REDISCOVERING THEIR HISTORY:
St. Paul’s Newhaven and it’s Old Boys

by Joanne Monk

In October I went down to St Paul’s Discovery Centre at Newhaven, Phillip Island, for the official opening of the new accommodation units. St Paul’s, opened in 1928, was formerly a disciplinary home and then a boys home, and is the Mission of St James and St John’s oldest property. I went as the Mission’s historian and consequently talked to a number of the old boys who returned. I was made aware of how important St Paul’s is to them, not just as part of their history but as their home. In this article I wish to discuss not only how this building has played an influential part in the old boys lives but also how it continues to do so.

The Mission of St James and St John was formed in 1919 in the Melbourne Anglican Diocese and in the mid-1920s opened a “chain of homes” to provide for “the unwanted babe, the deserted child, the wayward youth and girl.” St Paul’s reflects the three main eras in the Mission’s history. As St Paul’s Training School for Boys it was a congregate care institution with a regimented approach. As St Paul’s Home for Boys in the 1960s it tried to cater more for individual needs. And as St Paul’s Discovery Centre it now forms a part of the family services which try to keep families together. The large solid red brick building with its chapel tower marking it out for miles around, has changed its external appearance very little over this time. But the alterations within have reflected different approaches.

St Paul’s Training School for Boys at Newhaven was a disciplinary school for boys who had histories of stealing, truancy and larceny and had either been through the Children’s Courts or been found uncontrollable by their parents. It was built in 1927 with the proceeds of a public appeal. The Appeal didn’t raise enough and the dining room was smaller than originally planned and replaced one of the dormitories. Nevertheless the Mission was commended on the design. “Genius has been shown in the planning of the large airy and comfortable looking dormitories, as the maximum of supervision is possible at the minimum of effort.” By our standards today these dormitories were stark and sanitised. The Mission did not have the funds for cosy decorations and individual touches. More influential, however, was their function in the boys’ lives. Once a boy had risen and made his bed in the morning he wasn’t expected to return to the dormitory until he was to go to bed at night.

The living areas like the hall and dining room were carefully decorated to reform the boys. Boys were divided between three “houses” or grades, according to behaviour. A boy entered in third house and when a boy entered St Paul’s he would automatically go to third house, the lowest, and aimed to have the honour of being in first house. His place was recorded for everyone to see in the glass cabinets opposite the dining room entrance. Once his name had reached the honour roll it was “a permanent record of a brave fight fought and won.” Inside the dining was further incentive to reform. Around the walls was a mural freize of “the story of Onesimus, the runaway, who afterwards made good - so good as to be a personal friend of St Paul’s.”

It was praised by a visitor in 1935 who wrote, “I wish David Copperfield had gone to school with me yesterday. He would have rubbed his eyes and wondered whether such a place as this modern-day reformatory could be possible.” However as attitudes changed the focus changed from praising the honour of reform to criticising the old fashioned punishments. By the 1950s there was a public outcry in the press over St Pauls. The place once described as “homelike” now took on the Dickensian squalor. The Probation Officer of the Children’s Court decried the “long draughty dormitories with their distempered walls, their bare floors and their row of untidy beds.”

In 1955 St Pauls closed as a Training School only to be reopened the next year as a Boys Home. A similar group of boys was now being accommodated. They were there because their parents lacked the resources to cope in a crisis. But now they were admitted because one parent was ill or had deserted or died. In 1956 there was little change in the dormitories or the routine. It wasn’t until 1960 that these dormitories were divided up by 6 foot partitions to create smaller spaces.

In the decade that followed, the Mission believed that it could change the children’s lives by changing the building. The partitioning of the dormitories was
only the beginning. They appealed for homely curtains, and encouraged the boys to care for plants and put up posters. Even the bedding was changed - "Instead of blue and white quilts with the Mission’s emblem which had the anchor and shield on it, we changed over to multicolored chenille bedspreads.” Outside became a playground to amuse the boys. The ultimate piece of play equipment was the Antifizzlegobang-automulator. This was an old water siphon with some pipes and seats attached which the boys used as aircraft, submarine or whatever took their fancy. Also important was an outside building called the Hive (of activity) where the boys carried out their nature studies.

The Mission was aiming to make it a “home” for the boys in the sense we know it today. But finally it admitted defeat. No matter how they tried to change, the building always loomed large. The huge red brick edifice, which stuck out like a sore thumb, signified to those both residents and Newhaven locals that the boys were “home kids.” It closed in 1972 and the remaining children were transferred to the Mission’s Blackburn Cottages which had been built in 1963 in an attempt to resemble the average suburban house.

