

Government Reformatory for Girls, Coburg

1875 – 1893

Other Names:

- Protestant Girls' Reformatory
- Jika Reformatory for Protestant Girls

Details

The Government Reformatory for Girls in Coburg was established in 1875. The first reformatory for girls in the colony of Victoria was at [Sunbury](#), established in 1865.

The new premises in Coburg were “in immediate contiguity” to Pentridge Prison, in what was later known as G Division. The girls’ reformatory operated there from 1875 until 1895 when it closed. At this time it was also known as the Jika Reformatory for Girls.

The girls’ proximity to prisoners, not to the mention to the city, caused the government to consider relocating the reformatory to more appropriate surroundings. The Secretary of the Department reported in 1891 of how the next “desirable site” for the reformatory would be distant from the prison, the city, and also inaccessible to the girls’ relatives and former associates, “whose visits almost invariably have been found to have an evil influence and very unsettling effect on the girls”.

An article from May 1875 stated that another industrial reformatory school for the reception of girls was being erected “inside the wall of the Pentridge Stockade”. It was located opposite the superintendent’s quarters, not far from the boys’ reformatory. “Buildings are to be enclosed by a high wall, so as to prevent any communication with the other department”. It said that as soon as the buildings were completed, girls would be transferred from Sunbury to their new abode. The new reformatory was intended to accommodate from 40 to 50 inmates (*The Argus*, 25 May 1875).

At the reformatory, girls were trained in domestic service, sewing and doing the laundry of private citizens in the area.

The department’s annual report for 1881 stated that the year began with 29 girls and ended with 38 girls at the Reformatory. During the year, 13 had been sent out to service, 8 discharged and 7 transferred to other institutions. There had been 26 new admissions and 11 readmissions. The report noted that the reformatory’s Ladies Committee took a great interest in the girls’ welfare, present and future, and thanked them for their “in defatigable endeavours to place them in suitable situations on their becoming eligible to leave the Reformatory”.

The 1883 annual report noted that the reformatory’s location within Pentridge was undesirable, and that the department was seeking country premises. It stated that that there had been some improvements to the buildings, by building a small yard in the yard “for the isolation of depraved or insubordinate girls”. It comprised four roomy sleeping cells, an attendants’ room and a separate playground. The department noted that the cells would also be available in the event of an outbreak of an infectious disease.

In 1884 the matron reported that there were 36 girls at the start of the year, and 29 at the end of December. They worked doing knitting, needlework, washing and ironing. Her report stated that it was “exceedingly desirable” for girls to remain at the reformatory until they reached the age of 18 and recommended that the new planned legislation adopt this age for committals. “Had the present practice of extension of term in the case of Reformatory girls to the age of 18 been observed in former years, I have little doubt that several of our girls who are now utterly lost would have been saved to themselves and to society”.

That year, the Chief Justice of South Australia had visited the girls reformatory at Coburg and written the following in the visitors book:

I deeply regret to find an institution of this kind housed within the walls of a Prison. The walls of the prison, the sight of the warders, and the knowledge that convicts are separated from them by only a few yards, must suggest to the girls that they are prisoners also, instead of being scholars learning habits of industry, of virtue, and of self-reliance. I should think also, that the locality will create a prejudice against the girls when they go out to service, and increase the difficulty of obtaining suitable places for them.

In 1885, the annual report stated that they were still seeking country premises for the reformatory. They wrote that it would be desirable to secure other quarters for the girls in the “A” class, where they might be gradually accustomed to more liberty. “Girls who get the good conduct badge are put in class A and allowed the occasional holiday to go out for a walk or otherwise enjoy themselves”. The annual report stated that the Ladies Committee had sent a deputation with the reformatory matron to visit the [Shaftesbury Home](#) in Sydney. They reported back that Shaftesbury was “charmingly situated” and its girls “appeared to be quite under home discipline, but the place is surrounded by high walls and the Matron confirmed the opinion of the visitors that even a probationary home ought to be safely guarded”.

In 1886, the department established [Woodlands](#) in the adjacent suburb of South Preston, a probationary training school for the better behaved residents of the Coburg reformatory. It was reported that Woodlands was proving to be “a very effectual help in preparing girls for the change from the close restraints of Coburg to the absolute freedom of a service home”. The goal was still to relocate the reformatory to the country, where the girls could live in a series of cottages “under freer conditions connected to the healthy and remunerative work of a dairy farm”.

The report of the Ladies Visiting Association for 1886 mentioned a “serious disturbance” that had taken place that year, when 3 girls “who had always given considerable trouble, and bore very bad characters” attempted to set fire to a portion of the reformatory, so they could escape during the alarm created. The fire was discovered by attendants before any serious harm was done.

