

Cruelty to children is truly a most cowardly and shocking thing ... Surely a Society like this is doing a most beneficent work in being a friend of the friendless – a helper of the helpless.

Lieut. Col. Brodribb, Special Magistrate of the Children's Court, 1909¹



A Friend of the Friendless: 1896–1924

A society is formed

The Children's Protection Society owes its formation to Lady Sybil de Vere Brassey, wife of the Governor of Victoria, who arrived in the colony in 1895. Lady Brassey brought with her an aristocratic background and a strong reputation for philanthropic work. Having been a member of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in England, she was inspired to start a similar organisation in Victoria.

In January 1896 Lady Brassey asked Victoria's Chief Commissioner of Police, Hussey Chomley, to investigate the need for such a society.² Selina Sutherland, a prominent figure in Melbourne's social reform movement, was called on for her comment. Sutherland had become Victoria's first child rescuer in 1887 and established the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society in 1894.³ She was a vocal supporter of Lady Brassey's proposal. In a Melbourne newspaper Sutherland said the formation of a society for the prevention of cruelty to children in Victoria would 'be of incalculable benefit'. She urged that more needed to be done 'if we want to save hundreds of our children from lives of misery and vice, and the community from the reproach of nursing crime'.⁴

There was not unanimous support of Lady Brassey's proposal, however. One newspaper reported that 'Cold water was thrown upon it at first by many persons' who found it hard to believe that cruelty existed in the community to the extent that such an organisation would be needed. Even likeminded organisations who were well aware of the challenges facing children, including the Charity Organisation Society, were not completely convinced.⁵ And even Lord Brassey admitted his initial scepticism in the Society's second annual report in 1898:

We used to think it was absurd to talk of prosperous Victoria as having any of the dreadful weaknesses, and vices, and crimes which belong to older and more populated countries and by many it was thought to be almost an insult when Lady Brassey suggested that there was cause for anxiety on behalf of children and that intervention for their sakes was imperatively demanded.⁶



Lady Sybil de Vere Brassey, wife of the Governor of Victoria, brought together a group of Melbourne's most influential citizens to form the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty and Neglect of Children in 1896.

Child rescuer Selina Sutherland, pictured with children at a Christmas party at her children's home in Carlton in 1908, was a strong early supporter of the VSPCC.

Diamond Valley Local History Digitisation Project, Yarra Plenty Regional Library



Despite these misgivings, Lady Brassey's influence prevailed. One Saturday morning, 21 March 1896, she gathered together a group of Melbourne's most influential dignitaries and charity workers at Government House, with the intention of forming a Victorian branch of the NSPCC. The group included the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne Thomas Carr, Protestant leader Reverend Dr Llewelyn Bevan, Justice Henry Hodges of the Supreme Court of Victoria, and child rescuer Selina Sutherland. Following 'animated and earnest discussion', the meeting ended with the resolution to found a Victorian branch.⁷ A motion was passed to bring the organisation into being.

It was decided the organisation would be named the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty and Neglect of Children (VSPCC)*. Four main objectives were identified:

- a) To protect children from cruelty and neglect;
- b) To enforce the laws for the protection of neglected children and juvenile offenders;

*The word 'neglect' was removed from the Society's name in 1903. The acronym VSPCC is used throughout this book.

- c) To promote any new laws that may be necessary for the attainment of the above objects;
- d) To co-operate with all those Societies which have for their objects the care and aiding of neglected and destitute children.⁸

A provisional committee of thirteen members was appointed. It was decided that the Society's patron would be the Governor of Victoria, and that the office of president would be filled by the Governor's wife. Accordingly, Lady Brassey was appointed the Society's inaugural president.⁹

A colony of neglect

The context of the child welfare movement in Melbourne during the severe economic depression of the 1890s was critical to the development of the VSPCC. Children growing up in colonial Melbourne had much to contend with. The early colony was not the safest or healthiest environment for them, with imported infectious diseases flourishing in their new surroundings. Melbourne's polluted waterways and open sewers created a pervasive stench that earned it the evocative nickname 'Smelbourne'. Illnesses borne of inappropriate hygiene – gastroenteritis, dysentery, typhoid – resulted in an infant mortality rate that exceeded even that of London, until Melbourne's sewerage system was built in the 1890s.¹⁰

Children made up a very small proportion of the population in the early colony, until the gold rushes of the 1850s, which saw a huge influx of immigrants and new settlers. From that time, children became increasingly visible and their welfare came under greater scrutiny. But attitudes to child welfare were very different in colonial Australia. Children here, as in England, were seen as the property of their parents, who could treat them as they wished. The authorities would intervene only when absolutely necessary and children were rarely removed from their guardians. Early legislation and the formation of government-run industrial and reformatory schools, and children's charities set up by philanthropic organisations, focused on taking control of children deemed to be destitute and without any other appropriate form of care. Such children were seen as a threat to social stability, rather than as victims of neglect. In an article in *The Argus* newspaper in 1886, Senior Constable McHugh of the Victorian Police Force warned: 'there can be no question that a very large portion of ... children left without proper parental control, go completely to the bad and finally join the multitude who live by vice and crime'.¹¹ There was little concept of children needing protection from their parents or guardians and a reluctance on the part of the government to interfere with the private sphere of the home.¹²

The first wave of the child rescue movement swept across the world in the later part of the nineteenth century, and saw the beginning of a long and gradual process of change, through which children transformed from parental property, to future citizens considered to have rights of their own.¹³ The movement began in the United States, where mass immigration, the industrial revolution



This image entitled 'Incidents in the life of a street boy', appeared in the Illustrated Australian News in 1885. By that time, the welfare of children in the nation's cities was coming under greater scrutiny.

