

ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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NEWSLETTER

No. 104 FEBRUARY 2014

A story of persistence

DR KERR MEMORIAL INFANT WELFARE CENTRE

- by Noreen Thomson



This solid blonde-brick building stands adjacent to the Council Business Centre in Ruskin Street. Its official opening on 10th September 1954 was the culmination of many years of persistent fundraising dating back at least to the early 1940s. Noreen Thomson has researched the story behind the JAMES KERR INFANT WELFARE CENTRE.

In lovely sunshine on Friday, September 10th 1954, Orbost's new, modern, solid brick building known as the **DR. KERR MEMORIAL INFANT WELFARE CENTRE** was officially opened in Ruskin Street by the local member, Sir Albert Lind MLA. The building's name commemorates the services of Orbost's first medical practitioner, Dr James Kerr (1888-1928).

This building stands next to the Council Business Centre in Ruskin Street and was the culmination of many years of fundraising and lobbying by local people. A report of the opening ceremony in the *Snowy River Mail* 22nd September 1954 describes the building as *“cream brick veneer design, with tiled roof, spacious windows to every room; rooms decorated in the latest pastel shades, and fitted with hot water system, washing machine, electric stove, ice chest and sewerage [septic]. The outside appearance is very modern. The decorative window boxes have been tastefully planted with flowers, all of which impart a most pleasing appearance”*.

For the next 45 years (1954 to late 1990s), this building was the centre for the Council-operated infant welfare service to mothers and babies until this service was incorporated into Orbost Hospital in the late 1990s.

Since 2000, the Infant Welfare has had several moves, firstly to the old Nurses Home adjacent to Orbost Hospital, then to the corner of Ruskin Street

and Browning Street, and later to the old Lands Department Office in Browning Street.

Now, finally, in October 2013, the moves have come full circle, and the old 1954 building is again functioning as part of the Maternal & Child Health Early Years Services and the Orbost Early Learning Centre.

In *Orbost Hospital: history, personalities and stories*, the author, Dr Margaret Hollands, states that as far back as January 1942, the Victorian Government had made a special grant to the Public Health Department to establish an Infant Welfare Travelling Nurse to the Orbost District. Miss Verna Houghton was appointed and it was announced that the sister would be in attendance at the Cookery Room at the Mechanics Hall in Orbost on Fridays.

The local branch of the CWA (Country Women's Association) donated the necessary furniture and paid for the Cookery Room at the Mechanics Hall.

Later, Sister was provided with a large van to travel around the district. She could then visit mothers and babies in their homes in the Orbost and Omeo districts. This “Dodge” van with its raised roof was a very distinctive shape.

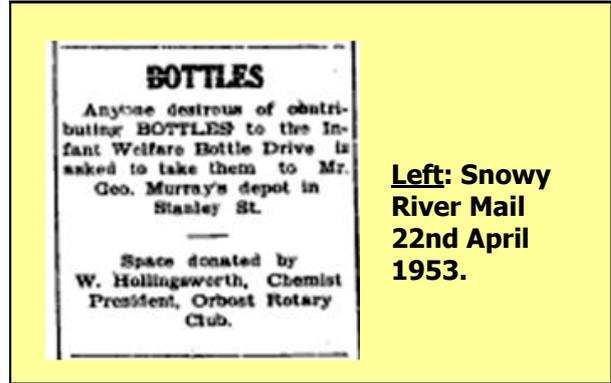
As a young child, I can remember it parked up in Wilson Street at the Salvation Army Hall where women and their babies who lived in the northern part of Orbost past Boundary Road (called “Newtown”) would come to see the Sister.



This photo shows the familiar “DODGE” van and the white veil and uniform of the Infant Welfare Sister on her rounds to “Newtown”. Many young families lived adjacent to the two timber mills in Shackleton Street and Stirling Street where their husbands and sons worked.



Left: This 1943 photo supplied by East Gippsland Historical Society shows the Victorian Government Public Health Dept. Infant Welfare Van which serviced the neighbouring Council areas of Omeo, Tambo and Orbost Shires.



Left: Snowy River Mail 22nd April 1953.

back as 1944, and over the next ten years, had put an enormous effort into fundraising. Street stalls, bottle drives, card parties, doll shows and fetes, penny drives, a three-act play, and door-to-door collections all raised money to build the much needed and long-worked-for Infant Welfare Centre. Other groups, including Rotary, joined in with the bottle drives.

By the 1950s, a small anteroom at the back of the old Council Chambers in Ruskin Street was made available for use by the Infant Welfare Sister.

In the early 1950s, in the time of Dr John Lane and Dr Mary Long (Mrs J Lane), an all-out effort was made to establish a designated Infant Welfare Centre. Dr Mary Long was a driving force.

An Infant Welfare Auxiliary had been set up as far

By 1953, the Auxiliary had raised £1,230 and the campaign had really gathered momentum. The post-war baby boom meant lots of babies and the need was evident for all to see.

