

Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society Receiving Home

c. 1881 – 1908

Details

The Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society Receiving Home in La Trobe Street, Melbourne, was a Home for the temporary care of children. It was closely associated with child rescuer Selina Sutherland who established the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society in 1894. From the early 1880s Sutherland had been taking in children as part of her work with the Scots and Presbyterian Churches and housing them in various locations in Melbourne, including in her own cottage in Collins Street. This work was based at the Receiving Home in La Trobe Street from 1894 until 1908. Children stayed at the Receiving Home temporarily, until they were found placements with families in country Victoria. The Home closed around May 1908, around the time that Sutherland ceased her involvement with the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society. However, Sutherland remained at the La Trobe Street property until 1911, continuing her work with children with a new organisation.

Before the Receiving Home became established at the premises in La Trobe Street, Sutherland housed children at temporary locations in the city, including at her own residence. In the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society annual report for 1894, Sutherland claimed that she had removed 1206 children from the streets of Melbourne during the period between July 1881 and October 1893.

The 1894 annual report of the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society stated that the Receiving Home was at a "temporary location" at 167 Collins Street, Melbourne. This was the cottage where Sutherland lived, at the back of Assembly Hall. (This Assembly Hall building was demolished in 1911 and a new Presbyterian Assembly Hall was built on the opposite side of Collins Street in 1915). Sutherland had been accommodating children at this property, sometimes known as "The Villa", since around 1881, in connection with her work for the Scots Church Neglected Children's Aid Society.

Sutherland left the Scots' Church Society in 1894 to establish a new organisation, the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society. The Society remained at the Collins Street location until moving to a new building in La Trobe Street in 1895.

When the La Trobe Street building was opened by Lady Clarke on 31 July 1895 it was described as "a house standing in large and airy grounds" with "easy access from city and suburbs".

The Home was overseen by a committee of 5 members who met weekly.

From the Receiving Home, the majority of children were sent to placements with families in country Victoria, at no cost to the Society. (The 1894 annual report states that a few children were sent to the Church of England Homes for Children in Brighton, and some placed in industrial schools.)

Sutherland found suitable families in the country for children, and once placed, they received supervision from local clergy and "responsible people in the neighbourhood". The households "take the little ones without fee, feed and clothe them and bring them up to useful occupation". Sutherland wrote about the benefits of the "training" these children received during these placements. In these country homes, children were trained in habits of

honesty and industry so that they could become useful men and women, Sutherland claimed.

She also declared that it was desirable to get children away from “evil surroundings” as young as possible, as the older they were, the more difficult was the task of their reformation. The Society’s annual reports often contained Sutherland’s remarks that “a boy or girl of 14 or 15 will give more trouble and anxiety than 50 younger ones”.

Children stayed at the Receiving Home temporarily, for periods of days or weeks. Sutherland wrote that the children she took in were mostly the children of the “unfortunate but decent and respectable poor”. The work of the Society meant that parents did not have to lose their filial rights as a result of placing them at the Receiving Home. Sutherland wrote of how many families parted with their children from “sheer necessity” and with hope that they would be able to have them at home again in the future. She claimed that the Society was “careful not to break family ties and keep respectable parents in touch”.

According to its annual reports, the Receiving Home took in children at any time of the day or night, irrespective of their creed or nationality. The annual reports included detailed statistics on children in the care of the Society. In 1897, it stated that they had cared for 628 children between 1893 and 1897. The average number of children in the Receiving Home varied, but when the Home had 35 children, this was described as “a number that taxed the resources to the utmost”.

Children at La Trobe Street received weekly religious instruction, and daily school work.

Located nearby to Victoria Police in Russell Street, from 1897, the Receiving Home began a new branch of work, taking in children found by the police late at night, who previously were put into police cells with adults.

The Receiving Home was located close to the Victoria Police station in Russell Street. The La Trobe St Home began to receive children apprehended by the police at night, who previously would have been placed overnight in cells with adults. In 1904, the Society reported that the number of children it took in that year, given over from the custody of the police, was at least 40 to 50. A piece from Victoria Police included in the Society’s annual report that year included a comment from a Constable that “I am at a loss to suggest any expedient, should Miss Sutherland discontinue her work here”. In fact the Receiving Home was so useful to the Victoria Police that the Chief Commissioner intervened in 1904 to have its rent paid by the Victorian government. This was described in the annual report as an “arrangement to enable the Society to keep the house open and available as a harbour of refuge”.

The Receiving Home also took in some women with infants, some of whom had called at Russell Street police first seeking help. Sometimes it took in “aged and decrepit women” temporarily, until they could be returned to their relatives.

In 1898, a benefactor called Mr Cornford gave the Society access to two cottages in the seaside town of Mornington, rent-free for a period of two years (Traralgon Record, 1900). The Mornington property, known as Cawendaar, helped to relieve pressure on accommodation in La Trobe Street. At Mornington, the “city waifs” could enjoy sea breezes and country life under the care of Miss Hope. A newspaper article about Mornington from 1900 reported that “over 20 children were there now, and when trained to obedience and cleanliness were taken from the Home in Latrobe Street East and kept there [Mornington] pending a satisfactory opening in the country for them” (Maffra Spectator, 1900).

The 1900 annual report stated that the Society had another “branch home” at Brighton Beach. This helped with the limited accommodation at La Trobe Street and also provided “weak children” with the benefits of sea breezes.

