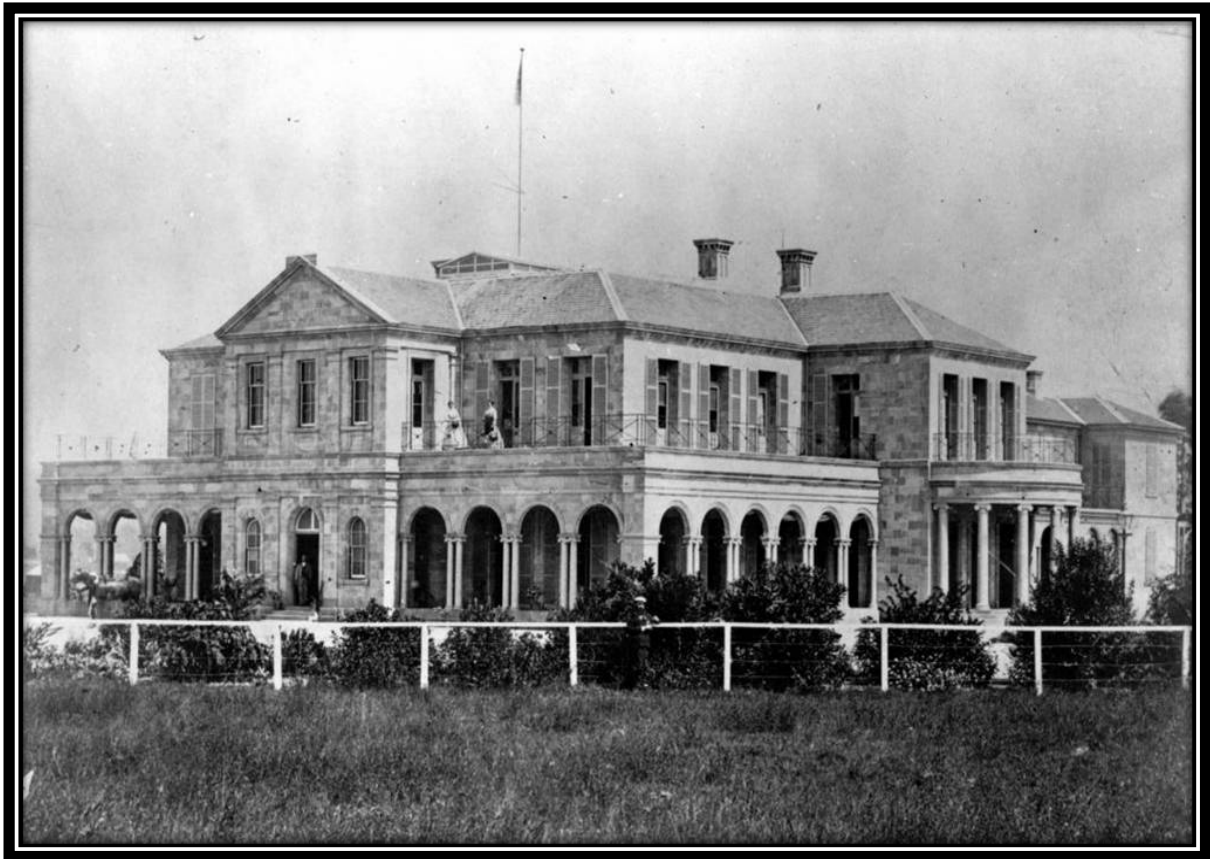


A Palace for His Excellency, Queensland's Old Government House.

Katie McConnel



Government House, circa 1867. Image courtesy of the State Library of Queensland.

When the Colony of Queensland was created in December 1859, the new Governor, Sir George Bowen, and his family were accommodated in the finest home available – *Adelaide House*, the home of the superintendent of the Brisbane Hospital, Dr William Hobbs.

Although it was a substantial two-storey stone building, it was generally agreed that it was 'a very humble' residence for the Queen's representative. A priority for the public and for the 26 members of Queensland's first parliament was the construction of a more fitting and permanent residence for the governor.

Following a parliamentary vote of '£10,000 towards the erection of a new Government House' on 21st June 1860, the design and tendering phases advanced rapidly. Within weeks, the newly-appointed Government Architect, Charles Tiffin, had completed the plans, employing classical revival principles which he adapted to suit Brisbane's tropical climate, particularly in its system of ventilation and controlled natural light. By late August, Joshua Jeays had been appointed the builder. Construction began in October 1860 on a 'delightful' rise of ground in the government domain that commanded 'a splendid view of the river.'

Construction of the 'magnificent palace for the accommodation of his Excellency the governor' and Queensland's first public building was watched closely by the general public. The Queensland *Daily Guardian* reported each stage: the April 1861 completion of the walls up to the cornice level in the main part of the house, the July start to the service wing at the rear of the building and the September completion of the house's two-story sandstone exterior. By October, the Director of the Botanical Gardens, Walter Hill, was laying out the garden. The internal plastering and much of the interior decoration had been finished by December. John Petrie's work on the stables, guard house and entrance gates provided for by an additional vote of £7000, was nearing completion.

The final fit-out of the house with local and imported furniture, imported marble mantelpieces, chandeliers and carpets took place in March 1862 and the house was completed the following month. The general verdict was that it was a 'structure...highly creditable to the Colony'. Governor Bowen and his family took up residence in May, the first of eleven governors that would reside in Government House over 48 years.

