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Decommissioned institutions: How will they be remembered?

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Abstract

The author, incarcerated in his childhood in a local orphanage, returns to the site – now a private school – hoping to stage a function there. He then books a room at a former Babies Home – converted to a bed-and-breakfast motel no more than 500 metres away. At the other end of town, he spends a short week at a posh holiday resort on the site of a former Catholic orphanage. The experiences at all three sites reanimate disturbing memories and narratives of childhoods marred by appalling abuse and neglect. Insiders know these decommissioned institutions once provided as much coercion and punishment as care and protection. This paper explores the value of insider knowledge and memory activism in exposing the dark histories of what some call these places of 'pain and shame' and others 'sites of conscience'. In the face of the competing commercial interests of new proprietors at all three sites, the paper contrasts the lack of apparent interest in memorialisation at two sites with a strong campaign led by former residents at the third site that has led to modest, but belated, success.

Keywords

Memory activism, insider knowledge, difficult histories, single mothers, orphanages, sites of conscience

Introduction

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, hundreds of thousands of Australian children were separated from their families to be incarcerated as inmates[1] in orphanages, children's Homes, missions and similar institutions (Senate Community Affairs References Committee—hereafter SCARC, 2004). Institutional upbringing shaped their identity as they grew, and continued to bear heavily on their lives in the aftermath. For some, being 'put in a Home' was an escape from family turmoil, fragmentation, or extreme poverty; for others, it led to a prolonged period of utter loss and inexplicable confusion; for

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far too many, it was ‘a world of appalling suffering, maltreatment and unimaginable loneliness that was hidden from sight’ (Wilson, 2024: 1292).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the large institutions that controlled and managed children were closed (Musgrove, 2013: 159–162). All these institutions were decommissioned, and many were sold to private enterprise, which demolished or adaptively re-used the buildings – in many instances as facilities for the aged. This in turn presented disturbing prospects for former inmates approaching old age who may have needed to be incarcerated again in the last years of their life (Sheedy in Steele, 2019; Turnbull et al., 2024).

A collection of short case studies of institutions, including Kildonan/Allambie in Victoria (Cooke et al., 2020), the Ballarat Orphanage (McLay et al., 2020), and sites formerly run by the Nuns of the Good Shepherd (Landvogt, 2020), reminds us of how few published studies there are on the heritage of children’s institutions which in many instances can be named as places of ‘pain and shame’ (Logan and Reeves, 2009). An outstanding exception is the Parramatta Industrial School for Girls, part of the Parramatta Female Factories and Institutions Precinct which was added to the National Heritage List (Australian Government, 2017; Hibberd and Djuric, 2019; Jones, 2018). Sustained advocacy by former residents of the Paramatta precinct was strengthened by re-positioning the campaign within the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, a global movement for the reclamation of places of human suffering ‘to make common ground for dignity, respect and civil participation, instead of abuse and neglect’. (Djurak et al., 2018; Steele, 2022).

Former inmates return to these places of incarceration for diverse and often conflicting reasons (Ashton and Wilson, 2014: 71–72). They want to reaffirm their memories of childhood experiences – good and bad. They want to show their loved ones, especially their children, where they grew up, and to talk about the impact of an institutional childhood. They want to gather with the friends they grew up with and swap yarns about the mischief they made, or the tricks they played, or the beatings … or worse. They want their accounts to be believed. Having heard a Prime Minister tell the Australian Parliament that this ‘ugly chapter in our nation’s history’ should not be forgotten (Rudd, 2009), some return in the hope of experiencing some form of reconciliation (Carr, 2009). Others return to these places to win support for their advocacy for the sites to be conserved, commemorated and memorialised. That goal is harder to achieve when the buildings have been demolished.

Not everyone who grew up in these institutions wants to reconnect in those affirmative ways (Milne, 2020: 50). Visits to these sites can reanimate disturbing memories of a childhood marred by abuse, confusion and neglect. Insiders know these places provided as much coercion and correction as care and protection, but dark histories are in danger of being obscured by the commercial interests of the new proprietors.

This article arose out of the author’s visits to three institutions in Ballarat for personal reasons. As will be shown, all three sites now serve markedly different purposes. Two of the three are visually intact, at least to the external observer. The third – the site of an orphanage which the author lived in for 11 years as a child – has retained only a few elements of the original building fabric. The article adopts an insider research perspective using narrative and counter-narrative approaches to explore these issues (Golding, 2021: 10–12, 174-80). These mixed methods embrace the author’s subjectivity rather than constraining it, as is the case with much empirical research (Ellingson and Ellis, 2008: 450–459). Insider knowledge, and determined activism, are not necessarily at odds with sound scholarship. Memory, recollections and personal testimony are important sources of evidence, but they are not privileged to the exclusion of other valid evidence. Insider knowledge can be tested, confirmed or challenged by exploring other historical sources, including archival research, interviews with others and testimony from other sources such as superintendents’ diaries, which are another form of insider knowledge.

