

# St Vincent de Paul Orphanage for Boys

1874 – 1967

**Other Names:** • St Vincent de Paul's Boys' Orphanage

## Details

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On 2 June 1874 the the Christian Brothers opened St Vincent de Paul Orphanage for Boys in South Melbourne. The Orphanage was created following the split of the St Vincent de Paul Orphanage into two, boys' and girls' orphanages. In 1967, the Orphanage became the St Vincent de Paul Boys' Home. Since closing, the St Vincent de Paul Orphanage for Boys has been the subject of many submissions where former residents' have outlined their experiences of physical, psychological and sexual abuse in the Home.

In 1878, the *Advocate* reported that the average number of boys accommodated was 175, with 52 children admitted during the year, and 42 children leaving due to removals or apprenticeships. It was also reported that outdoor apprenticeships, commonly to farmers, continued to work well. It was also noted that some boys were refused entry due to a lack of space.

The Orphanage relied heavily on donations, and fundraising activities were common. These included demonstration days where the boys would show their boxing or wrestling skills to an audience. An Orphanage band was established, and often performed as a fundraising activity. A cadet corps was established, and the boys spent two hours a week on drills. Orphanage bands attached to the cadet corps were paid by the Defence Force when they attended public parades and exhibitions, and the band enjoyed significant success.

St Vincent de Paul Orphanage for Boys also relied on people donating their time and services to support the organisation, including the creation of a Sewing Guild, whose members would visit boys who rarely received visitors. The Orphanage allowed visitors once a month on a Sunday. The Guild also hosted annual concerts and musical events to raise funds for the Orphanage. Occasional day trips were also arranged for the boys through the donation of services, for example a trip to Sorrento on a steamboat.

Over the years, the Orphanage received several updates. In 1905, the *Advocate* reported that the Orphanage "has been re-modelled, and greatly enlarged, having now ample accommodation for upwards of 200 boys."

In the 1918-19 influenza pandemic, all but one of the 226 boys in the Orphanage were ill. Additional nurses, Sisters, and Brothers were brought in to help the sick, and after a month the Orphanage was declared influenza-free with no deaths having occurred.

In 1923, the Inspector of Charities found significant problems of overcrowding and dirty conditions, leading the Brothers to update the Orphanage. A new building containing a laundry, boot-making and tailoring rooms, and accommodation for lay staff was erected, a new recreation hall was added, and a playground and handball courts were established. The Orphanage was also painted, had new kitchen and dining room floors laid, and glass replaced. At the same time, broken glass was removed from the top of the orphanage walls.

Religious education was given priority with daily mass was compulsory until the 1950s, and the day began and ended with prayers. The boys were also given a brief education. Ideally, they were expected to receive their Merit Certificate at the end of grade eight. In the 1920s, the Christian Brothers began to train boys in trades and

provide a technical education before apprenticing them in the city or suburbs. Following grade six in the Orphanage's school, some boys were sent to the South Melbourne Technical School, and from 1925, to St Joseph's College in South Melbourne, where they could undertake two years of training before being apprenticed.

At this time, *Holding onto Hope* reports "older boys were allowed to come and go on weekends" and local football clubs offered free entry to boys from the Orphanage.

During the Depression, the Orphanage income increasingly came from the government rather than charitable donations. The Orphanage began to accept state wards and received a small income for each. Other changes during the 1930s included a move back to apprenticing boys to farmers. They also advertised for Christmas holiday hosts for the boys.

In the late 1930s, the Orphanage opened a holiday camp at Shoreham. It was requisitioned for use by the Australian military during World War Two, but then returned to the Orphanage after. The camp was used by boys who did not have family or friends to visit during the summer.

During the Second World War, the Orphanage hall was turned into an air-raid shelter and was bricked up and sandbagged. Older boys were also involved in manufacturing mock hand-grenades for military training and supported the war effort through their band.

A gym instructor was employed in the late 1940s to train the boys in gymnastics, to support boxing and wrestling. These continued to be strong fundraising activities, especially the inter-orphanage challenge contest where boys from St Augustine's would box and wrestle against those from St Vincent's. Boys also competed in football, and other competitive sports. It has since been recognised, including in the *Forgotten Australians* final report, that boxing was sometimes used as a form of punishment and abuse.

In the 1950s a decline in numbers was seen, with the number of children there below 200 for the first time in decades. In an excerpt from *Holding onto Hope* one boy talks about charging his fellow boys to get treats from the kitchen and fridge, which he oversaw, and also in exchange for his tasks including polishing the floor, darning socks, kitchen duties.

