

## OUR BOYS HOME

Christine Robinson. (December 2008)

Our Boys Home (now known as Macquarie House) was built in 1890 on land donated to "The Society for Providing Homes for Neglected Children" by W.H. Paling. Mr Paling also donated land nearby for the building of "Carrington Centennial Hospital" which was completed at the same time as "Our Boys Home". The Home is situated west of Camden in Ferguson Road.



Our Boy's Home in 1903 (photo Camden Museum)

The Society" was founded in 1886 by George Edward Ardill (1857-1945) to provide care for the children of women who had given birth at the "Home of Hope for Friendless and Fallen Women" which was later renamed South Sydney Women's Hospital as private patients were attracted to the high standard of care and medical attention. The Society opened "Our Babies Home" in 1886, "Our Children's Home" at

Liverpool in 1887 and "Our Boys Farm Home" at Camden in 1890. These homes were established primarily to provide care and shelter for children so their mothers could take employment where a child was not acceptable. The Society operated from their central office at 403 Sussex Street, Sydney. The latter two homes were the first "Cottage Homes" in NSW.

Whatever the original criteria was for entry to Our Boys Home, by the 1920's and 30's the boys (aged from 9yrs to 14yrs) were mostly from families where one parent had died or was absent for whatever reason and the other parent had difficulty coping. The period of time spent at the Home by any one boy varied depending on their circumstances. Some boys were there for a short stay while others who were orphans would remain until 14 years old and were then placed with farming families to learn and earn a living.

"Matron" was in charge and the day-to-day running of the home was the responsibility of "Sister".

In a report from the Hon. Manager of "Our Boys Home", Mr. Ardill, in the "Camden News" dated 25th November 1915, it is stated that several of the former residents had made the ultimate sacrifice for their country in the campaign in the Dardanelles.

Mr. Ardill Snr. remained executive director of the Society until his death in 1945 when his son G.E. Jnr. became director. Our Boys Home ceased operations in 1945 and passed out of the Society's hands in 1946 when the building was sold.

The following information is anecdotal and was given by a few ex-residents of the Home and by several long-time Camden residents.

The boys from the Home did work for families and businesses around the town of Camden. Stuckey Bros. Bakers had boys to work in the bakery from time to time.

They wore the same khaki uniform Summer and Winter. They did not normally wear shoes, but that was the case with most young boys in those days of the 1920's and 30's.

The boys would march in for Sunday School and other church services at the Methodist Church in John Street. When there was a need to stay in town for something at the church after lunch the boys would be invited to have Sunday lunch with various families. Our family frequently had a "Boys Home" boy to Sunday lunch.

Mr. G.E. Ardill, the Director of the home, was a stern military-style of a man who applied strict discipline to the behaviour of the boys and demanded a high standard of manners.

(Camden resident. 1994).

My mother had twins, both of which died, and she could not cope after their death. I remember my father coming up each second Saturday and bringing a large slab of cake, sufficient for all the boys, the Matron in charge and the Sister.

We marched down the hill to Camden Public School and back again and to the Methodist Church and Sunday School on Sundays.

(Former resident of Boys Home. 1993).

I attended Camden Central School in the late 1930's and early 1940's and remember the boys from the "Boys Home". They did not wear shoes in summer or winter, which was very difficult walking to school across frosty paddocks, their feet would crack and ooze from the cracks.

The boys were sent out at weekends to work on farms and at houses in the district. While most families were kind to them there were one or two who exploited them and worked them hard. A friend complained that where he worked the wife got him to do "all the housework" when he came.

When one or two of the boys were planning to run away, as they did from time to time, other Camden boys including myself, used to collect our pocket money for a couple of weeks and secretly gather food from home to send these boys off with some assistance. These escapees usually were caught and returned to the home within three or four days.

The bread for the home was sent up from Sydney by train from a company owned by Mr. Ardill's family and was always stale for the boys' lunches.

As their mail was censored by the Matron, the boys wrote letters at school and gave them to the town boys to mail for them.

(Camden resident. 1994)

I was a resident of the Boys Home in Camden in late 1927 (Aug-Dec) and had my 11th Birthday there. The home was a modification of what could have been a two-storey gentleman's residence. There were four formal rooms on each floor. I remember a fibro addition near the kitchen - a combined eating area, study area and general recreation room.

There was something of a large parlour, containing a Bagatelle set, which we occupied for recreation on two or so occasions during my sojourn at the home. On the first floor were three large dormitory type rooms, occupied by about ten beds each, together with a smaller room, "Sister's" private domain. Bathing facilities were downstairs near the kitchen.

Breakfast was taken at about 7.15a.m. after prayers.

The senior boys could leave for their little jobs at varying town locations prior to getting to school on time. The younger boys, myself included, had jobs around the establishment prior to going to school. On returning from school there was the usual recreation, showers, the evening meal, followed by prayers, usually conducted by "Sister" after which we younger ones went to bed while the seniors attended to homework.

The routine was different at the weekend. Extra chores of a Saturday and a very busy Sunday involving two walks to Camden. Church in the morning followed by Sunday School in the afternoon.

School lunch consisted of "one syp" and "two drip". We all knew what it meant; one slice of bread and Syrup and two slices of bread and dripping. This food was prepared by one of the more senior boys, packed in a small tin trunk and stored in the playground in the shade of a tree. Often the trunk was left in the sun, the dripping became soft and smelly attracting ants, providing seasoned "drip" at times.

