Entry type: Organisation
Entry ID: AWE0611

Melbourne Orphan Asylum (Vic.)

(1853 -)

Born	18530101, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Occupation	Welfare organisation

Summary

The Melbourne Orphan Asylum was established in 1853 to provide residential care for orphans. It evolved out of the Dorcas Society, which was the first women's organisation to be established in Melbourne in 1845 on the initiative of Mrs George Cooper and Mrs William Knight and the St James' Visiting Society. It aimed to assist the most vulnerable members of society by providing emergency support for families and almost unintentionally launched into residential care work with children. The St James' Visiting Society became the St James' Orphan Asylum and Visiting Society in 1851, and in 1853 the Melbourne Orphan Asylum.

Details

Initially run by a committee of 'ladies', with Mrs Perry, wife of the Bishop of Melbourne, president, they had to accept occasional assistance from a committee of 'gentlemen', as married women were not permitted to hold property in their own names or to act as trustees. A Committee of Gentlemen was formed in 1854 to assist the Ladies Committee. The rules adopted imposed a men's business committee on the existing committee of ladies. Despite this unusual arrangement, it was the first organisation in the colony to include both men and women. Rule four of the new constitution stated that the Asylum was to be 'under the government of a president, six clergymen and six laymen of the various evangelical branches of the protestant church, elected annually by subscribers. The ladies became the junior partners, allocated the 'management of the domestic affairs of the institution'. Eventually the two separate committees had merged into one by 1875 when the Melbourne Orphan Asylum was incorporated. By-law 11 abolished the dual committee system , making provision for a single committee of eighteen men, including five ministers and twelve women.

The Asylum was conducted on principles of the Christian religion of the evangelical branches of the protestant church. Orphans were admitted regardless of their parents' creed or country. A matron was appointed to run the Asylum and orphans' relatives were permitted to visit only once a month.

It occupied its first site in Emerald Hill from March 1856, then made the decision in 1876 to sell the Emerald Hill site and move to Brighton. By 1883 the address was 'Windermere', Butler St, Middle Brighton. This institution remained in operation until attitudes to the welfare of children changed during the 1950s to embrace the family group, rather than the child alone, as the centre of welfare policy. This meant that the model of normal family life should also be applied to residential care. In February 1958 the Committee agreed to experiment with three family group homes. By 1963 the new headquarters were located at Glen Waverley, and all the children were housed in fourteen family group homes. This changed concept was reflected in the name change in 1965 to the Melbourne Family Care Organisation and in 1987 to Family Action.

Published resources

Book
Asylum to action: family action 1851-1991, a history of services and policy development for families in times of vulnerability, Jaggs, Donella, 1991

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

State Library of Victoria
Records of the Melbourne Orphan Asylum, [manuscript]

Anne's story, 1974. [manuscript].

National Library of Australia, Pictures Collection
Melbourne Protestant Orphan Asylum, Emerald Hill [picture] / A. Willmore sc

Royal Historical Society of Victoria Inc
Miscellaneous papers re Melbourne Benevolent Institutions

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