

Magdalen Home

1893 – 1974

Other Names:

- Mary Magdalen Home
- Convent of the Good Shepherd
- Mt St Canice
- Mt St Canice Convent

Details

The Magdalen Home, run by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, was established in 1893. It was a rescue home for girls and young women, aged between 12 and 39 years. Later it became an approved children's home. The Magdalen Home closed in 1974.

A bequest from WJ Dunne, a former Vicar-General, paid for the cost of building the Magdalen Home. The alternative name, Mount St Canice, was in honour of the Patron saint of Kilkenny, Dunne's birthplace. The architect, George Fagg, who with his wife, May, took an active interest in charity work, designed the building, with guidance from the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. David Williams, a builder, erected it. The contracted price of £2893 was very low, possibly because Williams forgot to include the roof in his quote.

The outside of the building was Italian in style. Inside, the first floor had a central block with a dormitory for girls and women, individual rooms for the nuns, and an infirmary at the northern end. Downstairs there was a large classroom, a doctor's surgery, a priest's sacristy adjoining the chapel and a refectory next to the hall and stone staircase. At the northern end of the central block, a single storey wing contained a large kitchen with a pantry and store. There was room for 30 nuns and girls or women.

Cardinal Moran opened the Home on 19 April 1893 with the Premier, Sir Lambert Dobson, giving a speech. A number of dignitaries attended.

Originally, the Magdalen Home accepted applications from the Lock Hospital, the New Town Charitable Institution Lying-in Home, the police, parents, and from the girls or women themselves. It did not take in pregnant women. Officials at the Neglected Children's Department, and its successors, used the Home as a place of last resort for state ward apprentices whose employers could not manage them. After the Mental Deficiency Board's establishment in 1920, it placed girls and women at the Home.

After 1960, the Magdalen Home was an approved children's Home under the 1960 Child Welfare Act.

The Home was extended a number of times. The first extension was a 100 foot long, two storey wing opened on 10 June 1896. A presbytery was built in 1901 and a new chapel in 1909. In the early 1930s, the buildings were remodelled and extended. Two new wings were added. The work employed 60 men for two years and cost £38,000 to build. After that, the Home could accommodate up to 155 girls and women as well as 23 sisters.

Throughout the Home's existence, the Sisters partially financed it through laundry work carried out by the young women. The Home took in laundry from private individuals, the clergy, and big institutions such as hospitals, schools, and hotels.

In 1948, three former residents made sworn statements about their treatment at the Home which led Arthur White, the Minister for Health, and Rex Townley, MHA to make an inspection. On the whole, they were pleased with what they saw. According to the *Mercury*, the lighting in the laundry was 'splendid' and it was equipped with modern 'labour saving' machinery. A few matters did concern the men. They were the diet of the girls and women, their financial situation when they left the Home, that the laundry did not come under the *Factories Act*, and a punishment room. This room was small with a window boarded almost to the top. They managed to have two concerns addressed. Firstly, the state dietician provided advice about a proper diet. Secondly, the Mother Proctress agreed to close the punishment room.

In a denial of accusations against the Home, Archdeacon TJ O'Donnell said that the girls and young women there learned cooking, lace-making, weaving, sewing, knitting, fancy-work, painting, designing, dressmaking, and the dramatic arts. They had their own orchestra and watched movies.

In a submission to the Senate Inquiry into Institutional Care, a former ward of state described her time at the Magdalen Home between 1950 and 1954. She did have some good memories. For instance, movie nights were 'fun':

The sisters would sit down the front and us girls at the back. I remember one terrific film with Esther Williams was being shown, but as soon as she appeared in her bathing costume, the Reverend Mother stood up and stopped the film.

Christmas was also fun with races and games at the farm to the back of the Home and 'better food'.

Overall though, she found it a 'bad place'. The Sisters read all the girls' letters and opened their parcels. She was beaten quite a bit. She remembers working in the laundry from an early age:

I was only 8 but had to work every day in the laundry from after breakfast until 5 pm with a break for lunch. It was a huge laundry and we used to do laundry for all the hotels, schools and hospitals in Hobart. I worked in the ironing room, sometimes I would iron but mostly I would fold and damp the laundry ready for the presses.

She did not attend school.

