

St Francis House

1946 – c. 1961

Other Names: • St Francis Home for Inland Children

Details

St Francis House was established in 1946 at Semaphore by the Australian Board of Missions. It replaced the Church of England Hostel for Inland Children as a Home for Aboriginal boys from the Northern Territory. In 1949 Aboriginal boys evacuated to New South Wales during World War II were sent to the Home. St Francis House closed around 1961. Some older boys were sent to Karingal Youth Hostel and most younger boys were placed in foster care.

St Francis House unofficially began in 1946 when ten Aboriginal boys aged between the ages of 8 and 15 living at the Church of England Hostel for Inland Children in Kensington Park were moved to Glanville Hall at Semaphore. This historic building had been purchased by the Australian Board of Missions (ABM) to be developed as a training centre for Aboriginal boys from the Northern Territory.

In 1945 Father Percy Smith established The Church of England Hostel for Inland Children at Kensington Park, as an extension of St John's Hostel in Alice Springs, to allow Aboriginal boys to be sent to the city to further their education. In 1946 the ABM and Father Smith lobbied the Northern Territory Administration for assistance to extend the training program by obtaining a larger Home.

In May 1946 a memorandum from the Commonwealth Department of the Interior, which was responsible for the administration of the Northern Territory at the time, agreed that the Administration should pay subsidies for the boys in the Home and some assistance towards staffing costs, but would not assist with the purchase of a building. The memo stated that:

This should prove an interesting experiment and the Government may be strongly criticised if it does not lend reasonable support. I think however, that the Board of Missions should accept an appreciable share of the cost.

Glanville Hall was the historic former home of a pioneer South Australian seaman, Captain Hart. As the ABM was not permitted in its constitution to own property, they purchased the property, but the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide held it on the Board's behalf. The home operated under the control of a management committee which reported to the ABM. The Northern Territory administration assisted with operating costs through the payment of a subsidy of 15 shillings per child and a contribution towards staffing costs. Although the first boys moved in during 1946, St Francis House was not officially opened and dedicated to St Francis of Assisi until 4 October 1947 which was St Francis Day. Father Smith as superintendent was assisted by his wife, Isabel and three staff members.

The new Home consisted of 28 rooms including a chapel, tower, former coach house, laundry and stables. It was set on grounds of five and a half acres (2.2 hectares).

Ngadjuri Elder Vince Copley, a 'St Francis old boy', described life at the Home in a 2018 book:

We attended Ethelton Primary School and later Le Fevre Boys Technical School. Initially the white kids taunted us and teased us, but we got our own back on the sports field where we were faster, more agile and smarter. At Le Fevre we learnt to use our fists and the headmaster Fred Vickery gave us the thumbs up to fight our own battles in the schoolyard. Perhaps it was our having to stick together that created the extraordinary bond we have today (Mallett, 2018, x).

Initially most of the boys placed in the Home came from Alice Springs and were moved to Adelaide to further their education. Mallett writes that there were "two distinct groups" of boys at St Francis House, those whose parents had consented to them being sent there, and those who were sent there from other institutions. The group of boys who came to St Francis House in January 1949 from Mulgoa in New South Wales were from this second group (Mallett, 2018, x).

Before coming to St Francis House, these boys had been evacuated to the Church Missionary Society's institution in Mulgoa under military orders during the Second World War in 1942. The children at Mulgoa came from Croker Island and Groote Eylandt in the Northern Territory, as well as from Queensland, South Australia and far western New South Wales.

These boys' arrival in 1949 increased numbers at St Francis to over twenty. Later that year the ABM approached the Government requesting financial assistance in the form of a reimbursement of costs associated with the setting up of the institution. In a letter of November 1949 the Secretary of the ABM wrote that unfortunately:

the costs have advanced to an extent impossible either to foresee or to keep pace with, so that the Board of missions is obliged to take fresh account of all its commitments.

In January 1950 a departmental officer was despatched to Adelaide to furnish a detailed review report on St Francis House. His six page report highlighted both positive and negative aspects of the Home. He noted that though the building was large, it was 'far from modern; and in its present form cannot be said to be entirely suitable for its purpose'. One of the main criticisms related to sleeping accommodation for the twenty boys in residence. This was confined to the attics which were 'generally ill-lighted, poorly ventilated and cheerless.' The steep steps to the attics were also considered 'a potential danger'. He commended the fact that boys and staff ate meals together and that the food was 'plentiful and good'. He noted that educational and employment opportunities were easily accessible:

An institution, such as St Francis House, close to technical educational facilities and away from handicapping environmental conditions, must fill a valuable function.

