

St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage

1901 – 1971

Other Names:

- St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Girls' Orphanage Industrial School, Subiaco
- Orphanage Industrial School for Roman Catholic Girls

Details

St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage was established in Subiaco in 1901. It was run by the Sisters of Mercy, for girls aged up to 16 years who were placed there by government authorities or who were private admissions. From 1947, child migrants from Britain and Malta were sent to St Joseph's. It closed in 1971 and became the Catherine McAuley Centre.

The St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage was run by the Sisters of Mercy from 21 November 1901 on the site of the old boys' orphanage in Subiaco. The Sisters and children from the Roman Catholic Girls' Orphanage in Victoria Square moved to Subiaco a few months after the boys moved out to Clontarf. Although St Joseph's was called an orphanage, both children who were wards and those who were 'privately placed' lived there.

A letter of appreciation of the *The Daily News* Orphans' Christmas Cheer Fund in 1915 gives an insight into life at St Joseph's. The letter shows that donations enabled the children to occasionally have extras that were not part of their daily experience:

The Sisters and children of the orphanage are extremely grateful for the donation [of £24]. Each child was provided with a portion of the money to spend as she wished, and nothing could exceed the pleasure thereby given, particularly as this year nothing was expected, owing to the heavy demands on our kind friends. A picnic was provided with the remainder which, as usual, delighted the children. Letter, 12 January 1916 published in The Daily News 2 December 1916, p.10

Government reports (*Signposts* 2004, pp.454-455) show that there were 129 girls resident in 1920, with 114 girls in 1921. In subsequent years before World War II, the number of girls at St Joseph's ranged from 91 (in 1922) to 37 (in 1943). Reports from the 1920s and 1940s also report on the number of girls who were 'at service'. That is, working-age girls who were placed with employers (under a formal agreement) or who worked within the institution. Occasionally, reports show 'abscondings' or the number of children who ran away.

From 1947, child migrants from Britain and Malta were sent to St Joseph's. The government reports (*Signposts* pp.457-458) probably underestimate the number of girls in the Home during the period 1947 to 1956. From 1957, 'private admissions' (girls who were placed at St Joseph's by families or others) exceeded the number of girls placed by child welfare authorities. It is possible that girls admittedly privately were not counted in government reports in previous years.

Published, official reports about the Orphanage generally present a far brighter picture than testimony from former residents. In evidence to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care, a woman described deprivations at St Joseph's that left a deep impression on her: 'We were never allowed to keep the presents as the nuns used to take them off us when we got back to the orphanage and would sell them at their fetes' (

Forgotten Australians 2004, p.88). In 2024, ABC News told the story of a group of women who call themselves the Joey Girls, child migrants who had to care for babies who had been removed from their mothers during the forced adoptions era.

They ended up in St Joseph's Orphanage in the Perth suburb of Subiaco, where they were given numbers and learnt how to work and pray, alongside wards of the state, under the guidance of the Sisters of Mercy.

But what has not been revealed until now is that, for some of them, the work they did around the orphanage also included caring for newborn babies and becoming their godmothers.

They were involuntarily and unwittingly dragged into what's now referred to as the "forced adoption era" when thousands of babies were removed from their mainly unwed mothers from the 1940s to the early 1980s.

The young migrants were instructed not to mix with the expectant mothers who, they say, were kept separate in a nearby "foundling home" and sat in the back row of the chapel during mass.

These young women, not much older than the migrants themselves, had been sent there from all around the country after becoming pregnant out of wedlock.

"The nuns called them sinners," says Teresa Phillips, a Joey Girl who came out on the first ship carrying child migrants from the UK in 1947.

"We weren't allowed near them. (ABC News, 21 August 2024)"

In 1971, St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage closed and became the Catherine McAuley Centre.

Gallery



St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage

Description: This is a digital copy of a photograph of the front entrance of St Joseph's Girl's Orphanage in 1953. It is from the State Library of Western Australia's collection of online images that were made available by the Historical Records Rescue Consortium Project supported by Lotterywest.



Table and chairs, St Joseph's Orphanage

Description: The caption on this photograph says it shows the children's activity room of St Joseph's Girl's Orphanage in 1954. It is from the State Library of Western Australia's collection of online images that were made available by the Historical Records Rescue Consortium Project supported by Lotterywest.



Main building St Joseph's Roman Catholic Girls Orphanage Industrial School, 1906

Description: 'Main building St Joseph's Roman Catholic Girls Orphanage Industrial School, 1906' is an image included (after p.16) in the *Report by the Superintendent of Public Charities and Inspector of Industrial and Reformatory Schools* for the year ending 31 December 1906. This image shows a long three-storey stone building with a wrap-around verandah on the ground floor, and enclosed verandahs on the first floor. Several women and children can be seen walking along the ground-floor verandah.



