

... the March family were found by the SPCC to be living in a state of almost incredible filth and misery. "I have never seen a more filthy or poverty-stricken home," reported a SPCC inspector. The heads of the children were alive with vermin and covered with sores. There was scarcely any furniture and a most inadequate supply of beds and bedding in the dilapidated home ...

Annual Report, 1940¹



Steadfast Resilience: 1925–1959

In the mid-1920s the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (VSPCC) entered a new era. Several years of financial struggle without an active president, and the resignation of both secretary and inspector, had left the organisation directionless and a shadow of what it once was. But strengthened links with the Charity Organisation Society (COS) and the appointment of new president Eleanor Gatehouse, saw the VSPCC take on new life. Gatehouse was a Justice of the Peace, an eminent figure in women's golf in Victoria and a keen advocate for the rights of children.² She provided the strong leadership and energetic personality the VSPCC needed to emerge from a challenging period and reclaim its earlier vigour.

From late 1924 the Society worked out of the COS offices in the newly erected Morris House on the corner of Little Collins and Exhibition streets, which became a central base for organised charities in Melbourne and encouraged close connections between the various organisations.³ New secretary Stanley Greig Smith was a crucial aspect of VSPCC's revitalisation. As secretary for both VSPCC and COS, Smith took a leading role in managing the organisations and coordinating their advocacy campaigns.

The following thirty years saw the Society continue its core work as a child welfare authority, expand on its advocacy activities around legislation concerning child welfare, survive the 1930s economic depression and another devastating world war, and expand into providing temporary emergency care for children. It was a challenging period in many ways, but the VSPCC survived and emerged as a strong voice and advocate for child welfare.

'Not fear, but friendliness'

Calls for a second inspector were finally answered in April 1925 with the appointment of William Williamson.⁴ Within two years the Society boasted three inspectors, with the employment of Minnie Beattie in 1927 as the VSPCC's first female inspector. The Society reported in August that year that the 'selection of a woman inspector was an experiment which has well justified itself'.⁵ However, it



Until the use of a motor car was donated in 1936, VSPCC inspectors relied on other forms of transport, including taxis.

Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria, MS 10384

took until 1932 for Beattie to be made a specially authorised officer under the *Children's Welfare Act*.

The Society was eager to convey a favourable image of its activities and the city's newspapers were an important means of achieving this. A newspaper article in August 1928 detailed how the VSPCC inspectors went about their work. Inspector Williamson showed the journalist an anonymous letter that had been received by the Society that day:

The mother ... often goes out for the day, leaving this child in the house on her own, with nothing but a few biscuits to eat. The child is always very dirty, and is subjected to undue thrashings.⁶

Williamson explained that it was possible there was nothing in the complaint, but it would be investigated at once. He assured readers that the inspectors took the Society's motto 'Not fear, but friendliness' seriously:

We treat all letters as strictly in confidence, and we cannot afford to ignore anonymous communications ... But remembering our motto, we do not go to the suspected home bullying and blustering, dressed in a little brief authority. We are at first received with hostility, naturally, but later on, when the people come to know us, they invite us in as friends.⁷

Inspector Beattie agreed 'that only by approaching these people in the spirit of comradeship can anything be achieved'.⁸ While the Society was clearly at pains to portray itself in a positive light, in many cases the inspectors were able to make a significant difference to the lives of the families they worked with. The records often refer to cases where the Society was able to 'see some return for its efforts in healthier, cleaner children and a better home environment'.⁹

It was a demanding, challenging job for the VSPCC inspectors, who knew 'no regular office hours if the cry of a neglected or ill-treated child calls them' and who required a unique combination of 'sympathy, tact and firmness'.¹⁰ In 1936, the Society's inspectors were provided with transport two days a week. The use of a motor car was donated after VSPCC president Mabel Brookes put out an appeal in the local newspapers, advising that the inspectors were 'much over-worked', having investigated 589 cases in one year in 1934. Access to transport would be 'a great service ... to the many unhappy children who find in the Society often their only friend in life'.¹¹ Fred Morris, Officer in Charge of Children's Courts, wrote a letter in support of Brookes' appeal:

There can be no question of the need for better means of transport, both for the sake of the poor neglected mites they are called to remove to better surroundings, and for the increase of their own efficiency and possibilities of service.¹²

The car would certainly have been warmly welcomed by the inspectors, who previously had to depend on the cooperation of others to investigate cases outside of metropolitan Melbourne, or in cases where transport was required.¹³ In one case, Inspector Beattie had a police constable waiting in a taxi nearby as she removed a child from a mentally ill mother. Beattie reported that the mother 'soon discovered her loss ... struggled with me for possession of the child and had to be forcibly removed by the constable'.¹⁴ By 1950 a roster of volunteer drivers had been introduced to ensure that the VSPCC inspectors had constant access to car transport.¹⁵

The campaign continues

While the VSPCC inspectors focused on investigating cases and working with the community, the courts and fellow welfare organisations, the VSPCC committee – energised by new members recruited by secretary Stanley Greig Smith – focused on fundraising and advocacy.

During this period the Society widened its scope, having its inspectors registered as probation officers under the *Children's Courts Act* and infant life protection officers with the ability to inspect foster homes under the *Infant Life Protection Act*. This was in addition to their role as licensed child rescuers, with the authority to 'arrest' children suspected of being neglected.¹⁶ A revised constitution adopted at the 1924 annual meeting included new goals 'to enforce the laws for the protection of neglected and juvenile offenders' and 'to co-operate with all those societies which have for their objects the care and aiding of neglected and destitute children'. As a result, the Society strengthened its links with other organisations, including the Children's Welfare Association (previously the Child Saving Council), COS and the National Council of Women, organising conferences and exhibitions and making submissions to the government for legislative reform.¹⁷ In 1932, the Society was formally incorporated under the *Hospitals and Charities Act 1928*.¹⁸

A special committee was formed in 1929 with representatives from the VSPCC, National Council of Women and the Children's Welfare Association, to develop recommendations for amendments to the *Children's Welfare Act*. The definition of a neglected child needed clarification, argued VSPCC secretary Stanley Greig Smith, as under the current law, for example, it was not possible to take action in the case 'of a woman who was found pouring beer down the throat of a three-months' old infant in order to keep it quiet'.¹⁹ Amendments to the Act were finally made in 1933, incorporating many of the suggestions made by the VSPCC and fellow organisations.²⁰

The advocacy efforts of the VSPCC also led to a 1929 inquiry into the system of boarding out infant wards of the state to foster mothers for payment of a fee, a practice known as baby farming. One article described 'scandalously lax supervision by the department' of four infants placed with a foster mother in 'most unsatisfactory conditions'. The department had allegedly not bothered to inspect the home 'until the shocking neglect of the infants' was uncovered by VSPCC inspectors Dell and Williamson, who found the babies 'in filthy clothing', undernourished and covered in sores,

A soldier's family

In an isolated part of an outer Melbourne suburb, and officer of the Society found a soldier's wife with an eighteen-month-old child living in what was little better than a shack, in squalid conditions. The dilapidated structure housed ten children, five women and two men. The adults were described as disreputable and immoral. Despite a military income of £4 a week, the baby was ragged and ill-nourished, and was in a filthy state. Two other children had previously been taken in by a relative, and the Society made the same arrangement for the baby. A portion of the military income was transferred from the neglectful mother to the foster mother.

Annual Report 1940-1941



The Society called for an inquiry into St John's and St Martin's Home for Boys in Canterbury in 1936, after allegations of abuse were made.