He felt, however, that its present value was limited due to the shortage of sleeping accommodation in the Home and the fact that it was 'denominational'. He recommended that the ABM forward plans for extensions to the Home to allow up to forty boys to be accommodated and that the present Government subsidies continue, with the proviso that the ABM agree to take in any Aboriginal boy recommended by the Director of Native Affairs. The Minister agreed to these recommendations.

Further review reports from for the years ending December 1950 and 1951 reveal that the building was suffering from ongoing disrepair. In 1950 the inspection report stated:

It is considered that the top portion of the premises should be completely sealed off from human habitation for, besides being unhygienic, it presents a very real fire risk.

It also noted that all the food in the Home was 'prepared in a condemned kitchen with most inadequate cooking facilities'. Despite this, no complaints were made regarding the quality or quantity of the food and the report made positive comments about the schooling and recreational opportunities for the boys. In contrast, the report for the year ending 1951 stated that:

The crowded living conditions allied to the depressing building still present a disappointing institutional experience and it is strongly recommended that every consideration be given to repairs, renovations and additional dormitory accommodation.

It was also noted that the staff were provided with the 'superior accommodation' in the Home which was in 'striking contrast with the facilities available to the boys'.

During 1950-1951, the Commonwealth negotiated with the ABM over the Government acquiring the Home and then making it available back to the Mission free of charge, on the understanding that it continued to provide accommodation for 'part-aboriginal boys from the Northern Territory'. This acquisition occurred on 4 June 1952. The Government still assisted the Home by paying subsidies and other costs.

Investigations into the management of the Home by the Government after the acquisition revealed that it was under the 'remote control' of the Headquarters of the ABM in Sydney and that the management committee in Adelaide was only an advisory body. In practical terms, it meant that the Warden of the St Francis ran the Home with little supervision. In late 1952 the ABM handed management of St Francis House over to the Adelaide branch of the ABM and a new management committee with no staff members included. This was regarded by the Government as a better arrangement as it allowed for 'more impartial examination and investigation of House management matters'.

During their time in the home, some boys were allowed to return to Alice Springs on vacation, but during the 1950s, only every second year. While in Alice Springs the boys stayed as a group at St John's Hostel rather than returning to their parents' homes. In January 1953 an article appeared in the Alice Springs Centralian Advocate describing the visit of the boys to their home town. In the article the current Warden of the Home, Mr Wilson described 'a typical day at the Hostel':

The boys rise early and after washing, making beds and a few minutes at chapel, sit down to a good breakfast. Each boy has some small chore to complete before going off to school. They attend either the Ethelton Primary or the LeFevre Tech. After school they are free to do as they wish. It may be a swim in the sea, a game about the house, a little gardening in their own plot, the making of some toy or article in the hostel's own work shop or merely sitting about reading or dreaming. Tea follows this period, then it is a case of homework, reading or games, according to their ages.

Mr Wilson also described the 'spiritual side of their training' as taking place through 'quiet teaching and practice'.

During the mid to late 1950s the ABM struggled to run the Home with the funding received. They wrote repeatedly to the Government about the need for extra financial assistance. In late 1958, as a result of financial problems, the poor condition of the building and changing policies in relation to the welfare of Aboriginal children, discussions about the closure of the Home began.

In August 1958, the NT Director of Welfare, Harold Giese met with representatives of the ABM and the St Francis House management committee to discuss the future of the Home. He explained that under present assimilation policy, a 'segregated institution such as St Francis House was undesirable as a permanent institution'. The policy of the department was to either place children in institutions where they would mix with white children or into foster care. It was decided at this meeting that St Francis House would continue to operate on an 'an interim arrangement as a clearing house for children coming from the Northern Territory' and that the ABM would explore other options for children's placement including foster care and adoption.

In late 1958 the Administration had made the decision that it would close St Francis House in December 1959, giving the ABM and management committee of the home approximately a year to find alternative placements for the boys. A report from a departmental inspection of the Home during this period included the following description:

The general atmosphere of St Francis House was one of decay and neglect. It is realised of course that the buildings are beyond further maintenance and repair but as the standard declines, the moral effect is reflected in the attitude of the inmates. The whole place bears an air of shabbiness and 'end of term' spirit. I feel it necessary for the boys to be established as quickly as possible into a more secure and ordered environment.

From July 1959, the ABM and the Home superintendent were in regular correspondence with the Director of Welfare to arrange and confirm placements for each of the boys before the closure of the Home. Of the nineteen boys remaining in 1959, most of the younger boys were placed in foster care while a number of older boys were accommodated at the Karingal Youth Hostel in New Hindmarsh. A small number of boys returned to the Northern Territory. By the end of December 1959, St Francis House had been completely vacated.

