

Sandhurst Boys' Home

1956 – 2016

Other Names:

- Sandhurst Boys' Centre
- Sandhurst Centre
- Bendigo Training Centre

Details

The Sandhurst Boys' Home was an institution for adolescent boys with intellectual disabilities, run by the Mental Hygiene Branch of the Department of Health. It was located in Finn Street, Bendigo. The residents received 'training' in various occupations and some older residents were placed in work in the Bendigo area. In 2010, it was known as the Sandhurst Centre and was part of the Department of Human Services' Disability Services division. Sandhurst closed in 2016, with residents moved to purpose-built residential homes operated by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Sandhurst Boys' Home was located in Finn Street, Bendigo, on the site of the former Commonwealth Ordnance Factory. After World War Two, the site was used for a time as accommodation for migrant workers, some of whom lived in Nissen huts. Remnants of the Nissen huts remain on the site in 2021.

In 1954, it was reported that the Bendigo migrant hostel was being taken over by the Mental Hygiene Authority as a training centre. The centre would provide accommodation for up to 100 adolescents with intellectual disabilities (The *Herald* 26 August 1954). The Mental Hygiene Authority's annual report for 1955 stated that it had successfully opened a training school for adolescent boys in Bendigo. It opened in March 1955 and was described as an 'unqualified success', the 'improvement in the mental and social outlook of the boys being most noticeable'.

The annual report went on to describe the accommodation – boys were accommodated in huts in groups of 6. The boys did the work to alter the internal partitions of the huts, and were also put to work at the centre doing activities like carpentering, painting and gardening.

David Banfield remembered his time living at Sandhurst:

They used to have old-style Nissen huts, we used to sleep in them. They're all gone now. Well all that area where the Nissen huts were it's been sold and they're now putting houses on it. So it's changed a hell of a lot. We had six people to a Nissen hut, and there was a couple of large Nissen huts that were there as well because the gymnasium or concert hall that we used to have, used to be one huge big Nissen hut sort of a complex.

In its early stages, the number of residents was around 40. The first residents were transferred to Bendigo from Kew and further groups then came from institutions at Stawell and Janefield. Some boys from the training centre played with local junior football clubs and some joined the YMCA. There was an 'active social committee' which organized regular Sunday evening concerts and dances for the boys and visitors. The residents attended local church services on Sundays and received weekly religious instruction from Catholic and Church of England

chaplains.

In the next annual report for 1956, the Mental Hygiene Authority reported that some boys had gone on to employment from the Home. It stated that young men in employment were encouraged to return to the Home from time to time 'to discuss any problems' and to see the training centre as 'home'. Later, the Home put aside 4 beds for ex-Hostel boys to visit and stay at the Centre.

By 1958, the number of residents at what was being called the Bendigo Training Centre had increased to 86. Training at the home now included boot repairing and a poultry farm. The Mental Hygiene Authority reported that although some boys had been found 'useful outside jobs', 'it will now be necessary to weed out those boys who are incapable of benefiting from the training. Most of these will need institutional care and only the mental hospital can supply this'. The secretary Mr Nugent wrote in the annual report that 'unsuccessful boys' should not be allowed to 'stagnate' at the training centre.

Describing the training residents received at Sandhurst, David Banfield said the idea was to teach residents a trade and get them out in the community. 'Like they had one area was an engineer' shop, they had a boot shop, and a carpenter's shop, and there was both a veggie and an ornamental garden. They had a paint shop as well. I worked in the boot shop', David explained. 'Mending government shoes, all that sort of thing, making government slippers, for nearly all the major institutions that they had at the time, like Sunbury, Coolanda [the Colanda Centre in Colac] and all that. We made all the shoes for 'em.'

In the 1960s, the Home had an active Scout Troop which participated in local scouting functions. In 1961 some members attended the international Jamboree in the Dandenongs. In the report for 1971, the Home was called the Sandhurst Boys' Centre and was classified as an 'intellectual deficiency service'. That year there were around 70 residents, who worked to prepare new residential and administrative buildings on the site. The move into the new Centre took place in January 1972 and the buildings were officially opened in November 1972 by the Minister for Health.

In 1974, the boys had a float in the annual Moomba Parade and were awarded the Chairman's trophy for 'the best float by a first time entrant'.

The Mental Health Authority annual report for 1975 made reference to a planning committee, which was considering further development of intellectual disability services in the Loddon-Campaspe region, and noted that the trend was towards small local units rather than a large institution in Bendigo. Some residential units in the region had been opened by 1979.

Throughout its existence, many residents at Sandhurst lived there for long periods and continued to visit the Home after leaving. One former resident, Claude, talked about leaving the Home when he was 27 years old and given a packaging job in Melbourne. He returned to live in Bendigo in 1986, after work and living arrangements in Melbourne fell through. He talked to the newspaper about his daily life walking around Bendigo, and sometimes being treated poorly by people who were ignorant about mental illnesses like schizophrenia. One of Claude's friends said to the newspaper: 'Unfortunately, those fellows who were tucked away in the Sandhurst Boys' Home were out of the public eye ... and he's trying to integrate himself into society' (The Bendigo Advertiser, 5 December 2008).

By 2013, it was known as the Sandhurst Centre, an institution for men and women with disabilities, and one of the last of its kind in Victoria. Its impending closure was announced in May 2013. The ABC reported that 'the then-Coalition government's plan to contract out the provision of care to private operators triggered a long campaign from staff and families, under the banner of Certainty for Sandhurst'. A Labor government was elected in 2014 and offered residents the option of staying under departmental care in new government-run care homes. This option was voted for unanimously and the Sandhurst Centre's last 30 residents were moved in these new homes in 2016 (ABC, 20 July 2016).

Gallery



Former Sandhurst Boys' Centre, Bendigo

Description: This is an image of the former site of the Sandhurst Boys' Centre in Bendigo. The Nissen huts which made up some of the buildings are visible.

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Resources

- Sheedy, Anthony James, [Submission no 283 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- Savidis, Penny, [Sex abuse Royal Commission urged to hold public meetings in regional Victoria](#), Ryan Carlisle Thomas Lawyers, 2014
- [Ken Merton interviewed by Lesley Alves in the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project \(28 October 2011\)](#), 28 October 2011

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