In 1967, apart from the nuns, the Magdalen Home housed 150 girls and women. Of these, about 84 were teenagers, 26 were women, admitted as girls who had not left the Home, and 20 had been admitted under the *Mental Deficiency Act*. Between 14 and 22 of the teenagers were wards of state. The rest had been placed there by parents or guardians. The other women were Auxiliary Sisters admitted to the Home as children and now working for the Order. They supervised the dormitories and work rooms. There were 20 or so nuns, all referred to as 'Mother' with the Mother Proctress being the 'Mistress'. They lived apart from the rest of the girls and women in a convent which was part of the same building.

In her book, *The little mongrel*, Merlene Fawdry remembered when the police first took her to the Magdalen Home in 1961:

A bell rang, muted from somewhere in the depths of the huge building and, almost immediately, I heard the quick shuffle of footsteps approaching the cathedral-like door. A nun in a white habit with a black veil invited us inside and motioned for us to wait on velvet upholstered afternoon chairs placed at intervals around the gallery. It was reminiscent of the pictures of ballrooms from my fairy story picture books, but

with the brightness dimmed and the shadows emphasised.

The floor was tiled in highly polished black and white precision. On one side a wall of windows looked out on the circular driveway and beyond that to the dark night waters of Sandy Bay. On the opposite side of the hallway, windows alternated with heavy wooden doors that sealed the occupants against the outside world. Close to where the front door opened, a darkened alcove protected its secrets and at the other end I could see a solitary door. It was a place of windows and doors, wood and glass, silent footsteps and whispered secrets. It was my new home.

On admission, girls were assigned to a group. This governed where they slept, ate, worked and with whom they shared their recreation time. A nun, known as the Group Mother, led each group, assisted by an Auxiliary Sister.

The dormitories were huge rooms divided into four spaces by five foot high partitions. Each section had eight to 10 iron beds separated by a bedside locker. An Auxiliary Sister slept with the girls.

In 1967, only 24 girls were at school. One attended a special school and another, a high school. The others received their education from the nuns assisted by an outside teacher. Most of them reached eighth grade and then received an exemption from further studies. Girls who wanted to continue undertook a correspondence course supervised by the nuns. They could also learn dressmaking, typing, cooking, speech training, home economics, and ballet.

According to Mary Dauntton-Fear the routine of the Home was as follows:

- 6:50 am – The girls got up, showered and made their beds. They were rostered in pairs to clean the shower rooms.
- 7:45 – Breakfast.
- 8:20 am – Catechism for Roman Catholic girls. A nun conducted a Bible lesson for Protestant girls. [On the other hand, Merlene Fawdry wrote that all girls attended the Catholic mass with the Protestant ones receiving some extra instruction afterwards.]
- 9:00 – The work in the laundry began. School girls helped until 9:30.
- 9:30 – School girls began their lessons.
- 12 pm – Lunch time.
- 1:00 – The girls and women returned to work or school.
- 3:15 – The school girls finished their lessons and went to work in the laundry.
- 5:00 – Sport or walks.
- 6:00 – Tea time.

The girls followed most of this routine in silence, unless they received permission to speak. The nuns announced these permissions with a 'God be blessed'.

On Saturdays, the girls cleaned the Home and washed their clothes. On Sundays, they all attended mass in the Chapel. After breakfast, the Mistress addressed the girls on topics ranging from general behaviour to preparation for marriage. They received a Benediction in the afternoon and after that there were no regular activities. Sometimes they watched a film in the evening or did some informal dancing. Family and friends could visit on alternate Sundays between 2:30 and 4:30. On the fourth Sunday of each month, girls could go out for the day with their parents. Otherwise they had to see all their visitors on the grounds of the Home.

Carleen Paul, who lived at the Magdalen Home during this period, remembers doing laundry for the Royal Hobart Hospital and the local hotels. Fawdry wrote that work in the laundry was allocated according to the physical size and strength of the girls and women. The strongest worked in the boiler and mangle rooms. There they stood 'for hours on end, their faces shiny with sweat, as they wrestled wet sheets between the giant rollers'. Fawdry was in the ironing room where she ironed priests' handkerchiefs, laundered at the Home.

I stood at a block bench, covered with a water-stained sheet over a yellowed blanket, wielding a vintage electric iron on damp squares of linen and ironed the handkerchiefs to dry. The iron was very heavy and I had to use both hands to manoeuvre it into position. The constant rise of steam onto the wooden handle, worn to a smooth patina by past sinners such as I, gave it a mind of its own. It slipped and skidded across the damp linen squares in complete irreverence to the task at hand.

