Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home

A place of removal, and a place of survival and healing

A note before you read. This read refers to events and policies that may be distressing, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers. Please take care as you read, and stop or take a break whenever you need to. If you would like to yarn with someone, support is available through 13YARN on 13 92 76, Lifeline on 13 11 14, and your local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service.

About the Home

Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home stood at 59 Beinda Street, Bomaderry, near Nowra on the South Coast of New South Wales, on the banks of the Shoalhaven River. It was established in 1908 by the Australian Aborigines' Mission, which became the United Aborigines Mission in 1929. It was a home for Aboriginal babies and young children up to about the age of ten.

Bomaderry was the first home established for Aboriginal children in New South Wales, and the longest running. For this reason it is often described as the birthplace of the Stolen Generations in New South Wales. Because the Home was a private institution and many of its records were lost or destroyed, the full number of children who passed through it is not known.

The Home opened in 1908 and operated for more than seventy years. Its closure is recorded as 1980 in some sources and as 1988 in others. The difference reflects when it stopped operating as a children's home and when the United Aborigines Mission's use of the site came to an end. The property is now owned by the Nowra Local Aboriginal Land Council.

How the Home began, and how it grew

The Home began in 1908 when seven Aboriginal children came into the care of missionaries: a baby girl taken in the year before, and six orphaned brothers and sisters whose mother had died. They were housed in a small cottage on land beside the Shoalhaven River. As more children arrived, more cottages were built, until there were four, the last opened in May 1924. Up to forty-seven children lived at the Home at any one time.

Bomaderry operated independently of the Aborigines Protection Board, and later the Aborigines Welfare Board. In practice, though, the Board sent many children to the Home from reserves and stations across New South Wales. The Aborigines Protection Act of 1909, amended in 1915, gave the Board wide power to remove Aboriginal children, including very young children, without the consent of their parents. Babies and infants were often taken to Bomaderry first.

Key dates

A timeline of the Home, from its establishment to remembrance and redress.

1908	The Home is established at Bomaderry by the Australian Aborigines' Mission, beginning with seven children.
29 May 1924	The fourth and last cottage opens. Up to 47 children live at the Home at any one time.
1929	The Australian Aborigines' Mission becomes the United Aborigines Mission.
1969	The Aborigines Welfare Board is wound down; the Mission continues its work with government departments.
1980 to 1988	The Home closes. Its end is recorded as 1980 in some sources and 1988 in others.
1997	Bomaderry is named in the Bringing Them Home report as an institution that housed removed children.
2008	A plaque marks the 100th anniversary of the Home.
2012	The site is added to the New South Wales State Heritage Register.
2021	The New South Wales government agrees to act as funder of last resort for redress connected to the Home.

Life at the Home

Children arrived at Bomaderry very young, some only days old. Many were told that their parents had died or were unknown. They were generally not allowed visitors, and were discouraged or forbidden from speaking their languages. Cared for by mission staff, many children grew up believing the matrons were their mothers, and that the other children were their only family.

The Home was one step in a longer system of removal. When children reached about the age of ten, they were moved on, most often the girls to the Cootamundra Girls' Training Home and the boys to the Kinchela Boys' Training Home. From there, many were sent into domestic service or labour. Throughout, children were separated from Country, culture, language and kin, and were raised to assimilate into white society.

The lasting impact, and the strength of survivors

The removals carried out through places like Bomaderry were the result of race-based policy, not of any failing by families. For the children, the losses were profound: connection to family and Country, language, culture and identity. Because records were sparse and often destroyed, many survivors have faced long and difficult journeys to trace their families and return home.

Alongside that loss is a story of survival and strength. Survivors have organised as the Children of the Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home, keeping the memory of the place and of one another close. The site is now cared for

by the Nowra Local Aboriginal Land Council and is heritage listed, so that this history is held and told rather than forgotten. Truth-telling about Bomaderry honours the people who lived there and supports healing for families and communities today.

Questions to reflect on

- How does understanding Bomaderry as the result of policy, rather than family failing, change the way the story is told?
- Why does the survival of records, and access to them, matter so much for survivors and their descendants?
- How could your organisation support truth-telling, commemoration and healing in respectful ways?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Bomaderry operated from 1908 for more than seventy years, and is often called the birthplace of the Stolen Generations in New South Wales.
- ✓ It housed Aboriginal babies and young children, who at about age ten were moved on to homes such as Cootamundra and Kinchela.
- ✓ Removal was the result of race-based policy, and sparse records have made family reconnection difficult for many survivors.
- ✓ The heritage listed site is cared for by the Nowra Local Aboriginal Land Council, and survivors continue the work of remembrance and healing.

Reference material

- **Find and Connect, Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home**
  findandconnect.gov.au
- **The Healing Foundation**
  healingfoundation.org.au
- **Link-Up NSW, family tracing and reunion**
  linkupnsw.org.au
- **Aboriginal Affairs NSW, Family Records Service**
  aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au
- **Bringing Them Home report, Australian Human Rights Commission**
  humanrights.gov.au

How Emus Talking can help

Emus Talking is a proudly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned business. We help organisations build culturally safe workplaces and strong partnerships, delivered remotely and virtually right across Australia, or in person by arrangement.

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