

Royal Derwent Hospital

1968 – 2000

Other Names: • Willow Court

Details

The Royal Derwent Hospital was established in 1968 when Millbrook Rise Psychopathic Hospital and Lachlan Park Hospital merged. It was in New Norfolk. In 1968, a new complex opened on the eastern side of the Lachlan River. The Royal Derwent Hospital closed in 2000.

In a 1944 report, Dr Catarinich, Victoria's Director of Mental Hygiene, condemned the buildings of Lachlan Park as too crowded, old-fashioned, unhygienic, and structurally unsound to carry out modern therapies. He recommended a new mental hospital and abandonment of the site. In 1949, a Parliamentary Standing Committee, appointed to comment on Dr Catarinich's findings, recommended that a new hospital be built on the eastern side of the Lachlan River using land bought in the nineteenth century to extend the hospital's pastoral and agricultural activities. Construction began in the 1950s.

The new hospital was also a response to the recommendations of a report written by E. Cunningham Dax in November 1962 about Tasmanian mental health services. It recommended dividing the hospital into two divisions, one for mental health patients and one for "mental defectives". In 1964, a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works recommended that the old Lachlan Park complex be used as a 'Mental Defectives Colony'. According to Dr JRV Foxton, Director of Psychiatric Services its purpose was:

to care for mentally deficient patients, ranging from infancy to old age on one hand and from total idiocy to high-grade feeble mindedness on the other. Therefore provision [had] to be made for those who [were] totally dependent... For children adolescent [sic] and adults, and for patients who require secure detention to protect the public.

(These categories reflect those of the *Mental Deficiency Act 1920*.)

Lyell Wilson writes that the "division of the hospital into east and west sides of the Lachlan River was seen as an important step towards modern psychiatric treatment practices. It was no longer considered best practice to have patients with physical and mental disabilities mixed with patients with acute and chronic psychiatric conditions. He states that while the division never became quite complete, it was by and large achieved by early 1974 (Wilson, 2022, p.52).

When the new Royal Derwent Hospital opened in 1968, patients with intellectual disabilities remained at the former Lachlan Park site on the western side of the Lachlan River. Mental health patients were transferred to the new site on the eastern side. In combination with the former Millbrook Rise Psychopathic Hospital, the two sites became the Royal Derwent Hospital. Lachlan Park was also known as Willow Court. The name came from a willow tree planted in the front court yard which was supposed to be a cutting from the one on Napoleon's grave in St Helena.

The old Lachlan Park site housed about 400 people with intellectual disabilities, with just under a quarter of them children. The parents of many of those children had committed them on the advice of doctors but others were wards of state placed at the Hospital from various institutions because they had been classified as 'mentally deficient'. The Tasmanian Ombudsman's inquiry, which reported in 2004, received submissions from wards of state who had been in the Hospital.

A new development on the Lachlan Park site was the Female Maximum Security Ward known as Alonnah or Ward A, for girls classified under the *Mental Deficiency Act*. This often meant, not an intellectual disability, but refusing to conform to social attitudes about sexual behaviour. Even though the *Mental Health Act* 1963, which superseded the *Mental Deficiency Act*, specifically stated that 'promiscuity' did not imply an intellectual disability, policy more suited to the old act appears to have persisted for a while. Miranda Morris ascribes this to a 'moral panic' about teenage girls and young women in the 1960s that led to the establishment of Weeroona Girls' Training Centre and a new women's prison at Risdon, as well as Alonnah Ward.

The walls of Alonnah were made of thick concrete and the windows were covered with metal grilles. There was one eight bed dormitory and 12 isolation cells for punishment. These had huge doors with one way peepholes, known as Judas windows, and asylum locks. The day rooms could be constantly surveyed from a glassed-in office on a dais. There was no privacy in the bathrooms. The only outside space was a small yard enclosed by 15 foot high concrete walls. With the help of a staff member, the girls made a little garden against the walls.

Some of the girls had employment in the occupational therapy centre, also on the site, packing pegs for the Pioneer Peg Factory in New Norfolk or collating for the Government Printer. They earned enough to buy cigarettes. Other activities included pottery, physical exercises, and playing a modified form of netball in the yard. There was a gramophone and TV. Bed time was at eight pm, except on the rare occasions the girls attended a social at the occupational therapy centre.

Although Alonnah was meant to be high security, by 1969, it was apparently more like an open ward. Only 10 girls lived there and they made a trip with staff to Maria Island that year. Morris suggests that Alonnah was 'obsolete even whilst it was being built'. The last girls left in 1985 and boys lived there temporarily. By 1990 it was closed and the building was used as a plant nursery in a sheltered work program for people with intellectual disabilities.

An oral history project conducted by Margaret Reynolds and Monica Hols led to the publication in 2011 of: *Remember the children: stories about the lives of young people in Tasmania's last mental institution, 1950-2000*. It contains stories from former residents of Millbrook Rise Psychopathic and Royal Derwent Hospitals, many of whom had traumatic experiences. Contributors to the book spoke of distressing treatments and children being unwashed, tied to their beds, and beaten as well as deprived of food, meaningful activity, and their own clothes. Similarly, *Through the window*, the autobiography of Rachel Greene, a former resident of the children's ward, briefly describes the very difficult childhood that she had there.

