

# Weeroona Girls' Training Centre

1959 – 1979

**Other Names:** • Weeroona Girls' Home

## Details

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Weeroona Girls' Training Centre opened in Latrobe in 1959. It was a government institution for girls who were either wards of state or on remand. Weeroona closed in 1979.

Weeroona opened in a large house in Forth Street, Latrobe which is in north-west Tasmania. It was an 'open institution' with a secure unit for girls that the Social Welfare Department found difficult to manage. The Director of the Department described it as 'the female counterpart of Ashley Boys' Home'.

The home had a limited capacity until 1961 when an extension and renovations made it possible to accommodate 20 girls and six employees in the open section. A new secure unit could accommodate four girls and one employee. The first Principal moved in during September 1961.

The secure unit was separated from the main building. It contained a common room, staff room, exercise yard, and four cubicles furnished with a built-in bed and small table. The cubicles could be locked and bolted. According to a Select Committee inquiry held in 1965, they were meant to be used as a last resort and as a form of restraint, not punishment.

According to Annual Reports of the Social Welfare Department, girls at Weeroona took part in a program that would help them when they left. Some of them attended a local school while others carried out their educations through the Correspondence School in Hobart. This included remedial work for girls who had missed out on primary school. The older girls learned domestic work. Girls with the potential to do office work studied typing and shorthand. Other activities included drama classes, dressmaking, handcrafts, sports such as basketball or hockey, and mothercraft classes taught by the sister from the Child Health Clinic in Devonport. In the summer, the girls went camping and swimming. They also went to the drive-in cinema and the football. Most of the girls spent Christmas 1969 at home with their families. In 1970, the home introduced weekend leave as an incentive to good behaviour and to help the girls sustain good relationships with their families.

A former resident of Weeroona does not agree with the way that the Annual Reports described life at Weeroona. She recalls that there was little schooling and no training in office work. Instead the girls worked in the laundry, the kitchen or pushed 'loads' of wheelbarrows outside. Public outings were embarrassing. For instance, the girls went to the drive-in cinema in their pyjamas so that everyone looked at them. At football matches, they were the cheerleaders. They wore special clothes and had to cheer every time the local team got a goal. Everyone knew that they came from Weeroona which made it humiliating. There was a points system. On Sunday evenings, the girls went to the Superintendent's office to find out how many points they had. Those that had the most worked in the local kindergarten where the staff treated them well. The kindergarten was the only highlight of life at Weeroona that the former resident remembers. She said that most girls came out 'more damaged than when they went in'.

From the late 1960s onwards, the Home ran a wildlife sanctuary which the girls looked after. This included cleaning out cages, feeding the animals and showing guests around. Some girls disliked the work as a letter to

the Burnie *Advocate* from a former resident in August 1973 shows:

*The girls do not really hate all the animals there but hate the filthy jobs they are made to do in the cages. It is heavy work, too.*

Finding suitable staff to run the home was a persistent problem. The cause appears to have been a combination of low salary, the location, and the necessity for the staff to live-in. Much of the concern within the Social Welfare Department was that the applicants were often women who had been deserted by their husbands or who were divorced. In 1973, the Director, GC Smith, wrote that they were: 'having a lean time domestically, in either case, domestic failures and thus persons not really suitable for training young girls in housekeeping and related functions'.

Weeroona had a troubled history. In 1965, Kevin Lyons, the MHA for Lyons, received a series of allegations from two staff members about the misbehaviour and mismanagement of the Principal. Lyons released this information to the Chief Secretary on 3 July and to the press on 13 July. The allegations resulted in a Public Service Commissioner's report, a Select Committee report, and considerable press attention. The most important findings were those of the Public Service Commissioner, MJ Jillett. He partially upheld an allegation that the Principal over used the secure unit and fully upheld allegations that he used improper language with the girls and visited their dormitories at night without a female member of staff. The Principal was transferred to a clerical position in the Housing Department.

Over this period, more allegations emerged going back to the beginning of the home. Most of them related to the secure unit and included extensive use of solitary confinement, sometimes without lighting, the taunting of girls by staff, beatings, physical weakness caused by the diet of bread, butter, and water, and orders to drug the girls to keep them quiet. According to Lyons: 'What has gone on at Weeroona is not just crimes against children, underprivileged in the main, but crimes against society, and indeed humanity'.

Following the Inquiry, standing orders were instituted, a woman child welfare officer began making regular visits, and a visitation committee with two women members was set up. Press reports suggest that these last two measures did not succeed as the girls found it difficult to talk to both the welfare officer and the committee. Three members of the committee soon resigned, leaving one man who, apparently, did not inspect the secure unit.

