

Karrala House

1963 – 1971

Details

Karrala House was opened 18 February 1963 in the female ward of the Ipswich Mental Hospital. Run by the state government, Karrala House accommodated 'wayward' and 'delinquent' girls and was a separate building and enclosure from the rest of the centre. A second unit, 'Karrala 2' was opened in December 1968 to accommodate more girls. The institution was closed in 1971 following the opening of a Remand and Assessment Centre for Girls at Wilson Youth Hospital. At this time, the remaining girls at Karrala were transferred to Wilson Youth Hospital.

In 1961 the Nicklin government announced plans to turn the vacant wards at the Ipswich Mental Hospital (Female 2 and 3) into a training school for girls. On 17 January 1963 Karrala House (Training Home for Girls), was established under the provisions of the State Children's Act 1911 – 1955. The State Children Department's annual report for 1963 stated that Karrala House was established 'for the purpose of dealing with the more emotionally disturbed girl and those girls in denominational homes who are incorrigible and are continually upsetting other inmates'.

The Medical Superintendent of the Ipswich Mental Hospital, Dr Richard Aubrey Atherton, was appointed Superintendent of Karrala in 1963. The report of the Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland (1999) contained this quote from Dr Atherton from 1963, expressing his views about Karrala:

'As indicated earlier, I believe that this Home would fulfil the most useful function by taking the more recalcitrant type of girl who is hardened to ordinary handling in a private or Church Home. Discipline should be as rigid as that in a Prison which would be the place these girls would find themselves but for their age. As Prison is a deterrent to crime so, in my opinion, should the discipline and consequent fear of return to this Home be a deterrent to the girls from returning to an antisocial or asocial form of behaviour' (p.150).

The Department's annual report for 1965 referred to Karrala House's role in Queensland's child welfare system, stating that: 'The existence of this home acts as a deterrent to many girls in other homes and contributes in no small manner to the maintenance of good conduct'.

One former resident spoke about her first impression of Karrala, having been transferred there after attempting to escape from the [Mitchelton industrial school](#):

... I saw the fence with the barbed wire and behind it was a building in a U shape. On the right side were all the solitary cells. At the bottom were the doctor's room, the sewing room and an office where the nurses sat behind unbreakable glass. On the left-hand side are the rooms where you slept at night and you were allowed out of that room during the day. There were nine rooms on each side.

When you arrived everybody got put into solitary first because you were punished for whatever you did before you were sent to Karrala. There was no conversation about how I felt. No one spoke to me as a human being. You were just a thing. They already knew everything about me and just told me what to do. They showered me from head to toe, looked me over everywhere and made me put on striped pyjamas and then stuck me in a dark room for 19 days. The bed was a slab attached to the wall with a hessian bag on it. No pillow. There was a black potty. Nothing else. I was I thought, 'What the hell is this place?'

They let me out in the morning to have a shower and empty my potty. I cried for days after they cut my hair. All the light switches were outside and so I was in the dark, unless I had a nurse who felt sorry for you who would turn your light on for a little while. Occasionally you would get a good one like that but you got no sunshine. There was no tap in the room for water. Some were mean and they wouldn't feed me—instead of getting three meals a day, you might get one. I never ate the cereal for breakfast because it had crawly things in it. There was no radio, no noise and I didn't know what day of the week or what time it was.

... After 19 days I went to the other side—the 'good side'—of Karrala House. I actually had a bed there but we didn't have sheets. There was a stripy mattress, a pillow and blankets. On the 'good side' they let you out of your room during the day but you still weren't allowed to speak to anyone. Girls were aged between 13 and 15. You spent all day in the sewing room and it's where you had your lunch. Everything was done in silence. It drove you crazy! Karrala was in the middle of a mental hospital. No other patients were near us but we did the sewing—making pyjamas for the other patients. We worked on the sewing machines all day. Now I hate sewing. I start shaking if I have to sew and when I sew a button I make sure that it will never fall off. If it's got two holes, there's a big bulge in the middle where I've gone back and forth with the thread because I don't want to do it again.

Karrala was tough. It was like back to nature—survival of the fittest. A lot of people thought we were in Karrala because we were bad. No we weren't. Most of us had absconded from Homes. We weren't bad but they made us hate (Jean/Erin, Goodna Girls, pp.31-32).

The system for disciplining girls at Karrala House was based on privileges and punishments. The concept was that girls started off at the institution with little or no privileges, and could gain privileges in stages for improved behaviour. The Minister for Labour and Tourism (Mr Herbert) stated in 1967 that a similar system was in place at the denominational institutions for girls in Queensland, Kalimna House (run by the Salvation Army) and Mt Maria Re-education Centre (run by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd).

The inmates start with very little and they advance in steps to ultimate release. They go up in steps, by which they earn the right to have hair-do's, use cosmetics and so on. These things have been used by both these institutions and that is the system that has been followed at Karrala. The system that was introduced was that they should gain privileges for good behaviour.

Throughout 1967, members of the Labor opposition were vocal opponents of conditions at Karrala House, claiming that its approach to managing 'delinquent girls' was out of step with the rest of the world. In a May 1967 letter to the Minister, the member for South Brisbane, Col Bennett, declared: 'Quite frankly, the girls appear to be treated like animals and conditions related to me appear to be worse than those that previously prevailed at Westbrook'.

