

Ballarat Boys' Reformatory

1879 – 1893

Details

The Ballarat Boys' Reformatory opened in 1879, in a building formerly used as an industrial school for girls. Before that, boys had been at the Jika Reformatory in Coburg.

The Ballarat building had accommodation for 200. In 1879, there were 95 inmates, with the department hoping to increase it to 121 when the last boys were transferred from Jika.

At Ballarat, boys received training in farm, garden and dairy work, carpentry, painting and blacksmithing.

The superintendent's report from May 1882 stated that the soil at Ballarat was "miserably poor and highly impregnated with ironstone". He also noted his belief that it was a mistake for the boys to be trained in shoemaking and tailoring at the reformatory. He said that working in these trades after their time in the reformatory could result in the boys working in cities and large towns where they would come in contact with "doubtful characters".

The superintendent stated that the Reformatory Committee, local citizens who took an interest in the institution and its inmates, gave him valuable assistance. He mentioned that the Reformatory had introduced a system the previous year, where instead of being discharged from the institution, boys were licensed out to their parents. This meant that the superintendent had some "continued control" of the boys after they left, something for which he said the parents were glad of.

The boys' labour was much in demand, especially from local farmers. Boys could earn the privilege of being released from the reformatory to a placement in a service-home, where the employer was the boy's guardian.

The Superintendent's Report from 1884 describes the system of classification used for boys in the reformatory. The reformatory had three divisions: A (best), B (medium), and C (refractory – meaning stubborn, or unmanageable). Each of these divisions had a senior and junior section, with separate dormitories. As an inducement to behave well, boys were first admitted only to the B or C divisions. Some of the privileges enjoyed by those in A division were

the run of the outer paddock, the walk after service on Sundays, the best dormitories, precedence in distribution of library books &c, eligibility to act as monitor, or to have charge of one of the horses, or to go out on licence, &c. I must say that there is no desirable enjoyment that is not within the reach of an 'A' boy.

The principal punishment at the reformatory, reported the Superintendent, was the system of 'fatigue' where boys were made to labour during play hours. Isolation in a lighted cell was the punishment for more serious misconduct.

The superintendent wrote that the buildings at Ballarat had gradually been adapted to the requirements of a reformatory. With the exception of the refractory yard, which was surrounded by a high, galvanized iron fence, the institution “may be said to be an open one”. However, this situation meant that the inmates required more supervision than had been required previously when the reformatory was at Coburg, and surrounded by a wall within the walls of the Pentridge stockade.

The superintendent wrote in the 1884 report that absconding was still “of too frequent occurrence”, but “without having to resort to objectionable prison surroundings, I can see no remedy ... During the early part of the year, a time when absconding appears to be the most frequent, we were much pestered by ‘larrikins’, who for days frequented the vicinity of the Reformatory ... These pests came to Ballarat with the fixed purpose of inducing boys to abscond, and caused great trouble”.

He reported that the Ballarat Reformatory’s system of classification, and the promise of becoming eligible to be licensed out and earning wages by good conduct and industry, was working. “The encouraging element of ‘hope’ is a factor in the remarkable results. New boys are placed in B or C according to the character they bear when admitted and all boys are informed at the outset that they can make themselves eligible for licence in 9 months”.

The probationary system introduced at Ballarat Reformatory that enabled boys to be licensed out to their relatives was planned to be introduced into the legislation that would replace the 1864 *Neglected and Criminal Children’s Act*.

From 1885, the number of boys at Ballarat Reformatory began to decrease. In 1886, the annual report referred to this “steady outflow” being sustained. At the end of that year, there were only 6 boys at the Reformatory who had been inmates a year previously. The institution now had an average strength of 74 inmates. Suitable boys were licensed out to employers, with relatives or transferred to the department for boarding out. They reported that the demand for the boys’ labour from farmers and selectors was far in excess of the number of boys available. These employers favoured reformatory boys because of their young age, meaning they were paid lower wages.

The 1886 annual report shows that the establishment of a new “probationary school” was being contemplated. This institution would be for the “short detention for the reception of recovered absconders, foster-lads returned for insubordinate conduct, and a certain proportion of those newly committed, who, while not proper subjects for a Reformatory, are too undisciplined to be at once placed either in a foster or service home with any reasonable prospect of their being retained”. The Ballarat Reformatory had submitted a scheme for a probationary or intermediate school, for no more than 18 boys, to be located on a portion of the Reformatory Reserve of 200 acres at Alfredton, near Ballarat. The [Ballarat Probationary School for Boys](#) opened in August 1890.

