

Retta Dixon Home

1946 – 1982

Other Names:

- Retta Dixon Children's Home
- Aborigines Inland Mission Half-caste Home

Details

The Retta Dixon Home was established at Bagot Road Aboriginal Reserve in 1946 by the Aborigines Inland Mission (AIM). AIM stated that the institution was for Aboriginal children and mothers and was run in conjunction with a Hostel for young Aboriginal women. The Home moved to new cottage style accommodation on the reserve in 1962. The Retta Dixon Home operated until 1982.

In 1941 a representative of the Aborigines Inland Mission (AIM) was invited to Bagot Road Aboriginal Reserve to take charge of a number of Aboriginal women and children referred to in documents of the time as 'part-coloured' or 'half-caste'. In 1942 the then superintendent, Miss Shankelton, accompanied 72 child evacuees to Balaklava in South Australia where they were to remain for the duration of World War II. Upon their return to Darwin in 1946, the AIM set up the Retta Dixon Home as an institution to provide care for these children.

Retta Dixon Home was located at the Bagot Road Aboriginal Reserve, in buildings furnished by the NT Administration. It was situated in the centre of the Bagot Compound between the hospital and the Bagot settlement and a fence was erected to separate the Home from the rest of the Bagot settlement. The institution was run by AIM as a home for Aboriginal children and mothers in conjunction with a Hostel for young Aboriginal women. The Commonwealth Government provided financial assistance. Original correspondence from AIM explains that:

The aim of the Aborigines Inland Mission at Darwin is to care for their half-caste wards and train them to become worthy and responsible citizens. The Hostel is intended to be a congenial home for young women employed in Darwin where they will receive advice and guidance. At present there are 48 children, two mothers and six single women in the institution.

At this time the oldest child in residence was 12 years of age.

While the Native Affairs Branch supplied all rations for the Home, the AIM provided clothing for the children except in cases where mothers were working and could afford to pay. Children of school age were transported to the Darwin Public School by 'Administration transport'. All medical and dental cases were taken to the Darwin Hospital.

In a letter to the Department of the Interior the Administrator of the NT described the way in which the AIM and the government worked together to run the Home.

At present it is semi-official in operation in that supplies and a number of services are provided by the Native affairs Branch whilst the Aboriginal Inland Mission workers perform their duties in an honorary capacity. The number of wards has increased considerably in the last year because of the removal of half-caste children from Aboriginal camps in rural areas and the acceptance by half-castes in Darwin of the facilities provided. There is a pressing need for such an organisation in Darwin and Miss Shankelton, with her staff, has proved her ability to deal with the problem.

In September 1947 six staff members worked in the Home under the direction of Miss Shankelton. By March 1949 the number of children at the Home had increased to 67.

A 1950 Review Report on the Retta Dixon Home said the average yearly number of children at the Home was 70 and that the average number of women receiving pre-natal and after care was eight. Children stayed at the Home until they were 18 years of age. They attended school from 5 to 16 years and after leaving were expected to do vocational training. Some children were sent interstate to complete their schooling under the Part-Aboriginal Education Scheme. They also received 'instruction in religious doctrine' and attendance at spiritual worship was 'insisted on'.

In the report the buildings that made up Retta Dixon were listed as follows:

*1 girls' dormitory – concrete
1 staff quarters – concrete
1 recreation – dining room with kitchen attached – concrete
1 store room – concrete
1 nursery – converted S.W. Type building
1 boys' dormitory – converted S.W. Type building
1 young women's quarters – converted S.W. Type building
1 garage and workshop – converted S.W. Type building
1 ablution block.*

Several other buildings at present used as stores can be made available should the necessity arise.

An S.W. Building refers to a Sidney William hut, also known as a Comet Hut. It was a prefabricated corrugated iron building extensively used by the army throughout northern Australia during WWII.

The report also referred to the 'Recreation and Social Life' of the Home describing what activities were provided for children:

Organised indoor games are held at least one evening each week. Socials, birthday parties etc. All of which the children help to arrange and prepare. Football, tennis, swimming, basketball and other outdoor sport is encouraged. Special instruction for older children in music, craftwork, domestic science and agriculture is provided through classes and individual teaching.

The society has two hutment type of buildings at Casuarina Beach. Children are taken here for periods of rest and change during holidays.

The Home also provided a library for older children and adults, a piano and a 16mm film projector.

No traditional songs, dances or ceremonies were allowed, and all contact with the other residents of the Bagot Compound was strongly discouraged. Some former residents of the Children's Home have spoken of severe

punishments meted out to children who broke the strict rules of the Home.