St Francis House was mentioned in the Bringing Them Home Report (1997) as an institution that housed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children removed from their families.

Gallery



Australian Board of Missions - Technical training of boys at St Francis House, Semaphore, South Australia [altered from original title]

Description: Handwritten caption on back of photo says 'Home for Inland Children (halfcastes) at Semaphore S. Aust. Front view'.



Australian Board of Missions - Technical training of boys at St Francis House, Semaphore, South Australia [altered from original title]

Description: This is a digital copy of a photograph in a National Archives of Australia file. Handwritten caption on back of photo says ' Home for Inland Children (halfcastes) at Semaphore S. Aust. Inspection by architects'



Australian Board of Missions - Technical training of boys at St Francis House, Semaphore, South Australia [altered from original title]

Description: Handwritten caption on back of photo says 'Frontlawn. Home for Inland Children (halfcastes) at Semaphore S. Aust.'



Australian Board of Missions - Technical training of boys at St Francis House, Semaphore, South Australia [altered from original title]

Description: Handwritten caption on back of photo says 'Backyard. Home for Inland Children (halfcastes) at Semaphore S. Aust. Inspection by Architect.'

More info

Chronology

- Church of England Hostel for Inland Children (1945 - 1946)
 - **St Francis House (1946 – c. 1961)**

Related Entries

Run by

- [Australian Board of Mission \(1850 - 1995\)](#)
Australian Board of Mission ran St Francis House in conjunction with the Church of England.

Related Events

- [Interstate movement of Northern Territory children \(1930s - 1970s\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [St John's Hostel \(1941 - 1970s\)](#)
- [Church Missionary Society Home for Half-Castes, Mulgoa \(1942 - 1949\)](#)
In 1949, a group of boys were transferred from the CMS Home at Mulgoa to St Francis House.
- [Anglican Diocese of Adelaide \(1847 - current\)](#)
- [Karingal Youth Hostel \(1952 - 1964\)](#)
A number of boys from St Francis House moved to Karingal Youth Hostel when St Francis House closed in 1959

Related Concepts

- [Stolen Generations](#)

Resources

- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, [Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families](#), 1997. *Relevance:* St Francis House was mentioned in the Bringing Them Home Report (1997) as an institution that housed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children removed from their families
- [Ted Hampton interviewed by Anne Ronberg in the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project \[sound recording\] \(2001\)](#), 25 March 2001
- Mallett, Ashley, *The boys from St Francis: stories of the remarkable Aboriginal activists, artists and athletes who grew up in one seaside home*, 2018
- St Francis House Project, [History & Legacy of St Francis House: A Home for Inland Children](#), 2020
- Smith, John P Mc D, *The flower in the desert: a biography of the Reverend Canon P Mc D Smith*, 1999
- [S.A. Hostel is their new home](#), The Mail, 12 February 1949
- [Church of England Notes: Warden's visit to Alice Springs](#), Centralian Advocate, 26 January 1951

Other Resources

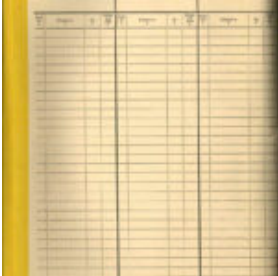


Title: St Francis House Semaphore, South Australia - Training of boys from Northern Territory [altered from original title]

Type: Image

Date: 1951 - 1956

[Details](#)

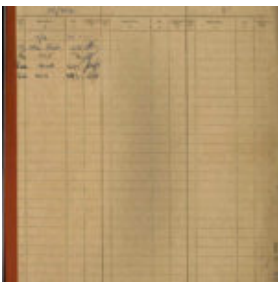


Title: St Francis House Transfer of Children at Closure

Type: Image

Date: 1959 - 1965

[Details](#)



Title: Welfare Branch St Francis House - Policy & Development

Type: Image

Date: 1957 - 1959

[Details](#)

Records

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

Records

- [Private collection of John P McD Smith, St Francis House \(1946 - 1980s\)](#)
- [St Francis House Records \(1946 - 1961\)](#)
- [Records related to Church of England Social Welfare Bureau \(1947 - 1991\)](#)
- [Australian Board of Missions - Technical training of boys at St Francis House, Semaphore, South Australia \[title altered from original\] \(1946 - 1953\)](#)
- [Welfare Branch St Francis House - Policy and Development \(1957 - 1959\)](#)
- [St Francis House Transfer of Children at Closure \(1959 - 1965\)](#)
- [St Francis House Semaphore, South Australia - Training of boys from Northern Territory \[title altered from original\] \(1951 - 1956\)](#)
- [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
- [Anglican Board of Mission \(Australia\) - further records \(1887 - 1996\)](#)

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