

# Holy Cross Retreat

13 October 1889 – 1978

**Other Names:**

- Magdalen Asylum, Woolloowin
- Holy Cross Magdalen Asylum, Woolloowin
- Holy Cross Retreat and Infants Home

## Details

---

Holy Cross Retreat or Magdalen Asylum, in Woolloowin, was operated by the Sisters of Mercy, Brisbane Congregation. It opened in 1889 as a home for unmarried mothers, disabled girls and infants. It ceased operating as a home for very young children in 1959. From 1974 it no longer cared for children but provided continuing care for physically and intellectually disabled persons and single mothers. In 1978 its function changed to a centre for intellectually and physically disabled persons and was renamed Mercy Centre.

Mother Mary Vincent was instrumental in the establishment of Holy Cross Retreat. She came to Queensland from Ireland in 1861.

The Holy Cross Retreat foundation stone was laid on Sunday 22nd April 1888 by Archbishop Dr Dunne. The Holy Cross Retreat was then opened 13th October 1889 by the Governor Sir Henry Norman. This institution was also referred to as the Magdalen Asylum. The girls worked in the laundry which was co-located on the site. State Government funds contributed to the running of the institution.

Holy Cross Retreat was licensed in 1895 under the *Orphanages Act 1879*, then under the *State Children Act 1911*. It was licensed again under the *Children's Services Act 1965*.

In 1904, the [Industrial School for Girls](#), also run by the Sisters of Mercy, was established on the same site as the Holy Cross Retreat. In 1966, this institution was known as [Holy Cross Home](#).

An article from 1937 describes Holy Cross Retreat as a “home for wayward and unprotected girls and for the infants of unmarried mothers” (*Courier-Mail*, 4 May 1937).

Holy Cross Retreat was mentioned in the *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices Report* (2012) as an institution that was involved in forced adoption.

A woman who was at the institution in the mid 1960s made a submission to the Senate inquiry into forced adoptions. She wrote:

*My mother had been told that I was to dress in white – and only white – during my stay there, so we had sewn plain white smocks in the weeks beforehand.*

*A nun met us at the door and spoke to my mother in a small office not far from the stairs leading to the upper floors and a short while after that, I said goodbye to my mother and was then led upstairs to a dormitory. On the way up the stairs, the nun told me that usually girls were given another name during their stay in the home but that since there was no one else at the home called Margaret at that time, I would be allowed to retain my proper name. However, I was cautioned not to tell anyone that that was my real name, nor reveal anything about myself to anyone else which would allow them to identify me in "real life". Nor was I to ask anyone else about any of their personal details. My hair was very long then and the nun also warned me that if I took too long in the showers, it would be cut off.*

*The dormitory contained cubicles which ran along either side of a long room, each one containing two narrow beds, a single wardrobe and a curtain for privacy across the front of the cubicle. There were bars on the windows ...*

*Life in Holy Cross was harsh, punitive and impersonal. A pall of shame and disapproval covered everyone. It was common to hear girls called "stupid", "foolish", "wicked" and "sinful". What struck me in the beginning of my time there was that all of the girls seemed cowed and abnormally quiet. Everyone was required to go to mass regardless of their religion. There was an alcove off the side of the altar where the girls were out of view of the congregation ...*

*There were no antenatal classes or any information at all about pregnancy and birth. The fact that we were pregnant at all was largely ignored by the nuns, though if our pregnancy was mentioned, our babies were always referred to as the baby". If talk of labour or anything related to pregnancy came up in conversation and was overheard by one of the nuns, it was actively discouraged and the group dispersed. We were all as ignorant of childbirth as one another, so any information gleaned from these conversations was mostly hearsay or conjecture.*

*The days at the home were long. All the girls were expected to work in the laundry, unpaid, for eight hours, Monday to Friday, and then again until midday on Saturday ...*