In 1951 the Retta Dixon Home cared for 70 children and up to 20 women in what was referred to at the time as “crowded” conditions. Because the Home was situated between the Bagot Aboriginal Hospital and the Bagot Aboriginal Settlement, there was reportedly “no opportunity for expansion”. In July 1951, a recommendation that a former RAAF stores depot site at Winnellie could make a suitable new site for the Retta Dixon Home was approved. However, financial concerns halted the move.

From mid 1952 the financial arrangements between the AIM and the government changed. While the government continued to pay a subsidy for each resident in the Home, it required the Home to take over paying for provisions, rather than receiving them free from the Native Affairs Branch. Over the years 1954 to 1957, however, the government assisted the AIM with some major purchases such as a Bedford Truck and later a VW Combi Van for transporting children, a refrigerator, the construction of a tennis court and poultry run and the provision of sixty individual bedside lockers.

Concerns about conditions at the Home led to a government inquiry into conditions at Retta Dixon Home in 1953, which described the missionaries as ‘fanatical’ and lacking in training (Pemberton, 2014). The inquiry by a patrol officer with the NT Native Affairs Branch reported:

The Home in its present location and form is a failure, and the children are merely benefitting to the extent that they are clothed, fed, and are receiving some form of education. The only other contribution to their upbringing is perhaps the religious training given by the staff, which to my mind is made to play far too important a part in their formative years, and is far too restrictive (Bringing them home report, 1997, Chapter 9)

This inquiry led to a decision by AIM to construct new premises at the Home based on the cottage system. Barbara Cummings writes about the failure of the new cottages to develop a ‘family-style environment’ at Retta Dixon: ‘While it was intended that the cottages were supervised by a married couple, most often, it was young, single females who had usually just come up from the south (Cummings, 1990, 119).

In 1955 the Director of Welfare, Harry Giese, stated in a letter that because the majority of children at the Retta Dixon Home were wards of the state, he as Director, should have ‘a strong say in what liberties should be granted to the children when they approach the age where they will (need) to undertake their own responsibilities.’

Giese’s comment was made in response to the superintendent of Retta Dixon Home informing him that AIM was opposed to letting older children attend picture theatres and social events in Darwin without supervision. Giese also recommended that children from Retta Dixon be supported in becoming members of the Scouts, Girl Guides and the Girls’ and Boys’ Police clubs.

A memo from February 1956 shows that 47 girls and 34 boys were ‘committed’ to the Home and that a further 16 children between 1.5 and 13 years were also at the Home. Six adult women were also in residence. The continued high number of children in the Home led to the resurfacing of plans to move the Home to a new location. Although a section of the Bagot Reserve on McWilliam Road was earmarked for the new site, the move did not happen until the early 1960s. Therefore in 1959 the AIM requested funding to repair the existing buildings.

In 1961-62 the first buildings of the new Retta Dixon Home were officially opened at the North end of Bagot Reserve, approximately two kilometres from the original Home. The new larger site was set up as a system of eight, independently run, six bedroom cottage homes. These were erected in a U shape with the Superintendent’s House in the centre. There was also a communal laundry, central food store, recreation hall, health clinic, two visitors cottages and a garage. In a 1992 article Louise Liddy-Corpus remembers the change:

The institution in which I was raised was run initially along an age and gender dormitory system overseen by a kind, unmarried white woman, Miss Shankleton (Laelie). In the early 1960s the Home moved into a new compound which had a cottage system in which each individual cottage was run autonomously although coming under the general jurisdiction of the male (married) superintendent.

The new cottage system was intended to bring a family style atmosphere to the Home. However, Barbara Cummings in her book 'Take this child' explains that:

Inexperienced staff, a high rate of staff turnover, and frequent transfers of children from cottage to cottage without explanation prevented a family-style environment from developing.

Additionally Barbara states that the bonding and sense of community that had developed in the old Home's dormitory system was largely lost at the new site.

In 1974 Retta Dixon Children's Home, along with much of Darwin, was devastated by Cyclone Tracy. Five of the eight cottages were left in ruins and some fifty children were temporarily sent interstate.

Changes in government policy in the late 1970s led to the decision to close the Retta Dixon Home. Although it was officially to close on the 30 June 1980, the Home continued to operate, with cottage parents taking in children by private arrangements, until 1982.

A memorial plaque now stands in Karu Park, where the former Retta Dixon Home once stood. It reads:

This plaque is in recognition of Aboriginal children displaced from mother and country. Karu Park accommodated a children's institution named Retta Dixon Home. Similar institutions were established at Kahlin, Garden Point, Croker island and Groote Eylandt. This plaque is dedicated to the memory of those children and their mission workers.