According to Daunton-Fear, the nuns were not allowed to use corporal punishment and there was nowhere to lock the girls up. Discipline was usually by withdrawing privileges such as the monthly outing or pocket money, paid at a rate of six shillings a fortnight. On Saturdays, the Group Mothers reviewed the behaviour of the girls in their group and awarded five shillings to the one that came first. Girls who absconded had to wear a plain blue house dress for one month after they returned.

On one occasion, Fawdry absconded and was caught by two Auxiliary Sisters as she tried to find her way out of Hobart. She recalls that for punishment, she had to wear a 'shapeless' tartan dress and hand over all her other clothes. One of the nuns cut her hair with shears: 'No effort was made to cut it evenly or in any style. It was just hacked off in a straight line at ear length'. No one was allowed to talk to her. At the end of a month, the nuns returned her clothes and a hairdresser fixed up her hair.

In 1970, the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau began assisting the Magdalen Home with admissions and assessments. Under the influence of the Bureau, the Home involved families in its re-education program. A new emphasis on family counselling and preventive supervision, led to a fall in the number of teenage girls entering the Home. The Home stopped admitting girls for the short term in 1971. The girls and women still living there moved from the dormitories to a hostel on the grounds. The following year, the Good Shepherd Sisters received a grant from the State government to appoint a social worker who worked out of the Bureau. This further reinforced the emphasis on family and away from institutionalisation.

On 5 September 1974, newly installed boilers in the laundry exploded while being tested. Seven people died. According to the *Mercury*, the explosion 'rocked the Sandy Bay area, and rattled roofs thirteen kilometres across the River Derwent'. It completely destroyed the laundry.

According to the Ombudsman's report, *Listen to the children* (2004), the submissions of former residents were both positive and negative:

Claimants have advised that Mt St Canice was commonly known as a home for 'naughty girls', who were sometimes pregnant when they came into care. Magdalen Home was also used by police when they picked up 'wayward girls' from the streets. One claimant described the institution as prison like, having bars on the windows, locked doors and nuns carrying keys on their belts.

There were favourable comments made about Mt St Canice and the kindness of some nuns. In the course of the Review, two former residents of the home contacted the Ombudsman's office to describe how happy their time at Mt St Canice had been. There were no allegations of sexual abuse reported.

The Magdalen Home closed in 1974. The Sisters, who later moved to Claremont, a suburb of Hobart, ran the Bayview, later the Blue Line Laundry, as a sheltered workshop.

The Magdalen Home was mentioned in the *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices Inquiry* (2012) as an institution that was involved in forced adoption. One submission to the Senate inquiry was from a woman who became pregnant not long after she left the Home aged nearly 16. She stated that many girls from Mount Saint Canice who fell pregnant went to [Elim Maternity Hospital](#) to "have, and then give up, their babies" (submission 90).

Gallery



Calisthenic exercises, Mt St Canice, Hobart, c.1950

Description: This is a copy of an image published in the book, *Pitch your tents on distant shores* (2010)



Devastation after the laundry boiler explosion at Mt St Canice, Hobart, 5 September 1974

Description: This is a copy of an image published in the book, *Pitch your tents on distant shores* (2010)



Australia: explosion at Roman Catholic convent kills seven

Description: This is footage from a Reuters story about the explosion at the laundry of the Magdalen Home in Hobart on 5 September 1974.



Mount Saint Canice

Description: This image was taken when former resident Janice Konstantinidis returned to Mt St Canice in January 2010. Her caption for this image as it is published on the National Museum of Australia website is: 'All these rooms belonged to the nuns'. Janice Konstantinidis' article, 'Return to Mount Saint Canice' has more images and her recollections of the institution.



Queen Mary in the Derwent River with the Magdalen Home to the left in the background

Description: This appears to be a photo from World War 2 as the Queen Mary is in battleship colours.



Hobart from Magdalen Home Paddock

Description: Photograph taken by Jack Thwaites.



Hobart from Magdalen Home Paddock - Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race

Description: Photograph taken by Jack Thwaites.

