



In 1863, four women arrived in Melbourne with only the clothes on their backs and few possessions to speak of. They had come from France, where they had been a part of a new religious order named the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, and intended to devote their lives to aiding women facing poverty, destitution and other social hardship. All four women, Bridget Doyle, Brigid Lalor, Helen Corbett and

Anastasia Lacey, were Irish and had grown up in the terrible potato blight of the 1840s, so were well familiar with extreme poverty and suffering. Despite having little in the way of money or land, the sisters worked out of a small chapter house and later a church, using their experience and passion for charity to give aid to the poor and needy women of Melbourne.

Over a century later, in 1988, Sister Anne Manning went to represent the same order in the small rural town of Dareton, in north-west New South Wales. Sr Anne, much like the original group of sisters in Melbourne, had a keen sense of social justice, and had experience of helping women and their families both in Australia and her native South Africa. Within a year, Sr Anne was joined by Sr Helen Swiggs, and both worked as volunteers for



local Aboriginal organisations. Among the organisations the two helped organise was a TAFE-funded sewing course that, despite the enthusiasm of its students, sorely lacked quality equipment and work space. After the Sisters were able to provide a house for the women to work in, the course became exceedingly popular, and an unexpected amount of bags were produced. Having no market for them in a rural town with a population of around 600, the Sisters began to buy the bags themselves, and later sold them to friends and family, funding the sewing circle with the proceeds. In facing this difficulty of finding a market for the bags, it occurred to Sr Anne that Good Shepherd-organised groups around the developing world were likely facing the same problem. She inquired with a number of producer groups whether there was anything the Australian chapter could do to assist, and, sure enough, most were facing market problems in some way or another. Soon, the Sisters began receiving packages from these international producer groups, and put them on sale during a congregational meeting in Wahroonga, Sydney. The sale was an enormous success, and Sisters Anne and Helen continued the business informally in both Brisbane and Sydney. Sr Helen's sales out of Ashfield, Sydney were particularly successful, and she was able to grow the business considerably over a few years, travelling to various different parishes throughout the city selling produce. Eventually, she was able to set up a permanent venue, first out of a chapter house in Victoria St, Ashfield, then later a permanent store in Lackey St, Summer Hill, where

it remains to this day.