As a vice-regal residence, the house was purposely designed for three equally important functions. It was the official office of the governor, a private family home and Brisbane's finest social venue.

In addition to his economic and political functions, the governor was also regarded as the head of colonial 'society', responsible for 'dispensing of hospitalities' - hosting balls, levees, dinners and garden parties at his vice-regal residence. These social displays by governors and their wives served to set the tone of colonial society.

Just a month after the Bowen family moved in, the first vice-regal ball was held in the house 'in commemoration of the Birthday of her Majesty'. This ball had been postponed until June 1862, in order that the mourning period for Prince Albert had elapse. Attended by 400 guests the event 'passed off with great *éclat*.' The ground floor suite of 'apartments' were thrown open for the occasion. The three principal rooms on the ground floor were used for dancing; the private drawing room served as a card and conversation room, light refreshments were served in the vestibule and the covered courtyard became the supper room.

The brilliancy of the lights, the gay and tasteful costumes of the ladies, and the sprinkling of uniforms...presented a very pleasing *coup d'oeil* (look-over) such as has never before been witnessed in this colony....The music which was excellent and gave great satisfaction to the dancers, who 'chased the flying hours with glowing feet,' until about four o'clock this morning.

For almost twenty years Government House was an excellent venue and was the scene of many brilliant balls, receptions, dinners and garden parties. But as Queensland's population grew so too did the guest list for these vice-regal 'hospitalities', and the size of the house, in particular the absence of a ballroom, made hosting these large-scale events increasingly difficult.



A Cotillion at Government House, circa 1881. A cotillion was a ball where young ladies were presented to make their debuts into society. Old Government House image.

Despite regular complaints and requests, no plans for a ballroom were drawn up. By 1884 the problem was so acute that Governor Musgrave shifted the annual ball to the larger Exhibition Building.

Though the house was initially regarded as large and spacious, by the late 1880s there was distinct change in how it was viewed. In 1887, *Cassell's Picturesque Australasia* described the House as 'pretty, but exceedingly small; indeed, from the cliff, on the opposite side of the river, it looks quite insignificant.' The situation now required it was argued 'a new Governor's residence erected elsewhere'. No action was taken as the 1890s depression stalled all capital works in the colony.

In 1909, the problems associated with the size of the house coincided with the government's search for a suitable site for the proposed Queensland University and it was decided to move the governor to a new vice-regal residence and to gift Government House to the University of Queensland as its foundational building.

On 10 December 1909, as part of Queensland's 50th anniversary celebrations, the Governor, Sir William MacGregor formally gave Government House to the new University. He remained in the house for an additional six months while refurbishment works were undertaken at the temporary residence *Fernberg* in Bardon. Though plans were drawn up for a new Government House the new building did not proceed beyond the laying of the foundation stone. In 1911 the government purchased *Fernberg* and it continues today to be the official residence of Queensland's Governor.

In 1911 the first classes were held in Old Government House, as it was now known as. Three faculties had been established: Arts, Science and Engineering and the rooms in the former

governor's residence were variously occupied. The governor's library became the biology lecture room, the drawing room the university library and mathematics was taught in the governor's bedroom.

Old Government House did not prove to be an ideal venue for a University. In 1922, Professor Priestly, the mathematics professor summarised the situation – 'we are housed in a building inadequate in size and unsuitable in design. It is riddled with white ants; leaking roofs are frequent and falling ceilings not unknown.'

The unsuitability of the building and the Gardens Point site in general was officially acknowledged in the Senate's 1926 decision to move the university to a new and much larger site at St Lucia.

The transfer to the new site took over 40 years and, as it progressed, the Queensland Institute of Technology, which was also located on the city campus, took over sections of Old Government House.

In the 1960s, the House, increasingly run down, was saved from proposed demolition by the National Trust of Queensland's listing of it as one of Queensland key significant heritage buildings. Official recognition of Old Government House's important heritage value came in March 1978 when the National Trust listing of the house was ratified and the house became the first building to be protected by heritage legislation in Queensland.

From 1973 to 2002, the National Trust was the custodian of the building and undertook major external and internal restoration work. In 2002, an agreement was signed to ensure the future conservation, management and use of Old Government House. Queensland University of Technology accepted the responsibility of custodian and initiated and implemented plans for the \$15 million restoration of Old Government House and the accompanying grounds.



The restored Old Government House in the Gardens Point campus of the Queensland University of Technology. Erika Fish photographer, Queensland University of Technology.

After being closed for almost two years, Old Government House was officially re-opened to the public as part of Queensland's sesquicentenary celebrations in June 2009 by the then Premier of Queensland, Anna Bligh, in the presence of the Governor of Queensland Ms Penelope Wensley. As one of Queensland's most important heritage buildings, Old Government House is open to the general public, and houses a range of interpretative displays and multimedia exhibits which tell the colonial story of the house, its design and construction and who lived and worked there.

Opening hours are 10am to 4pm, Sunday to Friday. Closed Saturday. Entry to Old Government House is free.

For more information visit www.ogh.qut.edu.au



The restored interior of Old Government House.
Erika Fish photographer, Queensland University of Technology.