

Carlton Refuge

c. 1854 – 1949

Other Names:

- Protestant Refuge
- Carlton Home
- South Carlton Home for Fallen Women

Details

The Carlton Refuge was a non-denominational institution established in 1857 to 'reform' women working in prostitution. From 1860 the Refuge accommodated mothers and their babies, and over time offered care to 'neglected' children, training in mothercraft and other related services. The Refuge closed in 1949.

The Carlton Refuge was a non-denominational institution established in 1857, guided by Protestant Evangelical principles, to target and reform 'fallen women' (women engaged in sex work and single mothers).

The operations of the Refuge shifted away from this original aim – by 1860 it was accommodating single mothers and their babies after they were discharged from hospital. By 1880, most of its residents were single mothers.

Over time, its functions expanded further to include care for 'neglected' children, training for mothercraft and infant welfare nurses, accommodation for married mothers and their babies (including women from regional areas), and other services.

The Refuge at Carlton was the first female refuge in Victoria. (Other female rescue institutions were established in Victoria in the 1860s, at Ballarat and Geelong, as well as the Catholic rescue home at Abbotsford run by the Good Shepherd Sisters.) The Carlton Refuge took its aims and objectives from London Magdalen Hospital, which was established in 1758.

Its 1866 annual report outlined the aims of the Carlton Refuge:

To provide a refuge for females who have fallen into vice, and who are desirous to return to the paths of virtue ... To reclaim them from their evil courses, and fit them to become useful members of society ... To assist in procuring them situations, or otherwise providing for them on leaving the Institution.

According to this report, the Refuge also attended to the 'restoration of the bodily health of the inmates; and to the inculcation of proper religious feelings and principles'. This was achieved through prayer and hard work, mainly in the institution's laundry.

From around 1860, the Refuge was moving away from its original 'reformatory' ideals, and increasingly taking in single mothers and their babies, following their discharge from hospital. While the institution focused on mothers, it is evident that the Refuge also accommodated some babies and children after their mothers were discharged. However, the historical sources contain many references to the Refuge's approach of encouraging unmarried mothers to keep their babies if possible.

In 1890, MJ Allen, honorary secretary of the Refuge wrote to the *Age* newspaper, and described the institution:

In this institution each mother nurses and tends to her own child, and the inmates stay for twelve months and often longer if the child is delicate. During their stay in the Refuge the women receive such instruction as will fit them to be efficient domestic servants. Before they go out a situation is obtained for them, and an outfit (to last the mother 3 or 4 months, and the child 12 months) is given them (The Age, 22 March 1890, p.13)

In 1890, the address of the Refuge changed from Madeline Street (later known as the northern end of Swanston Street) to Keppel Street, Carlton. The Refuge continued to be housed in the same buildings.

In 1907, Archbishop Clark opened new buildings at the Refuge, for administration and a dormitory. He reflected on how the Refuge's approach to single mothers and their children had changed since the 1850s. Its traditional reformatory approach 'had become increasingly unappealing'. He stated that the Refuge was intended for

unfortunate, friendless girls about to become mothers ... The inmates were tenderly taken care of and at the birth of their children they were given every encouragement and attention. What was more, the infants were looked after with the greatest care.

Evidently some of the residents of the Carlton Refuge would not describe their time at the institution as favourably as the Archbishop. One article from 1890 stated that it was not "unfrequent" for "girls" to leave the Refuge by scaling the wall at night, leaving their child behind to become "a burden upon the State" (*The Age*, 25 March 1890, p.6).

An article from 1934, by which time the institution was known as the Carlton Home, describes it as being "for the unprotected girl mother" and its location as "within easy walking distance of the Women's Hospital" in Cardigan Street. It contains an account of conditions in the institution:

Throughout their stay, inmates are provided with all necessary clothing, and are expected to be neat and tidy in person and dress.

The girls occupy separate rooms, simply, but comfortably, furnished, several being brightened by individual belongings, such as nick-knacks and pictures ... Lessons in cookery, in correct methods of washing and ironing, and in the making of baby clothes, are given, with the object of training the girls in household duties, and fitting them, later on, to take and creditably fill positions which the Home does its best to obtain for them.

Some few of the girls, with their babies, return to their parents, others leave their infants in the care of the institution, and pay towards their maintenance a small sum, regulated according to individual circumstances. In some instances, babies are adopted or boarded out (Weekly Times, 16 June 1934, p.25).

An article from the wartime years described how the Carlton Home was helping mothers married to servicemen by caring for their children while their mother was in hospital. It stated that there had been no deaths at the Home for the last 7 years, with "modern baby health and mothercraft methods" greatly helping to maintain a high standard of health for babies (*The Argus*, 19 August 1943, p.6).

The Carlton Home closed in 1949. It held its final annual meeting in August 1949 "after 92 years' continuous service to the community". Around 3800 mothers from around Victoria and some from interstate, and 3959 babies

had passed through its doors. Reasons given for its closure included the opening of organisations doing similar work, changing social and economic conditions, resulting in greatly diminished applications for admittance, and a scarcity of nursing staff, shorter working hours and higher wages (The *Argus*, 23 August 1949, p.10).

Two years later, another institution for mothers and babies operated on the same site, the Queen Elizabeth Maternal and Child Health Centre and Infants Hospital. This centre closed in 1997.

Gallery



Former Carlton Refuge, Keppel St

Description: The Victorian Heritage Database has an entry about the Queen Elizabeth Maternal and Child Health Centre (which occupied the former site of the Carlton Refuge from 1951). The entry in the Heritage Database discusses the significance of the site and has several pictures of the remaining buildings from Carlton Refuge.

More info

Resources

- Australian Heritage Council, [A thematic heritage study on Australia's benevolent and other care institutions](#), 2016
- Wickham, Dorothy Glennys, [Beyond the Wall: Ballarat Female Refuge, A Study in Moral Authority](#), 2003
- Swain, Shurlee with Renate Howe, [Single mothers and their children : disposal, punishment and survival in Australia](#), 1995
- Francis, Rosemary, [Carlton Refuge \(1854-1949\)](#), Australian Women's Register, 2010
- Carlton Refuge, [History of children's services: the history of the Carlton Refuge from the 1850's to 1920](#), 1992
- Kernot, M.J., [Reminiscences of the Carlton Refuge, 1854 to 1919](#), 1919
- [Annual report of the Committee of Management: Carlton Refuge \(Vic.\)](#), 1865 - 1930
- [Annual report of the Committee of Management: Carlton Home \(Vic.\)](#), 1931 - 1949

Records

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

Records

- [Records of the Carlton Refuge, 1875-1949 \(1875 - 1949\)](#)
 - ['Closed' Agency and General Correspondence Files \[Charities Board of Victoria\] \(1923 - 1983\)](#)
 - [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
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