

The Best Intentions

In the 19th century, Enlightenment principles were applied to the treatment of mental illness. "Lunatics" were placed in new asylums where illnesses of the mind would be cured by a scientific approach. The treatment program included medical therapies, routine work, and strong moral guidance.

Kew was one of the largest asylums ever built and conveyed the great optimism of the Victorian colony after the Gold Rush. It was known as a barracks style building, with two great wings, one for women and the other for men, and neat rows of beds in each ward. Smaller versions of Kew were constructed at Beechworth and Ararat.

Unfortunately, Kew never lived up to these benevolent intentions. Few patients were ever cured and released into the community. Inadequate government funding encouraged mistreatment of patients and Kew was subject to repeated public criticism leading to a Royal Commission in 1886. For the first half of last century conditions and morale were low.

In the 1950s a wave of reform came with widespread criticism of the large 19th century medical institutions. The Mental Hygiene Authority turned Kew into the Willsmere Mental Hospital for care of aged patients. Kew was earmarked for closure and eventually ceased operating in 1988 with the buildings and grounds sold for private development.

Preserving our Heritage...

Willsmere is listed on the Victorian Heritage Register Number H0861, with Heritage Overlay HO109.

This guide has been updated based on the original produced by the Australia Science Archives Project available at and redesigned by Antony Whelan.

www.asap.unimelb.edu.au/pubs/articles/asa97/KEWA.htm

Please visit the "Willsmere Heritage" blog where you can keep up to date with interesting facts and information about the construction, operation and history of the property and surrounding grounds.

<https://willsmere.wordpress.com>

Famous Patients...

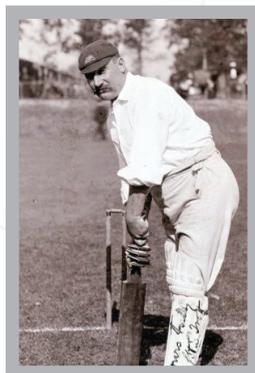


Thomas Wentworth "Tom" Wills
(Aug 1835 - May 1880)

Was an Australian sportsman who is credited with being his country's first cricketer of significance and a pioneer of Australian rules football.

Edward De Lacy Evans (born Ellen Tremayne or Tremaye)
(1830? - Aug 1901)

A servant, blacksmith and gold miner, who immigrated from Ireland to Australia in 1856, and made international news in 1879 when it was revealed he was a woman.



George Henry Stevens "Harry" Trott
(Aug 1866 - Nov 1917)

An Australian Test cricketer who was committed to Kew Asylum after a series of seizures. He was eventually discharged and returned to the game once again playing first class cricket for Victoria between 1888 and 1898.

If you'd like more information about properties available to lease or buy within Willsmere, please contact our Owners Corporation Manager. Please visit our website for contact details.

www.willsmere.net

Historical Willsmere

Former Kew Lunatic Asylum and Willsmere Hospital
1872-1988



Heritage Walk

Established in 1870, Willsmere is a rare, mostly intact 19th century lunatic asylum, and an architectural landmark. Spread over 25 acres, sitting above Yarra Bend Park, and at one time forming the highest constructed point in Melbourne, the institution was intended to portray Melbourne as a civilised and benevolent city.

The Italianate and French Second Empire buildings were designed by architects G.W. Vivian and Frederick Kawerau. The central administration block comprises a three-storey building with attic Mansard roof and cupola, with two double-storey wings extending on each side which include four-storey Mansard roofed towers, and courtyards lined with iron-columned verandas.

The design included "ha-ha" walls that retained views without the feeling of being enclosed. In 1993 Willsmere was converted to private residences with the addition of townhouses, but retains heritage listing as an important part of Australian history.

- 1. Main Entrance:** The restored front plantations and oval forecourt lead to the central administration entry flanked by smaller porch entries. The left-hand entry led to the female wings and the right-hand to the male section. Paying patients were housed in the front wings facing the city.
- 2. Inner Court:** 1864 plans show a garden here but by 1890 this was fenced as utility yards for residences of the Superintendent and Medical Officer, located upstairs in the front administration block.
- 3. Restoration works:** Notice the colour scheme along the paths. Red painted doorways, windows and other features are restored or new versions of the original design. Green painted features are new additions, such as the entrances to many of the apartments. The modern concrete paths were built during redevelopment. Originally, patients and staff used the covered walkways, now converted into verandahs.
- 4. Male Court:** Male patients and staff played lawn games here from 1878. The bowling green was rebuilt by the Lawn Bowls and Greenkeepers Association as a gift to the hospital in the 1950s. Inmates also built a cricket oval just north of the asylum walls during the 1870s.
- 5. Front Garden:** Able patients were allowed therapeutic work in the gardens, farm, and workshop, as well as cleaning the wards.
- 6. Male Paupers Airing Court:** The side wings housed public or non-paying patient wards. The sunshade from the early 1900's was repositioned about 50 metres south in 1993.

- 7. Privy:** Patients were confined daily in the walled airing court which had a sunshade, one tap and toilets in each side of the privies. The privies were uncomfortable and unhygienic until the 1950s.
- 8. Male Refractory Ward:** The most difficult patients were kept apart from the rest, confined in the end wards and small airing courts. Bars cover the windows in the bluestone cells for dangerous inmates. Notice the nearby peppercorn tree which is as old as Willsmere and also heritage listed.
- 9. Rear Gate Lodges:** Two small houses for families of the Gardener and Head Attendant flank the service entrance. Notice the massive bluestone gateway which once supported the timber gates.
- 10. Loading Bays:** Horse and cart deliveries came to the rear central wing where the loading bays were located. The heavy steel lintels above the first floor doorways carried block and tackle to haul goods up into the stores.
- 11. Fever tents:** These huts originally had canvas water-cooled roofs and were built in 1907 for typhoid fever patients.
- 12. Kitchens:** Standing in the inner female courtyard offers a view of the long central wing where staff lived, ate, and relaxed. Kitchens occupied the rear part of the wing, with dining rooms in the front part. A staff billiard room occupied the front upstairs.

- 13. Female Refractory Courtyard:** This courtyard was for difficult female patients. Brick walls and massive gates crisscrossed the grounds at Kew, confining patients to their appropriate categories: male/female, paying/pauper, manageable/refractory.
- 14. Laundry:** The rear part of this wing was the laundry. The chimney was built in 1921 for the laundry boiler.
- 15. Walls and Ha-Has:** A "ha-ha" wall has a trench on the inside making it impossible to scale from within while, from the outside, looking low so as not to suggest imprisonment.
- 16. Female Paupers Courtyard:** The rustic sunshade dates from 1872. Mostly the grounds at Kew presented a derelict, enclosed landscape of concrete and dirt, with few seats or activities for poorer patients.
- 17. Towers:** The imposing towers had no practical use except to house water storage tanks. They were also used as offices and storage for patient records.
- 18. Museum:** Located in a preserved ward on the first floor, the Kew Asylum Museum is only open at times specified by the Willsmere Owners Corporation.