The article aims to provide another perspective that has been largely absent, and to argue for more truthful interpretations of institutional experiences and memorialisation of these sites of coercive welfare.

Memory activated

Damascus college

I had not made an appointment to visit the school, and I was conscious of the possibility of being mistaken for a child molester lurking with intent, so I didn't loiter. Carrying an ill-defined sense of my right to be there, I walked straight in. The school bell had just signalled the end of the day and the office was busy, but the principal was well aware of a stranger.

I'm an old boy,' I explained, as if it had always been a private school, and not an orphanage. 'I grew up here. I wonder if I could have a look around. I've written a book about this place. If there is a suitable space still left, I'd like to launch it here

Call-me-Russell was gracious. After a cup of tea, he walked me around the classrooms in the former toddlers' block. I told him I was there when I was four. At first glance not much had changed, except the rooms were smaller than I remember. I pointed to the large fairytale murals. 'It's wonderful they've been kept. I think they were the only pictures that ever hung on these walls'.

We walked over to the old red-brick school, as I did a lifetime ago. We skirted around miscellaneous buildings standing in place of the prominent old double-storey building that was demolished many years ago, long before Damascus College took over the property. There were no traces of the daily life of 200 children eating, working, playing, sleeping and grieving together in the cold dormitories, the austere dining hall, the asphalt parade ground (Figure 1).

Damascus was making full use of the old four-roomed brick schoolhouse. I showed Russell where I started in the Beginners' room which doubled as the staff room in those days. And how the floor-to-ceiling partitions between the classrooms opened and shut if classes needed to double-up when a teacher was away sick. Russell seemed genuinely interested in these titbits of history. I made no comment about the religious icons on the classroom walls and the rows of shiny laptops on the tables.

He was proud of the assembly hall. 'You might remember it as the old gym', Russell said, pleased to be able to connect his present with my past. 'We've enlarged it quite a bit since the Orphanage days. You can have this space for your book launch. How about a couple of copies for our library in exchange?' I saw no need to tell him that the Orphanage school never had a library. Nor about the cruelty and brutality of the gym back in my day (Figure 2).

Bed-and-breakfast

When I grew old enough to be put to work on the Orphanage farm, I was given the daily task of delivering large cans of milk straight from the farm to the Alexandra Babies' Home, half a mile away. I never knew much about the Babies' Home nor about the double-storey mansion that overshadowed it next door. I knew that the toddlers were transferred to the Ballarat Orphanage when they became old enough. I grew up with some of those children, and some of us are still in contact.

As a young man on my way to football at the Eastern Oval, I used to walk past these buildings, but I wondered why I never saw adults or children in their shared front gardens. What was it that required the inmates to be partitioned from the rest of the community? Years later, I learned the double-storey building had been a Female Refuge accommodating homeless and destitute women,

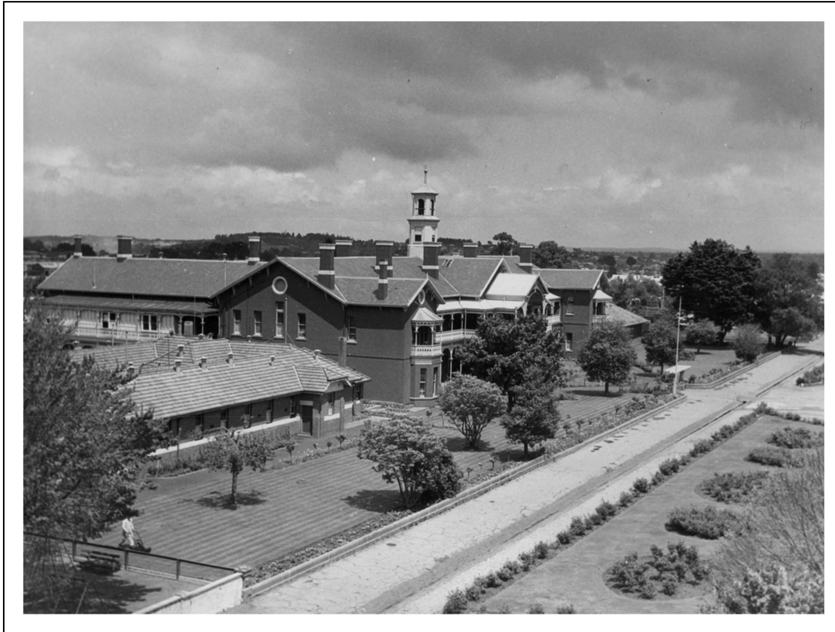

Figure 1. The former orphanage in Victoria street, Ballarat. The central building was demolished in 1965 and replaced by cottage-style accommodation. The last children left the site in 1983. The Toddlers' Block in the foreground has been adaptively re-used as a private childcare centre. The school at the far end (obscured) remains, but has been enveloped by a shopping centre. (Photo credit: Cafs Collection).

Figure 2. The old school at the Ballarat Orphanage built in 1921 enrolled its last state ward child in 1976. It was adapted for use as a Catholic school from 1987 to 2010. (Photo credit: the author).

