

Aboriginal Historical Places

Hobart Orphan School

lutruwita is the country of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and everyone has a responsibility to protect our heritage.



Queen's Orphan School New Town, 1872, Digitised item from: W.L. Crowther Library, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office.

In 1825, Governor Arthur established the 'King's Orphan School' together with the Church of England. It was modelled on a similar school in the colony of New South Wales. It was renamed the 'Queen's Orphan School' in 1837 when Queen Victoria became monarch. The School was located in New Town, just north of Hobart, to be a 'school of industry' for the 'illegitimate children' perceived to be overrunning the colony of Van Diemen's Land. There were fifty children in the first intake.

Between 1828 and 1850, about

forty Aboriginal children lived at the school. Among the first intake was an Aboriginal boy, Thomas Bunce, aged 7, admitted on 2 August 1828. Most children stayed between one and two years but several lived there for up to eight years. There were rarely more than six or seven Aboriginal children at the school at any one time.

Thousands of other children lived at the school before being discharged to colonist families at the age of 15 or 16. Girls were usually discharged to be domestic servants and boys to learn a trade. Most of the Aboriginal children

separated from their parents during these years were living as domestic servants with colonist families. These included Mary Ann Smith and Fanny Hardwicke. Other Aboriginal children who attended the school were orphans who had been living on the streets in various towns, such as Launceston.

The Aboriginal children who did not attend the school but remained with their families were removed to Swan Island in the north east, and then later to the Government settlement at Wybalenna on Flinders Island. At some point, most of these children were removed from Wybalenna to attend the Orphan School, before returning to their families some months, or sometimes years, later. These children included Walter Arthur, as well as Pungewalla, Walkenny, Tina, and Tommerick, among others.

Kennis Coonan	7	Aug 1	"	} Orphans
John Coonan	4	"	"	
Thomas Bunce	7	" 2	"	An aborigine
James Pearce	7	" 18	"	James Pearce



Unmarked graves at St John's Park.

Life at the Orphan School

The School was always under resourced. Conditions were poor and rations were minimal. Sometimes rations intended for the children were sold to others by those responsible for managing the School. Religious instruction occurred twice a week and each Sunday the children attended St John's Church of England which was connected to the School.

Eight Aboriginal children died at the School and were buried in unmarked graves in the nearby cemetery.

These were Firebroke (d. 2 June 1835), Tully (d. 17 June 1835), Frederick (d. 30 September 1835), Jessie (d. 2 March 1843), Charles (26 November 1839), Mary Sherwood (d. 27 September 1843), Nannie (d. 25 April 1849), and Moriarty (d. 5 March 1852).

When George Robinson was appointed Commandant at the Wybalenna Settlement in October 1835, most of the Aboriginal children at the school were returned to their parents. This was probably part of the agreement made between Aboriginal parents, Robinson, and Governor Arthur. Those left behind at the school were Thomas Bunce, Thomas Thompson, Duke and Charles.

Most Aboriginal children in Tasmania did not live at the Orphan School. The few who did received much greater instruction in reading and writing in English than other

Aboriginal children. Some had parents who continued speaking their first language at Wybalenna. These skills in first language and English enabled some of these children to later become teachers and leaders of the community at Wybalenna and beyond. Thomas Bunce, an orphaned child, went to Wybalenna in 1836. He had been at the school for eight years, the longest time any Aboriginal child lived at the school. At Wybalenna his name was changed to Thomas Bruny. Together with Walter Arthur, Thomas wrote a newspaper at Wybalenna, called "The Aboriginal or Flinders Island Chronicle" from 1836 to 1838. This was the first Aboriginal newspaper in Australia. Walter Arthur was a key leader in the next generation of Aboriginal people and played a central role in writing a petition to Queen Victoria in February 1846 that tried to have Doctor Jeanneret removed as Commandant at Wybalenna.

When Governor Denison closed Wybalenna in October 1847, the adults and children initially went to *putalina* / Oyster Cove together. After

spending Christmas at the Governor's house at New Norfolk, the children aged under 14 were placed at the Orphan School and their families returned to *putalina* / Oyster Cove.

These included Mathinna, who was first at the school as a 6 year old, from July 1843 – February 1844, and then from December 1847 – August 1851. Other well-known Aboriginal children who stayed at the School after living at Wybalenna were William Lanney (6 years old) and Adam (7 years old, brother of Fanny Cochrane).

When most of these children reached 14 years of age they were discharged to Dr. Milligan, superintendent of the Oyster Cove Station. At Oyster Cove Adam was reunited with his mother *Tanganutara*, and his sisters, Mary Ann Arthur and Fanny Cochrane. Martha was reunited with her mother, Catherine. William Lanney lived with Walter and Mary Ann Arthur. Hannah was discharged into the care of Dr. Smith a surgeon near Oyster Cove. Mathinna was discharged from the school in August 1851 and tragically died on 1 September 1852.

Mathinna, painted by Thomas Bock.



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