Pictures Collection, State Library Victoria, IAN05/08/85/121

and resulting population boom created overcrowded cities. In the face of inadequate public services, rampant crime and increasing child neglect, the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was founded in 1874. It was incorporated the following year as the first child protection agency in the world.¹⁴

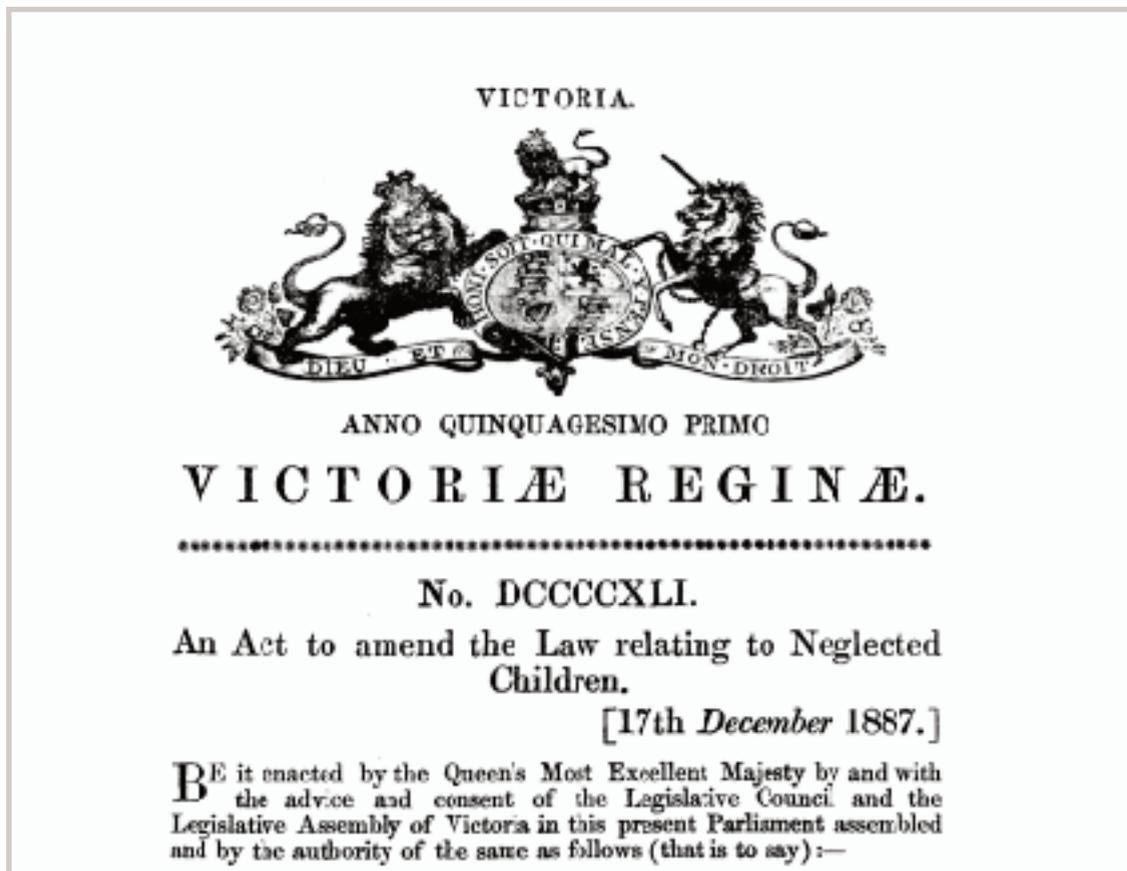
Expansion to Britain soon followed, with branches founded in Liverpool in 1883 and London in 1884. The London branch assumed the status of a national society – the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) – in 1889, and took control of what had grown to 31 branches throughout Britain. The NSPCC inspired Britain's first legislation aimed at protecting children from cruelty, through an Act known as the Children's Charter of 1889.¹⁵

The movement soon reached Australian shores, where a child welfare system was in its infancy. The influence of the child rescue movement encouraged a major shift in focus from the management of destitute children to the need for children to be protected from parents or guardians who were failing in their responsibility to care for them appropriately. This growing awareness of child welfare was reflected in legislative change. Victoria's *Neglected Children's Act* of 1887 saw a Department for Neglected Children assume responsibility for the management of children who were deemed to be inappropriately cared for. The *Infant Life Protection Act 1890* provided for registration of nurses, inspection of homes and supervision of illegitimate children. This legislation was largely in response to a growing concern about baby farming, an arrangement in which many infants died after being placed in the care of paid nurses.¹⁶ These Acts gave the government the power to seek out children in need of rescue, and to share this power with licensed child rescuers and the police. They also led to the establishment of several child rescue organisations.¹⁷

By the time the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty and Neglect of Children was formed in 1896, there were many organisations in Victoria that were concerned with child welfare, including the Carlton Refuge, East Melbourne Infant Asylum and the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society. Although vast improvements had been made by recent legislation and through the work of the existing organisations concerned with children's aid and rescue in Melbourne, there remained a need for more services, as the extreme poverty created by the 1890s depression drove families into destitution.