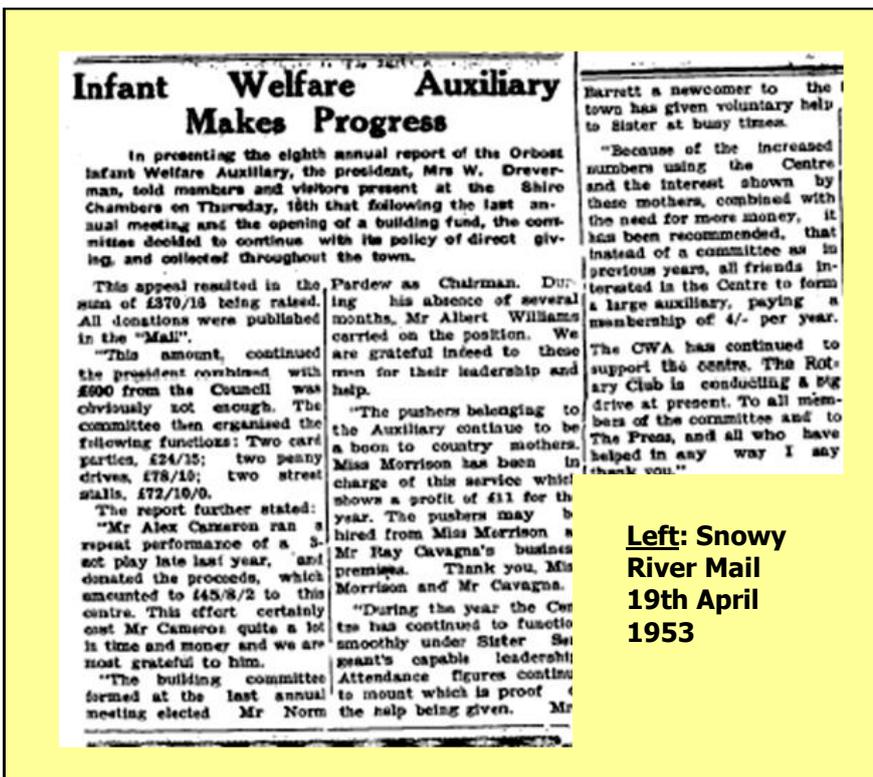
Indeed, in April 1953, the Infant Welfare Sister-in-Charge, Sr Sargeant, reported that individual attendances of babies and pre-school children for the past year was 447, with a total attendance of 3076. Of this, 1800 were at Orbost and Newtown. She also stated *"the health of the babies is very good and the mothers continue to show a real interest in the centre. I thank the Infant Welfare Ladies for their practical help, and to Mrs Macalister for her weekly supply of flowers, and to all who have given roadside assistance to the van."*

"Because of the increased numbers using the Centre and the interest shown by these mothers, combined with the need for more money, it has been recommended, that instead of a committee as in previous years, all friends interested in the Centre to form a large auxiliary, paying a membership of 4/- per year. The CWA has continued to support the centre. The Rotary Club is conducting a pig drive at present. To all members of the committee and to The Press, and all who have helped in any way I say thank you."

In May 1953 the Auxiliary sent a deputation to Orbost Shire Council to lobby for Council to build an Infant Welfare Centre. On this deputation were Mrs W Dreverman (president), Mrs J Nixon (secretary), Mrs J Lane (assistant secretary) and Mrs T H Rodwell.

This was not of course the first time that the Committee had lobbied the Council.

Earlier contact in 1950 had resulted in the inspection of a site on the Recreation Reserve



Left: Snowy River Mail 19th April 1953

but this did not proceed. (Sections of the Reserve were later allocated to the pool, the Senior Citizens Centre, Museum and Library). This time though, determination paid off. The deputation stated that there was still £2,000 to be raised and they asked the Council to establish a fund to complete the job. Mrs Lane stated that "**a band of women could not sit down and raise £2,000.**" It was too much responsibility for them.

Crs. C Ingram and E W Johnston then moved that a fund be opened to be called the **Dr John Kerr Memorial Infant Welfare Centre Fund**. It was pointed out that the service from the new Centre would not stop in Orbost, but would radiate to all centres of the Shire. The deputation was informed by Council that a tender for the building had been accepted and that plans and specifications had

been approved by the Council. Needless to say, the deputation was very pleased with this outcome.

Local builder, Albert (Chips) Williams' tender of £6,100 was accepted by the Council, and the building was completed (all except the fence) by September 1954. Of the servicing tradesmen who built this Centre in 1954, only Lindsay Thomson, Bruce Macalister and Daryl Pitt are still with us.

In October 1955, with the fence finished, the building played host to a Vice Regal visit of His Excellency the Governor of Victoria, Sir Dallas Brooks. Lady Brooks planted a liquid amber in the grounds. These were the finishing touches to a long and persistent effort.

HOW THE CENTRE WAS FINANCED (report by Snowy River Mail 22nd September 1954)

**Total cost (including fence) £6,100.
Contract price £5,400, extras (septic tank etc.)
£350, fence £350.**

**Infant Welfare Auxillary raised and paid to the
Orbost Shire Council £1,230; loans raised by the
Shire £2,500; donations £200.**

**An amount of £450 was still needed to complete
the job - this comprises fences, gate, lawns, shrubs
etc. to make the perfect Orbost Infant Welfare
Centre.**

SOME INFANT WELFARE SISTERS

- 1942 Miss Vera Haughton
Sr McGuire
Sr Brennan
Sr Ritchie (10 years)
Sr Sargeant**
- 1953 Sr Thelma Coles (Sr T Sealey)
Sr Cora Cutmore
Bernice Swan
Christina Weatherall**
- 2000 Jenny Freestone
Debbie Townsend
Caroline Paten
Katie Radic
Helen McCarthy**