The Reformatory’s visiting committee noted that new legislation was needed in Victoria, so that “criminal and purely unfortunate children” could be dealt with by separate acts of Parliament. “Having them committed to the care of the state under the same act leaves a stigma which is never wiped out, and appears to us unjust” (annual report, 1886). The next year, the committee stated it was happy that a new juvenile offenders bill had been introduced in Victoria. They noted that the new law contains the power to transfer a boy from gaol to the reformatory and urged caution about this, as “one scabby sheep may infect a flock”.

Following the passage of the [Juvenile Offenders Act](#) 1887, the annual report for 1888 noted that an unusually large number of boys had been transferred to the Ballarat Reformatory from the Neglected Children’s Department. This was because the new act required juvenile offenders aged under 12 to be committed as neglected children, and for the similar treatment of offenders aged above 12 who were not “really vicious or depraved”. The Reformatory wrote that it was no surprise that placing these children in foster homes was unsuccessful, and resulted in them being sent to the Ballarat Reformatory. They argued that this situation would not have occurred if a probationary school had existed in Victoria. It was also reported that 15 boys had been transferred from gaol to the reformatory, under s.23 of the new legislation.

In 1890, they reported that the “steady outflow” of boys from the reformatory was continuing. They had started the year with 93 inmates, and closed with 67. An article in *The Age* from 1890 wrote approvingly of the pathways now offered to boys out of the Ballarat Reformatory:

The old barbarous idea of immuring a boy or girl in such an establishment for five or seven years is, in Victoria at least, dead and gone. At Ballarat, for example, a boy can work his way out in nine months, and, when placed in a suitable situation, he is free to make his way in the world, the only restraint placed on him being careful but unobtrusive supervision exercised by the Government department with a view to pull him up at once should he again go wrong (The Age 25 January 1890).

In the 1891 departmental annual report, the great success of the [private girls' reformatory at Brookside](#) was referred to, along with the “earnest hope that someone will come forward prepared to try and do the same for the lads of this school”. These hopes were realised, and the 1892 annual report stated that 3 institutions “which had for years been doing successful reformatory work among the street children, offered to take over the Ballarat lads on the payment of the capitation rate of 10s per week and a service outfit. These offers were accepted, and before the close of the year arrangements had so far advanced that it was fully anticipated that the Private Reformatories would be opened and the inmates transferred” (p.5).

In April 1893, the last young men at Ballarat were distributed between 3 institutions that had been proclaimed Reformatories under the [Juvenile Offenders Act 1887](#): the [Heidelberg Boys' School](#) run by the Salvation Army, the [Excelsior Home](#) in Brighton, and the [Wandin Yallock Reformatory School](#) in the Yarra Valley.

From 1892, the Royal Park Depot had separate buildings for children who had been convicted of an offence. The 1893 annual report stated that with the new building for reformatory boys at Royal Park, “there will be little difficulty in keeping this class distinct from the other children during the short period they are inmates, pending their transfer to the Private Reformatories most suitable for them”.

After the Ballarat Reformatory closed in May 1893, the buildings were “handed over to the Lunacy Department for asylum purposes” (annual report, 1892). A large fire in 1917 destroyed a wing of the building which had formerly been the Boys' Reformatory (*Argus*, 20 December 1917).

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Department of Industrial and Reformatory Schools, Colony of Victoria \(1864 - 1887\)](#)
- [Department for Reformatory Schools, Colony of Victoria \(1887 - 1900\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Ballarat Industrial School \(1869 - c. 1879\)](#)
The Ballarat Reformatory was located on the former site of the Ballarat Industrial School
- [Ballarat Probationary School for Boys, Alfredton \(1890 - c.1893\)](#)
The Boys' Probationary School was situated within the grounds of the Ballarat Boys' Reformatory.
- [Jika Reformatory for Boys \(1873 - 1879\)](#)
When Jika Reformatory closed in 1879, boys were moved to the Ballarat Reformatory.

Resources

- [The Ballarat Reformatory](#), The Age, 16 April 1880

Records

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

Records

- [Victorian Government Wardship and/or Out of Home Care Records \(1864 - current\)](#)
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