The Society's work begins

At a meeting of the newly formed VSPCC in mid-May 1896, its first executive committee was formally appointed and a constitution, which had been drawn up by Justice Henry Hodges, was approved. With the organisation now firmly established, the clergy who had played a part in its establishment withdrew, leaving the actual running of the Society to a group mainly made up of women philanthropists. In contrast to many other child welfare agencies, the VSPCC was one of the few secular non-government organisations in the field.¹⁸



The executive committee met at Government House several times within the first few months, and soon turned to the task of appointing the Society's first paid employees: a secretary, William Church, and an inspector, William Noble. Church, a small businessman, worked out of his office in Queen Street in the Melbourne CBD and received an annual salary from the Society of £52. Noble was hand-picked by Lady Brassey for the important role of the Society's first inspector, as he had previously worked for the SPCC in Glasgow, Scotland. In employing only men and confining women to fundraising and supervisory roles, the VSPCC – and other Australian societies – followed a gendered pattern that was also firmly in place in the societies in Britain and the United States.¹⁹

Part of William Church's role as secretary was to scan the newspapers for issues relevant to the Society's aims, and to respond to letters from members of the public concerned about suspected cases of abuse or neglect of children. The Society applied to have Noble and Church authorised to



By 1896, when the VSPCC was formed, there were many organisations in Victoria concerned with child welfare, including orphanages and infant asylums. But as the 1890s economic depression drove families to destitution, there remained a need for more services.

Pictures Collection, State Library Victoria, IAN06/08/84/117

LEFT

The Neglected Children's Act of 1887 saw a Department for Neglected Children assume responsibility for the care of children, and the establishment of several child rescue organisations.

Find & Connect



William Noble was the Society's first inspector, hand-picked by Lady Brassey for the role. He was dedicated to his task, worked long hours and was described as having a 'tactful and kindly personality'.

OPPOSITE

The VSPCC was formed during the economic depression of the 1890s, which hit families hard. Charities and social welfare organisations, including the VSPCC, were overwhelmed by the demand for their help.

Pictures Collection, State Library Victoria, IAN01/07/92/1

apprehend children under Sections 19 and 21 of the *Neglected Children's Act 1890* but this application was initially unsuccessful. Noble was finally given this authorisation in 1907.²⁰ The Society also built relationships with the police, medical professionals and child rescuers working for other organisations who were licensed under the *Neglected Children's Act*. In cases where it was deemed necessary for children to be removed from their guardians, they were placed with suitable institutions or families. Other organisations often assisted the VSPCC by receiving children and finding places for them.²¹

Like its counterparts in other parts of the world, the VSPCC adopted a very different philosophy from earlier child rescuers, who believed that children had to be removed from the custody of their neglectful or cruel parents or caregivers in order to be saved from their harmful influence. In contrast, the approach of the SPCCs was to persuade parents of their responsibilities to care for their children. Inspectors, like William Noble, would investigate reports of cruelty or neglect towards children by visiting homes, issuing warnings and undertaking follow-up visits and ongoing supervision to make sure of improvement. The next steps of removing children from their families and bringing parents before the courts were taken only as a last resort, and were mainly the responsibility of the police.²² In 1913, the Society reported on the success of its approach:

It may be well to mention here that the Society does not prosecute, except in cases of flagrant cruelty, and many homes are considerably happier than if the parents had been prosecuted for some trivial dereliction of parental control.²³

Poverty and desperation

The economic context in which the VSPCC was founded had important implications for its early history. Melbourne was hit hard by severe economic depression in the 1890s, which followed close on the heels of the spectacular prosperity created by the land boom of the previous decade. It was a dramatic economic collapse. In place of wealth and optimism, poverty, hardship and suffering were clearly evident on Melbourne's streets. Unemployment skyrocketed, banks closed and many were plunged into debt and destitution.

In a society without a social welfare system, as struggling families grew increasingly desperate, charities were overwhelmed by the numbers of people needing help. Newspapers reported shocking cases of children living in poverty and suffering the neglect of their destitute parents. VSPCC inspector William Noble found one house, 'one of the dingiest dens in the thoroughfare ... in a filthy condition', where eight children lived 'all ill and starving'. Their mother was in jail and their father protested that 'it took all his time to try and earn the food and clothing for the children. He could not stay at home to attend to them, however ill they were'.²⁴ This was an all-too-common story.



Homeless and begging

After the death of a mother during the economic depression of the 1890s, her family became quite disorganised. The father's work as a waiter was unstable and did not bring in much money. The family was forced to move into a shed and the children were sent out to beg. The VSPCC decided that this was a case where, in the interests of the children's future, action could not be delayed. The father consented to his two daughters being taken by a children's welfare organisation, and by all accounts the children were well-behaved and obedient, and favourites at the children's home.

Annual Report 1897-1898

The dangers of drink

After the police received complaints of children begging, a police constable and Inspector Noble of the VSPCC visited a home in Dandenong Road, Cheltenham, and saw the mother and the two youngest children. The only furniture in the home was a broken chair, a cupboard with one door off and an old bedstead. The stench arising from the two rooms that served as bedrooms was described as abominable. There were no bedclothes, only old skirts, which were black with dirt. The two children were almost naked, wearing only rags. They apparently had not been washed for months. The only food found was a piece of bread, yet the children's mother was met by the constable coming out of the house on her way to the hotel for beer. She stated that she could not take her food without drink. She was told if she sent her children to school regularly no action would be taken, but a fortnight later the eldest boy was found begging at Elsternwick, and the case was brought before the court. The evidence showed that the children were sent out begging as early as seven in the morning, half naked, and if unsuccessful were beaten with a strap ...