St Paul's was to go the way of the Mission’s other large congregate care homes and be sold. But mercifully it never did and was occasionally used as a holiday place. In 1979 it was officially opened as St Paul's Discovery Centre. It’s remote location on Phillip Island which had originally recommended it as a reformatory for wayward youth, then condemned it as too far from children’s families for easy reunion, now once more was its saving grace. In the 1970s the Mission turned its focus to the family. St Paul’s now weaves “holiday magic” for families who could never afford a holiday, single parent families, families with disabled children, as well as individual children and adolescents. The location, with the “splendour of the island’s unique and beautiful environment,” rather than the building is seen as foremost in offering a chance for new experiences and quiet reflection. This is seen as important in alleviating stress and thus keeping families together.

Continuing with the history of changing the interior to reflect the lives of those within St Paul’s reached another milestone this year when the 1960 partitions were extended upwards and each section was walled off into self contained units with ensuites. This means that smaller groups, especially family groups can come and have some privacy and the space can be utilised more fully.

And so in an organisation which was once dominated by Homes and is now dominated by family services, St Paul’s is the one place which links it all together. But for many of the men who once
lived there, it has much more importance than just a building. It served as a home for them - for some the only home they knew. For them this building is symbol of the past in a very personal way.

The history of the family has been well documented as an important part of a child's developing identity.9 Some institutional children had little or no experience of a nuclear family of mum dad and kids. Their childhood memories are of the Home. But once they turned 14, and later 16, they were suddenly too old and were no longer able to be supported. They lost the only place to which they "belonged." It was difficult to continue contact with staff and boys, especially when there are so many other boys to consider.

In this way the building becomes important as a place to link them to their past. While today old boys cannot visit familiar faces, they can see their history in the architecture. Quite a number of them have been back. Some return because they need to come to terms with their harsh life and they see the cruelty of staff or boys as a part of this. Others feel it was a part of their learning, hard but essential, and want to bring their families to show them where they grew up.

Some things, like the mural in the dining room and the honours board, have gone. There are still reminders that it was a disciplinary school. The old bell is still there which would summon the boys in the third house to line up every 20 minutes when they weren't otherwise occupied, as is the gaol cell with names carved on the wall, and the painting of Jesus as boy carpenter over the chapel altar which was intended as an inspiration for all the boys. It is not difficult to imagine the boys lining up for dinner in the quadrangle they called the Garth and marching into the dining room.

When the old boys came to the open day this year many brought their families and were keen to see just how the old building had changed. It sparked a lot of memories for them. But it was also a site for their reminiscences. Three talks were given on the history of St Pauls, old photos were displayed and they had an opportunity to remember and discover their history. Perhaps the human contact is more important than the buildings but through having a place to return these men were able to meet up with other old boys and swap stories, despite them being there in different years from each other. Here is a place where they can find people who understood and shared a common memory.

Having a somewhere to return to is important for these old boys' sense of identity. Of the Mission's ten children's homes St Paul's is the one with the strongest reunion network for old boys. While the Mission does not actively seek to contact old boys, when they visit, their name and address is taken down and they are kept informed of open days and

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c.1946. St Paul's Training School for Boys.
The dormitories are bare and clean to cater for the boys physical and spiritual well being rather than nurturing them as individuals.
reunions. The other homes are all sold, most demolished, and it is much harder for children from these places to feel they can return home.

Thus the Mission's decision to keep St Paul's has been important to the old boys as well as the families who have used it in the last 15 years. For those who considered it their home for any part of their childhood the continuing link with the Mission means some continuity and stable in their lives. For many locals the building is still the "boys' home" just as many old boys are still "home kids." This is a personal aspect of history which historians today need to consider when assessing buildings' significance. More than St Paul's important place in the cultural landscape and history of Newhaven and Phillip Island, is the ways it can be active in changing people's lives by connecting them to their past. This link with the past will continue in another way as more families and children attend camps at St Paul's and go back there to find a place of security and happiness.

St Paul's was originally established with "child saving" in mind, so that boys could be "restored as useful and self-respecting members of society." Now the Mission's aim is prevention rather than cure and they use the Discovery Centre to alleviate stress within families before they break down. But they continue their child saving work in being there to provide support for the old boys who have been through the home. Whatever would David Copperfield think?

Plan in 1926
The opening of St Paul’s Training School.
The building was seen as an overbearing and formidable influence in the boys lives.

Endnotes

1 “The Response of the Church to the cry of the needy: A summary of the Activities of the Mission of St James and St John” c 1930, pamphlet in Mission Archives,


7 Interview with Robert Flavell, Principal 1964-9, taped 28 June 1993.


10 “The Response of the Church to the cry of the needy: A summary of the Activities of the Mission of St James and St John” c 1930, pamphlet in Mission Archives.

The Author

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