Figure 3. The former female refuge home opened in Scott Parade Ballarat in 1884 and closed to women in 1941. The Alexandra Babies' Home (inset) opened next door in 1909 and closed to children in 1973. (Photo credit: Heritage Victoria).

mostly single mothers, and their babies. The two buildings shared more than their front gardens (Wickham, 2003; Wickham and Golding, 2024).

The Female Refuge had closed to women midway through World War II and when the last children in the Babies'Home were controversially transported to Melbourne in 1973, it served a succession of purposes: a daycare centre, special accommodation units and even ironically an antique shop (Hemanth, 2022). In 2000, a new owner started up a bed-and-breakfast motel, and when I was visiting Ballarat, I decided to book in for a night or two. Curiosity perhaps, but I wonder if having never satisfied my curiosity as a child provoked the idea that sleeping in the place, even for a short time, would somehow generate new connections with an imperfect past.

The owner told me she how proud she was to have acquired a heritage-listed property. She had done some homework and knew quite a lot about its history. She knew how the many rooms had been used, including those at the back set aside for the commercial laundry where the inmates worked. She had acquired one of the giant washing machines and reconditioned it as a show piece. Guests often marvelled that it was still in working order. But owning an historic institution was not without its problems. She complained that the expenditure on renovations had been crushing. The Women's Refuge had no running water when she bought it, no heating or cooling, no electricity or gas. Did she wonder how the previous inmates might have coped in those conditions?

Alone in my refurbished guestroom, I found no traces of the 'fallen' women or their babies who, in exchange for safety, regular meals and a dry roof over their heads, were coerced into working in the laundry (Figure 3).

Figure 4. The former St Joseph's Boys' home, grant street Sebastopol opened in 1911. The Poor Sisters of Nazareth nuns occupied the bluestone building once known as the Leckie Mansion, and later Blythewood Grange. The boys were accommodated in the red-brick building (inset) built in 1911. The last boys were fostered out in 1981. It has now been adapted for use as a convention centre and resort. (Photo credit: Ballarat Heritage Services).

The holiday resort

I remember when I was a boy in the Ballarat Orphanage, we took part in the special boxing and wrestling nights at the downtown Alfred Hall. Our boys were very keen to beat the Joeys from St Joseph's Boys' Home in Grant Street, Sebastopol on the other side of Ballarat. We were Protestants and they were Catholics, and therefore we were enemies. That's all I knew about this orphanage – and about religion – at the time.

Most of the large barrack-style institutions for children in Australia closed in the 1970s. St Joseph's Boys' Home was among the reluctant last in 1981. The site lay vacant until a business consortium bought it in 1984 and created Blythewood Grange (its original name), as a convention centre with numerous conference rooms, restaurant facilities and 60 guest rooms with ensuites. The old chapel became a wedding and function centre. In 2003, the site was taken over by an international holiday resort company – Club Wyndham South Pacific. In a massive redevelopment, the company added a new indoor pool and gymnasium and converted the 60 guest rooms to 39 luxury suites. Club Wyndham Ballarat declared the property had 'turned another page in its long history of family and hospitality … to become a home away from home to many thousands of [timeshare] owners, their families and friends' (Club Wyndham, nd).

When a timeshare owner offered me some nights at the holiday resort at no cost, I was enthusiastic to accept, notwithstanding it would be mid-winter in a city known for its chilly winter weather. There was no concern about the warmth in our suite or around the amenities. We were physically comfortable. Multinational capital knows how to invest in pleasure. Yet the pervasive ambience was hard to disguise. From the outside, the institution appeared intact (Figure 4).

We pulled up in front of the original solid bluestone Leckie Mansion which housed the nuns who ran the orphanage. Adjacent to the Mansion stood a substantial red-brick Federation Gothic-styled building that housed the children, and just beyond was the chapel. The austere buildings, solid bluestone walls, dark red-brick add-ons, long passages and high ceilings presented an institutional aesthetic in scale and tone that resonated with a locked-in childhood. An extensive landscaped garden, grassed areas and mature trees softened the built fabric a little, but the former orphanage remained physically discernible.

Guests are offered history tours several times a week. I joined a group – none of whom disclosed any personal affiliation with the former institution – that followed the leader from building to building. He praised the dedication of the Poor Sisters of Nazareth who ran both St Joseph's and another older place called Nazareth House for girls and the elderly poor in Mill Street near Lake Wendouree. At St Joseph's, a nursery catered for babies and infants, both boys and girls, but when the girls turned 5 or 6, they were transferred to Nazareth House, leaving their brothers behind.

St Joseph's Home accommodated 2275 boys between 1913 and 1981 (Marlow, 2004: 75). The older boys worked on the self-contained farm which ran livestock and a large vegetable garden. The Home was largely self-supporting through the farm income, but our guide was keen to stress that the boys were taught useful skills on the farm such as boot-making. He did not mention that many of the boys were sent to work for Catholic families on the land when they were 13 or 14, leaving school without a qualification and destined for a life of short-term and poorly paid employment.