'Cruelty to Children. Parental Neglect. "That Cussed Drink"', Brighton Southern Cross, 10 September 1898, p. 3

There was so much work for the Society that the load on Inspector Noble was soon overwhelming. There were calls in 1898 for two additional inspectors to be employed, but the Society's funds could not stretch even to one. In 1900, when the Society investigated a total of 398 cases, a 'ladies visiting committee' formed, comprising twenty-seven women who undertook to assist the inspector by supervising cases after they had been thoroughly investigated. This scheme was said to have had 'very satisfactory and encouraging results'.²⁵

Without government funding, the VSPCC relied heavily on donations from its members and charitable community groups. A year's membership of the VSPCC initially cost five shillings (later raised to ten), while £10 or more entitled a person to life membership.²⁶ Local community organisations, such as suburban branches of the Australian Natives' Association, raised money for the Society by holding musical performances and other entertainments.²⁷ In the long-standing tradition of wealthy women philanthropists, one of the Society's major fundraising activities during this period was regular balls. Members threw themselves into the organisation of these grand affairs, necessitating the creation of decoration, programme and refreshment committees.²⁸

The VSPCC continued for years to try and raise the funds to employ a second inspector, but the committee was certainly not unhappy with the work of Noble. Annual reports referred to how well he continued to carry out what was often incredibly difficult work. In 1914 the committee stated that it could not:

... too highly commend the tact and ability of the Inspector, Mr. W. Noble, whose onerous and arduous duties have been carried out to their satisfaction, and feel assured that many of the improvement made in the conditions and surroundings of the families which, from time to time, come under the notice of the Society, are entirely due to his tactful and kindly personality.²⁹

Still, it took years for the economy to recover and the VSPCC's lack of funds to meet increasing demand remained a major problem. At the Society's annual meeting in May 1903, one member called for drastic action. Edward Fitzgerald moved that the Society should be shut down due to a 'lack of interest shown by the members in the Society's operations' and 'inadequate financial support'. Fitzgerald stated that membership had been declining year by year, from 110 members in 1901 to 78 in 1903. The Society was not raising enough money to keep up with the £250 being spent per year, even if it took up the secretary's offer to forgo his salary. Although 'he regretted exceedingly that it had fallen to his lot to sound the death knell', Fitzgerald argued that the Society simply could not continue under such pressure.³⁰

Justice Hodge, surprised by the unexpected motion, suggested that a change of name and narrowed scope may help: 'To cope with neglect was too wide a matter ... it would be better if the scope of the Society was limited to cruelty'. Amidst strong opposition to his proposal, Fitzgerald

withdrew the motion.³¹ Hodge's suggestion was soon adopted and the Society's title was shortened to the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (VSPCC).³²

Nevertheless, further funding was not forthcoming and the Society continued to struggle financially. An inability to fund a larger workforce prevented the Society from achieving a higher public profile during this period. In 1905 *The Argus* newspaper reported on a case in which a mother had left her two children locked up in a meat safe, and described the long hours worked by the VSPCC's Inspector Noble, yet the Society subsisted without any financial support from the government. In contrast, the Society for the Protection of Animals received an annual government grant. 'The Government therefore worries more over a horse's sore back than over a tortured child', the article objected.³³

A growing reputation

It was critical for the VSPCC to become widely known and to build a positive reputation, for it could not investigate potential cases of cruelty and neglect if it was not told about them. The Society began active self-promotion from 1897, with posters created for state schools presenting advice on 'What to do in cases of cruelty and neglect' and publicising the existence of an organisation that could help. The Chief Commissioner of Police also agreed to have these posters displayed in police stations.³⁴

The media was perhaps the VSPCC's most effective tool for profile-raising, and for influencing public opinion about its activities and about child welfare more generally. The Society's annual reports were reported widely by Victorian newspapers each year. The first annual report, presented at the VSPCC's first annual meeting at the Melbourne Town Hall in May 1897, stated that 380 cases of alleged cruelty or neglect had been investigated during the Society's first year of operation. This impressive statistic was crucial, providing evidence to justify the Society's existence and demonstrating the impact it was already having on the community. Referring to ambivalence from some quarters about the need for such an organisation, the Society proudly reported that this result for the year's efforts would demonstrate to those:

... who thought that there was no occasion to establish a Society of this nature, on the ground that cases of alleged cruelty or neglect were few and far between, that there is a definite need for the Society, and that an immense amount of good has been, and can be, affected through its agency.³⁵

At the second annual meeting in 1898, Reverend Dr Bevan stated that his initial reaction to Lady Brassey's proposal was that it was 'one of those luxuries of philanthropy', despite the fact that his wife was president of one of Melbourne's most prominent children's welfare organisations, the

The early VSPCC executive committee comprised some of Melbourne's most influential citizens.

Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria,
MS 10384



Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society.³⁶ But two years on, having seen the work being done, he was convinced of the great need for the Society:

I could hardly conceive that in favoured Victoria, there were conditions with which I was more or less familiar in older countries. I could not imagine that except in very few isolated and entirely exceptional cases, that the children of this country would be sadly neglected and harshly treated ... But that too rosy a view of Victorian life was rudely changed by a knowledge of the work which has been done by the Society in the last two years.³⁷

Newspapers printed reports of the Society's annual meetings, and supported its efforts to influence legislation. Newspaper reports of cases involving children that came before the courts frequently mentioned the involvement of the VSPCC, and quoted from evidence given by the Society's inspector and secretary. Publicising particular cases of cruelty and neglect and sharing stories of 'heartless brutality' and 'deplorable cases of cruelty and tyranny' against innocent children, designed to shock and appal readers, was an effective way of demonstrating the need for the VSPCC.³⁸ However, there was a tension between the obvious benefits of this approach, and the Society's policy:

... not to blazon forth the woes and vicissitudes of the families which come under its purview, but by friendly and timely help and supervision to bring parents and guardians to a better understanding of their responsibilities.³⁹

The media was also a crucial means of the Society correcting misinformation about its activities. From the time of its formation, the Society had to contend with ignorance and misunderstandings about its intentions, particularly from those who saw it as intending to meddle in the affairs of parents. Reporting on a meeting of the VSPCC in May 1896, *The Age* newspaper observed:

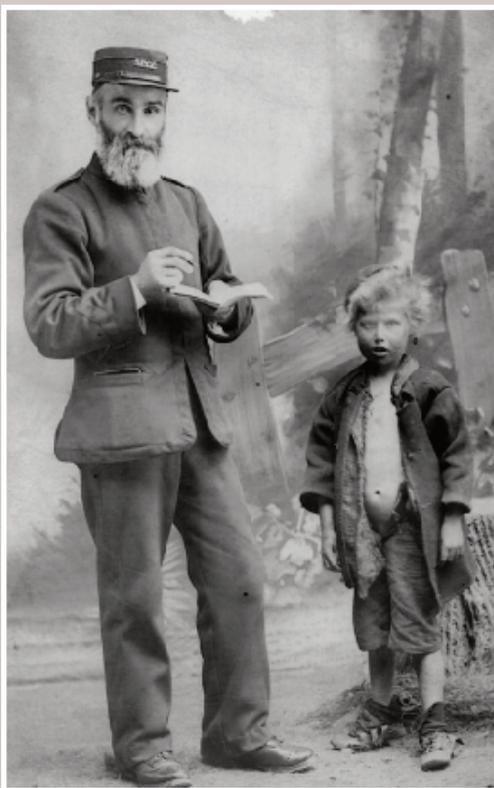
The idea had got into some people's minds that the Society's objects were intended to interfere with parental control and make charitable institutions do that which ought to be done by parents. This Society had no such purpose. Its object was not to put on other people the duties which parents ought to discharge. Its first object would be to the best of its ability to compel parents to discharge their duties, and if it could not to that by persuasion, then to put the law into force.⁴⁰

The VSPCC recognised from very early on the importance of building positive relationships with other likeminded organisations, which could promote and support each other. The Society reported that increasing recognition from other child rescue organisations and public departments of 'the Society's usefulness and marked success in the attainment of its objects', had brought about much 'generous cooperation' and largely contributed to the Society's success.⁴¹

Likewise, there was early recognition that the need for the Society's services was not confined to Melbourne. A Geelong branch of the VSPCC was established in 1897, just one year after the formation of the Society in Melbourne. W.H. Hudson was appointed as inspector and the annual report for that year reported that the branch 'has worked with very satisfactory results, the reports of the local Inspector showing a distinct improvement in many families under his supervision'.⁴² There were high hopes that this would be the first of many regional branches across the state. Secretary William Church visited Castlemaine and Bendigo in 1898 to assess the extent of local support in these areas. However, when Hudson resigned in 1900, the Geelong branch ceased operation and the VSPCC's hopes for further regional expansion were shelved for the time being.⁴³

The VSPCC executive committee also recognised the value of forging connections and maintaining relationships with counterparts and other likeminded organisations around the world. Committee members frequently took self-funded trips to England and the United States, to attend conferences and visit other child rescue agencies. Mrs G.T. Langridge went on six months' leave in Europe in 1911, with the intention of visiting the child rescue agencies there, hoping to 'bring back useful information concerning the latest methods employed in older countries in ameliorating the conditions of child life'.⁴⁴

Although some doubters were convinced of the need for the Society soon after its formation, the Society's existence continued to be questioned throughout its early years. Morale suffered after Lady Brassey's departure for England in December 1899. Although successive governors' wives continued to support the Society, few of them were as dedicated and active as its founder.⁴⁵



VSPCC inspector William Noble with Leslie in 1897. This photograph became a useful tool for publicising the work of the Society.

