

Reformatory for Girls, Sunbury

1865 – 1875

Other Names: • Sunbury Reformatory for Protestant Girls

Details

The government-run Reformatory for Girls was located at Sunbury from 1865 to 1875. It was located on the same site as the Sunbury Industrial School, about half a mile away. In 1875, girls were relocated from Sunbury to a new reformatory, located at Coburg.

The institution was sometimes referred to as the Reformatory for Protestant Girls. Catholic girls who were convicted could be sent to the Catholic reformatories at [Abbotsford](#) or [Geelong](#).

The girls' reformatory was on the eastern side of the hill. The girls at the Sunbury Reformatory were aged between 12 and 18. An article from 1867 refers to there having been concerns about boys at the Sunbury Industrial School being brought into contact with girls from the Reformatory. However, the article stated that these fears were groundless (*The Herald*, 12 October 1867).

An article from 1872 described the girls at the Sunbury Reformatory:

A visit to this portion of the institution is sufficient to convince anyone of the wonders that kind and considerate treatment will achieve. So far from being obdurate or refractory, as the designation would suggest, they appear, as a rule, happy, healthy and contented. They dance and skip, and sing and laugh, at their work as if they were really amusing and enjoying themselves, instead of following the arduous occupation of the laundry. Attention is paid to their tuition, good and moral habits are inculcated, and their deportment is admittedly excellent (Geelong Advertiser, 31 December 1872).

The main work performed by girls at the Sunbury reformatory was laundering the clothes from other industrial schools.

The girls' reformatory had 20 residents at the end of 1865 and in 1872, there were 31.

The Sunbury reformatory came under public scrutiny in 1874 following the death of 17 year old Juliana Bennett. After her death of pulmonary consumption, a board was appointed to inquire into the treatment she had received whilst an inmate at Sunbury. The inquiry was told that Juliana had been punished by being placed in a cell, which was wet, leading her to develop a cough.

Under questioning, the superintendent stated that the longest period he had ever sent a girl to a cell was one week. The matron was also found to have "unlimited power" to beat the girls with a cane. An article in the *Weekly Times* claimed that the powers of the matron and superintendent at Sunbury to inflict punishments "would be beyond the reach of a bench of magistrates" (*Weekly Times*, 28 February 1874). The newspaper was critical of the finding that Juliana's death had nothing to do with the way she had been treated at the reformatory:

Beating a girl over the back and head with a cane until it broke was declared not to be a severe punishment, and it was also deemed that locking her up in a cold cell in wet clothes could, or did not, have anything to do with the cold and cough which ended in her death. No disinterested medical evidence was called, neither was there anyone present to examine the witnesses except the judges who had heard the case, but even under these one-sided circumstances enough was elicited to suggest that there is much more still concealed than has been brought to light. It would appear that there is room for another investigation into the management of this institution, but to be satisfactory and conclusive it should be entrusted to gentlemen unconnected with the Government service, and should be conducted by a properly qualified examiner of witnesses, who would sift suspicious hints to the bottom, and make the most out of authenticated facts.

In July 1875, an article in the *Australasian* reported that the girls at Sunbury Reformatory were soon to be moved to a new building at Pentridge (Coburg), which was being constructed by prison labour.

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