

MY HORROR I was a 'Ten Pound Pom' baby but my life was a living hell – my heart was broken after I finally found my mum

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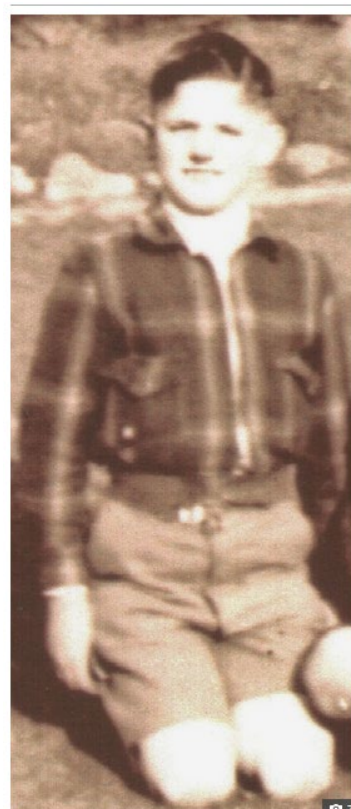


PICKED out from a line-up of young boys at a London's children's home, Tony Costa was told he was being sent to Australia for a better life of sunshine, kangaroo rides and freshly picked fruit.

Instead, the frightened 11-year-old – deported without his parents' consent – was sent to a home where he was labelled the “son of a whore”, stripped and flogged in front of the other kids and forced to do back-breaking work in his bare feet.



Tony Costa was told he was being sent to Australia for a better life of sunshine, kangaroo rides and freshly picked fruit Credit: Supplied



Tony Costa, pictured as a lad, was sent to a home where he was labelled the 'son of a whore', stripped and flogged in front of the other kids Credit: Supplied



130,000 children were sent to former colonies under the child migrant programme

Credit: Supplied

Tony, now 81, was one of 130,000 children sent to former colonies, including [Australia](#) and [Canada](#), under the child migrant programme, which ran up to the 1970s, [with many suffering horrific abuse at the hands of the institutions](#) that were supposed to care for them.

The horrendous practice – which separated children from UK families – is the subject of BBC One's 1950s drama [Ten Pound Poms](#), starring Michelle Keegan as single mum Kate, who searches for her young son after being forced to give him up.

For Tony, moving 9,000 miles from his home in London to Australia began a lifetime of trauma.

He says: "We were told we would be able to pick fruit from the trees and have a lovely life but we got a rude awakening.

"It was a brutal and harsh upbringing and we were subjected to inhumane treatment, humiliation and physical abuse."

Under the post-war child migrant policy, an estimated 10,000 kids aged between three and 14 were shipped out in a bid to empty overflowing British orphanages and populate Australia with "good white stock".

Childcare charities such as Barnardos, along with the Church of England, the Methodist Church, the Salvation Army and the Catholic Church, all played major roles in deporting the children.

In the show, [Michelle's character Kate](#) is tipped off by a nun that her son is being taken to Australia and follows him there to track him down.

But in real life most parents were not even consulted and were sometimes told their children had died.

For Tony, who lives in [Perth](#), the cruel heartbreak continued well into adulthood when he discovered his own mother had come back to the children's home in London to collect him, only to be told: "He's gone."

And while she left an address in America on file at the children's home, it was never passed on to her son when she herself emigrated.

Sadistic leader

Tony recalls: "We were called the sons of whores and told our mummies and daddies didn't want us, which was a load of rubbish.

"My mum did come back to the orphanage to get me but was told she was too late and that I'd been sent away for 'a better quality of life', without her consent."

Tony – the son of Irish parents who were living in Islington, North London – was taken aged two to a Catholic orphanage by mum Kathleen, who was struggling to survive and intended the stay to be temporary.

He says: "These were tough times. Many of us former child migrants were put into these institutions where they were supposed to look after us until our mums and dads got back on their feet.

"But in 1953, when I was 11, the institutions decided it would be better that the kids go to Australia or overseas. They picked us out and it was literally, 'You, you and you over there – you're going to Australia.'

“It could have been Mars or the moon as far as we were concerned.” Tony remembers the four-week journey, on the liner SS Oronsay, as an “exciting time” adding: “We’d never been treated so well, because we were special kids on this ship.

“Then we docked at Fremantle and we were put on the back of a truck and driven 65 miles to a place called Boys Town, Bindoon, run by the so-called Christian Brothers.”

At the orphanage, on abandoned farmland 60 miles north of Perth, the new arrivals were greeted with the sight of a near-naked boy being flogged to within inches of his life.

They would all face brutality at the hands of the Christian Brothers and, in particular, sadistic leader Brother Francis Keaney – who meted out beatings using specially made leather straps with bits of metal sewn in.



