

**FRIENDS OF THE ORPHAN SCHOOLS
OPEN DAY AND DESCENDANTS' GATHERING AND BOOK LAUNCH
SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE BARBARA BAKER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
ST JOHN'S PARK PRECINCT, NEW TOWN
SATURDAY 25 MARCH 2023**

Thank you, Bob [Bob Gordon, introduced HE], for inviting me to attend this Open Day and Descendants' Gathering. Thank you also for inviting me to launch this new publication, *Hidden Histories of the Orphan Schools*.

I pay my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land: the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, and recognise their enduring culture and connection to land, sea and waters. I acknowledge the impacts of colonisation upon our First People and commit to a future that respects and acknowledges Aboriginal stories, culture, language and history.

The focus of this weekend here at St John's Park Precinct is to mark the 195th anniversary of the establishment of the Orphan Schools in Van Diemen's Land, in 1828. It is a fitting way to do so by welcoming all descendants from those schools. In particular, may I mention Lisa Hutton, who has travelled from France to be here today. We are looking forward to your presentation, Lisa, and the others to follow this afternoon and tomorrow.

This precinct is home to an important part our island's social and educational history. It is to the great credit of the Friends of the Orphan Schools and other organisations, like KickStart Arts, that have invested time, funding, and care into protecting the buildings, keeping their stories and guarding our history.

Much of that history of the Orphan Schools is grim. That is all the more reason why the memories of those who lived here should be preserved with dignity.

In their beginning, there was optimism. In 1828, the London *Morning Herald* newspaper reported, I quote: "Under the auspices of the Archdeacon of

New South Wales an orphan school is established ... It will be the means of rescuing many a poor little innocent from the infection of ignorance and depravity.”¹

A few years later, an Irish newspaper commented that: “The government has founded two noble orphan schools, which would do honour to any country, at about two miles distance from Hobart-town, and will be a lasting monument to the fame of Lieutenant Governor Arthur who founded them. Here, all orphans, well as the children of the poorer class are clothed, fed and educated.”²

The realities of living in a difficult new social order in lutruwita, then Van Diemen’s Land, then meant that the schools were far from noble, and the children far from being rescued.

Archdeacon of New South Wales, Thomas Scott, and not mentioned in the *Morning Herald*, set about forcibly removing children from their parents, if they were convicts, or in his opinion, “dissolute”³ or, just because they were poor. Many of these children were not in any way “saved”; but instead subjected to harsh treatment in the Orphan Schools.

Lady Caroline Denison, the wife of Governor Sir William Denison, wrote in her journal in 1847 that, quote: “I was really touched with a poor Irishwoman, one of a large party who arrived only a few days ago, in a convict ship from Dublin. I made some enquiry from her respecting the children, a great number of whom, I knew, had come out in the ship with their mothers. The tears started into her eyes the moment I began to speak of them, and she told me she had two of her own amongst them, a boy and a girl, “and indeed,” she added, “I am just breaking my heart after them!”⁴

End of quote. That mother was then told that if she behaved herself while on probation aboard the *Anson*, she would be able to visit her children at the

¹ *Morning Herald* (London), Thursday 25 September 1828, page 1.

² *Waterford Mail* [Ireland], Saturday 25 January 1834, page 4.

³ “The Orphan Schools” – State Library and Tasmanian Archives Blog, written by Kim Pearce, Archivist, 2019 (printed page 2).

⁴ Denison, Sir William and Lady Denison, *Varieties of Vice-Regal Life*, edited by Richard Davis and Stefan Petrow, Hobart, Tasmanian Historical Research association, 2004, page 41. (First published in 1869.)

Orphan School when the six-month probation ended. The errors of the early years had not been rectified.

Improvements did eventuate, thanks to the medical practitioner Edward Swarbreck Hall, whose investigations led to a formal inquiry in the late 1850s.

We know that this precinct has since a long history of care to various sectors of the populace. Today, its significance is: “architectural, historical, social, cultural and archaeological.”⁵ Yet as your Friends website points out, although individual buildings have heritage registration, the site as a whole is not formally recognised. I join in the hope that that recognition will come about.

May I now turn to my second role this morning, and that is to launch the newly published *Hidden Histories of the Orphan Schools*. This work, edited by Dianne Snowden, has over twenty individual contributors.

This book is a fine example of the increasing knowledge of our Orphan Schools and also the entire social and economic infrastructure of convict transportation to Van Diemen’s Land.

Many individuals and groups have contributed to our understanding of this confronting part of our Tasmanian story. Through research, publication, refurbishment of buildings and the like, we surely come closer to this precinct being granted formal national recognition of its status.

Hidden Histories of the Orphan Schools is a worthy such publication that joins with books from the Convict Women’s Press; the massive undertakings of the Footsteps Towards Freedom project; the From the Shadows Committee; and numerous individuals closely identified with these histories, including Alison Alexander, Lucy Frost; and, of course, Dianne Snowden.

I am personally pleased to be launching *Hidden Histories of the Orphan Schools* because Government House has had a close involvement with the projects I have mentioned.

⁵ [Friends of the Orphan Schools](#), accessed 22 March 2023.

In 2017 my predecessor, Kate Warner, officiated with the then President of Ireland, His Excellency Michael D Higgins, at the unveiling of Irish sculptor Rowan Gillespie's four convict statues at the waterfront. Kate also unveiled another statue in February 2021.

Last year, in February, I unveiled a Convict Woman Statue sculpted by Rowan Gillespie at the Cascades Female Factory in the morning; and the Orphan School Children statues here in the afternoon.

Hidden Histories has images of Rowan Gillespie's statues on the principal front and rear covers; a measure of the integration of the various projects I have mentioned, and which now come together around this weekend's focus on the Orphan Schools and the living descendants of those who experienced life in them.

The stories told in these pages are memorable. Here are a few snippets as you get your credit cards ready:

- The children on board included my great-great-great-great grandmother ...⁶
- Temporary barracks for the convict workmen were constructed continuous with the Orphan School buildings. [Building Superintendent] John De Little refused to live on-site as "this would not be suitable for the female part of my family as they would be in the immediate neighbourhood of the most depraved characters."⁷
- Despite their difficult lives, Mary Ann's and Eliza's survival of both the fire at sea and the Orphan School, ensured that they have hundreds of descendants, many unaware of their unique history.⁸
- Following five years of his young life in the Queen's Orphan School and then being reunited with his mother, Mathew Lynn lived a long life far from his place of birth and baptism, with a wife and family of two sons

⁶ *Hidden Histories* page 51.

⁷ Page 11.

⁸ Page 74.

and possibly ten grandchildren. Mathew's life after leaving the Queen's Orphan School was one of the few success stories of those who were incarcerated.

On that positive note, may I conclude now, because we have many wonderful speakers ahead.

It remains therefore for me to have much pleasure in declaring launched *Hidden Histories of the Orphan Schools*, edited by Dianne Snowden.

I also wish you all a most positive and rewarding weekend as we all mark the 195th anniversary of the establishment of the Orphan Schools.

Thank you.