

Derby Leprosarium

c. 1936 – 1986

Other Names: • Bungarun

Details

The Derby Leprosarium had opened by December 1936, replacing an earlier 'lazaret' that had been attached to the Derby hospital. With approximately 1200 inmates over its 50 years, it was the largest institution for people with leprosy in Australia (Robson, 2016). Children lived at Derby Leprosarium and some babies were born there. It closed in 1986.

According to the State Heritage Office, by 1909 the site of the Derby Native Hospital 'included a "shed" that was in use as a lazaret (quarantine station for contagious diseases, particularly leprosy)' (Heritage Council, 2017). This site also states that in 1925, Derby's residents with leprosy were relocated to Cossack, in the Pilbara region of WA. In 1925 the Department of Native Affairs took over control of the site of the Hospital.

The Derby Leprosarium was established in the aftermath of the Moseley Royal Commission in Relation to the Condition and Treatment of Aborigines, which reported in 1935. In an interim report from July 1934, Moseley expressed concern at the lack of secure isolation of the patients at the Derby Hospital lazaret. 'There was no fence or any barrier to prevent the people going into town and mixing with the general public' (Robson, 2016). Moseley also condemned the policy of sending patients from WA to the Northern Territory: 'In spite of the utter discomfort and wretchedness obtaining under the present system, the only request I had from the patients was that they should not be sent to Darwin' (Darwin was the site of the Channel Island Leprosarium from 1931 until 1955). As Robson writes, 'The policy, [Moseley] maintained, was counter-productive since the fear of being sent so far from country induced many to abscond' (Robson, 2016).

The first 90 patients at Derby Leprosarium in 1936 came from the Derby Native Hospital.

The first staff members were a married couple, Mr and Mrs Luyer but they were replaced in early 1937 by Wybert and Gladys Powell who were government-appointed managers. Nursing duties were undertaken by Sisters of St John of God who had come from the Beagle Bay Mission. The arrangement for the Sisters of St John of God to provide nursing services at the Derby Leprosarium continued for more than 50 years with more than 1,200 people sent there.

Robson writes that 'By early 1937, there were 90 men, women and children in the leprosarium. 16 were from Beagle Bay Mission, while others had originally come from the various cattle stations in the area where they worked as stock hands, domestics and drovers. Over the ensuing years, people were brought in from other mission stations, schools and town camps. Among them were school children and babies' (Robson, 2016).

Robson describes the conditions in the Derby Leprosarium:

Originally, housing consisted of small huts, each designed for two-four people, however it was decided these were too cramped, and conducive to the spread of the disease. So long dormitory-style buildings were built, and divided into men's and women's quarters. These huts would not have been very comfortable either in the winter or summer, as they were made of galvanized iron. Gender segregation was considered essential, primarily to prevent sexual contact and the birth of children, as these would be at risk of contracting HD [Hansen's disease]. It was not only in housing that we see this segregation; it was in most of the occupations that involved the patients, especially where supervision was minimal ... Segregation policies did not prevent cohabitation between couples, and many babies were born in the leprosarium. They were then immediately taken from their parents and after a period in the Derby Hospital or in the care of the leprosarium Sisters, they were placed in foster care. Some of those babies were frail and several died after short illnesses.

In 1944, Derby Leprosarium was approved as an institution that could receive child endowment. The application stated that Derby Leprosarium 'was established many years ago for the reception and treatment of natives and persons of aboriginal blood suffering from leprosy. No charge is made, institution maintained wholly at the expense of the state'.

At that time, 20 children were under treatment for 'leprosy in various forms'. Correspondence at the National Archives of Australia from April 1944 stated that 'In some cases, their parents are also at the institutions while others are to all intents and purposes, orphans' (NAA, A885, B90). According to a questionnaire on the same file, from 1950, Derby Leprosarium had 11 inmates under the age of 16 at that time (NAA, A885, B90).

Babies born at the Leprosarium were taken to the Derby Native Hospital (1925-1968) after birth. 'This would be to prevent possible infection while many would be sickly from drugs given to their mothers as treatment for Hansens Disease' (Kimberley Community Profile, 2015). The Hospital and the Leprosarium were located on the same site (Heritage Council, 2017).

From 1968, some babies born at Derby Leprosarium went to Maria Goretti Home, a residential nursery and kindergarten run by the Catholic Diocese of Broome.

Maxine Armstrong, a former patient diagnosed in her early 20s, recalled her time at Derby:

When we were admitted as patients it was a different society altogether from what we had lived out there in Derby town. We had to adjust ourselves to that. I can't speak for everybody else, but it is a place of sadness, it's a place of love, it's a place of respect, and it's also our home, because it's what we lived in for so many years (quoted in Park, 2016).

Residents were assigned jobs, the nuns and doctors were attentive, and there was a busy schedule of sport, craft, cooking and music. Quoting Maxine Armstrong again: 'There was beautiful green lawn everywhere and everybody had a thing to do. You had people who worked in the kitchens and people working in the convent, they had chores to do ... The nuns taught the people how to play music – all different things like organ, guitars, the whole lot. They even had their own little band out here'.

The spread of leprosy in Western Australia continued to be serious throughout the 1940s, but by the end of the 1950s outbreaks became less frequent and more isolated (State Solicitor's Office, 2005). By 1986, a cure had been found for leprosy and Derby Leprosarium (also known as Bungarun) was shut down. It was the last leprosarium in Australia to close (Park, 2016).

In 2019, the site houses Juniper Nunbala Nunga, an aged care residential facility.

Gallery



Derby Leprosarium

Description: This is a copy of an image that has the caption: Hospital and administration block, Derby Leprosarium.

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Public Health Department, State Government of Western Australia \(1911 - 1984\)](#)
- [Health Department, State Government of Western Australia \(1984 - current\)](#)

Related Events

- [Royal Commission to Investigate, Report and Advise upon Matters in Relation to the Condition and Treatment of Aborigines 1935, State of Western Australia \(1934? - 1935\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Beagle Bay Mission \(1895 - 1976\)](#)
- [Maria Goretti Home \(1968 - 1974\)](#)
- [Sisters of St John of God \(1895 - current\)](#)

The Sisters of St John of God undertook nursing duties at Derby Leprosarium.

- [Channel Island Leprosarium \(1931 - 1955\)](#)

Before the establishment of the Derby Leprosarium, some patients were sent to the Channel Island Leprosarium in Darwin.

Resources

- Robson, Charmaine, [Care and control: the Catholic religious and Australia's twentieth-century 'Indigenous' leprosaria 1937-1986](#), 2012

Records

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

Records

- [Derby Leprosarium/ Hansens Disease/ Patients Monthly Return \(1976 - 1981\)](#)
 - [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
 - [Files - Community Welfare \("A" Series\), State Records Office of Western Australia \(25 August 1908 - 23 December 1990\)](#)
 - [Files - Aborigines Departments \(1 January 1926 - 16 June 1972\)](#)
 - [Patient Record Cards, Derby Leprosarium \(1935 - 1986\)](#)
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