

# Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution

1898 – 1987

**Other Names:**

- Tasmanian Institute for the Blind and Deaf
- Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institute

## Details

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The Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution, run by the Society for the Blind, Deaf and Dumb, opened in North Hobart in 1898. It provided an education and industrial training to adults and children with hearing and sight disabilities. There was accommodation for the country children who attended the school on the site. The Institution closed in 1997.

The Institution had a welfare section, a school which opened in 1901, and a small factory. The school had two sections, one for children who were blind and the other for those who were deaf. Their education reflected the Institution's belief in the dignity of manual work and the importance of developing the mind.

Children who were blind learned knitting, net making, simple fancy work, the piano, history, geography, scripture, Braille, and Moon Type, a system of raised curves, angles, and lines, which was supposed to be easier to learn than Braille. By the 1920s, the curriculum had expanded to include other handcrafts such as bead work or making papier maché. The children also learned to swim. A group known as the Braille Writers developed a Braille library that children and adults could use.

There were two approaches to teaching children who were deaf. One supported the children's deaf culture, which they expressed through sign language. The other sought to assimilate them into mainstream society by teaching them to lip read and speak. At first, influenced by the Quaker educationalist, Samuel Clemes, the first President of the Institution, the school taught both methods. In the beginning of 1912, with the appointment of a new teacher, the emphasis moved towards teaching speech and lip reading. That remained the trend.

Parents whose children had intellectual disabilities and speech problems often sent them to the school because there were no alternatives. However, the teachers sometimes found them difficult to manage and in 1918, the Committee called publicly for these children to have a school of their own. Five years later, the Committee changed direction when Edmund Morris Miller, an academic at the University of Tasmania, the Director of the State Psychological Clinic, and Chairman of the Mental Deficiency Board, became President. He accepted children with intellectual disabilities into the school because he believed they had a right to an education and that the school was the best place for them because they were often blind, deaf or unable to speak. Miller would have liked to base the State Psychological Clinic at the Institution but other Board members refused.

In 1923, the Institution's financial difficulties led to an inquiry. It recommended, without success, that the Education Department take over the school. Even so, this was, according to Joy Smith, the 'first step into what would eventually be a State monopoly of special education'.

In 1925, the headmaster was found guilty of stealing from the Institution's funds and sentenced to two months in prison. A former student, the Reverend Nat Sonners, remembered lining up on the front steps with the other students to see him driven away in disgrace for sentencing. The trial led to a Royal Commission into the Institution's affairs. It criticised the admission of children with intellectual disabilities, the purchase of a farm which

did not make money, and the failure to collect fees from parents. It recommended a restructure of the Institution's management with five government nominees on the controlling body and a chairman also nominated by the government.

The Institution seems to have recovered both its finances and reputation by the 1930s. It was incorporated by an Act of Parliament in 1933.

In 1949, New Town Primary School introduced a special class for children who were partially deaf to prepare them to attend an ordinary school. They continued to board at the Institution. The same year, Professor Alexander Ewing and Dr Irene Ewing visited. They were Manchester University academics and advocates of teaching speech and lip reading. The Ewings were concerned that the children with partial deafness would be held back because, in the evenings when they went back to the Institution, they reverted to sign language with the children who were deaf. In 1952, this led to the opening of Wyadra, a hostel specifically for children with partial deafness.

The numbers of children at the Institution who were blind were always fewer than those who were deaf. As methods of preventing blindness improved, less children suffered from it. In 1933, this had led the school to accept children with partial sight. Teachers hoped that, with professional help, they would eventually be able to go to ordinary schools. The Sight Saving School, which evolved out of this idea, opened in March 1940 on the grounds of the Elizabeth Street Practising School. The aim was to prevent further loss of sight and to teach the children Braille. This left only two children with blindness at the Institution. They too transferred to the Sight Saving School. Even so, the School for the Blind continued sporadically until it finally closed in 1972.

Many of the children at the school came from outside Hobart. From the beginning, the Institution provided accommodation for them. The premises were at Brickfields in North Hobart, originally a nursery and female convict hiring depot, then an immigrant depot, and finally an invalid depot, which closed in 1882. By 1897, when the Institution acquired it, the only remaining building was a 10 room house. This is where the children lived and attended school.

As the numbers of children in the school increased, they needed more accommodation. In 1907, a partial second storey was added to the previously single storied building. In 1916, the second storey was extended across the whole of the building. It included new dormitories, an open air sleeping area for 'delicate' children, a kitchen, staff rooms, bathrooms, and toilets. During the building operations, the children moved temporarily to Stowell, a house in Battery Point.