Our guide invited us to adjourn to a common room for sherry and a screening of a grainy video with historic photos. Questions were polite and answers adept. 'Sure, the nuns could be tough', the guide told us, 'but on the whole the boys were in good hands'. We were not introduced to any former inmates on our guided tour of the former St Joseph's. What commentary might they have offered the tourists?

Confronting difficult history

St Joseph's home for boys

When the local newspaper ran an advertorial in 2011 for Blythewood Grange, its only reference to the past was that the heritage-listed property 'once served as the St Joseph's Boys Home in the early 1900s and is set upon a tree-lined lake' (*Courier*, 9 October 2011). This elicited the following response from 'Former Ward':

> I was 2 months old when I first arrived there! It was my new home for the next 13 years of my life. There have been nights as an adult that I quietly walk out the front of the gates and try and remember my distorted past. I was bullied by an older guy who turned out to be my brother when I was first introduced to our mother in Mother Superior's office in the old bluestone building (*Courier*, 11 October 2011).

Gordon Hill, a former inmate of St Joseph's, did not know his own surname until he was about 11 years old. He was known by his locker number, 29. Gordon had two brothers in the Home, one older and one younger, but he did not know them until later in life when he also discovered he had two sisters in another Home – unnamed, but possibly Nazareth House (Hill, 2013).

Grace Ryan recalls that many girls at Nazareth House lost connection with their brothers who lived at St Joseph's, but there was always January to look forward to.

> In January we always had a picnic in the Ballarat Gardens. We girls would go by steamer across Lake Wendouree, and the boys from St Joseph's used to come in a big charabanc. We'd all run around mad finding our brothers! (Find and Connect, 2025)

In 1978, Departmental officers recommended the Home be closed, and the government signalled its intention to stop sending state wards, for whom it paid maintenance. In effect that meant it ceased funding the Home since the vast majority of boys from the 1950s onwards were state wards. A strong public protest led by the Save St Joseph's Committee (chaired by local MP Murray Byrne) staved off the closure until December 1980 when the last 42 children were placed in foster homes (O'Connor, 2010). A retrospective report drafted by a government bureaucrat explained the closure in institutional terms.

> By the mid 1970s concerns were being expressed about the relative isolation of the Home, its congregate care style of operation and the fact that most of the children accommodated were from Melbourne rather than the surrounding region. Rising costs were also an issue and referrals to the Home were in decline. By 1978 the Home was only accommodating the minimum necessary (60 children) to remain financially viable (Jenkinson, 2000).

However, former inmate Joseph Marlow (birth name Antun Guratovitch) claimed that he 'learned in confidence from some government officials … that nuns and priests were no longer regarded as suitable de facto parents' (Marlow, 2004: 6). That was not the tenor of a publication co-written by Marlow and a former inmate of Nazareth House, celebrating the centenary of the Nazareth Sisters with their full cooperation. (Pegler and Marlow, 1988) The book was dedicated to the Sisters, 'their ideals' and their 'selfless dedication' to children who needed their care. The publication drew heavily on whimsical anecdotes and recollections of former inmates who, the authors claimed, saw themselves as 'beneficiaries of [the Sisters'] kindness'. Readers might hear echoes of our tour guide: 'fun and games' mixed with some 'tough love' and a bit of hard work that 'didn't do anyone any harm'.

A second book by Marlow (2004) was remarkably different. It described St Joseph's as 'a veritable smorgasbord of sexual activity … regularly dotted with incidents of paedophilia or homosexuality'. The former inmates Marlow interviewed for this book 'named names and places where such crimes occurred'. He, too, was sexually abused. The Sisters were unaware of the extent of the sexual activity, he writes, but they kept the boys under close supervision all through the night. He admits that the nuns were often cruel and sometimes sadistic in their caning of children, and links this to their suppressed sexuality (Marlow, 2004: 62).

It is now common knowledge that notorious paedophile, Father Gerald Ridsdale, was a visiting chaplain at both institutions during the 1960s. Tragically, the nuns allowed him to take girls and boys to private rooms for 'confession', 'counselling' and 'sex education' where he mauled both boys and girls (Broken Rites Australia, 2023). The constant cover-ups – likely by the nuns, and certainly by his superiors in the Church – were ultimately exposed, and Ridsdale was prosecuted and gaoled. After more than 20 years in incarceration he died in prison in 2025 (ABC, 2025).

