

Boys' Farm School, Dookie

1882 – 1886

Other Names:

- Government Experimental Farm, Cashel
- Cashel Experimental Farm
- Dookie Farm School

Details

The Boys' Farm School, Dookie opened in 1881. It provided training for boys from Victorian industrial schools and boarding out placements in farming. It closed in 1886 when a government agricultural college opened on the site.

The 4800 acre property was in north-eastern Victoria, with “a short frontage to the Broken River on the south, and extending for about 5 miles to the Cashel (Dookie) township on the north (*The Australasian*, 24 July 1886). Originally, the site housed a government farm where parents paid for their young people to receive farming training. However, this farm school received criticism in the newspapers in 1881 when people made complaints that the young people there were learning nothing. A newspaper published a letter from one of the paying students claiming that in 12 months they had not learned anything about ploughing nor sowing, and that no one at the farm knew how to use the reaping machine. This “disgraceful state of affairs at Dookie” led to the manager resigning in June 1881 (*Herald*, 23 June 1881). In December 1881, the Minister for Agriculture agreed that the farm had been a failure (*Herald*, 7 December 1881). The Minister and the Chief Secretary then made a decision to place boys from industrial schools and boarding out placements at the Dookie farm (*Argus*, 8 September 1883).

The object of the farm school was to initiate young men “into farming pursuits; give them stability of character and, at the same time, the rudiments of the three R’s” (Department of Industrial Schools and Reformatories, 1885 annual report, p.24). Previously, in 1872, the [Royal Commission on Penal and Prison Discipline](#) had expressed glowing approval of agricultural training in farm schools for children in industrial schools. Such training had advantages both for the children and indirectly to the general community, when the trained young people were subsequently “distributed over the rural districts, and would thus be saved from the demoralizing influences which beset youthful mechanics in large towns”. Farm schools were said to be the “best method that could be adopted for rescuing the children from dependence, and making of them industrious, self-reliant, contented, and useful colonists. For these reasons we strongly recommend that the industrial training of the children shall be made essentially of an agricultural kind, in preference to handicrafts or seamanship”. The Commissioners stated their belief that being an independent farmer was “of all occupations, the healthiest and most cheerful” (p.6).

In August 1882, the first boys at Dookie were 10 from foster home placements and 6 from the [Sandhurst Industrial School](#). Aged between 12 and 14, they took a train to Violet Town, en route to the “Dookie Experimental Farm, Cashel”. They were to be under the direction of the superintendent, Mr Herdman, and an instructor, Mr McKinstry, who had 10 years' experience in the industrial schools in Scotland, who would teach the boys, and provide instruction in vocal and instrumental music. The article stated that the number of boys at Dookie would soon be doubled if their work fulfilled the superintendent's expectations (*Argus*, 4 August 1882). The article also reported that the “cadets” who were previously paying pupils at the farm, had now all been settled on farms, stations, or selections, or otherwise employed.

The Department stated that the boys chosen for a placement at Dookie were “the elder or more restless of our Industrial School boys”, too old for placing in foster-homes and yet not of an age for service. The placement was intended to be for a period of 12 to 20 months (1889 annual report). In 1883, the Department reported that the farm at Dookie was practically self-supporting. The Department of Agriculture paid 4s a week for each boy at the farm, which was said to be well worth the money, as “the country has a useful return in the form of an industrious workman” (1889 annual report, p.49).

An article from 1882 stated:

They rise at half past 6, wash, make their beds, clean up their room, and have breakfast at 7 o'clock. They start work at 8. They work until half past 11. Dinner at 12, and start work again at 1 o'clock, and work till half past 4, when they knock off. They have a game of football until 6, when they have supper. They have one hour and a half teaching by Mr McKinsty, a little singing, and to bed at 9 (Kyneton Observer, 15 August 1882).

The 1883 annual report described the boys' routine at Dookie: “They work during the day, with a half-holiday on Saturday afternoon, and pursue their studies with some zest for an hour and a half each evening, receiving further lessons on days of excessive wet or heat, and are licensed out to employers after a training of twelve to sixteen months”. The Department claimed that manual labour stimulated rather than dulled the boys' intellectual faculties and mental appetite.

The 1884 annual report stated that the system at Dookie had been the same since 1882. The 14 to 16 boys on the farm did 7 hours of work and one and a half hours of school, every day except Saturday. There was “ample time provided for meals and play, on the principle that ‘all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy’”. Every Sunday, they attended a service in their respective churches (p.25).

During the “slack season” in summer, some boys went to Narracan in Gippsland to work picking hops on a private farm. The growers paid the government a sum per bushel (*Argus*, 8 September 1883).

In 1885, the Department reported that although it was impossible to find volunteers to transfer to receive training at the [Macedon State Nursery](#), there was no such problem at Dookie. “The greater attractiveness and variety of the work have always secured a sufficiency of suitable candidates. The lads, as they become eligible for service, are every year more in request with the farmers and selectors, being engaged at higher commencing wages than the ordinary licensed boys”. That year, 23 boys had been successfully hired out to farmers and vigneron. The superintendent expressed his belief that “it must be a blessing for the boys themselves to be able to earn an honest livelihood, instead of being a burden to the State” (1885 annual report).

The 1885 annual report alluded to plans for Dookie to become the site of the proposed government agricultural college, which would mean that the industrial school boys would have to be moved to make way for paying students. The commencement of the Dookie Agricultural College on 4 October 1886 led to the closure of the farm school.

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