Bennett was referring to the Farm Home for Boys, Westbrook, a state-run reformatory which had been the subject of an enquiry in 1961. On 21 November 1967, Mr Bennett said in Parliament:

We heard for a long time that Westbrook was all that it should be and that the conditions there would compare with the standard of treatment of boys of that age in similar institutions in any country of the world. An investigation (or should I say an inquisition) was held behind closed doors. The revelations were horrible and scandalous, and indicated barbaric conditions, although they were not quite as bad as what is going on every day at Karrala House.

In November 1967, there was spirited debate in the Queensland Parliament about conditions at Karrala House, focusing on the 'admission room' where girls first stayed upon arrival at the institution. One parliamentarian quoted from an article in the *Sunday Mail* which had a detailed description of 'Room 9'. The room was 10 feet square, with a mattress on the floor and canvas sheets. There was no toilet or running water. There was little natural light in the room (politicians argued about whether it could be described as 'gloomy', 'dismal' or 'dark' in the room) and girls' only view was through the door, out to a bare wall across the corridor. A former resident said that Room 9 was called 'POP', meaning 'Place of Punishment' (Jean/Erin, *Goodna Girls*, p.33).

Girls' only human contact was with staff members, who visited 'at least 14 times a day' with meals or to take them to the toilet. The journalist stated that staff were not allowed to speak to girls during these visits. Although the Minister had vigorously denied on several occasions that girls were kept in 'solitary confinement' at Karrala House, the Member for Toowoomba East asked 'What name other than solitary confinement could one give it?'

The public concern and criticism directed at Karrala House in the late 1960s reflected a growing interest in the rehabilitation rather than punishment of delinquent children. Karrala House was an institution that came under the scrutiny of the Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland (Forde Inquiry) in 1999. The report of the Inquiry concluded:

The government, it seems, was content to allow the churches to carry on the business of reforming wayward girls. Its commitment in respect of Karrala House was limited to providing a quasi-penal institution to facilitate the task of extracting and disciplining 'problem' girls and returning them back to the denominational homes for future care.

Over 500 girls passed through Karrala House between 1963 and 1971, when the institution was closed. All inmates at Karrala in October 1971 were transferred to the new girls' section at the Wilson Youth Hospital. The Forde Inquiry report pointed out that:

Most of these girls had not been convicted of a criminal offence, but had committed status offences. In the majority of cases, it appears that sexual behaviour perceived as inappropriate prompted the Children's Court to make an order for care and control. Girls initially admitted to one of the denominational training homes or a similar institution for care, whose behaviour and emotional disturbance was such that they could no longer be cared for in that home, were also admitted to Karrala House.

In the late 1990s, the buildings that had formerly constituted Karrala House (Byron House and Claire House) were repurposed as part of the Ipswich Campus of the University of Queensland. There is a memorial plaque dedicated to the residents of Karrala House on the site. The text on this plaque reads:

Karrala House, as this building was formerly known, was jointly operated by the State Children's Department and the Health Department, as an institution for teenage girls committed to care between February 1963 and October 1971.

In remembrance of the girls who were placed in Karrala House.

To those who succumbed to harsh punishments meted out by a severe system, we remember you.

To those who overcame such experiences, we acknowledge your courage and your determination to have your story told.

Gallery



Challinor Centre

Description: This image provides an aerial view of Challinor Centre and was included in the UQ Ipswich Campus Progression of an Institution exhibition.



Building 4 [Karrala House]

Description: Building 4 was part of Karrala House and in 2012 was known as Clair House, part of the Ipswich Campus of the University of Queensland.



Plaque dedicated to residents of Karrala House

Description: A memorial plaque was erected on the former site of Karrala House, which was on the grounds of the Ipswich Mental Hospital, between 1963 and 1971. The text on the plaque reads: 'Karrala House, as this building was formerly known, was jointly operated by the State Children's Department and the Health Department, as an institution for teenage girls committed to care between February 1963 and October 1971. In remembrance of the girls who were placed in Karrala House. To those who succumbed to harsh punishments meted out by a severe system, we remember you. To those who overcame such experiences, we acknowledge your courage and your determination to have your story told.'

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Children's Services Department, State Government of Queensland \(1 August 1966 - 6 June 1987\)](#)
Date: 1966 - 1971

Related Events

- [Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions \(1998 - 1999\)](#)
Karrala House was an institution mentioned by a number of witnesses to the Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions.

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

Karrala House was mentioned in Submissions 222 and 512 to the Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care

Related Organisations

- [Wilson Youth Hospital \(1961 - 1983\)](#)

When Karrala House closed in 1971, its residents were transferred to the Remand and Assessment Centre for Girls at Wilson Youth Hospital.

- [Ipswich Mental Hospital \(1938 - 1964\)](#)

Karrala House was established within the Ipswich Mental Hospital complex.

Resources

- Atkinson-Phillips, Alison, [Not a Celebration](#), 2017
- Gahan, Kate and Kijas, Johanna, *The mental welfare of children: a history of child and adolescent mental health services in Queensland*, 2014

Records

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

Records

- [Client Files, Queensland Government-run Institutions \(c. 1865 - 2001\)](#)
 - [Administrative Records, Queensland Government-run Institutions \(c. 1865 - 2001\)](#)
 - [Punishment Register - Karrala House \(1963 - 1968\)](#)
 - [General Correspondence Batches - Agent A223 Labour and Industry Department 1 \(1921 - 1974\)](#)
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You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/karrala-house/>