A Royal Commission found that then Father George Pell played a part in protecting Ridsdale (Cooke, 2019; Royal Commission, 2017, 2020). In Ballarat and elsewhere, Pell (later Cardinal Pell, and now deceased) is perceived to be a divisive figure. The publicly touted proposition that the Australian Catholic University should remove his name from a building at its Ballarat campus, is vigorously opposed by many who still revere him – among other things, he was a Ballarat boy who rose to fame (Attwell, 2019a, 2019b). By contrast, there was little opposition to the disgraced Father Ridsdale's

name being blacked out in 2016 on an honour board at St Patrick's College in Ballarat where he also served as chaplain. A nearby plaque reads: 'The black line above stands both as a symbol of respect to the bravery of victims and survivors, and for the college's deep remorse' (ABC, 2016). No such plaque or memorial has yet been put in place for the boys of St Joseph's or the girls of Nazareth House. St Joseph's is included in the Ballarat Planning Scheme (as HO142) presumably because of the intactness of its distinctive historic buildings. The commercial owners claim that 'Former residents of the orphanage continued to visit the institution in adult life, reflecting their 'deep attachment to what they call[ed] their only real childhood home' (cited in Rowe, 2012: 52). Such sentiments need to be assessed alongside the powerful testimony that many former inmates have given to formal inquiries and subsequent recommendations about marking such sites in noteworthy ways (Family and Community Development Committee, 2013; Royal Commission, 2017; SCARC, 2004).

The female refuge and Alexandra babies home

It is easy to be seduced by the architectural charm of the historic buildings of the decommissioned Alexandra Babies' Home and Female Refuge that stand side-by-side in Scott Parade, Ballarat East. The site is registered with Heritage Victoria (No. H1893) as 'a rare surviving example of a nineteenth century and early twentieth century purpose-built institution devoted to the welfare of women and children' (Heritage Council Victoria, 2025). One or other of the buildings on the property has attracted a string of buyers since their closure – the Refuge in 1941 and the (re-named) Toddlers' Home in 1973 (Wickham and Golding, 2024: 270–278).

One owner, who acquired one of the buildings to house her 10 children and grandchildren after the B & B motel closed, told a reporter that former inmates often stopped outside to look. 'We have brought at least 20 people in; we wanted to ask them "how well were you treated when you were here?" Every one told us this home was their place of peace'. The owner said she personally would miss 'the elegance, warmth and peace of the home' (Day, 2020). This view is at odds with formal evidence given by former inmates such as Susan Connolly who was in the Babies' Home with her younger siblings.

> I remember being hungry and cold all the time, I remember a roomful of small crying rocking children being smacked and punished for crying and rocking. … I remember being hit on the face arms and legs; I remember the whelps, the shock, and the bewilderment. I remember being made to sit in a freezing cold bath because I had wet my bed and then being made to sleep again on the wet smelly sheets … what sort of people were these so called carers. (Connolly, 2004).

In 2012, a small number of former inmates conducted a long-overdue remembrance service at the Ballarat New Cemetery in memory of an estimated 300 babies who did not survive. A memorial plaque was erected at the Cemetery

> … dedicated in memory to all those babies and children who died while at the Alexandra Babies Home and Ballarat Female Refuge who were buried in this area in unmarked graves. Here, we remember them. May their souls rest in peace. (Ballaarat General Cemeteries Trust, 2012)

There has been little public agitation for memorialisation at the site of the Female Refuge, the laundry, and Alexandra Babies' Home, in spite of the complex being included in the Victorian Heritage Register (as H1893). The citation for the Refuge in this register makes reference to both the built fabric and its social history. The architectural significance of the former Toddlers' Home is warranted by it being a representative example of a Federation villa. Its social significance

derives from its 'physical expression of early twentieth century attitudes to the moral welfare of prostitutes and single mothers'. The Heritage Register further describes the complex as '… a tangible expression of the strong vein of social responsibility and Christian charity running through early Victorian society' (Heritage Council Victoria Heritage Register, H1893).

The detatched language of the Heritage Council provides no insights into the transactions that took place in the name of social responsibility and Christian charity, nor do the buildings. The site itself provides no tangible traces of the power relations that saw 'fallen' women relinquish their liberty and autonomy – and in many cases also their allegedly 'unwanted' children – in exchange for a safe bed, regular meals, and a dry roof over their heads. That provision came in exchange for a coercive Christian piety in the form of backbreaking laundry work and strict discipline imposed by a management committee and staff who intimidated, denigrated and controlled them, in much the same way as similar coercive institutions in Ireland and elsewhere that clearly fell outside the remit of the formal criminal justice system (O'Donnell and O'Sullivan (2020).

As Wickham (2003: 125) shows, even personal space was regulated in the Ballarat Female Refuge: 'Having left her room early in the morning she was not allowed to return until night. For the rest of the time the women were located in the common space, their behaviour constantly monitored by staff and other inmates'. As late as 1934, the rules were still authoritarian. The young women were not allowed to visit one another's rooms. Conversations were regulated: 'No Bad Language or Light Talk' (sic) was permitted. Prayers were compulsory every day at 8:45 am and 7:30 pm, and 'any Inmate who wishes to absent herself from Prayers or any Religious Service must first have the consent of the Matron'. The denial of choice extended to leisure time. 'The Wireless shall only be turned on by the one in charge, who shall decide the Station to be listened to'. 'No Inmate is allowed to use the Telephone'. And once their time was up, they weren't welcome back. 'Inmates, when once they leave, shall not re-visit the Home except for the purpose of interviewing the Matron' (Ballarat Town & City Mission, 1934).

