September 2011 - current\)](#)

The Renwick Association was formed to protect the heritage and history of Mittagong Cottage Homes.
- [Probationary Farm Home, Rydalmere \(1891 - 1894\)](#)

The Probationary Farm Home at Rydalmere was for boys considered unsuitable for Mittagong Cottage Homes.
- [Mittagong Farm Home for Boys \(1906 - 1947\)](#)

Mittagong Farm Home for Boys was located on the same site as the Mittagong Cottage Homes.
Date: 1906 - 1947
- [Mittagong Training School For Boys \(1947 - 1976\)](#)

Mittagong Training School for Boys was located on the same site as the Mittagong Cottage Homes.
Date: 1947 - 1976
- [Probationary Farm Home, Branxton \(1890s - 1915?\)](#)

The Probationary Farm Home at Branxton was for boys considered unsuitable for Mittagong Cottage Homes.

- [New South Wales Institution for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind \(1869 - 1957\)](#)

State wards from Mittagong Cottage Homes were sent to the New South Wales Institution for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind and children from the institution went to Mittagong for vacations and other periods

Resources

- Van Krieken, Robert, *Children and the state: social control and the formation of Australian child welfare*, 1992
- Quinn, Peter E, [Unenlightened efficiency: the administration of the juvenile correction system in New South Wales 1905-1988](#), 27 March 2006
- [N.S.W. Report: Reforms sought in child protection](#), The Canberra Times, 21 December 1974
- [Renwick Child Welfare House](#), State Heritage Inventory, 2022
- [Renwick Reunion attracts big crowd](#), Southern Highland News, 5 November 2014
- Arnold, Alex, [Renwick State Ward Home gets listed](#), Illawarra Mercury, 27 March 2014
- [Reliving the Renwick State Ward Home years](#), Illawarra Mercury, 29 October 2012
- Australian Heritage Council, [A thematic heritage study on Australia's benevolent and other care institutions](#), 2016
- [Dreams of pets, milkshakes and ironed clothes](#), Sydney Morning Herald, 1 September 2004
- Meyers, Jackie, [Historian records tales of 30,000 children who called Renwick home](#), Southern Highland News, 2009

Records

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

Records

- [Departmental Records relating to State Wards, New South Wales \(1918 - current\)](#)
- [School Files \(1876 - 1979\)](#)

You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/mittagong-cottage-homes/>