

*Pursuing the complete story:
interpreting Queensland's Old Government House*

Katie McConnel, Curator Old Government House

In June 2009, as a key event in Queensland's 150th celebrations, the fully restored Old Government House was re-opened to the public as an important historical site complemented by interpretative print and multimedia exhibits. The structure itself is an historical artifact that offers a fascinating insight into Queensland's early colonial life; bringing to light the cultural and historical significance of each part of the building, within its nineteenth century social and political context, is the key objective of the museum which is based in three of the ground floor rooms.



Government House, 1908



Old Government House, 2009

Government House, 1908. Image courtesy of the Elliot collection, Museum of Brisbane

The overriding aim of the interpretation project was to research and develop a range of interpretative displays that would tell the remarkable story of Old Government House and the story of *all the people* who lived and worked in the House during its time as a vice-regal residence from 1862-1910. Well, this proved rather challenging.

Although designed and constructed purposely as a vice-regal residence, the building was used for a number of different functions during its post vice-regal period from 1910-2002. It housed a university, the Queensland music examination board, the Queensland Institute of Technology, and the National Trust of Queensland. Yet, despite almost a century of other uses and even calls for its demolition, the original structural design of the house remained almost totally intact. This in theory provided us with a unique opportunity to tell the often under told domestic side of the House's story.

By design, colonial government houses were purposely built as places of power. Not surprisingly, most interpretations have inevitably focused on the lives and work of the white, often upper-class and male residents who occupied the position of governor. But behind the scenes at each government house was a veritable army of men and women who generally outnumbered the front of house occupants and who worked to ensure that the lives of the governor and his family ran as comfortably and smoothly as possible. Though crucial to the household, surprisingly little detail existed about how many servants worked at Queensland's Government House, who they were, or the specific nature of their work. Researching the everyday workings of a vice-regal residence presented a number of challenges and surprises. This paper outlines some these challenges and presents a selection of the more intriguing research discoveries.



Linen stamp, circa 1896. Queensland State Archives.

By its strategic and prominent location on a point on the Brisbane river, the 'elegance of its design' and its sheer size in comparison to other domestic dwellings in Brisbane, Government House was, deliberately, an impressive architectural symbol of British colonialism.¹ It was, the *Moreton Bay Courier* declared, a 'magnificent palace for the accommodation of his

Excellency the Governor'.² The floor plan of the House immediately reveals the clear structural differences between the main part of the building and the rear service wing. The House was divided on class lines between the upper class family in the front of the house and the working class servants at the rear. The separate 'place' for servants was further demarked by the use of a different and rougher building stone (porphyry) in the back of the house with sandstone used in the front. These back rooms also had a lower ceiling height, were smaller and were plainly decorated. Great importance was placed on keeping the 'working' part of the house separate from the main house. A separate entrance and smaller 'back stairs' to the upper floor ensured that servants were not seen while they went about their work. While the floor plans of the House do outline the location, size and amenities of the servants' quarters, and portrays the cartography of power inherent in a shared inhabitation of domestic space by differing classes, they contributed little to the lived or social history of domestic servants.³



Rear service wing of the House, 1869. The lower roof line of the service area is evident.
Image courtesy of the John Oxley Library, SLQ.

Beyond the obvious challenges posed by the fact that the majority of domestic servants were young women who rarely left behind much in the way of historical records, there were additional hurdles to be confronted by the House being a vice-regal residence. As a vice-regal residency, secrecy or confidentiality protocols were in force to closely guard the privacy of its vice-regal inhabitants. Arguably, these protocols were in play in all major households under the Victorian era's separate spheres with the home being the private domain or sanctuary. But within colonial vice-regal households the governor was the appointed representative of Her Majesty Queen Victoria and was accorded the status and reverence of royalty.⁴ This reverence largely guaranteed the privacy of vice-regal occupants. Thus, while thousands of people would have attended the multitude of social events held at the House, very few of these guests seemed to have left any written commentary or detail of these events. The vast majority of diary entries that make a specific reference to the House, provided little more than the title of the event that was attended. Beaumont Featherston, a bachelor traveler, for example, wrote in his journal for Wednesday 3rd May 1892: 'Nice day, garden party at Government House went for an hour' and for Monday 8th May 1892 'Showers but fine at night. Liedertafel played and sang at Government House – pleasant evening'.⁵

One of the more infamous breaches of what was referred to as ‘the etiquette of Vice-Regal Palaces’ was the actions of the well known New South Wales and Queensland colonial figure, the Reverend John Dunmore Lang, after his August 1864 visit to Queensland.⁶ On his return to Sydney, Lang published a lengthy account of his visit to Government House in the *Empire*, in which he outlined the content of conversations he had with Sir George Bowen, Queensland’s first Governor. The journalist, ‘A Sydney Man’, presumed the interview between Lang and Bowen was a public interview because ‘a man of the doctor’s good taste *would never* have given the world the opinions of his Excellency’.⁷ But in Lang’s reporting of conversations with Lady Bowen and details of the songs she had sung, Lang had performed ‘social evils...of various kinds.’ More particularly:

The reverend gentlemen can think of no better return for the courtesy of the distinguished lady...than telling out what passed in her drawing-room....The self-conceit so absurdly exhibited in this personal narrative...is, after all, the best excuse for that gross and vulgar breach of good manners.’⁸

This etiquette effectively silenced what usually is a key source of historical information, personal accounts and diaries, and to a large extent newspaper reports.