In time, this example of coercive charity for young women in dire circumstances passed into obscurity. In part that was because of more enlightened attitudes towards, and greater support for, young mothers, but it is reasonable to speculate that young working-class women developed a greater consciousness that they did not have to put up with coercive practices that masqueraded as benevolent charity (Wickham and Golding, 2024: 302–303).

It is also reasonable to speculate on why there has been little agitation from former inmates or the community at large for public memorialisation at the site. The repressive nature of this complex over many years would have prevented former inmates from sharing the claim that it was their 'place of peace'. Being forbidden to return to the Refuge once they left could hardly be conducive to a longing to return, let alone wanting to agitate for its memorialisation. Given those circumstances, even if former inmates felt they had a cause, that cause has been lost once the property passed into the hands of a series of private owners each creating a different character for the facility.

The Ballarat orphanage

The centenary history of the Ballarat Orphanage opens with this paragraph:

> Mercy was the mission and warm charity the spur of a small group of pioneers gathered about the fireside of a Ballarat East home on a bitter winter night in 1864. Their talk was of children, of the orphaned, destitute and deserted waifs, growing in numbers and an increasing problem in the young developing city. (Morris, 1965: 1)

The history was commissioned and published by the Board of Management in 1965. Like so many such histories, it is hagiographic in tone, paying tribute to a succession of dedicated and idealistic men (more than 200 individuals are mentioned by name – just a handful are women) as they struggle manfully to meet the challenges of finding the resources to meet the needs of the children described above.

There is no discussion of policy issues in this published history. We learn little about the circumstances that led children to be incarcerated, or why it was thought a good idea to put 200 traumatised children together in one vast warehouse in the first place. There is no discussion about separating siblings, or about parents visiting, or plans to reunite and support families. There is nothing about how they survived the abandonment, the lovelessness, the Spartan conditions, the violence and the harsh punishment meted out by untrained staff (Golding, 2005; McGinniss, 2019). For the most part, the children are invisible.

At times, the Orphanage management privileged the reputation of the institution over the safety and wellbeing of the children. For example, the abrupt departure in 1964 of Superintendent Hylton Sedgman was not mentioned in the centenary history, but his sexual abuse of the children in his custody in 1963–64 was common knowledge – and not just among the children (McGinniss, 2019: 208–212). The (all male) Board responded to complaints by punishing the children, enforcing a code of silence, and conspiring with the highest level of police and government of the day to cover-up. Sedgman's sexual crimes would only come to public notice after former inmates took legal action (Age, 2003: 4). Many more years would pass before the high-level cover-up was exposed (King, 2021).

Under its current leadership, Cafs (formerly known as CAFS, Child and Family Services), the body which assumed responsibility for heritage services related to the institution, has been more candid about its difficult history. On the honour roll for Superintendents, Cafs has run a translucent red line not only through Sedgman's name but also the names of two other men who brutalised children under their 'care' and control. An explanatory statement next to the board reads: 'These men do not belong on an honour board, but this history must not be hidden away'.

Yet, while outing some abusive individuals is respectful to their victims, and ethically proper, focusing only on deviant offenders diverts attention from the evidence that abuse at the Ballarat Orphanage was systemic in nature over a lengthy period of time. One law firm has negotiated legal settlements for about 60 former inmates who have made allegations against multiple perpetrators over a 40-year period (King, 2017). One must ask questions about power and accountability in this site of pain and shame: questions about selection of staff, their training and supervision, and crucially, why the children's voices were unheard.

Despite (arguably because of) their experiences of the place, former inmates have vigorously advocated for a heritage plan for the site of the Ballarat Orphanage. They have conducted a campaign over 15 years with a succession of private developers (selling on portions of the site to other developers) as well as seeking the support (with varying degrees of success) of the Heritage Council of Victoria, the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT), local government, the trade union movement and Cafs. The narrative of negotiations is complex and has been the subject of several commentaries (McGinniss, 2019; McGinniss et al., 2024; McLay et al., 2020; Wilson, 2024) but, several issues emerge that are particularly pertinent to this paper.

Vested interests drive heritage assessments

It is evident that when they assess heritage value, some professionals (for example, Heritage Council of Victoria, 2011; Lovell Chen, 2011; Rowe, 2012) privilege architectural form over social

significance. As Orphan Asylum, Orphanage and Children's Home, the institution occupied the site from 1865 to 1983, but the central building that impressed the public for 100 years was demolished in 1965 and replaced by small-scale cottages in accordance with changing philosophies about congregate care. When Damascus College sold the site to private developers in 2010–11, there began a period of slow but steady deterioration of the remnant fabric. During this period, the new owners sought ways of maximising their investment in the face of former inmates whose advocacy for heritage controls were framed as barriers to 'progress'.

