

St Joseph's Home, Neerkol

1885 – 1978

Other Names:

- Neerkol Orphanage
- Meteor Park Orphanage
- Neerkol

Details

St Joseph's Home, Neerkol (near Rockhampton) was run by the Sisters of Mercy. The Home was commonly referred to as 'Neerkol' or 'Meteor Park' Orphanage. It was built in 1885 to accommodate children transferred from St Joseph's Orphanage, Bucasia. Over 4,000 boys and girls lived at Neerkol throughout its years of operation, including child migrants from Britain. It closed in 1978 when the children were transferred to Family Group Homes. In the 1990s, allegations of abuse against residents of St Joseph's Home, Neerkol received public attention. Sixty-four former residents and staff gave evidence to the Forde Inquiry in Queensland.

On 11 May 1885, the official register of Meteor Park Orphanage shows that eleven children were transferred from the State Orphanage, Rockhampton to Meteor Park, 'with the sanction of the authorities'. On 22nd December 1885, it is recorded that fifty-seven children were brought from the Mackay Orphanage and then on 1st January 1886, seven children came from the Townsville Orphanage. Records indicate that by this date, ninety-two children were in residence.

The arrival of these children began a history of out-of-home care for thousands of children until the last group of children were transferred to Family Group Homes in 1978. Over the years, the number of children cared for at the Home has varied. At one time the numbers were near to one hundred, and yet at another time, the numbers were closer to five hundred. From existing records, the total number of children who have lived some or all of their childhood years at Neerkol would exceed four thousand five hundred.

The four thousand acre property included a dairy, cattle yards, pigs, fowls and an area for growing crops and mixed vegetables. A dam was constructed to ensure an adequate water supply. At first, the buildings included a convent, kitchen, nursery, three other dormitory buildings, a dining room, bakery, laundry and a school.

A small chapel was built beside the convent and when Fr Cassar resided at Neerkol in 1916, a presbytery was built on the grounds near the cemetery. In 1922, Neerkol became a separate parish and in 1927, the presbytery was relocated to a site near the chapel.

Young girls assisted in the kitchen preparing meals for the children, the Sisters, the house-keeping staff and the farm workers.

Over the decades, older wooden buildings gave way to more modern brick constructions. The first change occurred during the time of World War II when, with the financial help of the American soldiers in Rockhampton at the time, a brick building called the 'Change and Dressing Rooms' was erected. This building later became the school when the old school was pulled down early in the 1960s.

Wooden dormitories were gradually replaced by brick structures and over time, dormitory groupings were changed from Nursery, 'Little Girls', 'Little Boys', 'Big Girls', 'Big Boys' to the small family-group idea. Here

brothers and sisters could be together with a mixture of boys and girls of different ages in the hope that the experience of family could be felt in this very large environment.

Throughout the years, secondary school age teenagers had the opportunity to continue their education – the boys at St Brendan’s College (Yeppoon) and the girls at the Range College (Rockhampton). By the 1970s, many children travelled into Rockhampton for their education at the various Catholic and Education Queensland primary and secondary school facilities.

In 1974 changes in child care practices and policies led to the Sisters of Mercy placing children in alternate accommodation. Children were re-united with their own families, others were fostered and by 1978, the remaining children were settled in either of the two specially-purchased Family Group Homes in Rockhampton.

The original orphanage was licensed under the *Orphanages Act* 1879. It was then licensed under the *State Children Act* 1911 and under the *Children’s Services Act* 1965 on 4 August 1966.

Allegations of abuse of children living at St Joseph’s Home, Neerkol received public attention from the 1990s. Many submissions to the Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions (1998 to 1999) related to Neerkol. A delegation of British MPs travelled to Australia in 1998 and heard testimony from Former Child Migrants who had placed at Neerkol. The 2004 report of the Senate’s Forgotten Australians inquiry stated that ‘Neerkol Orphanage in Rockhampton, Queensland, was mentioned in a number of submissions, very often in an unfavourable light’.

