

# St Joseph's Native School and Orphanage, New Norcia

1861 – 1974

**Other Names:**

- St Joseph's Orphanage for Girls
- St Joseph's School for Aboriginal Girls

## Details

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St Joseph's Native School and Orphanage, New Norcia, dates from 1861 when it established by the Benedictine Fathers. From 1904 until it closed in 1974, it was run by the Benedictine Missionary Sisters. Aboriginal girls and young women lived and went to school there.

Tilbrook (1983) reports that sisters 'Elizabeth and Helen (or Ellen) Tainan arrived at St Joseph's Orphanage for Girls in 1865, four years after it opened. They were looked after by the first schoolmistress at the orphanage, Mrs Judith Butler.' (see page 189, with photograph).

By 1847, the government had a policy of placing the children of single Aboriginal mothers at New Norcia mission:

*Mary Helen or Ellen Pangieran was born in Bunbury in 1847. Because her mother had been deserted by Mary's European father, the government authorities considered that she was unable to bring up her daughter on her own. As a consequence, Mary was sent to New Norcia Mission to receive an education. Mary grew up at New Norcia, where she met Benedict Cooper or Cuper. The couple were married and had a small family. In 1873 the telegraph line from Perth to Geraldton was completed as far as New Norcia, and Mary Cooper was appointed as the first telegraphist and post-mistress. She ran the small post office, and tended to her house which was built adjoining the office, until her early death from tuberculosis in 1877. (Tilbrook, p.177).*

Children were also sometimes placed by their parents in St Joseph's New Norcia, as shown in the following example.

*Widower Charlie Fitzgerald found he was unable to look after his family and at the same time tend to his [Chinese vegetable] gardens. Wishing to do what was best for them, he made an arrangement with New Norcia mission for some of the girls to be sent there, where they would be cared for and receive an education. The girls were placed on the train, and were to be met at the station and driven to New Norcia by their uncle. On the same day that they were travelling, a number of children were being sent to Moore River Settlement on the train. When they arrived at the railway station, the girls' uncle was late. The station master assumed that they were really meant to be going to Moore River Settlement and so bundled them off with the other children. When their uncle arrived, he found no nieces and thought that their step-father had changed his mind at the last moment. It was one month before the error was finally sorted out, and the*

girls reached their intended destination, New Norcia Mission. (Tilbrook, p.137)

In his 1899 Report (p.12), the Protector of Aborigines said that the girls' school had 30 pupils who were taught by 'women of colour, under the superintendence of one of the Brothers'. Girls at the school were given a working general education in reading, writing, and arithmetic, and thorough education in domestic work. The goal was for girls from St Joseph's to go on to work as domestic servants.

From 1904, St Joseph's was run by the Benedictine Missionary Sisters who had come from Spain for that purpose. They ran St Joseph's until it closed in 1974.

In 1909, the buildings were replaced.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, St Joseph's was sometimes short-staffed. By this time, trained teachers were attending the school and there were difficulties in retaining them. Additionally, the Sisters were aging and there were few young recruits, and the number of children coming to St Joseph's declined.

By the 1970s, attitudes had changed towards larger institutions such as those at New Norcia, with more emphasis on group homes thought to better mimic the family environment. These attitudes, plus the declining number of nuns and teachers by then, led to St Joseph's closing in 1974.

## Gallery

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### The School for Girls

**Description:** This is a copy of an image from the *Western Mail* on 29 December 1906. The image shows pupils and staff outside the St Joseph's Native School and Orphanage, New Norcia.



### Aboriginal girls at New Norcia orphanage, 1932

**Description:** This is a digitised copy of a negative and is part of the Collection of Photographs from the Royal Western Australian Historical Society held at the State Library of Western Australia. The image shows five girls from the St Joseph's Native School and Orphanage, New Norcia.



### St Joseph's College, New Norcia, 1920

**Description:** This is a photograph of St Joseph's College at New Norcia Mission, which housed Aboriginal girls who had been placed at the Mission. It shows a long, single-storey stone and brick building with a decorative stepped roofline. Although this appears to be the front face of the building, there is no visible door or entrance-way. This photo is part of a collection of 29 photographs of New Norcia Mission taken by Ernest Lund Mitchell in the early 1920s.

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## More info

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## Related Entries

### Run by

- [Benedictines, New Norcia \(c. 1846 - current\)](#)  
Date: 1861 - 1904
- [Benedictine Missionary Sisters \(1904 - current\)](#)  
Date: 1904 - 1974

### Related Organisations

- [St Mary's Mission, New Norcia \(1848 - 1974\)](#)  
St Joseph's (which housed girls) and St Mary's Mission (which housed boys) were both located at New Norcia Mission
- [New Norcia Mission \(1848 - 1974\)](#)  
St Joseph's Native School and Orphanage (which housed Aboriginal girls) and St Mary's Mission (which housed Aboriginal boys) were known as the New Norcia Mission.

## Resources

- Stolen Generations' Testimonies Foundation, [Stolen Generations' Testimonies](#), 2009. *Relevance:* See testimony of Kathleen Farrell
- Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission and the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes, *A piece of the story : national directory of records of Catholic organisations caring for children separated from families*, November 1999
- [The Aborigines Question. Evidence Taken by Dr. Roth](#), Western Mail, 25 February 1905

## Records

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

### Records

- [Department of Aboriginal Affairs \[predecessors\], Records \(1886 - 2004\)](#)
  - [New Norcia Archives \(1846 - current\)](#)
  - [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
  - [Files - Aborigines Departments \(1 January 1926 - 16 June 1972\)](#)
  - [Correspondence Files, Colonial Secretary's Office, Chief Secretary's Department \(1883 - 1983\)](#)
  - [Files - Department of Aborigines and Fisheries \(1909 - 1920\)](#)
  - [Files - General \[Health Department\] \(1899 - 1987\)](#)
  - [Files \(Aboriginal Matters\) - Department of the North West \[1\] \(1915 - 1949\)](#)
  - [Files - Chief Protector of Aborigines \(1898 - 1908\)](#)
  - [Files - Departmental \[Education Department\] \(1 January 1885 - 31 December 2000\)](#)
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