St Joseph's Roman Catholic Girls Orphanage Industrial School, 1906

Description: 'St Joseph's Roman Catholic Girls Orphanage Industrial School, 1906' is an image included (after p.16) in the *Report by the Superintendent of Public Charities and Inspector of Industrial and Reformatory Schools* for the year ending 31 December 1906. This image shows a group of approximately 40 girls in white dresses standing in front of a large church.



St Joseph's Guard of Honour Kings Park

Description: 'St Joseph's Guard of Honour Kings Park' is a digital copy of an undated photograph from the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Archives and Heritage Centre. It shows girls and a sister from the St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage awaiting a royal procession, which may have been a visit by the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester (1934 and 1945).



Guard of Honour Kings Park

Description: 'Guard of Honour Kings Park' is a digital copy of an undated photograph from the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Archives and Heritage Centre. It shows girls from the St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage awaiting a royal procession, which may have been a visit by the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester (1934 and 1945).



Classroom

Description: 'Classroom' is a digital copy of an undated photograph from the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Archives and Heritage Centre. It shows students in the St. Maria Goretti School at the St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage. The school is known to have been on site in 1953.



Sing song

Description: 'Sing song' is a digital copy of an undated photograph from the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Archives and Heritage Centre. It shows girls gathered around a piano in the hall at the St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage. An approximate date range of 1920s to 1960s has been given, based on the girls' uniforms.



Ballet lesson

Description: 'Ballet lesson' is a digital copy of an undated photograph from the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Archives and Heritage Centre. It shows girls in the hall at the St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage. An approximate date range of 1920s to 1960s has been given, based on the girls' pinafores.



Dancing classes

Description: 'Dancing classes' is a digital copy of an undated photograph from the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Archives and Heritage Centre. It shows girls at a dress rehearsal in the hall at the St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage. An approximate date range of 1920s to 1960s has been given.



Gardening St Joseph's

Description: 'Gardening St Joseph's' is a digital copy of an undated photograph from the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Archives and Heritage Centre. It shows girls working in the garden at the St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage. An approximate date range of 1920s to 1960s has been given, based on the girls' pinafores.



Back of St Joseph's main building

Description: 'Back of St Joseph's main building' is a digital copy of an undated photograph from the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Archives and Heritage Centre. It shows two girls on a see-saw and some sisters. An approximate date range of 1920 to 1960s has been given, based on the children's clothing.



St Joseph's Front

Description: 'St Joseph's Front' is a digital copy of an undated photograph from the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Archives and Heritage Centre. An approximate date range of 1930 to 1950s has been given, based on the car in the image.



Early photo

Description: 'Early photo' is a digital copy of a photograph from the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Archives and Heritage Centre. It shows the Benedictine Monastery which became the Subiaco Boys' Orphanage (1872-1901) and then the St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage (1901-1971). The image dates from 1859.



Back area - colour

Description: 'Back area - colour' is a digital copy of an undated photograph from the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Archives and Heritage Centre. According to information from the Mercy Heritage Centre, the St Maria Goretti classrooms were built in the lower area that is showing in the image. As it is a colour photograph, it is likely that the image dates from the 1940s or later.



Orphanage dining room

Description: 'Orphanage dining room' is a digital copy of an undated photograph from the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Archives and Heritage Centre. It shows the dining room at the St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage. An approximate date range of 1901-1950s has been given, based on the furnishings.



Dormitory, St Joseph's Girls Orphanage

Description: 'Dormitory, St Joseph's Girls Orphanage' is a digital copy of an undated photograph from the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Archives and Heritage Centre. It shows a dormitory at the St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage. An approximate date range of 1920s to 1960s has been given, based on the style of the dolls on the beds. It is possible that the picture was taken when the dormitory was decorated for a special event.



Girls' dormitory

Description: 'Girls' dormitory' is a digital copy of an undated photograph from the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Archives and Heritage Centre. It shows a dormitory at the St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage. An approximate date range of 1920s to 1960s has been given, based on the style of the furniture.