J. T. Collins Collection, La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library Victoria, H93.400/327

while the foster mother's own five children had a 'healthy appearance'. After being removed from the home, one of the infants subsequently died. This tragedy led to an inquiry into the Children's Welfare Department, which was extensively reorganised. However, for many years substantial reform of the system remained a low priority for the state government.²¹

Many of these campaigns were focused on similar issues to those that had concerned the VSPCC in its early years. However, they took on a renewed urgency in a post-war society faced with economic decline, increasing poverty, and the looming image of the damaged child as a threat to national stability. While child rescue remained a genuine concern, one historian in this field has argued that another belief driving the Victorian child welfare movement was the perceived link between truancy, immorality, delinquency and crime.²²

There were calls for increased regulation of children in the workforce and juvenile street trading again came under scrutiny. The *Street Traders Act* was implemented in 1926, regulating the age and hours that children could work in the city's streets. The VSPCC's bid to have its inspectors licensed under the Act was unsuccessful, yet it still dealt with numerous reports from those who viewed such labour as child abuse.²³ The increasing visibility of children working or simply begging on the city's streets was rarely understood as the result of rising poverty, but rather as evidence of the failure and irresponsibility of parents. However, the crisis of the Great Depression in the 1930s marked the end of the movement against child labour, bringing with it a recognition that employed children could be of great help to impoverished, struggling families. In 1934, with the city's streets 'swarming with poorly-clad and often dirty urchins', the VSPCC made an earnest request to the public not to encourage the demoralisation of children by responding to their appeals for coins. The child who took on the responsibility of employment was much less of a concern than the idle, begging child.²⁴

Moral dangers to children were of increasing concern to the VSPCC, making up a small but consistent proportion of case reports throughout the 1920s and 1930s.²⁵ In July 1929 the Society submitted to the National Council of Women a series of resolutions relating to sexual offences committed against children, stating:

That this Society views with alarm the prevalence of sexual crimes perpetrated by men against girls of tender years, often with appalling and far-reaching results on the moral and physical welfare of innocent victims ...²⁶

Adolescent working-class girls were at risk of becoming 'fallen', while for boys the overwhelming threat was that they would become juvenile delinquents, a phrase used to describe unruly and anti-social young people, and characterised by truancy, defiant and dishonest behaviour, and petty theft. Threats to both boys and girls were seen to be the result of poor parenting and inadequate parental supervision.²⁷ However, the resolutions also drew attention to the difficulty of securing convictions and inadequate sentences given to those convicted of child sexual and physical abuse.²⁸

Despite becoming involved in such campaigns, there were some issues that the VSPCC avoided. When pushed on the subject of corporal punishment of children while giving evidence in one court case, Smith replied diplomatically, 'I think that corporal punishment ... should be administered with great discretion'.²⁹ In an era in which physical discipline of children was considered normal and necessary, the VSPCC limited itself to determining whether the degree of severity involved in the punishment could be considered to have reached the level of 'cruelty'.³⁰ Nor, for many years, did the Society investigate complaints regarding the abuse of children in government-run institutions. The VSPCC had received complaints of this nature since its formation, but decided that it was not its place to investigate such institutions, as this was the responsibility of government-appointed inspectors. In 1927 Smith advised a North Melbourne court, 'My Society is not supposed to interfere in any case involving the treatment of children under the control of the Children's Welfare Department'.³¹ The department was overseen by the Chief Secretary. When the VSPCC committee suggested to the Chief Secretary in 1934 that a committee of representatives of Victorian child welfare organisations be formed and given the right to inspect children's institutions, he responded:

... that adequate provision already existed for the official inspection of institutional homes for children; and that in consequence he did not think it necessary or desirable to duplicate this inspection.³²

However, by the mid-1930s, after high-profile press reports on the tragic death of a boy who had been beaten by the superintendent of his institutional home, the VSPCC began to take action on such allegations. In 1936 the Society conducted a 'discreet investigation' into the treatment of children at the Eye and Ear Hospital, and called for a full government inquiry into allegations made against St Martin's and St John's Home for Boys in Canterbury.