Boys who wet the bed were commonly severely punished. This included having their beds checked each morning and receiving the strap and cold showers if they had, and being made to sleep on an enclosed verandah. Corporal punishment was common with other punishments including being made to stand in the yard on a metal square and being locked out of breakfast.

In his book, *Orphanage Boy*, Ryszard Szablicki writes about arriving at St Vincent's: "The car pulled up through a gateway which broke a long, low, pallid brick wall topped with leafy hedge that stretched from one street corner to another. I peered through the window and saw, beyond the wall, a tower above a broad yellow double-storeyed rendered building" (p.101). During his time at the orphanage, there were about 140 boys living there, aged between 9 and 17. He describes St Vincent's as "the end of the line for these boys in the Catholic orphanage system". Szablicki was transferred to St Vincent's from the [St Joseph's Home for Boys](#), run by nuns of the Sisters of St Joseph. His book gives an insight into what it was like for him to shift between the various Catholic institutions for boys in Melbourne:

*The nun departed. She was the last nun I saw. Each orphanage meant new rules and routines. There was nothing else and there were no compromises. Discarding the past and adapting to the present was the only way I could travel through this journey to nowhere in particular. Survival was necessarily about the here and now (p.102) ...*

*I observed the others. Gee, they're big. How come they're here? I had rarely seen big boys and seeing so many was daunting. It did not seem right. I believed they should be in the outside world. These places*

*were for boys like me, my size. The others had always been my size in these places (p.104).*

Jenkinson's *Guide to out of home care services* includes quotes from inspection reports which state, "the home's capacity...was 150 beds. The Home admitted Roman Catholic boys aged 9 to 16 years. In 1955 over half were Wards of the State... While impressive from the outside, the Orphanage was in need of modernising and there was no possibility of developing a cottage home facility on the site...The home had a small number of larger dormitories ranging from approximately 20 beds up to 40 beds. Furnishing consists of an iron bed, a chair for older boys and a dresser for each boy."

Szablicki writes about the usual food at St Vincent's.

*Every Friday was fish day. It was a sin to eat meat on these days. I raced to be near the front of the queue because I like the fish offerings, and the accompanying chips were crunchiest during the early servings. Weekend nourishment usually comprised indestructible leftovers, pies and pasties, as fewer of us were around at these times. The portions were adequate and sustained a living body until the next meal. I never saw a fat boy. Breakfast was the best meal, because I was most hungry in the mornings. Lunch and tea, well: boiled tripe, boiled cabbage, boiled cauliflower, boiled beans, they were the 'greys' on our plates. Bleached mutton chops, pumpkin slurry, greasy sausages, bubble and squeak, suspicious looking stews (lots of those) and other barely edible things filled our plates. Two culinary saviours sustained my body through all of this: spaghetti and potatoes (p.143).*

However, on one occasion, to Szablicki's delight, the boys were served roast beef, baked potatoes and pumpkin, green peas and gravy. He then became aware that there were two male visitors in the dining room, and that they were government inspectors. One of them talked to Szablicki, asking him if he liked the food at the institution. Szablicki said that he certainly liked this food, and told the man that it was the first time he had seen such food at St Vincent's. He was later beaten by a Brother for "bringing shame to the Orphanage" and not showing gratitude (pp.143-147).

In January 1956, St Vincent de Paul's Boys' Orphanage was declared an approved children's home under the Children's Welfare Act 1954. The number of state wards increased, with over 63% of boys in 1956 being state wards. This was also when the Orphanage started to slowly undertake small renovations and improvements to move towards more of a family group home style of care, in line with the thinking in child welfare of the time.

In 1967, the St Vincent de Paul Orphanage for Boys became the St Vincent de Paul Boys' Home.

The St Vincent de Paul Orphanage for Boys is the subject of many submissions to several inquiries. The submissions outline former residents' experiences and detail physical, psychological and sexual abuse. Some also discuss the lack of education they received, leaving them unable to read and write. In 2017, the ABC reported that staff at the St Vincent de Paul Orphanage has been subject to 114 claims of child sexual abuse.

## Gallery



**St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage, building c.1945**



## St Vincent de Paul's Boys, Roll Call, 1930



## 'One of the dormitories', St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage



Boys R. MCCARTNEY and W. THOMAS  
Two brilliant students who topped their class list at the Christian Bros' College, South Melbourne. This distinction was obtained in competition with boys from C.B. College, South Melbourne (Primary division) and C.B. Primary Schools, Middle Park and South Melbourne.



