

# State Heritage Areas of South Australia



## Regional Reserve Headquarters

former Australian Inland Mission, Elizabeth Symon Nursing Home  
cnr South & West Terraces, Innamincka

*SAHR 12759 – confirmed as a State Heritage Place 25 July 1985*

The Elizabeth Symon Nursing Home opened at Innamincka on 11 May 1929. It was part of a network of outback hospitals built, equipped and staffed by the [Australian Inland Mission](#) of the Presbyterian Church, to provide health and welfare services for people living in isolated areas.

The Australian Inland Mission was formed in 1911 by [Reverend John Flynn](#), a former Victorian schoolteacher, who had seen the desperate need for outback medical services during his travels in remote areas. The first nursing home was established at Oodnadatta, and by 1926 another seven had been built – at Alice Springs, Maranboy, Halls Creek, [Beltana](#), Victoria Downs, Port Hedland and Birdsville.

Although Innamincka did not have an A.I.M. hospital until 1929, a nursing service was established in the area from 1924. The managers of Innamincka, Cordillo Downs, Nappa Merrie and Arrabury Stations had asked Flynn to provide medical support for the people of the area, which covered a total of 7 500 square miles. A nursing system, in which a nurse (known as a Border Nurse) made her headquarters at each station in turn, operated for four years. This service was definitely 'better than nothing' but a permanent base was obviously needed. In 1928, after many [impassioned letters](#) and fund-raising efforts, construction of the Elizabeth Symon Nursing Home began.



*Parks Headquarters, Innamincka, 2004*



*Mule Team, Innamincka 1920  
Photo B 32222/56: State Library of SA*

The two-storeyed hospital, constructed of reinforced concrete, cost approximately £6,000 to build. £1,500 was donated by Sir Joshua Symon, and as a result of this gift, the new nursing home was named after his mother, Elizabeth Symon. The building was designed by Adelaide architect Thomas Macadam and, like similar A.I.M Nursing Homes, was built with consideration to the hot climate. Concrete was the best material for the walls. The sand, gravel and water were all readily available in the area – only the cement was needed. The building materials were sent by rail to Lyndhurst, Farina or Broken Hill and transferred by camel and truck to Innamincka.

When it was finished, the Elizabeth Symon Nursing Home dominated the Innamincka landscape. A flight of stairs led to the entrance through double doors onto a wide encircling verandah and lobbies. The ground floor area included a ward, dispensary, sitting room and two bathrooms. The kitchen, at the rear of the building, had steps leading down to a large underground cellar, which was used for storing supplies. Two bedrooms for the nurses were upstairs, as well as a sleep-out. Water was supplied from four tanks located on the corners of the building, an underground tank, and a nearby well and windmill.

The first nurses were Sisters Stewart and Edgar, relieved in September 1930 by Sisters Currey and Burchill. ([Read letter written by Sister Currey.](#)) In-patients were nursed in the ward, but dental work, out-patients treatments and minor surgery were carried out in the dispensary. In 1939 a separate ward was opened for Aboriginal people. It had a concrete floor, was made of corrugated iron and flyscreens, and had one room for men, one for women, a storage area and verandahs all round.

Working at the hospital demanded special skills. Sick and injured people usually travelled to the nursing home for treatment and stayed in the ward while they recovered, but many patients only came as out-patients. The nurses usually stayed on-site, but occasionally one had to ride out to the stations to see very ill patients. In the very early days, the nursing sisters had to make all medical decisions without the support of a doctor. In the 1930s though, a pedal radio was installed, which eased their isolation.



*Aerial view of Innamincka, c1990*



*Aerial view of A.I.M. ruin, c1990*

In 1951 the Innamincka hospital was closed. The Royal Flying Doctor Service was now providing many of the services that had been available at the nursing home, and patients were quickly taken to a base hospital if an injury was serious. The building and the Aboriginal ward were dismantled and the materials sold to Arrabury Pastoral Company, to be used for the construction of the manager's house at Mount Leonard Station. Only the concrete walls remained.

The A.I.M. building was a ruin for more than 40 years until the 1990s, when it was restored by the Australian Geographical Society and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (now Department for Environment and Heritage). This building is a significant survivor of the earlier settlement at Innamincka and provides a link between the pre-1950s town and the present hotel, store and other buildings dating from Innamincka's revival in the 1970s. It is now the headquarters for the [Innamincka Regional Reserve](#) and contains an interpretive display opened in 1994.



*Australian Inland Mission ruin, 1990*



*Restored A.I.M Building, 1994*