The ever-increasing work of the Society led to it starting a children’s Home in Leonard Street, Parkville in 1902. Both it and the Receiving Home were under the management of the committee and the “personal supervision of Miss Sutherland and Miss Sanderson”.

The building in Parkville was upgraded several times, meaning that by 1905 the Receiving Home was used mainly for temporary cases, “including foundlings, lost children and children whose parents are locked up”.

In 1906, the Society reported that the Education Department now undertook the teaching at the Home and it was gazetted as State School no 3522.

In 1908, there was a very public falling-out between Selina Sutherland and the committee of the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society. This concluded with Sutherland's "retirement" from the Society in May 1908, after which she set up a new organisation in her own name to continue her work with neglected children. From June 1908, the Sutherland Homes for Orphans, Neglected and Destitute Children (often referred to as the Sutherland Homes) operated out of the building at 68 La Trobe Street, where the Society's Receiving Home had been formerly located.

It would seem that there had been trouble between Miss Sutherland and the Society's committee for some time. In 1908, Sutherland was in her late 60s and in poor health, due in part to a couple of accidents she'd had, first in New Zealand in 1881 and another one in 1904. An article in the Age attempted to explain the relationship difficulties within the organisation:

It seems with the encroach of old age Miss Sutherland became somewhat crotchety and dictatorial in her manner with her official associates, and gave offence by certain trifling eccentricities of conduct. Possibly she was found a little difficult to deal with by the younger generation of amateur philanthropists whose business it became to patronise and supervise her labours (The Age, 6 November 1908).

Ongoing disagreements between Sutherland and the committee of the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society came to a head in April 1908 when Sutherland and members of the committee met with the Victorian Chief Secretary. At this meeting, committee member Mrs Hamer said that Sutherland had long "been allowed to do very much as she liked". Hamer told the Chief Secretary that Sutherland's health had been poor for a while, and that the committee had suggested to her that she take a year off to rest (The Age, 7 April 1908). Initially, Miss Sutherland agreed to this but later changed her mind, and entered into a battle with the committee for control of the Homes at Parkville and La Trobe Street.

By May, the committee had dismissed Miss Sutherland for "insubordination". The Age newspaper reported that Sutherland and the committee were at "loggerheads". In a position that she described as "holding the fort", Sutherland was at the Parkville Home, refusing to leave the premises (The Mercury, 9 May 1908). The committee appointed a new matron to run the Parkville Home, Mrs Margaret J. Morgan. On 6 May, the Chief Secretary made a statement that the official appointment of a new matron meant that Sutherland's registration under the Neglected Children's Act had been revoked (The Age, 6 May 1908).

The papers reported of a compromise on 7 May and that Sutherland had agreed to leave the Parkville premises by the following week. However, a "fresh rupture" led to dramatic proceedings taking place at both the Parkville and La Trobe Street sites. Miss Sutherland's continued occupation of the Parkville Home led to gates being locked and staff being denied entry, one committee member being nailed inside a dining room at Parkville, calls to the police from both sides, and interviews with the media. Sutherland told The Age about her and her supporter Miss Coltman (a "slight girl of about 21") ejecting a man from 68 La Trobe Street (The Age, 11 May 1908).

By 15 May 1908, The Age reported that Selina Sutherland had "peacefully retired" from the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society, "after having defied the attempts of the committee to dislodge her". The article stated that she had taken up quarters at La Trobe Street (where her name was on the lease) and that Sutherland proposed to carry out her own child rescue work in the future from that address (The Age 15 May 1908). Sutherland said, "I will take charge of the Receiving Home and after all it will be best for me as I shall be more in touch with the city, where my work lies. The home will be known as the Sutherland Home." (The Age 22 May 1908) By June 1908, a new organisation had been formally constituted, The Sutherland Homes for Orphans, Neglected and Destitute Children (Hoban, 2006).

The conflict between Selina Sutherland and the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society continued to play out in public. In September to October 1908, Mr Keogh conducted an inquiry into allegations of Selina Sutherland's drunkenness and cruelty while working at the Society's Homes. The newspapers reported on the testimony given

at this inquiry. Former staff members and residents of the Home gave accounts of Sutherland punching children, and tramways employees described having seen Sutherland on the Sydney Road tram affected by alcohol (The Bendigo Independent, 30 September 1908; The Leader, 3 October 1908). Under cross-examination, Sutherland described a “wicked plot” against her, saying that “It is a pack of lies to say that I was in a regular state of drunkenness. It is absolutely untrue that I indiscriminately punched children” (The Argus, 28 October 1908).

In early November, the inquiry announced that all charges against Sutherland had been dismissed. By that time, the Receiving Home in La Trobe Street had nothing to do with the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society. From May 1908, the building was the base for a new Sutherland Home, which continued Miss Sutherland's work with neglected children.

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- [The Presbyterian Society for Neglected and Destitute Children \(1893 - 1895\)](#)
- [Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society \(1894 - 1920\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Sutherland Homes for Children \(1908 - 1991\)](#)
From 1908 until 1911, Sutherland Homes for Children was located in the La Trobe Street building that was previously the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society Receiving Home.

Resources

- Golding, Frank, [Lost & Found: State Children in Victoria](#), Frank Golding: author, researcher, historian and consultant specialising in child welfare, 27 July 2017

Records

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

Records

- [Victorian Children's Aid Society Records \(1893 - 1993\)](#)

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