According to the Launceston *Examiner*, between 1965 and 1973, another seven departmental inquiries took place but did not find against the home. In 1973, its problems became public again. This time, the former utility officer, WC (Bill) Vandendool, alleged that girls were hit by members of staff and kept in the secure unit for long periods of time with nothing to do, insufficient bedding, and inadequate supervision. He called for another open inquiry by the Public Service Commissioner. The Minister for Health and the Social Welfare Department, Dr Allen Foster, initially decided on another departmental inquiry. However, after receiving a statutory declaration from Vandendool that set out the allegations, he agreed to an inquiry by the Public Service Commissioner, MJ Jillett, who had also carried out the 1965 one.

Jillett found the allegations to be 'baseless'. Although officers were not on duty in the secure unit during the day, they visited often. There was always adequate bedding unless the staff feared that a girl might commit suicide. For a period of seven or eight days, two girls in the secure units did not have anything to read or do but this was not the usual situation. Corporal punishment was in the form of 'open handed slaps usually on the side of the face' which Jillett considered to be 'mild'. He recommended modifying the standing orders to take into account the fact that staff were not always on duty in the secure unit and that 'mild' corporal punishment took place.

In 1978, the Director of the Social Welfare Department, Dennis Daniels, carried out an inquiry into allegations made by two girls at Weeroona that after absconding they had been hit by the Principal and the Housemistress, a married couple. Daniels only upheld one of the allegations, that the Housemistress had hit both of the girls. Even so, he revised the standing orders to limit the use of restraint to exceptional circumstances and to outlaw corporal punishment. His definition of corporal punishment included slapping with an open or closed hand. He asked welfare officers to make more frequent visits to the home and to hold monthly conferences there. In addition, the

Principal and the staff at Weeroona were to hold weekly conferences. Daniels sent a letter of reprimand to the Housemistress.

In compiling the 2004 *Listen to the Children* report, the Ombudsman received claims from 14 former residents of Weeroona. The Final Report of 2006 received 28. Over the twenty years of the Home's existence, according to claimants, some girls were abused in the secure cells, as well as other areas of Weeroona, and at a holiday house used by the institution. They also described the manual labour required of Weeroona residents, including scrubbing floors, attending to the many animals and birds on the site, and cutting wood.

The Social Welfare Department closed Weeroona in 1979 to enable Lucinda Resource Centre to be established. It offered programs to families and children that were designed to prevent the children from becoming wards of the state. This reflected a growing commitment by the Department to keep children out of institutions as far as possible. After Weeroona closed, girls went to Wybra Hall.

## Gallery

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**Forth Street, Latrobe: 'Weeroona'**



**Chair Found at Weeroona**

**Description:** This chair was found at the former Weeroona Girls' Training Centre by Kris King and Leonie Sheedy after it became a guest house. It is now in the CLAN Museum

## More info

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### Related Entries

#### Run by

- [Child Welfare Division \(c. 1953 - 1980\)](#)  
The Child Welfare Division managed Weeroona Girls' Training Centre.

#### Related Events

- [Listen to the children: review of claims of abuse from adults in state care as children, Ombudsman Tasmania \(2003 - 2006\)](#)  
Weeroona Girls' Training Centre is mentioned in the *Listen to the Children* report.
- [Inquiry into the Conditions at Weeroona Girls' Home, Public Service Commissioner, Tasmania \(1965\)](#)  
The Report of the Public Service Commissioner concerned Weeroona Girls' Training Centre.
- [Select Committee Inquiry into Weeroona Girls' Training Centre, Tasmania \(1965\)](#)  
The Select Committee Report, Weeroona Girls' Home: accuracy and/or veracity of answer to question asked in the House of Assembly , concerns Weeroona Girls' Training Centre.
- [Investigation of the care and treatment of "socially maladjusted teenage girls", Sub-Committee of the Tasmanian Branch of the Australian Institute of Welfare Officers \(c. 1975\)](#)

The report discusses conditions at Weeroona Girls' Training Centre.