Colleen Stevenson, a former resident of Neerkol, reflected in 2010 about her time at Neerkol, and on the Australian government’s Apology to Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants in November 2009:

Well, life in Neerkol was no pretty picture at all. We’d get up 5 o’clock in the morning, go to church, then we’d come back and we’d have to do the dormitories and we’d just have to do a lot of things. If we didn’t do it properly we were given a hiding. We were given the strap. We just had to do it proper.

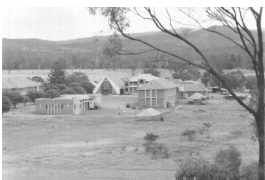
As a child we weren’t able to form bonds at all. We never really got to know each other as children. I think we were all scared of what would happen to us, not that we couldn’t but we just weren’t allowed to, we just didn’t feel like we could, you know, because of things that went on – sorry. Things that happened out there to different kids, kids were strapped and they were hurt very badly.

Being here today, the apology means today that it’s finally recognised as we were all telling the truth and not lying. Well, it helps move on a little bit, one step at a time. You can’t go – one day at a time – you can’t go any further than that. If you try to go any further you get nowhere (“We were charged with being neglected”, 2010).

In November 2017, the Rockhampton Regional Council granted approval for a developer to convert two of the buildings on the site of St Joseph’s Home into a private residence.

St Joseph’s Home, Neerkol, was investigated by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Case Study 26: St Joseph’s Orphanage Neerkol.

Gallery



St Joseph's 1970



St Joseph's early buildings

Description: This photo is undated, the date included is an estimate only.



St Joseph's front gate and drive

Description: This photo is undated, the date included is an estimate only.



Up to 100 children slept in large dormitories at St Joseph's, Neerkol

Description: This image was published in the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions as Photograph 5.4 It states its source as courtesy of Neerkol witness. This photo is undated, the date included is an estimate.



Test Site [St Joseph's Home, Neerkol]

Description: This image has the caption: An image of Neerkol orphanage where, according to documents, children were used to test vaccines. This photo is undated, the date included is an estimate.



Photo from the archives of the St Joseph's Neerkol Orphanage near Rockhampton

Description: This is a copy of an image published as an illustration for an article on the Morning Bulletin website on 1 November 2017.

More info

Chronology

- St Joseph's Orphanage, Bucasia (1874 - 1885)
 - **St Joseph's Home, Neerkol (1885 – 1978)**

Related Entries

Run by

- [Sisters of Mercy, Rockhampton Congregation \(1873 - 2011\)](#)

Related Events

- [Visit of John Moss \(1951\)](#)
John Moss inspected this home as part of his 1951 tour and report
- [Case Study 26: St Joseph's Orphanage, Neerkol, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse \(2015\)](#)
- [Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions \(1998 - 1999\)](#)

- [Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care, Parliament of Australia \(2003 - 2005\)](#)
St Joseph's Home Neerkol was mentioned in Submissions 78, 96, 149, 170, 197, 217, 218, 219, 225, 309, 353, 361, and 431 to the Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care
- [Fact-Finding Mission on Child Migration \(1956\)](#)
- [Child Migration Programmes Investigation, UK Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse \(2017 - 2018\)](#)

Related Legislation

- [State Children Act 1911, Queensland \(1911 - 1966\)](#)
- [Orphanages Act 1879, Queensland \(1879 - 1911\)](#)
- [Children's Services Act 1965, Queensland \(1965 - 2000\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Rockhampton Orphanage \(1870 - 1894\)](#)
On 11th May 1885 the State Government transferred eleven children from the State Orphanage, Rockhampton to St Joseph's Home, Neerkol.
- [Townsville Orphanage \(1878 - 1934\)](#)
On 1 January 1886 the State Government transferred seven children came from the Townsville State Orphanage to St Joseph's Home, Neerkol.
- [Ward Street Family Group Home \(1977 - 1979\)](#)
Children were moved to the Ward Street Family Group Home when St Joseph's closed in 1978.
- [Jessie Street Family Group Home \(1978 - 1985\)](#)
Children were moved to Jessie Street Family Group Home when St Joseph's closed in 1978.