The committee praised the work done in the reformatory’s laundry, claiming that “this one item of training alone is sufficient to place the girls in a position to obtain an honest and profitable livelihood at all times. It also adds to the revenue of the establishment, people outside being glad to avail themselves of the opportunity of having their laundry work so well done”.

The report also stated:

The committee think it exceedingly advisable to discourage, as far as possible, the licensing or discharge of girls to their relatives. No less than three of those who during the year were so discharged (it is true they entered with a very bad record), fell back to evil courses, being found entirely beyond the control of the parents, who in the past had shown their inability to guide and train them respectably.

It described the privileges granted to well-behaved girls at the reformatory: “Small monetary rewards are given to those who do their work in a satisfactory manner, besides an occasional half-holiday to go out for a walk or

otherwise enjoy themselves. It is also considered a privilege to attend the singing class on Saturday afternoons. This, I consider, exercises a softening and womanising influence upon the girls, and helps greatly with their education”.

The 1888 annual report noted that the reformatory was prevented from placing girls out to service before the age of 15. This was only possible if the employer was prepared to provide the girl with daily home teaching, and most employers were “indisposed to undertake” this.

The annual report for 1888 stated that 6 girls had been handed over from the government reformatory to the new private [Brookside](#) reformatory. In 1890, an editorial in the *Age* lauded the private reformatory known as Brookside and compared its farm life with the conditions facing girls at Coburg. It posed the question, “Can no one else be found to emulate this truly noble example?”

The 1890 annual report noted that “the percentage of Reformatory girls who are of respectable parentage is decidedly smaller than that of the boys. It is, therefore, the aim of those in charge of them, as far as possible, to prevent their return home on the cessation of the departmental control. The methods adopted to secure this end are-First, to place the girl, at the earliest moment it is deemed judicious and safe to do so, in the position of a wage-earner, with employers interested in her welfare, and at a distance from cities and old associations; and, secondly, to arrange, whenever practicable, that she shall be in such service at the date when control ceases”.

At the start of 1890 there were 26 girls at the reformatory, and the year ended with 18 inmates. The annual report mentioned “a brief disturbance” early in the year, “owing to a few discontented spirits combining to try to get away from the school to regain their liberty. The offence was summarily dealt with by the Matron, with the Secretary’s knowledge and concurrence. The girls have since apologised, and have tried in every way to make amends for the trouble they gave, and I am pleased to add that since then their conduct has been exceptionally good”.

The 1891 annual report again spoke of the private Brookside reformatory in glowing terms: “The excellent results hitherto obtained in this school have been fully maintained, and the mere fact that of the 93 girls who have passed under Mrs. Rowe’s reformatory treatment since the 29th December, 1887, in not a single instance is one known to be leading an immoral life, and that all can be accounted for, speaks for itself”.

The Jika Reformatory for Girls closed in 1893. From this time, the department used private reformatories and the Coburg residents were allocated to either the reformatory at Brookside, the [Roman Catholic Reformatory for Girls at Oakleigh](#), or the [Albion Reformatory for Girls](#) in Brunswick, run by the Salvation Army.

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Department of Industrial and Reformatory Schools, Colony of Victoria \(1864 - 1887\)](#)
Date: 1864? - 1887
- [Department for Reformatory Schools, Colony of Victoria \(1887 - 1900\)](#)
Date: 1887 - 1893

Related Organisations

- [Woodlands Home \(1886 - 1889\)](#)
Woodlands Home was a training school for selected inmates of the Government Reformatory for Girls, Coburg.
- [Convent of the Good Shepherd, Oakleigh \(1883 - 1981\)](#)
- [Brunswick Girls' Home \(1892 - 1902\)](#)
- [Brookside Private Reformatory for Protestant Girls \(1887 - 1903\)](#)

Resources

- Lynn, Peter, [Pentridge Prison](#), eMelbourne: the city past and present, 2008
- [A Reformatory School Sensation](#), Colac Herald, 26 January 1892
- [State Children: Abolishing Barrack Reformatories](#), South Australian Register, 15 March 1894
- Victoria. Children's Welfare Department and Reformatory Schools, [Report of the Secretary / Department for Neglected Children and Reformatory Schools](#), 1887 - 1895. *Relevance:* Mentioned in reports dated 1888-1893

Records

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

Records

- [Victorian Government Wardship and/or Out of Home Care Records \(1864 - current\)](#)
-

You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/government-reformatory-girls-coburg/>