Retta Dixon Home was investigated by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Case Study 17: Retta Dixon Home. The findings were published in July 2015, in the 'Report of Case Study No 17: The response of the Australian Inland Ministries, the Australian and Northern Territory governments and the Northern Territory police force and prosecuting authorities to allegations of sexual abuse which occurred at the Retta Dixon Home'.

National Redress Scheme for people who have experienced institutional child sexual abuse

In 2021, the Commonwealth government has agreed to be a funder of last resort for this institution. This means that although the institution is now defunct, it is participating in the National Redress Scheme, and the government has agreed to pay the institution's share of costs of providing redress to a person (as long as the government is found to be equally responsible for the abuse a person experienced).

Gallery



Retta Dixon Homes, Darwin- Guests at opening ceremony? [editor's note: original caption]

Description: Although this photo at the NAA is listed as being from 1947 this picture in fact shows guests at the opening ceremony for the new Retta Dixon Home in 1961. The guests appear to be in front of one of the new cottage homes.



Darwin area welfare - Darwin Retta Dixon Home

Description: This image shows the dormitory at Retta Dixon Home.



Retta Dixon homes, Darwin - Dining room

Description: This image shows the dining room at Retta Dixon Home.



Dormitory at Retta Dixon Home, Bagot Aboriginal Reserve, at Darwin, NT

Description: This image was taken by William (Bill) Pedersen for the Australian News & Information Bureau.



Darwin Retta Dixon Home



Retta Dixon Homes, Darwin- Guests at opening ceremony?

Description: This image is thought to show guests at the opening ceremony for the new cottages at Retta Dixon Home.



Retta Dixon homes, Darwin - Bedroom



[Retta Dixon] Home

Description: This image is of the Retta Dixon Home.



Homes Opening

Description: The description reads: People gathered at the opening of the Retta Dixon Homes, Bagot Road, Darwin, NT, 1961.



Children board a bus at Retta Dixon

Description: This undated colour photograph shows children from Retta Dixon Home boarding a bus. The children are wearing uniforms.

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Aborigines Inland Mission \(1905 - 1998\)](#)

Related Events

- [Case Study 17: Retta Dixon Home, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse \(2014\)](#)
- [Interstate movement of Northern Territory children \(1930s - 1970s\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Kahlin Compound \(1913 - 1939\)](#)
Children from the Kahlin Compound were sent to accommodation at Bagot Reserve which later became the Retta Dixon Home.
- [Bagot Aboriginal Reserve \(1938 - 1978?\)](#)
The Retta Dixon Home was located on the Bagot Aboriginal Reserve.
- [Phillip Creek Native Settlement \(1945 - 1956\)](#)
In 1947, some children were moved from Phillip Creek Native Settlement to the Retta Dixon Home.
- [Fannie Bay Receiving Home \(1956 - 1957\)](#)
After the Fannie Bay Receiving Home was damaged by fire some children were moved to the Retta Dixon Home

Resources

- Aborigines Inland Mission, [Our Aim newsletters](#), 1907 - 1961
- Duguid, Charles, [The Aborigines of Darwin and the Tropic North](#), 1951
- Sherwood, Matthew & Weeks, Jonny, ['You're Not Given Any Love': The Stories of Australia's Stolen Generations - Photo Essay](#), The Guardian, 2016
- Marsden, Beth, *Aboriginal mobility, scholarships and Anglican Grammar schools in Melbourne, 1958-65*, Australian Historical Studies, 2020
- Commonwealth of Australia, [The Northern Territory Report for 1959-60](#), 1961
- Commonwealth of Australia, [The Northern Territory Report for 1960-61](#), 1962
- Bardon, Jane, [Sexual abuse survivor falls through the cracks, as lawyers accuse governments and institutions of playing hardball](#), ABC News, 2 December 2018
- Day, Bill, [Aboriginal People of Darwin: the Bagot Community](#), 2012
- Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, [Report of Case Study No. 17: The response of the Australian Inland Ministries, the Australian and Northern Territory governments and the Northern Territory police force and prosecuting authorities to allegations of sexual abuse which occurred at the](#)

[Retta Dixon Home](#), July 2015

- Brett Vickers, Christine, [How was 'improper conduct' at the Inland Mission buried for so long?](#), The Conversation, 31 October 2014

Records

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

Records

- [Collection 01: Australian Indigenous Ministries papers and pictorial material, 1903-1998 \(1903 - 1998\)](#)
 - [Aboriginal Inland Mission Retta Dixon Home Bagot - Policy and Development \(1955 - 1960\)](#)
 - [Registration of births after lapse of nine months \[Croker Island, Garden Point, Retta Dixon Home and other areas\] \(1954 - 1955\)](#)
 - [Aborigines' Inland Mission, Retta Dixon Home - Northern Territory \(1942 - 1957\)](#)
 - [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/retta-dixon-home/>