Boys PAUL CAMERON and LEO BREEN  
Winners of Scholarship at Christian Bros' College, Park St., South Melbourne. The latter secured the Gold Medal for Arithmetic in the competition open to boys seeking entrance to the Intermediate classes of the Brothers' College in Melbourne.

## Clipping from 1920 Annual Report, St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage

**Description:** Article reporting on the academic achievements of R. McCartney, W. Thomas, P. Cameron and L. Breen



## Former St. Vincent de Paul Boys' Orphanage

**Description:** Orphanage located at 231-241 Cecil St and 199-201 Napier St and 34 Church St, South Melbourne. This image is one of a series of photographs available from the Victorian Heritage Register.



## Kids War Effort aka Schoolboys Aid War Effort

**Description:** This is footage from a voiceovered newsreel from 1941 that includes boys from St Vincent de Paul Boys' Orphanage, South Melbourne. The caption reads: 'Various shots as schoolboys make camouflage nets for the army, they weave the thick thread in and out. One boy bounces on a net held by other boys to test the strength. The camera pans across boys at an orphanage making dummy hand grenades with sand instead of explosives for practise purposes. M/S of the bags in a pile. M/S of the boys gathered around a caricature of Adolf Hitler, they pick up the bags and pelt him with them.'

# More info

## Chronology

- St Vincent de Paul Orphanage, Prahran (1854 - 1857)
  - St Vincent de Paul Orphanage (1857 - 1874)
- **St Vincent de Paul Orphanage for Boys (1874 – 1967)**
  - St Vincent de Paul Boys' Home (1967 - 1997)

- MacKillop Family Services (1997 - current)

## Related Entries

### Run by

- [Christian Brothers \(1868 - 1885\)](#)
- [St Patrick's Province of the Christian Brothers \(1953 - 1967\)](#)
- [Australasian Province of the Christian Brothers \(1885 - 1953\)](#)

### Related Events

- [Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care, Parliament of Australia \(2003 - 2005\)](#)

### Related Organisations

- [St Vincent's Hostel \(1924 - 1967\)](#)

## Resources

- Twigg, Karen, [St Vincent de Paul Orphanage](#), eMelbourne: the city past and present, 2008
- Murray, Suellen, John Murphy, Elizabeth Branigan, Jenny Malone, *After the orphanage: life beyond the children's home*, 2009
- Willis, Rob, [Smoky Dawson, excerpt from interview with Rob Willis, 20 April 2000](#), Forgotten Australians: Our History website, 2009
- Dawson, Herbert Henry, *Smoky Dawson: a life*, 1985
- Stuart, Ann, [Submission no 109 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- Hewat, Daniel, [Submission no 137 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- Miller, Wayne, [Submission no 15 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- Robertson, Ethel, [Submission no 522 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- McCrae, David, [Submission no 357 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- [Christmas is party time ...](#), The Argus, 15 December 1952
- Turner, Laurence, [Victoria's Unwanted Children - 6: Willing Hearts Handicapped by Lack of Cash](#), The Herald, 31 October 1952
- Grogan, Robert, [From green to red and white: a chronicle of the Parish of St Peter and Paul's from its origins in Emerald Hill to the present day in South Melbourne.](#), 2009
- Cade, Mark, [Submission No 38 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- [Heritage Display](#), MacKillop Family Services website, 2013
- Green, S., & Jones, M., [All the little travellers: the children of 'Morningtown Ride'](#), Find & Connect web resource blog, 29 February 2016
- [St Vincent de Paul Orphanage/Home \(1854-1997\)](#), Finding Records, No date
- [Catholic Church schools and homes with the most child abuse claims revealed](#), ABC News, 17 February 2017
- [St. Vincent de Paul's Boys' Orphanage, Sth. Melbourne - Annual Report](#), Advocate, 7 January 1943
- [St Vincent's Boys' Hostel](#), Advocate, 17 September 1936
- 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
- Gough, Deborah, [Hidden orphanage lives](#), The Age, 20 October 2004

## Records

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

### Records

- [MacKillop Family Services Records, Victorian institutions \(1857 - current\)](#)
- ['Closed' Agency and General Correspondence Files \[Charities Board of Victoria\] \(1923 - 1983\)](#)

- [Voluntary Children's Homes Files \(1921 - 1989\)](#)
  - [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
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