In the later years of the Royal Derwent Hospital, conditions improved. Contributors to *Remember the Children*, remember the staff as 'co-operative, courteous and helpful'. There was a special facility outside the ward where about 10 children could do activities supervised by two nurses.

When the Royal Derwent Hospital closed in 2000, residents, many of whom had been there since childhood, were sent back to their place of origin, sometimes to families who did not know that they existed. A number of lifelong friends were split up in the process. In 2013, former residents of the Hospital live in group homes and supported accommodation run by not-for-profit organisations. The former Lachlan Park site is registered by the Tasmanian Heritage Council.

The Ombudsman's *Review of claims of abuse from adults in state care as children: Final Report – Phase 2* of 2006 mentions the Royal Derwent Hospital.

Gallery



The Royal Derwent Hospital after it closed

Description: Photographed by Korske Ara This webpage is no longer in operation. this URL is taken from the wayback machine and is dated 11 October 2018.



An isolation cell in Alonnah, Royal Derwent Hospital, as it looked in October 2012

Description: The heavy door which is lying on its side against the wall originally belonged to the cell. The windows had a shutter that could be closed at night. Many of the cells at Lachlan Park had the light switch outside the room so that residents had no control over it.



The corridor in Alonnah as it looked in October 2012

Description: The isolation cells are on either side of the corridor. The nurses' station was to the left at the end of the corridor. It overlooked the dayroom.



The dayroom at Alonnah as it looked in October 2012

Description: The nurses' station was higher than the dayroom so that nursing staff could look down on it. This established their authority.



The outside of Alonnah as it looked in October 2012

More info

Chronology

- Millbrook Rise Psychopathic Hospital (1933 - 1968)
- Lachlan Park Hospital (1937 - 1968)
 - **Royal Derwent Hospital (1968 – 2000)**

Related Entries

Run by

- [Department of Community Services, State of Tasmania \(1989 - 1993\)](#)
- [The Mental Health Services Commission \(1968 - 1989\)](#)

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 Royal Derwent Hospital.

Related Legislation

- [Mental Health Act 1963, Tasmania \(1963 - 1999\)](#)
The Mental Health Act superceded the Mental Deficiency Act. Its statement that 'promiscuity' did not indicate intellectual disability did not immediately affect policy in Alonnah Ward at the Royal Derwent Hospital.
- [Mental Deficiency Act 1920, Tasmania \(1920 - 1963\)](#)
The terms of the Mental Deficiency Act underlay the establishment of Alonnah Ward at the Royal Derwent Hospital.
- [Disability Services Act 2011, Tasmania \(2011 - current\)](#)
The *Disability Services Act* followed the closure of the Royal Derwent Hospital. It was intended to prevent the future use of institutions such as the Royal Derwent Hospital for the care of people with disabilities.

Related Organisations

- [Weeroona Girls' Training Centre \(1959 - 1979\)](#)
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.
- [Veranto Lifestyle Assistance \(2011 - 2023\)](#)
Veranto Lifestyle Assistance manages some of the homes of former residents of the Royal Derwent Hospital.
- [Rosebank Cottage for Disabled Children \(1979 - c. 1994\)](#)
Rosebank Cottage was established in part so that children with disabilities were not sent to the Royal Derwent Hospital.
- [Risdon Prison \(1960 - current\)](#)
Like Alonnah Ward at the Royal Derwent Hospital, the women's section at Risdon Prison was built during a period of concern about the behaviour of girls and young women.
- [Division of Psychiatric Services \(1963 - 1968\)](#)

Resources

- [Royal Derwent Hospital records](#), Libraries Tasmania, No date
- [More calls for abused ward compensation clemency](#), ABC news, 11 December 2007
- Gowlland, RW, *Troubled asylum: the history of the Invalid Barracks, New Norfolk Colonial Hospital, New Norfolk Madhouse, New Norfolk Her Majesty's Lunatic Asylum, New Norfolk Mental Diseases Hospital, New Norfolk Lachlan Park, New Norfolk Royal Derwent Hospital*, 1996
- 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
- Greene, Rachel, *Through the window*, 2007
- Knight, Karen, *Postcards from the asylum*, 2008
- Tooth, John, [Royal Derwent Hospital](#), The companion to Tasmanian history, 2005
- Tooth, John, [Treatment of Mental Illness](#), The companion to Tasmanian history, 2005
- [Willow Court History Group](#), 30 April 2014
- [Tasmanian government declares never again to institution days](#), Institution watch: international edition, November 2008

Records

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

Records

- [Case Files, Tasmanian Institute for the Blind, Deaf and Dumb; Tasmanian Deaf Society \(1930 - 2006\)](#)
- [Films and Videos Produced and Acquired by the Agency \(1950 - 1985\)](#)
- [Correspondence Files, Public Health Department \(1940 - 1989\)](#)
- [Patient Files, Lunatic Asylum, Hospital for the Insane, Mental Diseases Hospital, Lachlan Park Hospital, and the Royal Derwent Hospital \(1857 - 1993\)](#)
- [Patient Records-Alphabetical Register of Patients, Royal Derwent Hospital \(1888 - 1974\)](#)

- [Patient Records Removed from Case Books, Millbrook Rise Psychopathic and Royal Derwent Hospitals \(1894 - 1979\)](#)
-

You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/royal-derwent-hospital/>