Related Concepts

- [Child Migration \(1800s - 1970s\)](#)
- [Medical experiments \(1803 - 1970s\)](#)

Resources

- Community Affairs References Committee, [Lost Innocents: Righting the record - Report on child migration](#), 30 August 2001
- Senate Community Affairs References Committee Secretariat, Parliament of Australia, [Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children](#), 2004. Relevance: p.42
- Immigration Museum, [Stolen childhoods](#), 2012
- Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, [Report of Case Study No. 26: The response of the Sisters of Mercy, the Catholic Diocese of Rockhampton and the Queensland Government to allegations of child sexual abuse at St Joseph's Orphanage, Neerkol](#), March 2016
- [Allan Allaway interviewed by Rob Willis in the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project](#), 9 August 2010
- [Daphne Falconer interviewed by Jennifer Barrkman in the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project \[sound recording\] \(2011\)](#), 31 August 2011
- [Delia Sweeney interviewed by Jenny Gall in the Bringing them home oral history project \[sound recording\] \(1999\)](#), 15 May 1999
- [Catholic Church schools and homes with the most child abuse claims revealed](#), ABC News, 17 February 2017
- Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse, [Child Migration Programmes Investigation Report](#), March 2018
- Queensland. Dept of Children's Services, [Centenary of care for children 1879-1979](#), 1979
- Hall, Glen, [St Joseph's Orphanage Cemetery \(Bucasia\)](#), Mackay History, 2011
- [Bill Granger of Neerkol Orphanage tried his lungs on the bagpipes while two of his mates looked on](#), Morning Bulletin, 15 December 1953
- Children's Commission of Queensland, [A preliminary report on allegations of abuse of former residents of St. Joseph's Orphanage at Neerkol, Rockhampton, in the 1940's, 50's and 60's](#), 1998
- Williams, Garnett B., [Nightmare at Neerkol](#), 2004
- Forde, Leneen et. al., [Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Child Abuse in Queensland institutions](#), May 1999
- [Research Guide to orphanage and children's home records at Queensland State Archives](#), Queensland State Archives website, February 2022

- Social Work Staff, Faculty of Education, University of Queensland, [Directory of Social Services Queensland](#), 1958
- Jackson, Jody, [Stain on the brain: the David Owen story](#), 2012
- Blayse, Lewis, [Neerkol: \(Or: Mercy! Sister!\)](#), lewisblayse.net, 28 May 2013
- Taylor, Adrian, [Neerkol kids were guinea pigs](#), The Morning Bulletin, 5 June 2010
- Falconer, Daphne, *The story of my life in Neerkol Orphanage, Rockhampton, Queensland, 1944 to 1949*, 2014
- [Neerkol Orphanage Revisited](#), Sara Rosetta Photography, 25 August 2011
- [Forgotten Australians](#), Forgotten Australians Justice Committee inc, No date
- Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission and the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes, *A piece of the story : national directory of records of Catholic organisations caring for children separated from families*, November 1999

Records

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

Records

- [St Joseph's Home Records \(c. 1882 - c. 1985\)](#)
- [Commonwealth Child and Youth Migration Records \(1901 - 1983\)](#)
- [Correspondence files, multiple number series \(policy matters\) \(1922 - 1968\)](#)
- [Heritage photographs of Queensland children's homes, buildings and people \(1848 - 1979\)](#)
- [Indexes to State Children's Allowances \(1910 - 1914\)](#)
- [Admission Registers, Meteor Park \(later St Joseph's Home, Neerkol\) \(11 May 1885 - 10 May 1909\)](#)
- [Registers of Children Hired Out, Meteor Park Orphanage \(later St Joseph's Home, Neerkol\) \(29 July 1882 - 28 February 1978\)](#)
- [Case Files, Meteor Park Orphanage, Rockhampton \[St Joseph's Home, Neerkol\] \(29 March 1886 - 31 January 1986\)](#)
- [Registers of Children Released on Probation, Meteor Park Orphanage \(later St Joseph's Home, Neerkol\) \(21 July, 1915 - 15 January 1930\)](#)

You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/st-josephs-home-neerkol/>