Leslie's Story

In October 1897, VSPCC inspector William Noble came across a young boy 'at a dust-heap' in Melville Street, Hawthorn. He was scooping jam out of a tin he had found in the rubbish tip, and was eating it with his fingers. Noble followed the boy, and saw a woman hand him half a loaf of bread over her fence, which he 'ate ravenously'. The boy told the inspector that his mother had sent him out to beg for bread. Noble later described his appearance:

He was half-naked. He had on an old dirty coat and trousers, and no shirt. The coat was open, and the bare body was exposed from the neck to the middle. He wore an old pair of shoes and stockings, with the toes through them . . . His clothes were smothered with vermin, as were also his head and body. There were small lumps all over his body caused by vermin. He seemed to be suffering severely from want of food and clothing.⁴⁶

Noble had encountered seven-year-old Leslie and his family before. On previous occasions when he visited their home, Noble had found Leslie's stepmother 'under the influence of drink, and the children crying out for food'.⁴⁷ Leslie was one of six children. His mother had died two years previously in childbirth and the baby was taken into the care of the Neglected Children's Department at five weeks old. Leslie's father, a carpenter, remarried his widowed housekeeper, who had a drinking problem. By the time Noble first visited the family, three of Leslie's older siblings had already been removed by child rescuers and sent to live in homes in the country.⁴⁸

When the case was brought before a Hawthorn court, child rescuer Selina Sutherland defended the children's father as 'a sober, steady man'. She offered to take charge of the children and attempt to reform their stepmother and bring her 'to a sense of her duty'.⁴⁹ Leslie and his five-year-old sister, Elsie, were returned home, but within months the case was again brought before the court, Noble alleging that the situation was unchanged. A neighbor supported his allegations, testifying that she 'heard the children crying all day for food and no one seemed to take any notice of them. The children were allowed to run about in a filthy neglected state'. Leslie and his sister were committed to the care of the Neglected Children's Department. Their stepmother was sentenced to six month's imprisonment for her cruelty towards them.⁵⁰

Ten years later, a photograph of Inspector Noble and Leslie was featured in the VSPCC's 1907 annual report. Noble is staid and authoritative in his uniform, his pen poised over his notebook, while Leslie stands disheveled next to him, his belly sticking out of his unbuttoned shirt. A poignant image of the neglected child, this photograph was used repeatedly by the society to promote the necessity of its work and appeal for support, so that it could help other such children and ensure their abusers were brought to justice. The photograph was a useful propaganda tool, but behind the awkwardly posed image is a complex situation without a simple solution. Leslie and his siblings may have been 'rescued' from their neglectful parents, but by the time Leslie's photograph was shared by the VSPCC his three sisters were in a psychiatric institution, where he would later join them.⁵¹

Advocacy and child welfare

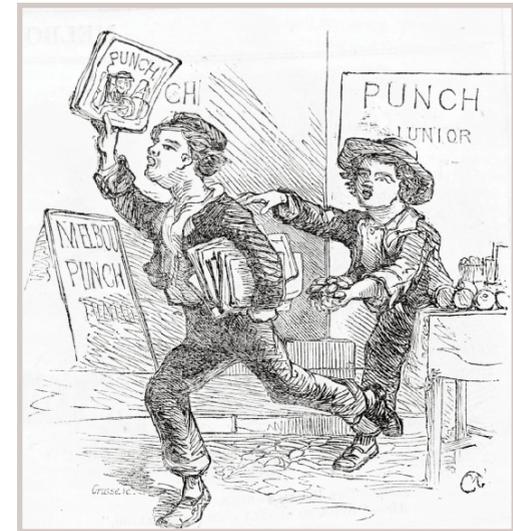
As well as investigating suspected cases of cruelty and neglect towards children, from the time of its formation the Society made influencing legislation and advocating for legislative change a major aim. Much of the existing legislation concerned with sexual abuse, begging and street trading by children was unclear about the limits of parental authority and of the responsibility of external authorities to intervene.⁵² One of the major roles of the Society's secretary was to prepare reports for the executive committee on particular issues concerning child welfare that the committee wished to investigate.

In 1900 a report was prepared for the Minister of Education on street trading, truancy, and crime among children. A sub-committee on street selling was formed the following year.⁵³ In 1911, the VSPCC submitted a report to the committee on juvenile street trading. The Child Saving Council also took an interest in the report, which stated that a bill introduced into Parliament as far back as 1900 to regulate and control street trading had not progressed any further. According to the report, street trading by juveniles in Melbourne had become 'rampant'. It suggested a variety of means to control the practice, including a recommendation that street traders should be of a minimum age, required to apply annually for a license and should wear a badge to declare their legitimacy.

Newspaper boys, who were delivering newspapers but not selling them 'promiscuously' on the streets, would be exempted. Similar laws existed in other Australian states and in Great Britain, where an inquiry found that street trading for young children 'is equivalent in most cases to encouraging them to commit moral suicide, thus are wasters, criminals and depraved women added steadily to the adult population'.⁵⁴

In 1912, the issue of juvenile street trading was considered by the Child Saving Council, which had been inaugurated by Lady Gibson-Carmichael, president of the VSPCC, the year before and was comprised of delegates from the various agencies in Victoria that were concerned with child welfare. Recommendations were forwarded to Cabinet with the request that another 'Juvenile Street Traders Bill' be introduced into Parliament. But the issue was still ongoing in 1914, when the VSPCC reported:

Street trading by Juveniles is a most pernicious evil, and the sooner Victoria falls in line with the other States of the Commonwealth, and minimises the evil by regulating the trading, the better for the youth of this State. Competent authorities in England aver [avow] that Street Trading by Children is merely an apprenticeship to casual labor for boys engaged in it, and almost invariably the first step to a degraded life in the case of girls, and is an occupation which sharpens the wits without developing the intelligence.⁵⁵



The VSPCC contributed to efforts to crack down on children selling items on Melbourne's streets in the early 20th century.