*Girls who had come from the other side of Brisbane or from provincial towns or interstate, or even overseas (there was one from New Zealand), were permitted to go for walks to the shops at Lutwyche once a week. I wasn't allowed out at all because my home was at Kedron and there was considered to be a high risk that I would encounter someone who knew me. So, other than my short journeys to [the doctor's] surgery, I spent my entire confinement behind locked doors at the home (submission no 190).*

A publication from 1976 states that until 1973, women at the Holy Cross Retreat paid no board but worked in its laundry. It described the current situation where women did pay board as well as working "light duties" for a few hours per day. The same book reports that since 1970 there had been a decline in the number of single mothers at Holy Cross Retreat, with the institution having accommodated 155 women since 1970. However the number of women with disabilities in the Home had remained "fairly constant". Holy Cross Retreat accommodated 31 women with disabilities and 14 of them worked in the commercial laundry which was classified as a "sheltered workshop". Eight other women came to Holy Cross daily to work in the laundry. The book stated that in March 1976 a Day Care Centre for children and adults with disabilities was open once a month at Holy Cross (Ann Amen, 1976, pp.38-39).

## Gallery



**Magdalene Asylum at Woolloowin, Brisbane, 1937**

**Description:** The library catalogue includes this description: Magdalene Asylum at Woolloowin, Brisbane was designed by former colonial architect Francis Drummond Greville Stanley, one of Queensland's most prolific late 19th century architects. It was built between 1888 and 1889.



### Holy Cross entry/despatch section of laundry building

**Description:** This image is from page 144 of the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Child Abuse in Queensland institutions and the image is an Inquiry photograph. The Holy Cross laundry was located on the same site as the Holy Cross Home and Holy Cross Retreat.

---



### Holy Cross at Wooloowin, operated by the Brisbane Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy

**Description:** This image is from page 141 of the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Child Abuse in Queensland institutions and the image is an Inquiry photograph.

---

## More info

---

### Chronology

- **Holy Cross Retreat (13 October 1889 – 1978)**
  - Mercy Centre (1977 - current)

### Related Entries

#### Run by

- [Sisters of Mercy, Brisbane Congregation \(1861 - current\)](#)  
Date: 1888 - 1978

#### Related Events

- [Inquiry into Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices, Commonwealth of Australia \(2011 - 2012\)](#)  
Holy Cross Retreat was mentioned in submissions 26, 108 and 190 to the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices Senate inquiry as an institution that was involved in forced adoption.
- [Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care, Parliament of Australia \(2003 - 2005\)](#)  
Holy Cross Retreat was mentioned in Submissions 221 and 237 to the Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care

#### Related Legislation

- [State Children Act 1911, Queensland \(1911 - 1966\)](#)
- [Orphanages Act 1879, Queensland \(1879 - 1911\)](#)
- [Children's Services Act 1965, Queensland \(1965 - 2000\)](#)

#### Related Organisations

- [Holy Cross Home \(1965 - 1973\)](#)  
The Holy Cross Home was located on the same site as the Holy Cross Retreat.
- [Industrial School for Girls, Wooloowin \(1904 - c. 1966\)](#)  
The Holy Cross Retreat was located on the same site as the Industrial School for Girls, Wooloowin.

## Resources

- Senate Community Affairs References Committee, [Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices](#), 29 February 2012
- Amen, Ann, *Archdiocese of Brisbane: a survey of social welfare resources*, 1976
- [Holy Cross Retreat](#), Brisbane Courier, 25 December 1902

- [Christmas](#), Brisbane Courier, 25 December 1897
- [Magdalen Asylum Woolloowin](#), Brisbane Courier, 25 December 1901
- Social Work Staff, Faculty of Education, University of Queensland, [Directory of Social Services Queensland](#), 1958

## Records

---

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

### Records

- [Records and Archives, Children's Institutions, Sisters of Mercy Brisbane \(c. 1900 - c. 1995\)](#)
  - [Adoption Records](#)
  - [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
- 

You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/holy-cross-retreat/>