Although complaints had been raised about St Martin's previously, the VSPCC had dismissed them as mere rumours. This time, however, members of the committee led a deputation to the Chief Secretary, who agreed to launch an inquiry. The superintendent of the home resigned before it was completed. Nevertheless, this event marked a clear turning point in the VSPCC's approach to the welfare of children in institutions, strengthening its belief that such institutions required external oversight.³³

The Great Depression

Smith was an active promoter of the VSPCC, and was often quoted in Melbourne newspapers publicising the work of the Society and what it was able to achieve, despite only a handful of staff and limited means of financial support. But rousing the interest of the public to the plight of children remained a challenge. One newspaper article, quoting VSPCC inspector Minnie Beattie, declared:

Close supervision

More than twelve months of close supervision by VSPCC officers worked wonders in the home of the eight Green children, who were found badly neglected in a dilapidated and poorly furnished home. Poverty was not a factor, as the father was in steady work. The condition of the beds was described as appalling – torn, broken mattresses, saturated hessian sacks filled with grass – and all covered with little better than dirty rags. The children's clothing was torn and ragged and they had nothing but what they wore. The causal factor in this case was identified as the sheer incompetence, indifference and apathy of the children's parents, who were firmly warned that their children would be removed and charged with being neglected unless immediate steps were taken to improve conditions.

In this case, the warning worked. During the next twelve months VSPCC representatives were pleased to witness progressive improvement both in the furnishings and cleanliness of the home. The parents responded to the chance that they were given and the inspectors commented that it was a pleasure to enter their home and see the improvement in the clothing and the general condition of the children.

Annual Report 1949-1950



Dame Mabel Brookes was president of the VSPCC in the early 1930s, leading the initiative to open a temporary shop in Collins Street in 1933 to raise money for the Society. She was an active supporter of Melbourne's charities and community organisations.

Monash Health Archives

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the VSPCC worked with many families suffering from severe poverty and living in poor housing conditions.

F. Oswald Barnett Collection, State Library Victoria, H2001.291/9

F. Oswald Barnett Collection, State Library Victoria, H2001.291/42

Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria, MS 10384

Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria, MS 10384

Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria, MS 10384

F. Oswald Barnett Collection, State Library Victoria, H2001.291/255

Too often is our compassion stirred by the cries of “Starving Russia” while we fail to respond to tales of squalor and misery in our own city slums. “The filth and disease, the poverty and want, which some children have to endure in their struggle for existence, is unbelievable,” declares Mrs. Beattie...³⁴

The Society also invested in public advertising campaigns, which served the dual purpose of both raising awareness of its work and encouraging donations. In 1925 Melburnians might have seen an advertisement for the VSPCC in a movie theatre before the start of the show, a poster on a tram or train as they travelled to work in the morning, or they might have heard Smith promoting the Society on local radio.³⁵ The VSPCC also presented displays about its work at the Children’s Welfare Exhibitions held at Melbourne’s Royal Exhibition Building during the 1920s.³⁶

By 1929, the VSPCC declared in its annual report that it was at ‘a pinnacle of community usefulness’. However, with three inspectors to pay and the amount of cases to investigate ever increasing, it was by no means financially stable.³⁷ Sadly, Inspector Williamson died in 1930, after six years on the job. For financial reasons, he was not replaced, with Dell and Beattie carrying on as the Society’s only inspectors. It had been ‘a very trying and worrying year’ financially, as the nation plunged into a lengthy period of severe economic depression. Yet the VSPCC still managed to help 456 children in 1930 – a record in its history.³⁸ The case numbers continued to climb through the depression years, peaking at 569 in 1935, while financial support of the VSPCC decreased. The Society again faced dire financial struggles while also experiencing the busiest period in its history.

Without government funding, the Society was heavily dependent on the skills, influence and networks of its committee members to keep functioning.³⁹ The committee got creative with its fundraising efforts during this difficult period, including opening a temporary shop named ‘The Sunshine Shop’ in Collins Street in 1933. New VSPCC president Mabel Brookes (later Dame Mabel Brookes) ‘gathered all her friends and acquaintances together’ to organise and run the shop, which sold flowers, sweets, cakes, jams and other home-made items, raising a total of £640 in just one week.⁴⁰ Brookes was a valuable leader for the VSPCC. As president of the Queen Victoria Hospital and serving on the committees of several other organisations, she was an active and well-known supporter of Melbourne’s charities and good causes.⁴¹