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Sisters of the Good Shepherd \(1863 - current\)](#)

Related Events

- [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 mentions the Magdalen Home.
- [Listen to the children: review of claims of abuse from adults in state care as children, Ombudsman Tasmania \(2003 - 2006\)](#)
- [Inquiry into Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices, Commonwealth of Australia \(2011 - 2012\)](#)
Magdalen Home was mentioned in submissions 90 and 385 to the Inquiry Committee as an institution that was involved in forced adoption.

Related Organisations

- [Mental Deficiency Board \(1922 - 1964\)](#)
The Mental Deficiency Board placed girls and young women at the Magdalen Home.
- [Social Services Department, State of Tasmania \(1934 - 1961\)](#)
Officials at the Social Services Department used the Magdalen Home as a place of last resort for state wards.
- [Social Welfare Department, State of Tasmania \(1961 - 1983\)](#)
Officials at the Social Welfare Department used the Magdalen Home as a place of last resort for state wards.
- [Maylands Salvation Army Home for Girls \(1945 - 1981\)](#)
Girls at Maylands Salvation Army Home for Girls who presented discipline problems might be transferred to the Magdalen Home.
- [New Town Charitable Institution \(1879 - 1912\)](#)
The Magdalen Home accepted young women from the New Town Charitable Institution Lying-in Home.
- [St John's Park \(1936 - 1994\)](#)
The Magdalen Home sometimes sent people to St John's Park.
- [Catholic Family Welfare Bureau \(Tasmania\) \(1959 - 1977\)](#)
- [Neglected Children's Department, State of Tasmania \(1901 - 1918\)](#)
Officials at the Neglected Children's Department used the Magdalen Home as a place of last resort for state wards.
- [Children of the State Department, State of Tasmania \(1918 - 1934\)](#)
Officials at the Children of the State Department used the Magdalen Home as a place of last resort for state wards.

Related Legislation

- [Mental Deficiency Act 1920, Tasmania \(1920 - 1963\)](#)
Some girls and women were admitted to the Magdalen Home under the *Mental Deficiency Act*.

Related Concepts

- [Stolen Generations](#)

Resources

- Gill, Alan, [Bad girls do the best sheets](#), The Sydney Morning Herald, 24 April 2003
- Fawdry, Merlene, *The little mongrel: free to a good home*, 2007
- [Victoria Stuart interviewed by Rob Willis for the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project](#), 15 October 2011
- Rimon, Wendy, [Children's homes](#), The companion to Tasmanian history, 2005
- Konstantinidis, Janice, [Return to Mount Saint Canice](#), Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions blog, 10 March 2011
- Konstantinidis, Janice, [Life in "The Mag"](#), Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions blog, 28 February 2011
- Baxter, Valerie J, *Magdalen Home Mount St Canice: The Early Years*, 1983

- [Treat to children of the charitable institutions](#), 22 May 1900
- [Demonstration at Hobart; the children entertained](#), Examiner, 22 May 1900
- Howell, PA, [Catholicism](#), The companion to Tasmanian history, 2005
- Sub-Committee of the Tasmanian Branch of the Australian Institute of Welfare Officers, *Report and recommendations of the care and treatment of 'Socially maladjusted teenage girls' in Tasmania*, 1975
- Davis, Lorraine, [Submission No 182 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2004
- Hope, Emma, [Service tribute to eight who died in explosion at Mt St Canice Convent in 1974](#), The Mercury, 6 September 2014
- National Archives of Australia, [Forced Adoptions History Project](#), 2013
- Hanson, Dallas, *Why are they in children's homes: report of the ACOSS children's home intake survey*, 1979

Records

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

Records

- [Records of Magdalen Home, Tasmania \(1893 - c. 1980\)](#)
 - [Records held by CatholicCare Tasmania \(1959 - 1979\)](#)
 - [Register of the Admission of 'Mental Defectives', New Town Infirmary \(1926 - 1965\)](#)
 - [Correspondence Files \(1919 - 1998\)](#)
 - [Building Applications, Hobart City Council \(1919 - 1990\)](#)
 - [Films and Videos Produced and Acquired by the Agency \(1950 - 1985\)](#)
 - [General Correspondence-Hospital and Health Administration \(1932 - 1987\)](#)
 - [Reports to the Minister, Child Welfare Advisory Council \(1967 - 1971\)](#)
 - [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
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