In 1945, with the numbers of children needing accommodation still rising, the government bought a large house opposite the Institution in Lewis Street and leased it back. Twenty-two children stayed there. In October 1946, a new extension provided accommodation for another 25. Girls lived at Lewis Street while boys remained in the old building.

In 1961, Lady Rowallen House, a purpose built school for children with deafness, opened at Campbell Street School. Those from outside Hobart boarded at the Institution. In 1972, after a pre-school class began, the Institution set up a pre-school dormitory for about 10 children in the Lewis Street house. Parents could stay there while young children settled in.

By the end of the 1970s, children with disabilities were increasingly attending their local schools. This meant that numbers at the hostels declined. There were only 16 children at Lewis Street when it closed in 1976. The hostel in the main building closed in 1982.

The Institution's functions were now completely different to its original purpose. It no longer offered an education or accommodation to children. From now on, until its closure in 1987, it would be mostly concerned with adults.

The Institution closed in 1987, following the recommendation of the Arthur Young Review of Services. The review also recommended that the Society for the Blind, Deaf and Dumb split into two separate organisations, the Royal Guide Dogs and the Tasmanian Deaf Society or Tasdeaf.

# Gallery

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**Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution**

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**Blind & Deaf Institute, visually-impaired boy reading a Braille map, 1951 to 1973**

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**Blind & Deaf Institute, visually-impaired boy writing on a Braille typewriter, 1951 to 1973**

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**Blind & Deaf Institute, visually-impaired girl reading Braille text, possibly then transcribing to Braille typewriter, 1951 to 1973**

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**Blind & Deaf Institute, visually-impaired girl reading Braille text, possibly then transcribing to Braille typewriter, 1951 to 1973**

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**Blind & Deaf Institute, visually-impaired girl reading Braille text, possibly then transcribing to Braille typewriter, 1951 to 1976**

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**Blind & Deaf Institute, visually-impaired girl reading Braille text, possibly then transcribing to Braille typewriter, 1951 to 1976**

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**Blind & Deaf Institute, student at work, 1951 to 1973**

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**Blind & Deaf Institute, student at work, 1951 to 1973**

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## More info

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### Chronology

- **Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution (1898 – 1987)**
  - Tasdeaf (1987 - current)
  - Royal Guide Dogs Tasmania (1987 - current)

### Related Entries

#### Ran

- [Wyadra Hostel \(1952 - 1957\)](#)  
The Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution, which was also a Home, ran Wyadra Hostel.

#### Run by

- [Society for the Blind, Deaf and Dumb \(1887 - 1987\)](#)

#### Related Organisations

- [Mental Deficiency Board \(1922 - 1964\)](#)  
Edmund Morris Miller, the third President of the Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution, was also the Chairman of the Mental Deficiency Board.
- [State Psychological Clinic \(1922 - 1964\)](#)  
Edmund Morris Miller, the third president of the Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution was also the Director of the State Psychological Clinic.
- [Sight Saving School \(1940 - c. 1991\)](#)  
Children from outside Hobart who attended the Sight Saving School boarded at the Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution. The Sight Saving School evolved out of the school run by the Institution for children who were blind.

#### Related Legislation

- [Education Act 1905, Tasmania \(1905 - 1932\)](#)  
Many of the children coming under the *Education Act* 1905 were sent to the Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution.

- [Education Act 1932, Tasmania \(1932 - 1942\)](#)

Many of the children coming under the *Education Act* 1932 were sent to the Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution.

## Resources

- [Those afflicted make appeal for aid](#), The Mercury, 26 March 1954
- Oats, William N., [Clemes, Samuel \(1845-1922\)](#), Australian Dictionary of Biography, 1981
- [Educating the deaf](#), The Mercury, 29 June 1931
- [Education of the deaf](#), The Mercury, 1 July 1931
- [Education of the blind](#), The Mercury, 4 August 1931
- [Education of the blind](#), The Mercury, 7 August 1931

## Records

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

### Records

- [Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution Records held by Royal Guide Dogs Tasmania \(1887 - 1987\)](#)
- [Case Files, Tasmanian Institute for the Blind, Deaf and Dumb; Tasmanian Deaf Society \(1930 - 2006\)](#)
- [Correspondence Files \(1919 - 1998\)](#)
- [General Correspondence \(4\), Education Department \(1906 - 2010\)](#)
- [Building Applications, Hobart City Council \(1919 - 1990\)](#)
- [Admission Register, School for the Blind and Deaf \(1924 - 1969\)](#)
- [Admission Register, School for the Blind \(1959 - 1970\)](#)
- [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)

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You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/blind-deaf-and-dumb-institution-2/>