The former inmates were not overly concerned to see the newer buildings removed from the site but insisted on the preservation of the 1921 schoolhouse, the 1929 Toddler's Block (which had also taken in many of the children from the Alexandra Toddlers' Home), and the original 1880s brick wall. The former inmates valued the Toddlers' Block and the School where they had been most likely to find relief from the harsh physical and emotional regime of the Orphanage, but the professionals asserted these buildings lacked architectural merit. They disparaged the former inmates' position as 'a very personal response' as if that was a demerit point (Lovell Chen, 2011: 53). They drew attention to the school roofline having been raised to provide better light and argued the building was thus compromised architecturally. They asserted that the demolition of the two-storey 1865 building meant the site lacked holistic integrity; given there were orphanages in Melbourne, Geelong and Bendigo that were more architecturally intact, there was no need to list yet another orphanage (Heritage Council of Victoria, 2011; Lovell Chen, 2011; Rowe, 2012). This listing mechanism is apparently typical in 'focusing on the superlatives – the best, oldest, most intact and most representative heritage' (Ireland et al., 2024: 202).

The 1880s wall was the only item that produced consensus, albeit from conflicting perspectives. The developers agreed the wall was in good order and that obviated the need to pay for a new boundary fence. A heritage expert valued the wall for its technical features: 'a weathered variant of Yorkshire bond with three stretchers separating each header…' (Lovell Chen, 2013: A30). The former inmates remembered it for its emotional resonance. For some it was the crying wall where they grieved their abandonment; for others, it marked the boundary of containment which they scrambled over to abscond; and yet others recalled sitting on top on Saturdays waiting in hope that visitors would arrive (Golding, 2005: 24). The wall has been saved.

Former inmates kept the bastards nearly honest

The campaign for preservation and memorialisation would not have occurred at all had it not been for the activism of former inmates of the institution. No other parties were sufficiently motivated to take the initiative. A core group of former inmates (including the current author, and now including the children of former inmates) initiated the campaign in 2011 and have stayed with it through a range of strategies – rallies, petitions, meetings with developers, lobbying city councillors, submission to formal tribunals (Golding, 2025; McGinniss et al., 2024).

Some site developments have breached undertakings negotiated by former inmates with VCAT and the City Council. In hindsight, the period of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013–17) deflected energy from the heritage campaign. When Catholic Archbishop Anthony Fisher said 'that the Ballarat story is probably the worst story in the history of the Catholic Church in Australia' (Doumit, 2015: 1), he was referring to the Commission's hearings in Ballarat that focussed exclusively on child sexual abuse in Catholic institutions (including St Joseph's and Nazareth House). Former inmates of the Ballarat Orphanage expended time and energy unsuccessfully lobbying the Commission to include abuse at their institution in their

Figure 5. The former toddlers' block built in 1929 was re-purposed as a commercial childcare centre. The adaptation was sensitively managed. (Photo credi: the author 2024).

investigations. The Commission said it wanted to avoid jeopardising legal action that was in train against former Superintendent Sedgman (Wilson, 2024). Ironically, the prosecution of Sedgman came to nothing because in 2016, at 88 years of age, he was considered not fit to stand trial. His victims were devastated (King, 2017, 2021).

During this period of disruption which was stretched further by the COVID19 pandemic lockdowns (–-22), developments were allowed to take place on the site, setting aside Council's undertaking to consult with the former inmates' group. Subdivisions were approved, and large-scale residential building began on a section of the property. Another private company adapted the Toddlers' Block building as a childcare centre. It should be noted, in passing, that the former inmates who have recently visited at the owner's invitation are well pleased with this adaptive re-use. Likewise, after seeing a new street in the subdivision named after the architect of the original Orphan Asylum, they submitted to the City Council that other new streets in the subdivision should reflect children's historical activities, and the Council did agree to Hopscotch Street and Marbles Crescent – a small victory (Figure 5).

In contrast, contrary to its assurance that the schoolhouse would be preserved (Henderson, 2014: 4), the City Council permitted developers to erect a large, ugly supermarket and other retail outlets right against the school in a manner that is totally incongruous. The commercial development completely overshadows the historic school, which is now reduced to being a storeroom for the shopping complex. Former inmates are excluded. As Wilson (2024) comments, 'No-one passing by could possibly chance upon any recognisable remnant of the site's history. … you have to know it is there'. Indeed, people might well wonder why a rectangular red-brick remnant is attached to a supermarket (Figure 6).