Pictures Collection, State Library Victoria, MP00/00/56/22

A helping hand

The mother of three children received constant money from the children's father, who was away working in Western Australia. The payments varied from 30 shillings to £2 and 10 shillings per week, but she spent all of it on drink. The two eldest boys were terribly neglected, hardly ever having sufficient meals or proper clothing, the mother being almost constantly drunk. The youngest child, a baby, was never attended to, and the dwelling was in a filthy and disgusting state. The VSPCC gave the mother a good chance to mend her ways, but without success. The children were brought before the Carlton Court as neglected children, the mother as a drunkard. Thanks to the kind assistance of Sister Florence and Miss Waugh, of the Wesleyan Home Mission and Children's Society, a home was found for the three children. Their mother was discharged from jail after one week and went to the Wesleyan Inebriate Retreat for nine months. The VSPCC received letters full of gratitude from the father.

Annual Report 1897-1898

The VSPCC was deeply concerned about the potential for children to be exploited and the working conditions for child employees. In 1909 Rowland Church – who by that time had taken over the role of VSPCC secretary from his father, William – prepared a report on children being employed to perform on the stages of Melbourne's theatres. In the course of his investigation, Church made a tour of the city's theatre venues, visiting Her Majesty's, Theatre Royal and The King's. He found the management at each venue 'most courteous and obliging' and anxious to consider his suggestions for improvements. Church's investigation found that these children were often performing six evenings a week and in some weeks two additional matinees, for an average wage of ten to fifteen shillings per week. This was ample motivation for parents to use their children for financial support. However, Church found to his surprise that it was not only the poor who relied on their children in this way:

These children are, it is generally assumed, the offspring of people in more or less indigent circumstances, or in all probability the sole support of a family presided over by a drunken father or a callous mother, or perhaps both, but I am informed ... that this is an erroneous assumption, as the children are in many cases members of families in comfortable circumstances.⁵⁶

To address this problem, Church recommended that salaries should be paid into an account in trust for the children. He also suggested that although children seemed to be generally well-supervised while working in the theatres, the law should dictate a minimum age of twelve for child performers, that no child should be allowed on the stage after 9:30pm and that they should be taken home by an adult rather than being left to wander the streets alone at night.⁵⁷

In 1905 the VSPCC added its voice to calls for a Children's Court in Victoria. In 1906, the Children's Court was established at every place where a Court of Petty Sessions (Magistrates' Court) was held. Before this, children charged with a crime were dealt with under the same procedures as adults.⁵⁸ The committee reported the advocacy success with great pleasure, describing their hope:

... that in the near future power will be given to such court to deal with cases in which the children are offended against as well as when they are offenders and that the Magistrates be given power to order the removal of children from parents or guardians whose cruel conduct or willful neglect warrant such a course.⁵⁹

Unfortunately, legislative change could be frustratingly slow. From the time of its establishment in 1896, the VSPCC formed an intention to improve the protection of infants. Twelve months later a sub-committee was formed to examine the *Infant Life Protection Act* and consider how it could be improved. A report was presented to the government and based on these recommendations a bill

proposing amendments to the Act was drafted and passed through the Legislative Council. But at that point the bill's progress halted. In 1901 *The Age* newspaper reported that 'a feeling of keen disappointment prevailed' at a VSPCC meeting when attendees were informed that it was uncertain when the bill would be introduced into the Legislative Assembly. The article described the frustration of the VSPCC committee:

As a very considerable amount of preventative work with good results is being accomplished, the committee feel that much more good would be done if the Society were more liberally supported.⁶⁰

In 1905 they were still waiting, commenting in the annual report that it had become 'quite the recognised thing for each succeeding ministry to promise to remedy matters in this regard' without following through on these promises.⁶¹ The *Infant Life Protection Amendment Act* finally passed both houses of Parliament in 1907, a decade after the Society first began advocating for it.⁶² This was a pattern that, unfortunately, would be repeated in years to come.

Yet even once these amendments had successfully been approved and introduced, the VSPCC's advocacy around the issue continued. In 1909 the Society reported that the committee had 'been strenuously endeavouring to impress upon the Government the absolute necessity of the Head Inspectress under the new Act being a qualified Medical Practitioner' and also that the inspectresses should be women with experience working with children, and would preferably be trained nurses.⁶³ For every inch the Society gained in legislative reform, there were still miles more to go.

Challenging times

When Rowland Church replaced his father as secretary of the VSPCC in 1909, he must have realised the job that lay ahead of him when a scornful article appeared in *Truth* shortly after he took up the role:

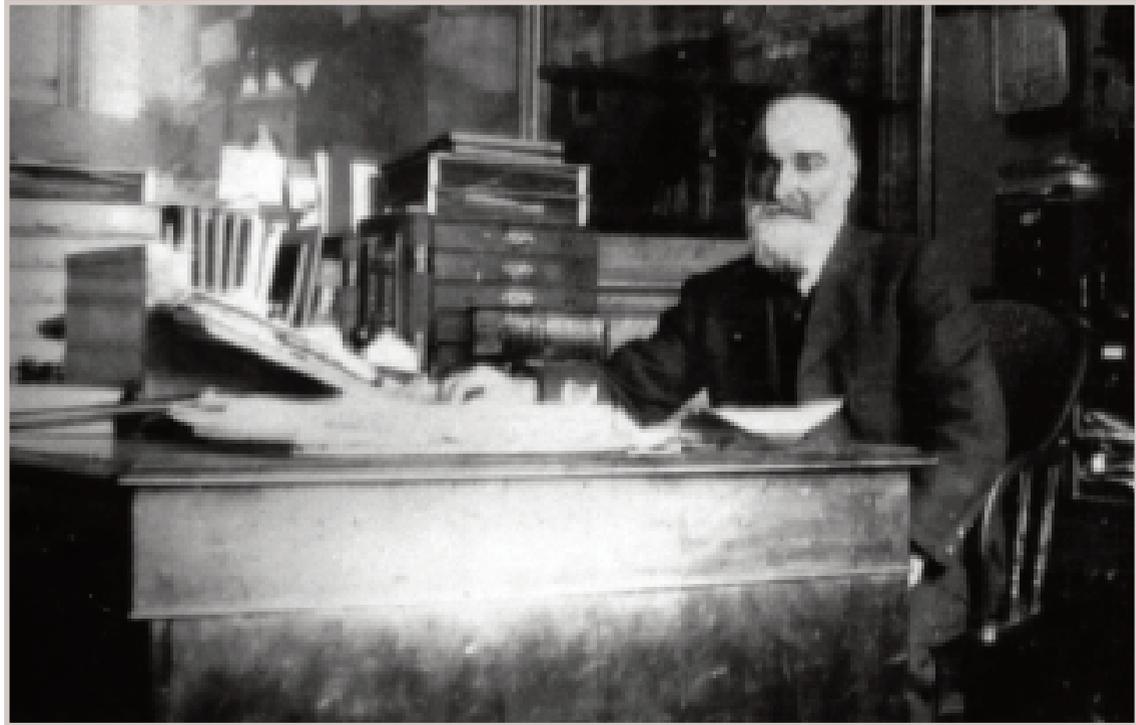
There is undoubtedly room for such an institution as that which the Churches, father and son, keep alive, but in order to justify its existence it must do something more than hang on to the police and Government institutions as a meaningless excrescence [growth].⁶⁴

The article urged readers to stop donating to what was 'a hibernating money-collecting concern' which should be shut down.⁶⁵ On top of such scathing attacks, lack of money was a continuing problem. In 1913 the Society reported a credit balance of just £3, 6 shillings and 11 pence, after the death or departure of some of the Society's most generous supporters, and having also increased Inspector Noble's salary due to increased costs of living. What's more, the committee



The impact of World War I on families and children saw the VSPCC's work increase substantially.
Pictures Collection, State Library Victoria, H99.166/254.

William Noble was the VSPCC's sole inspector for 25 years, until his resignation in 1921.



was still concerned 'that a great number of the public are ignorant of the Society's existence and doings'.⁶⁶

Morale was therefore already low when the outbreak of World War I in 1914 placed the Society under increasing pressure. As tens of thousands of Australian husbands, fathers and sons marched off to war, many Australian families struggled to cope without them. With families in distress, the war saw need for the VSPCC increase substantially, while at the same time support declined, as people poured all their charitable energies and finances into the war effort. In 1915 the VSPCC reported:

The work has increased considerably owing to the circumstances of War and Drought ... The patriotic objects which have had much sympathy and financial support from the community during the past 10 months, are both laudable and desirable, but it is to be hoped that in the turmoil of national crisis the cry of the child will not be disregarded.⁶⁷

The Society's honorary treasurer, Lawrence Marks, and secretary, Rowland Church, wrote to *The Argus* newspaper in early April 1915, begging the public for financial support and describing

the poor response to its Christmas appeal and the loss of subscribers ‘owing to their having been called upon for so many patriotic objects’.⁶⁸ Just days later, heavy losses were suffered during the landing of Australian troops at Gallipoli – an event that intensified recruitment and fundraising efforts on the home front in support of those fighting for king and country. With all eyes on the battlefield in Europe and on the needs of Australian troops, it was a challenge to draw attention to the plight of children and families at home.

Nevertheless, the VSPCC managed to survive throughout the four years of war, and to make a positive contribution to the community during that time. In 1917 the Society reported that it was aiding the Lord Mayor’s Patriotic Society by providing reports about the state of child welfare and supervising cases of families in distress on its behalf.⁶⁹

Unfortunately, no annual reports from the years 1919 to 1924 appear to have survived; a six-year period in which records of the Society’s activities are limited. It seems that for much of this time the Society was without an active president and its caseload declined substantially. In 1921 it reported that just 48 cases had been investigated, a significant decline compared with 250 to 300 cases per year since its establishment.⁷⁰ The Society lost both its long-serving secretary in 1920 (Rowland Church was replaced by younger brother Stanley Church – the third Church in the role) and its inspector in 1921. William Noble resigned for health reasons after 25 years of service, and William Dell was appointed to replace him as inspector.⁷¹

In 1923, the VSPCC moved into offices at 47 Collins Place, which it rented from the Charity Organisation Society (COS). The two organisations had maintained a close association over the years, with the COS undertaking to carry on the VSPCC inspector’s work whenever he was unwell. From 1923 the two organisations also shared a secretary, Stanley Greig Smith.⁷² In February 1924 Eleanor Wright Gatehouse (also known as Nellie Gatehouse) took on the role of VSPCC president, and the future of the Society looked considerably brighter.

At an early meeting of the Society in 1896, Sir Henry Hodges, a justice of the Supreme Court, stated of the Society, ‘He hoped it would have little to do. He feared it would have much’.⁷³ Almost thirty years on, the Society had proven that its existence was fully justified and there was plenty for it still to achieve.