that poor broken down, wilted flower with its soiled and withered leaves, or he that has crushed its young
tendrils under foot and left to rot and consume in the delirium of despair, which of the two is most offensive.
Reverend T Smith, 1868

In 1848 the Sydney Female Refuge Society was established to provide a home for women escaping from
prostitution and for young unmarried girls who fell pregnant. The library has just completed digitising three ‘minute
books’ from the Society records.

The refuge was established on 21 August 1848 by those concerned at the level of pregnancies outside marriage
and resulting from prostitution. The Committee which set up the refuge made it clear that Sydney was no worse
than other cities around the world but that it did have unique problems.

The first of these was the legacy of young women sent out as convicts and separated from the guidance and
support of their parents and families, leaving them susceptible to attack by unscrupulous men. A second problem
was caused by the lack of water and sanitation in the city which made women in these circumstances vulnerable to
disease and poor health.

The society had its origins with a member of the Sydney Mechanic’s Institute, Philip Clapman, who in June 1848
arranged a private meeting with New South Wales State Ministers. A provisional committee was set up supported
by Edward Deas Thomson [2], Colonial Secretary, and Sir Alfred Stephen [3], the Chief Justice. Among their first decisions was the stipulation that the new institution should be non-denominational and should abide by a clear set of rules. The running of the Institution was conducted by the Ladies’ Committee and the Gentlemen’s Committee, but the internal management of the Institute was the sole responsibility of the Ladies.

The refuge was first housed in the ‘Old House of Correction’ next to the Carter’s Barracks in Pitt Street. This building originally housed the treadmill (known locally as the ‘Climbing Sorrow’) where juvenile offenders, were ‘corrected’. Modifications were made to the buildings, including the removal of the treadmill, by Mr Thomas Cowlshaw, a builder from Hutchinson Street, Surrey Hills.

Entry to the refuge was either voluntary or upon the recommendation of a magistrate, keeper of the gaol or a minister of religion. Once inside the women were expected to abide by the rules laid out and to stay for 1-2 years during which time they worked in the laundry or as seamstresses to earn money for the upkeep of the refuge.

The rules stipulated that they were not allowed to receive visits from anyone except relatives and those that had a legal right to see them. These visits were only on Tuesdays and Fridays and were in the presence of the ‘Visiting Ladies’. According to the records of the refuge, these rules were at times hard to enforce as it was difficult to confirm exactly who the relatives were. For example, on Tuesday 15 December 1864, Emily Brown was visited by “her brother” - “I told him he could not see her again without a letter from his father as matron has heard he was not her brother’.

The problems faced by the matron supervising the refuge were numerous and the journal books held by the Library provide us with a remarkable insight into the realities of life in a women's refuge in nineteenth-century Sydney.

The library has digitised the Ladies Committee book, 7 June 1863-5 December 1911 [4], Daily journal book, 30 September 1864-22 October 1870 [5], Daily journal book, 1 May 1891-26 January 1899 [6]. Many of the entries are brief but they highlight the day-to-day activities within the refuge. These examples are taken from the Minute book for 1864 and 1865.

Martha Slater made her escape last night by forcing the lock of the front gate. A carpenter was sent to repair the damage he says it’s not the lock but the gate that requires repairs. Friday 11 December 1864.

Blanche was allowed to go as she seemed to poison the minds of others and was herself worth help.
although so clever if she chose to express her talents. 2 January 1865.

Cath Kirkwood at 6 o’clock asked admittance she was dressed in a light blue silk dress and a very costly black silk [word not clear] new worth 6 pounds easily, says she wants to lead a better life, her sister Annie Kirkby was here for a while and then made her escape through the commission window, in the afternoon she was called before the ladies of the commission but she ‘tumbled’ so they sent her away. 6 January 1865.

William Gully brought in an ill-looking dirty woman but she refused to stay saying she didn’t like the look of the place. Friday 3 February 1865.

Elizabeth Williams is very unwell through staying too long in the bath. Saturday 4 February 1865.

A policeman brought Hester Bruce back she was so dirty having slept in a water closet … her sister called to ask if it was true that she had run away and she cried and seemed very sorry when she was told she had. Thursday 30 November 1865.

Although the institution claimed to only accept voluntary admissions it seems that in some cases parents placed their daughters in the refuge. In December 1858 the Society reported how,

Two young girls, aged respectively, fifteen and sixteen years, who were for some month’s inmates of the Refuge, have since repeatedly called, and in the most feeling manner gratefully acknowledged their obligations to your committee, for the reception and treatment; their parents have also expressed their thankfulness for the beneficial change effected in their daughters.

By 1855 around 150 women had passed through the gates of the refuge and by 1858 the committee claimed that 46 had been employed, 15 married, and 31 restored to their friends. This suggests a high success rate, but the number of escapes listed in the minute books suggests a much more complex environment. It also remains unclear whether the return of 31 women to their “friends” would mark a successful outcome.

In 1858 Charles Cowper’s government undertook to reimburse the society for improvements they made to the site. The first new building was opened by Mrs Young, 3 October 1860, but requests for improvements to the buildings were a constant feature in the annual reports over this period. In 1869 the committee described the accommodation as being,

by no means satisfactory, and the addition of another range of buildings is absolutely necessary; the old and unsightly one now standing, and to which reference was made two years ago, being in a most dilapidated condition. It has been repaired from time to time but the expenditure seems almost useless.

In 1870 a new building was approved, plans submitted by the architect, Mr Mansfield, and the new building was completed in 1871.

Around 1901 the buildings on Pitt Street were demolished to make way for the Central Railway Station and the society purchased a new property in Silver Street, St Peters. On 31 March 1925, the refuge was voluntarily wound up and the process started to deliver their assets to the Church of England Homes in Glebe Point.

The records of the Refuge Society were digitised from microfilm as part of the Library’s ongoing digitisation program. The Library continues to digitise original manuscripts, however, in some circumstances, digitisation from microfilm provides effective and rapid access to information without the need to handle the original documents.
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