Compromises

In 2015, Ballarat Cafs (then CAFS, entering its 150th anniversary) invested heavily in a professionally-designed 'Research and Legacy Centre' in the basement of its headquarters in the

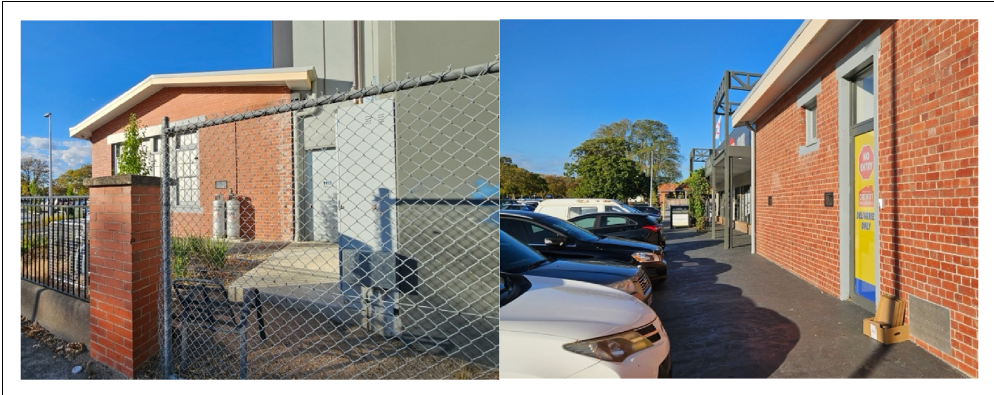

Figure 6. The orphanage primary school built in 1921 remains, but has been swamped by commercial development. (Photo credit: Tim Stewart 2025).

CBD, well away from the original site. The Centre was touted as a complement to, even a substitute for, any heritage project on the Orphanage site (Golding, 2025). Yet CAFS made no effort to seek support or input from former inmates. While the Centre produced a more balanced version of children's experiences than was portrayed in the centenary history, it sanitised the content and made no attempt to disrupt the consensus narrative that is found in many heritage projects (Gross and Terra, 2018; Smith, 2006). In presenting the history of the institution as an 'asset' for the managing organisation, CAFS kept hidden from sight the 'world of appalling suffering, maltreatment and unimaginable loneliness' that the children experienced (Wilson, 2024: 1292). Under new management, the Centre has recently been re-imagined and re-designed with greater input from former inmates (McGinniss et al., 2024).

This episode raises questions not only about the value of off-site memorials (Atkinson-Phillips, 2020), but also about co-design. Decades ago, SCARC (2004: para. 11.46) had urged governments, churches and agencies to fund the erection of suitable memorials in the form of memorial gardens, plaques at the site of former institutions, or the construction of heritage centres on the site of former institutions. A key element of the Committee's recommendation was that the form and location of memorials should be determined after local consultation with former inmates and their support and advocacy groups. The Committee acknowledged that the re-animation of a site's difficult history is best realised when those who experienced their childhood on site are engaged as equal partners, if not leaders, in that realisation.

In hindsight, it is now evident that the laudable objective of SCARC to involve former inmates in having a say, let alone be in partnership in memorialisation of these sites, has been thwarted by the transfer of assets to private enterprise, who see no benefit in paying respect to places where people were once incarcerated.

Concluding remarks

Using a case study approach from an insider perspective, this paper has explored the diverse ways three historic sites of incarceration in Ballarat have been remembered. On two of the sites – St Joseph's, and the Female Refuge and Alexandra Toddlers' Home – the external physical fabric remains much as it was when they operated for their foundational purpose. Using Google street view, former inmates might think nothing has changed. That is not the case, of course, since these

sites now serve wholly different purposes, and have been acquired by agencies that see no tangible benefit to them in memorialisation. Although these two sites offer a strong visual reminder to former inmates, the architectural presence alone has not stimulated inmates to campaign for further memorialisation at the site.

On the third site – the former Ballarat Orphanage, which is now in the hands of multiple owners – only the two surviving buildings and boundary wall remain as a reminder of the large institution that once operated on the site. Developments by private owners have now diminished the possible scope of heritage work. Insofar as any site may be an archive in its own right, with buildings capable of triggering memories and meanings for inmates, this site can still evoke strong sometimes contradictory reactions. Notwithstanding the compromised nature of the remnant fabric, former inmates have made protracted efforts to mark the site, and continue to prosecute their campaign which has been described as, '…a developing story, playing out at the intersection of municipal planning, academic research, urban development, and personal and collective memory'. (McLay et al., 2020: 47).

The significant changes at the site have resulted in uncoordinated developments that have left little property that the City Council now controls. Nevertheless, in its last annual budget (2024–25), Council allocated funds that will enable the former inmates to continue to work with Council staff, Cafs, designers and landscapers on the installation at the site of an interpretative heritage trail that will explore the theme 'We were here. We are here'. It remains to be seen whether the outcome will match the sustained efforts and hopes of former inmates.

This paper has highlighted some of the many obstructions to creating heritage interpretations of former sites of coercive welfare in the present regime of private ownership of sites. The example of the planned interpretive commemoration at the Ballarat Orphanage site, made possible by funding secured by former inmates and their supporters, is a modest but important victory. It suggests that the neglect of built fabric and even its demolition need not be an end to the aspirations to mark such sites. It may also signal that, if the dominant narratives of these sites are to be challenged and the consensus histories disrupted, it may require the survivors to lead the way.

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Note

1. 'Inmates' was a label routinely used in these institutions. Despite its connotations, the current author will use this term throughout because the language demonstrates how institutions thought of the people in their custody. It is acknowledged that the terms 'former residents' or 'care leavers' are preferred by many.

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