There were occasions when grown men would visit the place for a few days and acted as people returning home. Perhaps it was the only home which they had ever known.

(Former Boys Home resident. 1998).

The first Matron I remember was Miss Thompson (c.1897). I sold Mr. Ardill about 3 acres to give the Home a frontage to Ferguson Road and a play area at the eastern part of the Home. That was about 1921. We bought the area joining the home from Mr. Paling about 1898.

Sometimes the numbers at the Home would only be small, 10 or 12, other times up to 15. Then the Home had an addition of dormitory area and the number increased to 20 odd, at times up to 30 boys.

(Camden resident. 1970's).

The boys from the Home did not have shoes for normal wear and would, even in the coldest weather, only wear shorts and a shirt.

They used to pull a trolley into town to collect the bread that would come up from Sydney by train. The bread was donated by someone in Sydney.

The boys were available for work at private homes in the district for shoe cleaning, washing floors, sweeping and other odd jobs. The payment was made to the Boys Home for their work.

The boys used to walk into town across the paddock and past the showground to attend the Methodist church on Sunday mornings. They were known as the "Home Boys".

I do not recall ever having seen Mr. Ardill in Camden or at any functions.

The boys were always well behaved and were of a trustworthy nature. They were closely supervised and directed.

(Camden resident. 1993).

My mother and her siblings were placed into 'homes' after the death of their mother in 1913, their father couldn't work and care for them as they were 8, 6, 4 and 2 years old. The two youngest, girls, were placed in Our Babies Home, Rockdale, transferred to Our Children's Home, Liverpool, then Our Children's Home, Concord where they remained until they were about 20 years old.

The boys went straight to Our Children's Home, Concord then in 1914 to Our Boy's Home, Camden where they remained until approx. 1923 (I am not sure of these dates). Robert, the eldest boy, walked from Camden to Liverpool Police Station to report cases of cruelty at the Home. No action was taken. The boys worked for various people in the district. After leaving the home the boys worked at the Botanic Gardens in Sydney.

When the food donated to the home from Sydney restaurants arrived at Camden station the boys took it back to the Home in a wheelbarrow and had to run to school, if they were late they would be caned. If they were naughty in church they were caned by the school teacher on the following Monday.

The skills he learned on farms during his stay must have helped my uncle in later life as he was a first class wool classer and managed a large property at Coonamble NSW. Always a quiet man, he didn't care to talk about his life at Camden, he never forgave his father for putting them into care. He told my mother he and his brother were treated cruelly.

My mother, aunt and Robert remained quite close, even though the women lived in Sydney. Robert married and had 9 children, sadly he passed away aged 55 years.

The younger lad met with his sisters in the 1940's and told them he was going to marry and didn't want his new wife to know anything about his upbringing, it was all too painful for him. He explained whilst he cared for them, he would like them to ignore him if they saw him with his wife, he just wanted to put his past behind him altogether. He was a non drinker, heavy smoker.

Four years ago, after searching for him for many years at my mum's request, I found, with the help of the Salvation Army, he had died in 1986. I contacted his children, they knew nothing of any brother and sisters, that their grandfather had been alive until the 1960's, or that he had been in the Children's Home. He had told them he was an orphan and adopted by a family in the country. He claimed an uncle had put him through an education program where he qualified as an engineer. After speaking to his children it was quite clear he was a good, loving father.

(Relative of Boys Home residents. 2001)

On a light note this article is from the 'Camden News' Thursday December 30th 1943.

'Last Thursday was zero hour for the boys of the Camden Boys Home as it was the occasion of a big Xmas party provided by members of the Camden Bowling Club in the local clubhouse and grounds.

Fourteen fine young Australians accompanied by their Matron and Sister, partook of the best that could be procured, and the members of the local club excelled in the manner in which they provided various entertainments.

During the afternoon Rev. Wesley Stocks, Messrs. H. Willis, G.V. Sidman, H.R. Powe, W. de Saxe and R.L. Josselyn spoke to the kiddies and left no doubt in their mind as to the interest the bowlers had for their future, and assured them what they were expressing that afternoon was the forerunner of many more such functions.

A particularly pleasing incident during the afternoon was the presentation of a cricket set by the Rev. Wesley Stocks, a gift of one of the club's vice presidents (Mr. C. Haffenden).

The climax to an enjoyable afternoon was the justice done to a large plum pudding, served hot, and the clever serving by which means every lad received several silver coins.

Miss Small and Mrs. Josselyn arranged the tables in a manner that could not be faulted, and the bowlers are very grateful for their assistance.

Adjourning from the club premises at 7.30 the boys were then the guests of Mr. P.J. Fox at the pictures and were duly taxied to their home after a day which could be said as one of the brightest of their young lives.

The Bowling Club's President, Ald. H. Willis, advises that it is the intention of his club to have these entertainments for the boys regularly.

It is a step in the right direction and the club is to be congratulated on its interest in the welfare of the boys.'

I would like to hear from anyone who was a resident of "Our Boys Home" or anyone who believes a relative was a resident, so that more information can be gathered and shared with people researching their family's history.

I can only guess at the number of boys who passed through this home during its fifty year history. For some it was their only real home while for others the experience was unpleasant. Whatever their experience it can only have left a lasting impression on these young boys and helped to shape the men they became. Let's not let their memory fade. They were a very real part of the Camden community and should be remembered as such. [Christine Robinson](#)