

# Petford Training Farm

1978? – c. 1999

## Details

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Petford Training Farm was in Petford, to the west of the Atherton Tablelands in North Queensland. It provided station-based training to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youths. It opened in 1978 and in August 1983, the Petford Training Farm Aboriginal Corporation was licensed as a foster home. Funding for Petford Training Farm as a residential facility ceased in March 1999, after a number of inquiries into incidents including physical and sexual abuse of residents.

It was on the homestead of Geoff Guest, who first took in Aboriginal young people to teach them to ride horses in 1973. An article from 1988 states that Guest and his wife, Norma Perrot, began fostering for the Queensland Department of Family Services in 1982, and that they had continuously cared for 6-12 adolescents at any one time since then. The homestead and an additional 30 acres were held under a special lease by the Petford Training Farm-Aboriginal Corporation. Guest held the surrounding 80 square miles which was also used by the Corporation. Petford Training Farm was licensed by the Department of Family Services as a residential institution (Venables, 1988).

Young people at Petford completed Commonwealth-funded stockman's courses run from 3-6 months, studying animal husbandry, fencing, farm mechanics and basic literacy and numeracy. Venables writes that a big emphasis was placed on horse riding and eventually horse-breaking skills, and Petford residents were usually drawn from Cape York and Gulf Communities and towns close to Petford, such as Mareeba and Kuranda.

Venables described Petford as a new response to youth offending, "albeit one still outside the offenders' community". He claims that Petford had very flexible guidelines about who it took, and that sometimes non-Aboriginal young people attended:

*The Farm has always accepted the most serious and/or chronic young offenders when secure custody is imminent or already been tried with no positive effect ... As the Petford program grew it was shaped by Aboriginal foster parents responding to the needs of Aboriginal youths. The content of the program is at least socially acceptable as most communities have their own stock camps. Most lads who are accepted into Petford have an affinity for such work through having been on stations themselves or through the influence of relatives who may be stockmen. This is not a strong pre-requisite, however ...*

*Upon arrival every boy or girl is quickly placed in a position of contributing to the program. Jeff says "whenever a lad comes out here I watch him very closely. I try to find his good points and build on them". (Social Workers with a liking for abstract language will recognise this technique as making an assessment and mobilising client strengths!)* (Venables, 1988).

The article mentioned that Petford was only funded to care for 8 young people at a time, but "excessive demand frequently results in twelve departmental referrals at any given time. In addition, Petford usually accommodates up to thirteen other children referred by themselves, their family or local community". It concluded that "The Petford Training Farm can claim to make a valuable contribution in addressing the offending, unemployment and

other social problems of young people in North Queensland”, and that the “vast majority of adolescents return home and continue to reoffend at a reduced rate”.

In October 1998, the Daffen Report (“Evaluation of the service provided to young people through the Petford Training Farm (Aboriginal Corporation)) was used by the Queensland government as the basis for ceasing funding to and closing Petford.

(A document online by the “Friends of Geoff Guest group from 2001 critiques this decision, and argues that “under scrutiny”, the Executive Summary of the Daffen report did not recommend Petford’s closure. The Group described itself as comprising “people academically trained in the psychiatric, psychological, intercultural, and social sciences to post doctoral level”, and its critique defended Guest and the approach taken at Petford.)

In March 1999, the Minister Anna Bligh made a statement to the Queensland Parliament, citing the Daffen Report, as well as “numerous departmental investigations over 14 years and a recent report by the Queensland police service”. She stated that Petford had an “alarming history” when it came to child safety and referred to investigations for incidents including physical and sexual assault of children, drug use, access to firearms, and “the exploitation of children as cheap labour”. Bligh stated that there was little evidence of young people being successfully rehabilitated as a result of the Petford institution. She announced her decision to cease funding to Petford, based on the facility’s “appalling record” on 3 March 1999 (Ministerial Statement: Petford Training Farm, 1999).

The 1999 report of the Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland also recommended that government funding of the facility be withdrawn.

In the publication *Missing Pieces* (2001), it stated that ‘further details on Petford records will be advised as information becomes available’.

In July 2025 Geoff Guest pleaded not guilty to one count of unlawful carnal knowledge, four counts of unlawful and indecent dealings with a child, and one count of repeated sexual conduct against a child under 16. The jury was unable to return a verdict. At the time of writing it was not determined whether Guest would face another trial.

## National Redress Scheme for people who have experienced institutional child sexual abuse

The Queensland government has agreed to be a funder of last resort for this institution. This means that although the institution is now defunct, it is participating in the National Redress Scheme, and the government has agreed to pay the institution’s share of costs of providing redress to a person (as long as the government is found to be equally responsible for the abuse a person experienced).

### Gallery

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**Petford Training Farm: with Geoff Guest**

**Description:** This video is a news story about Petford Training Farm. The beginning of the video features an introductory segment by a show host which is followed by footage and interviews featuring Geoff Guest and Norma Perrot, the founders of the training farm. The video also includes scenes of a group of Australian Aboriginal youths working with horses, receiving lessons from Geoff, going for a horse ride, and participating in activities such as leatherwork, playfighting and meal times together.

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### More info

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## Related Entries

### Run by

- [Petford Training Farm Aboriginal Corporation \(1983 - 1998?\)](#)

## Resources

- Forde, Leneen et. al., [Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Child Abuse in Queensland institutions](#), May 1999. *Relevance*: pp.97-98
- Mostead, Arthur, [Petford Training Farm, Queensland \(1985\) Arthur Mostead](#), 1985

## Records

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

### Records

- [Correspondence Files - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs \(1916 - 1999\)](#)
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You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/petford-training-farm/>