Members of the committee also held fundraising events at their own homes, such as bridge parties and afternoon teas. In 1936 a play written by Mima Andrew, who by that time had taken over from Mabel Brookes as VSPCC president, was performed at the Garrick Theatre, in support of the Society.⁴² The committee also considered ways to cut costs. The two remaining inspectors had their salaries reduced, and by 1933 Inspector Dell had been asked to resign, after fifteen years’ service. He was replaced by Ronald Burke, who had been unemployed for some time and was willing to work for an even lower wage.⁴³

Despite the severe poverty created by the Great Depression, the VSPCC did not substantially



In moral danger

VSPCC workers found Nellie, who was not yet eleven years old, and her mother in a small, filthy and scantily furnished attic room which was frequently the scene of much debauchery. It was no uncommon occurrence for Nellie to be roused from her sleep at any time during the night and the early morning and sent to a nearby shop to buy wine. Immorality was Nellie's mother's source of income. Her husband, if she had been married, had long since disappeared. Children's Court magistrates had no hesitation in declaring Nellie to be a neglected child and committing her to the care of the Children's Welfare Department.

Annual Report 1950-1951

alter its beliefs regarding the reasons for parents abusing or neglecting their children. The Society's inspectors were confronted daily by families living in city slums or country farms in makeshift homes without appropriate clothing, bedding or food. Yet they were reluctant to see poverty as a contributing factor to the cruelty or neglect of children.⁴⁴ Focus remained on the character flaws of parents, such as in this case reported in 1940:

Imagine three children, 7, 5 and 3 years of age, two of them sick, left in a poverty-stricken room with only a drunken relative to care for them ... The mother, a drunkard, had deserted the home. The father, a Sustenance worker, was away all day, but would not allow the children to be placed in Homes because of their economic value to him in his weekly Sustenance allowance.⁴⁵

Blame was placed particularly on women who failed to care for their children, homes and husbands. In 1929, under the headline 'Housewives blamed for poverty', the *Herald* newspaper reported that VSPCC committee member Lady Irvine's suggestion that 'domestic training should be a compulsory part of every girl's education' was met with 'warm approval'. Mrs Colin Fraser, president of the VSPCC and the National Council of Women, stated that she knew of households where adequate funds were coming in, 'yet the life led there is appalling, owing to the inefficiency of the women who have the handling of the money'.⁴⁶ Mima Andrew agreed:

... many troubles in the family are too often caused by the crass ignorance and inefficiency of the mothers ... Teach the girls of Australia the use of soap and water, how to cook a meal, and attend to a baby. We would then find fewer men deserting their families and fewer children dependent upon the State.⁴⁷

In 1934, Stanley Greig Smith told one newspaper that 'Ignorance, apathy and laziness are at the bottom of most cases' that the Society investigated, and that 'The cruel stepmother ... is not confined to fiction'.⁴⁸ The VSPCC annual report in 1936 quoted a father whose family of eight children living in a Melbourne slum the Society had helped that year:

We have a lot to thank your Society for as this has made a new woman of my wife. It is a comfort to come home to decently cooked food and clean floors and beds.⁴⁹

Yet there was some recognition that severely impoverished families were in certain circumstances beyond reproach. After locating a family living in a flooded bush shack, VSPCC inspector Dell asked, 'The Police think that they should not be there but what can they do?'⁵⁰ There was also crucial recognition of the impact on children's wellbeing of growing up in Melbourne's most impover-

erished slum environments. At the VSPCC's annual meeting in 1938, Sir Henry Gullett, MP, condemned 'the timid manner' in which the authorities were tackling Melbourne's 'slum problem', which he saw as 'the greatest cause of cruelty to children'. He added that he hoped anticipated defence expenses 'would not be allowed to stand in the way of this movement for social justice'.⁵¹ For no sooner had the pressures of the Great Depression begun to ease, than the nation was plunged once more into war.