In the show, Michelle's character Kate is tipped off by a nun that her son is being taken to Australia and follows him there to track him down Credit: BBC



The Boys Town compound – founded in 1947 – had been partially built by the children, some as young as ten Credit: © State Library of Western Australia

The children were given nothing but porridge or bread and dripping to eat while the Brothers dined on lavish meals.

Tony says: “We were suffering from malnutrition, always hungry. If we were caught raiding the orchard to get fruit we were ridiculed and flogged in front of other kids.

“If anyone wet the bed, they would flog you – and I was a bedwetter so I was harshly disciplined.

“Keaney would also use a belt and apply the boot in some cases.”

The Boys Town compound – founded in 1947 – had been partially built by the children, some as young as ten.

Tony was put to back- breaking laundry work but also did manual labour on the building site in bare feet and threadbare clothing.

Those who fell behind in their duties were beaten so severely they often suffered bone fractures.

Sexual abuse was also rife, with some of the boys dubbing the order “the Christian B***ers”.

At 16, Tony was sent to Perth where a job in a dry cleaning factory had been arranged for him. But he remained a ward of the state until 21.

It was only then he was handed his birth certificate, but he says: “It meant nothing to me, given that I didn’t know about my mum or dad all this time and had constantly been told they didn’t want us.”

When he travelled back to the UK to find out more, he discovered his mother had married an American airman and moved to the US.

She had given her church a letter with her address in case he came to find her – yet despite Tony asking the Catholic authorities for help, it was not passed on to him.

Years later, with the help of the Child Migrants Trust, he was able to look for her in America – but by then, tragically, she had passed away.



The Christian Brothers moved the remains of brutal leader Keaney from an ornate marble grave to a humble plot Credit: © State Library of Western Australia

‘I laid on grave and cried’

Tony says: “After she remarried she had a reasonably comfortable life but her husband Leon told me she was terribly disturbed knowing that she could never have access to me.

“I went to America at the invitation of my mother’s husband and he took me to her grave.

“That was the first time I’d been close to my mother. I couldn’t believe it was her body lying in the ground.

“I laid on her grave and cried. I had been robbed of the chance to know my mother.”

Tony worked on the railways in Australia and for 11 years was mayor of the Perth district of Subiaco. He says the mental scars of his childhood prevented him finding love.

He revealed: “I never married and I put that down to never knowing a mother’s love. How would I know what love is, to this day?”

“I survived but many of the lads lost their way and ended up with all sorts of problems – alcoholism and broken marriages.”

Many kids were told by institutions that their parents were dead, while birth dates and names were changed to prevent them being tracked down.

Mirroring the storyline of [the 1950s-set TV drama](#), which is named after the processing fee that was charged for migration, Tony’s dad emigrated to Australia as a ten pound pom while his son was still in Bindoon.

But they were not reunited until Tonys 50th birthday and they didn’t stay close afterwards.

Tony says: “He was a man of few words. I was not as informed as I’d like to be after meeting him.” But he is in touch with his half-sister Kathleen, daughter of his mum and Leon, who is a grandmother of nine and now living in Wisconsin.

“We talk on the phone and exchange letters,” Tony says. “Kathleen is a great source of comfort to me.

In 2016, the Christian Brothers offered an “unreserved” apology to the children in its care who had been abused, and moved the remains of brutal leader Keaney from an ornate marble grave to a humble plot.

Prime Minister [Gordon Brown](#) officially apologised to the British child migrants on behalf of the government in 2010.

He said: “We are sorry they were allowed to be sent away when at their most vulnerable.”

He also announced a £6million fund to help reunite families – but, 13 years on, campaigners including Tony feel forgotten all over again.

He says: “There is still no memorial in London which is one thing we have asked for all along.

“Funding for family reunions is running out and former child migrants are worried we might never see our families again.

“Neither [Boris Johnson](#) nor [Rishi Sunak](#) have publicly made a statement of support for child migrants and they seem to have forgotten us.

“People ask me if I have any affinity with the UK, and I say, ‘Why would I when nothing is being done about this?

“The Australian government has recognised the appalling behaviour of these institutions and the failure of the governments who allowed it happen.”

Former social worker Dr Margaret Humphreys, who established the Child Migrants Trust in 1987, exposed the horrors of the migrant scheme after receiving a letter from Australia from a victim asking for help to locate long-lost family members.

She says: "Thirteen years ago, the nation's apology was given by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who gave a commitment to former child migrants that, "We will support you all your lives."

"Much has been achieved, but it is now time to ensure we fully honour our nation's apology."

THE Sun

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