More info

Chronology

- St Joseph's Catholic Orphanage for Girls (1868 - 1901)
 - **St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage (1901 – 1971)**
 - Catherine McAuley Centre (1971 - 1991)
 - Mercy Community Services (Inc) (1997 - 2002)
 - MercyCare (2002 - current)

Related Entries

Run by

- [Sisters of Mercy, Perth Congregation \(1846 - 2011\)](#)

Related Events

- [Fact-Finding Mission on Child Migration \(1956\)](#)
- [Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry, Northern Ireland \(19 January 2013 - 2017\)](#)
- [Inquiry into past forced adoptive policies and practices, Western Australian government \(2023 - 2024\)](#)

The WA inquiry into past forced adoptive policies and practices found that institutions operated by the Sisters of Mercy (now Institute of Sisters of Mercy Australia and Papua New Guinea) engaged in pressure and coercion practices which caused unmarried mothers to agree to the adoption of their children.

Related Organisations

- [St Vincent's Foundling Home \(1914 - 1971\)](#)

St Joseph's Orphanage and St Vincent's Foundling Home were close to each other at Subico. Younger children went to St Vincent's and older girls were housed at St Joseph's.

Date: 1914 - 1971
- [Catholic Child Welfare Council, United Kingdom \(1929 - 2003\)](#)
- [Father Hudson's Society, United Kingdom \(1902 - current\)](#)

Father Hudson's Society sent some girls from Britain to St Joseph's Orphanage as child migrants.
- [Subiaco Boys' Orphanage \(1872 - 1901\)](#)

St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage was established on the site of the Subiaco Boys' Orphanage.

Date: 24 September 1901 - 1972
- [Catholic Episcopal Migration and Welfare Association \(1947? - 1970\)](#)

The Catholic Episcopal Migration and Welfare Association was responsible for placing British and Maltese child

migrants at St Joseph's Orphanage.

Date: 1947 - 1966

Related Legislation

- [State Children Act 1907, Western Australia \(1907 - 1948\)](#)
St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage was classed as an orphanage within the meaning of the *State Children Act 1907*.

Resources

- Community Affairs References Committee, [Lost Innocents: Righting the record - Report on child migration](#), 30 August 2001
- Immigration Museum, [Stolen childhoods](#), 2012
- Coldrey, Barry, [Good British stock: child and youth migration to Australia](#), 1999
- [On their own: Britain's child migrants](#), Australian National Maritime Museum website, 2010
- McLay, Anne, [Women Out of Their Sphere: A History of the Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia](#), 1992
- [Joy Milligan interviewed by Mary Hutchison for the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project](#), 17 April 2012 - 20 April 2012
- [Dilys Budd interviewed by Ann-Mari Jordens in the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project](#), 9 March 2010
- [Child Migration](#), National Archives of Australia, No date
- Battye, JS, [The Cyclopaedia of Western Australia \(1912\)](#), 1912. Relevance: p.505-506
- Walsh, John, [Submission No 41 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 23 July 2003
- Department for Community Development, State of Western Australia, [Submission No 55 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), July 2003
- Pushong, Lyn, [Heritage Trail: A journey through the history of MercyCare](#), 2008. Relevance: p.8
- Peterson, Margaret, [Submission No 172 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 11 September 2003
- House of Commons Health Committee, [Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Health Committee on 11 June 1998 \(Health - Third Report\)](#), 11 June 1998
- Family Care Society, [Memorandum by the Family Care Society](#), Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Health Committee on 11 June 1998, 11 June 1998
- Thompson, Ann, [Submission No 410 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 26 July 2004
- Thomas, Ivy, [Submission No 483 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 1 November 2004
- Heritage Council of Western Australia, [Catherine McAuley Centre](#), inHerit: our heritage places, 8 February 2015

Records

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

Records

- [Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea Perth Archives \(1847 - 1991\)](#)
- [Tuart Place Historical Photos Collection](#)
- [Father Hudson's Society, Records \(1902 - current\)](#)
- [Catholic Archdiocese of Perth CEMWA and CMC Files \[Former Child Migrants\], Catholic Archdiocese of Perth \(c. 1928 - 2008\)](#)
- [Commonwealth Child and Youth Migration Records \(1901 - 1983\)](#)
- [UK fact finding mission 1956 part 2, National Archives of Australia \(1955 - 1956\)](#)
- [John Moss C.B.E. U.K. Child Welfare Expert. Visit to Australia. Part II, National Archives of Australia \(1951 - 1952\)](#)
- [PHIND Personal History Index \(1938 - 1965\)](#)
- [St. Josephs Orphanage and St. Vincents Foundling Home, Leederville, Western Australia \(1948 - 1951\)](#)
- [Correspondence files, multiple number series \(policy matters\) \(1922 - 1968\)](#)
- [Files - Child Welfare, State Records Office of Western Australia \(1 January 1917 - 16 June 1972\)](#)

- [Indentures \(Guardianship\) \(1947 - 1960\)](#)
 - [Former Child Migrants Blue Index Cards \(1947 - 1968\)](#)
 - [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
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