Once more at war

The impact of World War I continued long beyond the sound of the last gun shot in 1918. Repatriation work to support returned servicemen and women and their families had been ongoing throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The VSPCC cooperated with the state's Repatriation Department in this work, and the Society acted as trustee for repatriation pensions and allowances in a number of cases in which this money was being misused and children were not be adequately cared for.⁵² When in 1939 Australia was again at war, the Society's activities were interrupted once more. For the second time, the VSPCC faced a challenging and uncertain war-time period.

As in World War I, the Society found that its workload increased during World War II, while at the same time financial support and general interest in its activities decreased. One annual report from the period stated:

The world war in which Australia ... is so deeply involved, has tended to divert public interest in and support of the work of such agencies as the VSPCC but it would be a tragedy if the grossly neglected children in the community were to be deprived of the watchful care of the only friend and protector that many of them have known.⁵³

The Society was represented by secretary Stanley Greig Smith on the Coordinating Committee for Child Care during War Time. This committee, despite some conflict of values around the idea of working mothers, promoted the need for expanded child care services for women forced to join the workforce during the war.⁵⁴

The VSPCC committee also offered its assistance to schemes established to find suitable homes for children evacuated from Britain, working to ensure that they were run with the interests of the children in mind. In 1940 Mima Andrew wrote to *The Argus* urging authorities to take care in organising adoption programs for British war orphans, lest they be 'used as unpaid drudges' or made to work 'long, weary hours on outback farms'. 'The idea of adoption is a marvellous gesture, but it must be instituted with care and understanding', she cautioned.⁵⁵

The VSPCC continued its practice of acting as trustee for repatriation pensions during and after World War II, with the committee acknowledging that the Society's intervention in this cause



During World War II demand for the Society's services rose, as families dealt with the impact of losing mothers and fathers to military service and the war-time workforce.

Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library Victoria, H98.105/270



The image of post-war Australian prosperity disguised the reality for many families living in poverty in Melbourne's slum housing.

F. Oswald Barnett Collection, State Library Victoria,
H2001.291/267

had 'been a big factor in ensuring the welfare of a large number of children during their youth and adolescence'.⁵⁶ But the Society again found itself in a state of financial insecurity, and even considered the possibility of reducing its staff to a single inspector in 1942. This need was averted only by drawing on funds that had been earlier set aside for the purpose of establishing emergency accommodation for children.⁵⁷

However, in 1944 the Society did lose one of its inspectors, Minnie Beattie, after sixteen years 'of self-sacrificing and devoted service'. Beattie resigned following criticism of her performance by the Children's Welfare Department.⁵⁸ The Society's annual report paid tribute to her contribution:

Her zeal in the cause of suffering childhood knew no limits, and she was a well-known and respected personality in the slum areas of Melbourne and in the Children's Courts. The Committee hope that she will long enjoy a well-earned rest from her years of strenuous work. Her position will not be easily filled.⁵⁹

This prediction proved all too accurate. For the first time, the committee instructed Smith to find a trained social worker for the role of inspector. By that time, the University of Melbourne offered courses in social work, and the VSPCC inspectors had provided supervision to students as part of their training. Smith appointed Miss Pollock to the position, and she soon 'showed much promise of developing into a capable officer'. But trouble arose within six months 'after irresolvable differences surfaced between her and Inspector Burke'. Pollock alleged that Burke had interfered in her work and failed to offer assistance when asked. The committee agreed that Burke had been 'lacking in tact ... and helpfulness', but was ultimately swayed by his greater experience and asked Pollock to resign.⁶⁰ Dorothy Rye, an ex-mission sister who had many years of experience but was not professionally trained, was then appointed to replace her.⁶¹

Post-war progress

The post-World War II years saw the VSPCC remain focused on its core activities. In 1948 it moved with the Charity Organisation Society to 120 Exhibition Street. After the death of Emily Turnbull that year, after several years as president, the Society also underwent a change in leadership. Lady Penelope Gullett, who had served for many years on the executive committee, took on the role of president.⁶²

