

Brookside Private Reformatory for Protestant Girls

1887 – 1903

Other Names:

- Girls' Protestant Reformatory, Glenfine
- Brookside Reformatory
- Brookside Private Cottage Reformatory for Girls

Details

The Brookside Private Reformatory for Protestant Girls was established in 1887 by Mrs W. T. Rowe. It was located at Glenfine, and later in the town of Cape Clear, near Scarsdale. Many girls ended up in Brookside after unsuccessful boarding out or foster care placements. It closed in 1903.

The Brookside Private Reformatory for Protestant Girls was established on 29 December 1887 by Mrs W. T. Rowe. In a visit to Brookside in 1890 reported on in the *Age*, the author 'Mem' describes Mrs Rowe as 'a lady who has made it her life work to assist in the rescue of young girls whose surroundings have, almost inevitably in most cases, brought them into trouble' (Farm life for reformatory girls, 1890). It was initially established at Glenfine, and soon moved to more extensive premises in the town of Cape Clear, near Scarsdale.

Brookside was a private, or 'assisted', reformatory, made possible by the [Juvenile Offenders Act 1887](#), which was assented to only weeks before the opening of Brookside. The government paid 5 shillings a week towards the maintenance of girls in the reformatory. (The government also ran a reformatory for girls in Coburg, and one for boys in Ballarat.) A government report from 1890 stated that Mrs Rowe and the Good Shepherd Sisters (who ran reformatories at Abbotsford and Oakleigh) 'have the same entire control and guardianship over their wards as that enjoyed by the Superintendent of the Boys' Reformatory, a Government institution'.

The 1872 Report of the Royal Commission on Reformatory and Industrial Schools had commended the reformatory work of the Good Shepherd Sisters with Catholic girls, and stated the 'extreme desirability' of work with Protestant girls being in private, rather than government, hands. The Secretary urged the same in the Departmental Report of 1886, leading to the establishment of Brookside in 1887.

The Department saw Brookside's rural location as ideal for such an institution, being 'away from large towns, gold-fields and factories, and surrounded within moderate distances by the residences of suitable employers'. Another benefit, according to the Secretary of the Department, was the 'absolute separation from disreputable friends and relatives'. The reformatory was about giving the young women an "involuntary retirement" from the sins of city life. The Department of Industrial and Reformatory Schools considered country life to be the "most steadying of influences" for young people, and wanted all private reformatories to be situated as distant as possible from Melbourne and large towns. (annual report, 1888, p.50).

Mrs Rowe lived in an "elegant and hospitable home" at Glenfine, which was located around 9 miles away from the Brookside reformatory, which was on an estate described as "80 square miles of splendid pastoral country". The Brookside residents lived in a "modest group of cottages" (*Ballarat Star*, 9 June 1894). The 1888 annual report of the Department described Brookside's buildings as being "of a rough and homely farmlike character, consisting of a four-roomed stone cottage, with weatherboard additions and iron roof. A new iron washhouse and

store had lately been erected. The buildings are on rising ground sloping down to the Western Creek, which creek is a source of unending interest to the girls (p.11). Another article from 1895 described the houses for the inmates as well-ventilated with a "clean, cheerful look, and to a stranger have nothing of the Reformatory type about them" (*Ballarat Star*, 28 October 1895).

When Brookside opened at Glenfine in 1887 it had room for 6 girls. By 1890 the Brookside Reformatory had moved to Cape Clear and had an average of 20 girls in residence. The continual increase in numbers at Brookside from its opening led to the establishment of a number of sub-reformatories at nearby Pitfield, Fairhaven, Rokewood, and Heywood .

A news article from 1894 stated that Rokewood housed the "physically helpless and mentally weak" of the reformatory's residents. The "small establishment" at Fairhaven was for girls with more "turbulent spirits" (*Ballarat Star*, 9 June 1894).

The same article described the work done by the Brookside residents: milking cows, making butter, baking bread, drawing and carrying water from the well, chopping and carting firewood and cultivating the gardens for both food and flowers. The superintendent Mrs Rowe wrote a letter about the work done by Brookside residents:

The extent of ground we have at Brookside is a great advantage in the work. Live stock has many charms for young folk, and especially for those who have been shut up within brick walls, as are the girls at Coburg. Hand-reared calves are the delight of their hearts. The pig-feeding, common and uninteresting as it may appear to the general mind, is a great source of gratification and honour to the girl who is, for the space of a current week, 'on the pigs,' as they insist upon terming it. We have been intensely amused at this phrase. The girl who is waiting on the parlour for the week is stated to be 'on the table,' another is 'on the kitchen'; in fact, since we added a baby to our establishment, we have been amused by hearing 'so-and-so is on the baby.'

Monday is devoted to washing, if moderately fine, and though the younger children are at school as usual, there is no sewing in the afternoon. Four days in the week all hands do two hours' sewing. Saturday again is devoted to cleaning up. No girls are kept washing after mid-day. At the expense of a little trouble and inconvenience, each girl washes her own clothes. When dry, the things are wrapped up and brought for inspection ; if passed as really clean, they are then folded down for ironing. Before being put away they are mended by the owner, who gets a small money reward if the washing, ironing, and mending has been well done. A penny earned in this way makes its owner very happy (annual report 1888, pp.12-13).

