

# Fremantle Asylum

1857 – 1909

**Other Names:** • Fremantle Lunatic Asylum

## Details

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Fremantle Asylum was a government-run facility, established in 1857 to house adults with mental illness. By the 1890s increasing numbers of children aged 9-15 years with intellectual and other disabilities were sent there. Fremantle Asylum closed in 1909.

Fremantle Asylum was built and run by the colonial government from 1857. By the 1890s increasing numbers of children aged 9-15 years with intellectual and other disabilities were sent there, often for a lifetime. Children were transferred from Fremantle to the Claremont Hospital for the Insane from 1903 to 1908. Fremantle Asylum closed in 1909.

Fremantle Asylum was built in 1857 as a response to the reportedly increasing number of 'insane' convicts being sent from Britain after transportation began in 1850. In reality, the growing numbers of people with mental illnesses were as likely to have been a natural consequence of a growing population in the colony. The desire and economic need for a stable and controlled workforce was also a factor in removing people who were 'uncontrollable' from civic institutions like schools, prisons, hospitals and work depots in the colony. Paupers were of particular concern to the colonial government. 'Pauper lunatics' were given precedence in admission to the Fremantle Asylum.

A girl aged 13 years was admitted to Fremantle in 1869. A ten-year-old girl was admitted in 1886 and remained at the Fremantle Asylum until she was transferred to the new Claremont Hospital for the Insane in 1908. In July 1896 the youngest child, aged 9 years, was admitted to Fremantle. Government officials had debated whether this child should go to the Fremantle Asylum or the Poor House. Eventually, the matter was referred to the Premier who decided that, as an 'imbecile', she should go to the asylum. She, too, lived out her life at Claremont Hospital.

For children as well as adults, 'getting into the Fremantle Asylum was far easier than getting out' (Megahey, p.41).

Fremantle Asylum never had a full time medical practitioner on staff. From 1857 to 1870 the Surgeon Superintendent was Dr Attfield. His approach was one that was popular in Europe at the time: 'moral management'. This approach emphasised the humanity of people in the asylum, the 'benefits of self-discipline, cleanliness and recreation, and the abolition of mechanical restraints' (Megahey, p.41). However, the penal facilities, the use of wardens with prison experience, over-crowding and an emphasis on the 'incurable' and 'helpless' characteristics seen in the patients by medical staff meant that the people in the Fremantle Asylum did not actually receive any treatment to improve their health, prospects or their lived experience.

The conditions for people in the Fremantle Asylum did not gain the attention of the public until the 1890s. A Select Committee was appointed to investigate conditions in 1890 but it was constrained by the absolute poverty of psychiatric or related expertise in Western Australia at the time. Following a campaign by the *Sunday Times* newspaper in 1898, another Select Committee was established. It was chaired by Frederick Charles Burleigh Vosper, who had established the *Sunday Times*. The Vosper Committee has been credited with bringing 'much-

needed reforms to the treatment of the mentally ill in Western Australia' (Ellis, p.198), but focused solely on adults. Children were transferred to the new [Claremont Mental Hospital](#) between 1903 and 1908.

## Gallery

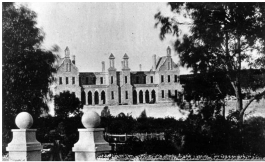
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### Old Lunatic Asylum, Fremantle, rear of building

**Description:** This is a digital copy of a photograph of the buildings that once held the Fremantle Asylum. It is from the State Library of Western Australia's 'Wylie collection of slides' that were made available online by the Historical Records Rescue Consortium Project supported by Lotterywest.

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### Fremantle Lunatic Asylum

**Description:** This is a digital copy of a photograph of the Fremantle Lunatic Asylum, probably in the 1870s. It is from the State Library of Western Australia's W.P. Clifton collection of photographs that the Library has made available online.

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## More info

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### Chronology

- **Fremantle Asylum (1857 – 1909)**
  - Claremont Mental Hospital (1903 - 1972)

### Related Entries

#### Run by

- [Colonial Secretary's Office, Crown Colony of Western Australia \(30 December 1828 - 1890\)](#)
- [Colonial Secretary's Office, Colony of Western Australia \(1890 - 1924\)](#)
- [Lunacy Department, State Government of Western Australia \(1903 - 1934\)](#)

Date: 1903 - 1909

#### Related Events

- [Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly to consider and report as to what is necessary to place the Asylum for the Insane on a satisfactory basis as to Accommodation and Maintenance, Colony of Western Australia \(2 February 1891 - 19 February 1891\)](#)
- [Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly appointed to inquire into the condition of the Fremantle and Whitby Falls Lunatic Asylums, Colony of Western Australia \(17 October 1900 - 21 November 1900\)](#)

#### Related Legislation

- [Lunacy Act 1871, Western Australia \(1871 - 1903\)](#)

#### Related Organisations

- [Whitby Falls Hospital \(1897 - 1972\)](#)

Whitby Falls Hospital was originally established to take 'quiet and chronic' male patients from the Fremantle Asylum, including those with intellectual disabilities.

## Resources

- [Our History](#), Fremantle Arts Centre, No date

# Records

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

## Records

- [Records of Claremont Mental Hospital \(1903 - 1969\)](#)
  - [Records of Fremantle Asylum \(1857 - 1961\)](#)
  - [Files - Chief Protector of Aborigines \(1898 - 1908\)](#)
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You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/fremantle-asylum/>