Lady Gullett oversaw the first Derby Eve Ball in 1948, a major fundraising event for the VSPCC. After raising £1,602 in its first year, the ball became a popular fixture of the Society's annual calendar and a vital source of funds, providing up to 60 per cent of the Society's required finances for the year. The Derby Eve Ball was an example of the VSPCC committee members using their influential and wealthy social networks to spectacular advantage. It was organised by a dedicated

committee, whose elaborate racing-themed decorations were described in great detail by press reports, accompanied by photographs of society ladies dressed in sequined gowns. The ball continued to be held annually, apart from 1956 when an Olympic Torch Ball was held instead on the eve of the Melbourne Olympic Games, raising over £3,000.⁶³

An auxiliary founded in Canterbury in 1940 to support Melbourne's first child guidance clinic (which treated emotionally disturbed children), offered to share its funds with the VSPCC and continued to provide ongoing donations.⁶⁴ The extra financial support from such initiatives and partnerships was timely – in the 1948 to 1949 financial year, the Society dealt with a record number of 602 cases.⁶⁵ The familiar picture of post-war prosperity in Australia, and of the modern, progressive Olympic Games host city, disguised the reality for many struggling families living in poor housing, with under-nourished children and widespread infectious disease. VSPCC inspectors Burke and Rye were well-known at Camp Pell, a military barracks in Royal Park, which from 1946 was used to provide emergency housing for around 3,000 people. VSPCC secretary Stanley Greig Smith reported in July 1954 that eight of 38 cases dealt with that month were located there. Poverty and hardship remained evident in some areas of Melbourne's inner and outer working-class suburbs, with poorer families remaining the major focus of the Society's work.⁶⁶

In 1954 the *Children's Welfare Act* was amended, incorporating some significant modifications. The Act introduced a requirement for non-government children's institutions to be registered with the Children's Welfare Department and subject to inspections. It also reflected changing concepts of abuse and neglect. Children were no longer described as 'neglected' but 'in need of care and protection' – a phrase that was taken from the British *Children and Young Persons Act 1933*. The 1954 *Children's Welfare Act* also widened the definition of children who could be seen as 'in need of care and protection'. Following the enactment of the new legislation the following year, there were significant increases in the number of children being taken into care.⁶⁷

During the post-war period, a large number of children were placed in institutional care, which was mostly provided by long-established non-government church organisations. The placement of children in institutions was usually not undertaken as the result of a court decision in response to abuse or neglect, but initiated – and paid for – by parents struggling with spousal desertion or illness. Some of these 'private placements', as they were called, were for short durations, such as when a mother was hospitalised for the birth of another child. In other cases, children remained in care for extended periods. Some eventually became wards of the state at the initiative of children's homes, which sought financial support when parental payments ceased.⁶⁸

By 1962 there were 63 government-approved homes in Victoria, run by voluntary organisations. However, the VSPCC was not primarily focused on bringing children into state care, maintaining its tradition of removing children from their families 'only as a last resort, and after firm warnings, helpful counsel and friendly service proved unavailing'. As in the past, the major responsibility for removing abused and neglected children, and bringing their cases before the Children's

Beyond parental control

In 1953 the Society reported that it had taken eleven-year-old Harry and seven-year-old Bill before a Children's Court and charged them with being neglected children. It was felt that they were at risk of entering into a life of vice and crime. This action was taken at the request of the parents, who admitted that the boys were quite beyond their control. The boys had been involved in several cases of theft and mendicancy.

The VSPCC had known Harry and Bill for five years. Their father was dishonourably discharged from the army, mentally erratic and over-indulged in drinking and gambling. The Society reported that the boys' mother was young, inexperienced and had never done any housework or cooking prior to her marriage. The home atmosphere had been characterised by violent fighting between the parents. The home itself was always found to be a filthy and uncared-for place, with scant bedding. The VSPCC officers had little success in their efforts to encourage better conditions for the children.

Harry and Bill were committed to the care of the Children's Welfare Department, and the VSPCC held bright hopes for their future lives.