"The baby" referred to above was a two-year-old Aboriginal boy, "a protégé of one of Mrs Rowe's daughters, who is for the time being having a holiday stay at Brookside" (Mem, Farm life for reformatory girls, 1890).

By the end of 1891 there were 25 girls in residence at Brookside, and by the end of 1892, with the closing of the Coburg Government Reformatory for Girls, numbers at Brookside had risen to 47.

In the Department's annual report for 1893 it was reported that numbers of girls in residence at Brookside had fallen slightly to 43, and as a consequence the matron was considering closing the sub-reformatory at Rokewood. However in February 1897 another sub-reformatory, St Ann's at Heywood, had opened, receiving an initial 10 girls from the approximately 40 in residence at Brookside. A second cottage, known as 'No. 2', had also opened on the Brookside estate at this time, with each Brookside cottage housing approximately 15 girls.

Brookside's remote situation meant that absconding was 'practically unknown'. This was also mentioned by 'Mem' in the Age report:

There is no lock and key supervision here, but liberty to scamper among the fields, full and free trust when the cows have to be brought home, hay has to be made in the paddock beyond the Creek, or the wood cart has to be loaded in the forest land still further away ... Green fields, I'm sure most people will agree, are a very much more wholesome restraint than iron bolts and bars.

Older and younger girls were housed separately at Brookside, Mem noted with approval, so that young girls were protected from 'contamination' by the older and more worldly girls.

Many girls ended up in Brookside after unsuccessful boarding out or foster care placements.

Punishment at Brookside was described by Mem as 'neither severe nor frequently inflicted'. Girls being punished had to perform their usual duties for three days without companionship, that is, not in solitary confinement, but not allowed to talk to the others.

Girls usually went from Brookside to a 'service home'. Mem wrote that demand for the girls' services from local squatters and farmers were 'more numerous than could be granted'. Ladies from Brookside continued contact with girls once they were placed in service, and records were kept of all correspondence with each girl and of their 'career' post-reformatory.

Mem reflected that the barracks system operating at the Boys' Reformatory at Ballarat would not be suitable for girls, as training in domestic service cannot be provided in such conditions.

In 1899, newspaper articles criticised the conditions at Brookside Reformatory. This coverage resulted from the claims of a group of girls who had absconded from the Reformatory, about their harsh treatment at Brookside. The girls told police about punishments including floggings, having their hair cut, being confined to bed, and bread-and-water diets. However, an article in the *Argus* reported that all the girls unanimously exonerated Mrs Rowe.

Staff from the Department of Industrial Schools held a subsequent inquiry into the girls' claims.

A newspaper article from August 1899 stated that Mrs Rowe was superintendent of Brookside, but that she lived at Glenfine, eight miles away. Miss King and Miss Hamilton managed the girls at Brookside. Nine girls were living in one cottage, and four in another cottage.

The journalist discussed Miss King's qualifications as a matron at Brookside. Despite having the 'best of motives', he doubted that Miss King's past experiences as a machinist in Ballarat, and working as a biblewoman with the Wesleyan mission qualified her to 'venture into a field like this'.

Miss Hamilton, although also untrained, was described as 'in every way a better stamp of woman', being more intelligent and kindly than Miss King.

Of the girls and young woman at Brookside, the article declared that they were probably some of the Department's 'hardest cases', almost all of them 'grossly immoral'.

The 'Special Reporter' concluded that:

the authorities at Brookside are untrained and unsuitable for their difficult task; that the system pursued is antiquated and non-reformatory in its effects; and that the inspection is so inefficient and casual as to be practically a negligible quantity.

An editorial in the *Argus* on 4 August 1899 declared, 'It is a growing scandal in Australia that the vast state contributions to charitable institutions are unaccompanied by adequate state supervision'.

On 10 August 1899 in the Legislative Assembly, the Under-Secretary made his rejoinder to claims published in *The Argus* about Brookside and private reformatories in general, defending the Department's management and oversight of the institution.

In August 1900, the matron, Miss King, purchased the Brookside Estate upon which the Reformatory was situated. Brookside closed in 1903, with the Department's annual report for that year citing unsatisfactory accommodation and management as the reason for the closure. The remaining girls at Brookfield were sent to Mintaro Reformatory at Lancefield Junction.

More info

Related Entries

Ran

- [St Ann's Reformatory for Protestant Girls \(1896 - c. 1905\)](#)
St Ann's was established as a sub-reformatory of Brookside
Date: 1896 - 1899

Related Legislation

- [The Juvenile Offenders' Act 1887, Victoria \(1888 - 1890\)](#)
The Brookside Private Reformatory was established under the provisions of the Juvenile Offenders' Act 1887.

Related Organisations

- [Government Reformatory for Girls, Coburg \(1864? - 1893\)](#)
- [Mintaro Reformatory Home for Girls \(1903 - 1912\)](#)
Following the closure of Brookside the remaining girls in residence were sent to Mintaro.

Resources

- Golding, Frank, *Orphanages in Ballarat - brief historical notes (draft)*, 2009
- Victoria. Children's Welfare Department and Reformatory Schools, [Report of the Secretary / Department for Neglected Children and Reformatory Schools](#), 1887 - 1895
- Maunders, David, *Two different worlds: cultural and political conflict in a 19th century boys reformatory*, 1987

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