- [Inquiry into Weeroona Girls' Training Centre, Public Service Commissioner, Tasmania \(1973 - 1974\)](#)
- [Inquiry into Weeroona Girls' Home, Social Welfare Department, Tasmania \(1978\)](#)

### Related Organisations

- [Wybra Hall \(1956 - 1988\)](#)  
Following the closure of Weeroona in 1979, girls were placed at Wybra Hall.
- [Maylands Salvation Army Home for Girls \(1945 - 1981\)](#)  
Girls at Maylands Salvation Army Home for Girls who presented discipline problems might be transferred to Weeroona Girls' Training Centre.
- [Royal Derwent Hospital \(1968 - 2000\)](#)  
Like Alonnah Ward at the Royal Derwent Hospital, Weeroona Girls' Training Centre was built during a period of concern about the behaviour of girls and young women.
- [Malmesbury Girls' Home \(1950 - 1962\)](#)  
Malmesbury stopped taking girls with 'behavioural problems' when Weeroona became well established.
- [Lucinda Family Group Home \(1980 - 1986\)](#)  
After Weeroona Girls' Training Centre closed, Lucinda Family Group Home was in its former Superintendent's house.
- [Lucinda Resource Centre \(1980 - 1986\)](#)  
The Lucinda Resource Centre was in the same building as Weeroona Girls' Training Centre.

### Related Concepts

- [Stolen Generations](#)

## Resources

- Wettenhall, Roger, *What happened at Weeroona*, Politics, 1968
- Marks, BF, *Ombudsman for Tasmania: a progress report*, Australian Journal of Public Administration, 1970
- Public Service Commissioner and Public Service Appeal Board, *Report of the Public Service Commissioner into allegations concerning conditions and treatment of inmates at Weeroona Girls' Home and the decision and report of the Public Service Appeal Board on the appeal of Walter Bailey Pridmore against decision of the Public Service Commissioner thereof*, 1965
- *State probe on allegations at girls' home*, The Mercury, 14 July 1965
- *Weeroona Inquiry: MHA urges statement to the public*, The Mercury, 15 July 1965
- *Girls' home allegations: complete statement promised*, The Mercury, 16 July 1965
- *Information on home*, The Mercury, 17 July 1965
- *Budget and Weeroona mean political fireworks*, The Mercury, 28 August 1965
- *Weeroona Principal moved*, The Mercury, 1 September 1965
- *Weeroona closed at present*, The Mercury, 8 September 1965
- *Weeroona Home reports: excisions made in interest of public and girls involved*, The Mercury, 8 September 1965
- *14 allegations made against Mr Pridmore*, The Mercury, 8 September 1965
- *No undue resort to security unit*, The Mercury, 8 September 1965
- *Debate on Weeroona charges*, The Mercury, 30 September 1965
- *Weeroona - crimes against society - Mr Lyons*, The Mercury, 1 October 1965
- *House debates motion on Weeroona*, The Mercury, 1 October 1965
- *Fear of reprisals claimed*, The Mercury, 1 October 1965
- *Support for appeal for a full inquiry*, The Mercury, 1 October 1965
- *Mr Fagan's view: two sides to character*, The Mercury, 1 October 1965
- *Weeroona inquiry rejected*, The Mercury, 2 October 1965
- *It was tactics and a Bible*, The Mercury, 2 October 1965
- *Weeroona sparks new move by MP*, The Mercury, 4 November 1965
- *Truth of answer to be probed by Select Committee*, The Mercury, 5 November 1965
- *Weeroona secure units report this week*, The Mercury, 23 November 1965
- *Minister made 'honest error on Weeroona'*, The Mercury, 24 November 1965
- *Weeroona Girls Home - accuracy and/or veracity of answer to question asked in the House of Assembly*, 1965
- *'Other side' of Weeroona Home*, Advocate, 15 August 1973

- *Cruelty claims go to govt.*, Examiner, 15 October 1973
- *Open inquiry on Weeroona?*, The Mercury, 16 October 1973
- *Training centre inquiry approved*, The Mercury, 18 October 1973
- *I saw the girls cruelly treated: claim by Weeroona ex-employee*, Examiner, 16 October 1973
- *Weeroona inquiry to start at once*, Examiner, 18 October 1973
- *Ill treatment probe: no basis to claim*, The Mercury, 18 March 1974
- *Editorial: Weeroona inquiry*, Examiner, 29 March 1974
- *Findings on Weeroona delight Superintendent*, Examiner, 29 March 1974
- *Role of Latrobe centre to alter*, The Mercury, 16 October 1979
- Hornsey, Linda, *Home away from home*, Advocate, 10 August 1973
- *Weeroona girls learn new skills to help find jobs*, Advocate, 24 August 1968

## Records

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

### Records

- [Correspondence and Associated Papers Relating to Building for Government Departments Arranged Alphabetically by Department \(1929 - 1980\)](#)
  - [General Correspondence, Public Service Board \(1973 - 1985\)](#)
  - [Reports to the Minister, Child Welfare Advisory Council \(1967 - 1971\)](#)
  - [Correspondence Files \(1919 - 1998\)](#)
  - [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
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