Annual Report 1952-1953



The VSPCC inspectors were familiar faces at Camp Pell, a military barracks in Royal Park, Melbourne that was used to provide emergency housing for around 3,000 people after World War II.

Melbourne Library Service, 19221

Melbourne Library Service, 20273

Court, continued to be that of women police. While the police concerned themselves with 'definite breaches of the law', the Society focused on cases 'which may not provide justification for prosecution, but which still involve suffering, hardship and misery for the children concerned'.⁶⁹

However, during this period the Society did provide some short-term out-of-home placements for children while their parents were unwell or otherwise temporarily unable to care for them.⁷⁰ The idea of establishing a temporary home for children had been on the agenda for some years, but was always put off due to insufficient finances. In 1955, the Society reported that it was in discussions with a couple who were considering offering their own home for the purpose of providing emergency care for children. By the time of the VSPCC annual meeting the following year, media publicity about the issue had put the Society in contact with 38 women who wished to offer voluntary emergency accommodation to children on a temporary basis. Already six children had 'been quite happily placed' for short periods in several of these homes.⁷¹ With this initiative the Society dipped its toes into the possibilities of providing emergency care for children – an area that would grow enormously in years to come.

After its World War II advocacy around adoption practices, adoption became a minor but ongoing area of activity for the VSPCC. In 1954 Inspector Burke represented the Society at a conference held by the Victorian Council of Social Service on the problems and abuse of adoption in Victoria. The Society was a signatory to the resulting report, which was submitted to the government in the hope that it would influence legislative change. A new *Adoption Act* was subsequently passed in 1955 and the Attorney-General approved the VSPCC inspectors, Burke and Rye, as guardians under the Act.⁷²

Continuing traditions

In 1957 the Charity Organisation Society, by then known as the Citizen's Welfare Service (CWS), moved offices, and after 25 years of sharing accommodation with VSPCC it was no longer able to find the necessary space. The VSPCC therefore began renting offices of its own at 560 Lonsdale Street.

The resignation of long-time secretary Stanley Greig Smith in 1960 marked the end of an era for the VSPCC. Over 37 years in the role and a lifetime working in the area of social welfare in Melbourne, Smith's dedication to the cause of child welfare had influenced significant legislative changes and raised awareness of the important work of the VSPCC, CWS and other similar organisations. The Society's 1960 annual report paid tribute to him:

Mr Smith has been a prominent figure in social work in Melbourne for over 50 years, during 37 of which he has given devoted service to the SPCC as its part-time secretary. The benefit of his wide knowledge and wise guidance will be greatly missed from the deliberations of the

committee, all members of which hope that, in his retirement, he will long enjoy a well deserved rest.⁷³

By that time, the VSPCC was noticing considerable changes in its core work. Cases of suspected cruelty against children between 1950 and 1960 were almost half of those investigated in the pre-World War II period, falling from 628 suspected cases of cruelty to 373.⁷⁴ Child neglect, however, remained a serious problem, and was the reason for the VSPCC's investigation in approximately 60 per cent of cases by the 1950s.⁷⁵ Along with the drop in cases of cruelty, prosecutions of parents were decreasing. The Society reported in 1958 that out of 464 cases investigated that year, 348 were cases of alleged neglect, just 30 were cases of alleged cruelty and in no case that year had it been necessary to take court action.⁷⁶ The inspectors were much more often called on to provide advice, guidance and ongoing supervision for families.

The VSPCC's role in the community was evolving, but in many ways the organisation itself was not. By the 1950s, other welfare organisations were developing new ways of understanding problem behaviours and new methods of working with troubled families, informed by psycho-social approaches being developed by mental health and social work practitioners. In contrast, the VSPCC staff consisted of long-time, non-professional inspectors Ronald Burke and Dorothy Rye, and a relatively stable and unchanging executive committee of philanthropic women. Without the input of professional social workers, the VSPCC continued its traditional style of child-protection work and advocacy in much the same way as it always had since its formation.⁷⁷ At the beginning of the 1960s, modernisation for the VSPCC was yet to come.