While the unseen nature of the working class is no great surprise, it is the totality of the ‘invisibility’ of this larger group of people under technically the same roof that was quite astonishing. While detailed government records exist outlining the numbers of pine tables in the kitchen, scullery and servants hall, as well as the types of brushes the house maids used and what cooking utensils were preferred in the kitchen, we do not have the names of the people who used these items. References to the household staff were initially only fragmentary with newspaper reports announcing the departure the governor to his summer residence accompanied by his ‘household servants’. An additional and slightly more productive source was the passing reference to a servant made by the governor’s wife in a request for repairs at the House or in a letter or diary. Full names though were infrequently used. More common was just the position; for example, ‘the Groom’ or a first name and position, ‘Thomas the coachman’ or in the case of Lady Lamington the nationality and position was given ‘my Irish Housekeeper’ or ‘my Scottish maid’.⁹ But by utilising the wonderful advance in historical research created by the National Library of Australia’s newspaper digitalisation project, a few more invaluable pieces to the puzzle have been found.

Surprisingly, the type of article that has been the most helpful in providing names and details of the household staff has been criminal or court reports; for example in June 1875, the New South Wales paper the *Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser* reported that at Maryborough, Queensland ‘Jessie Gambling, lately a servant at Government House, has been committed for trial for stealing clothes from Ridley Smith’s residence.’¹⁰

A May 1890 article reporting on the proceedings at Brisbane’s City Police Court published in the *Brisbane Courier* was particularly helpful. The report details the case brought by Margaret Sutherland, a housemaid at Government House, against the Butler, Mr. Alban Wise, for the support of an illegitimate child. Witnesses for the defendant were Cecilia Milcock formerly, a domestic servant at Government House, and Malcolm Campbell, cook at

Government House. This one article provided four full names, which was a relative gold mine in this area of research!¹¹

Collectively, after much research, only forty-four individuals have been identified as domestic servants who were employed at Government House during almost fifty years. It is estimated that a number closer to 200 would be representative of low to medium staffing levels. Further, considering that the number of household staff or servants was a recognised symbol of higher status, it is plausible to argue that a number around 250 would be closer to the mark. Of the forty-four, only half were identified by their full names. Fifteen of the twenty-two were male servants, and interestingly the most frequently named was the gardener. The reference to the Butler, Mr. Alban Wise, in the above court report is in fact the first full name found for a butler at Old Government House even though the butler was the head of the household staff. Intrinsically, this namelessness maintains and reinforces the separateness of the two realms in the House. To put a face to these names was seemingly a pipe dream.

In the course of scouring the holdings of libraries and historical societies a remarkable series of photographs was discovered. The photographer was Lieutenant George Hope Verney, Aide-de-Camp to Queensland's second Governor, Colonel Samuel Blackall. Between 1867 and 1869, Verney took several photos of the House and its gardens and several informal photos of its residents including the household servants.

In September 1868, Verney took an extraordinary photograph of fourteen members of the household staff: nine 'inside' servants and five 'outside staff'.



Government House staff, September 1868. Album 257c G.H. Verney, Album of photographs of Brisbane 1867-1869. Image courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

Although it is clear that Verney considered the staff as worthy photographic subjects (there would have been some significant cost involved in the purchase of the glass plates) and it is evident that some time was taken to gather the staff together during the working day - no easy task - and further to pose them for the photograph, yet even after this effort Verney felt it unnecessary to provide a descriptor beyond 'Government House staff'. On first sighting, this photograph was a eureka moment for it potentially put faces to the largely invisible group of workers at the House. While it was hoped that this would be just the first piece and inevitably more would come to light, this photograph remains the only group photograph of the household staff at Government House in its almost 50-year period as a vice-regal residence. Though a wonderful discovery for the Old Government House story, its individuality and the manner in which the servants are depicted in the photograph served not only to reinforce invisibility but further highlighted hierarchy.

It is widely accepted that there existed a rigid set of rules that dictated the lives of household servants: when they got up, who they could speak to, and how they dressed. Servants were differentiated by task and title, and worked within a hierarchy. The butler or house steward was the head of all male servants including the hall porter, the valet, and the footman. The housekeeper was the second in charge and was 'constantly on the watch to detect any wrongdoing on the part of the female domestics.' A housemaid's duties were numerous but it was cleaning that occupied most of her time. The lowest ranked servant in the house was the scullery maid whose duty it was to wash dishes and scour pots.

Clear markers of the household hierarchy are evident in Verney's photograph. By the clothing that is being worn and by their position in the photograph, each servant's role and status within the household is identifiable. The three men in uniform were mounted orderlies or guards, their uniforms identify two of them as soldiers from Her Majesty's 50th Regiment (*individual on the far left and the second from right*) and the other a member the Queensland Volunteer Artillery. The group of women seated in front were house, kitchen, and scullery maids, with the housekeeper standing beside them to the left. Note the position of the housekeeper's hand on one of the sitting women in conjunction with their lower position in the photograph and their lighter cotton day dresses all clearly conveys to the viewer their lower status within the household staff. The young man to her left is a footman and the older man is the butler or house steward. It looks like a bit of fun was being had between the footman and the housekeeper - note the arm of the footman going around the housekeeper! To the left of the butler is the only identified person in this photograph: coachman, Walter Hinton. Walter's young age and his appearance in another Verney photograph points to Walter being a junior coachman. The only other person to whom a name may be able to be given is the man second from the left who it is thought to be Robert Lane, the head gardener. This cannot be declared with any certainty as no other photograph or description of Robert Lane has yet been found.

How these servants found employment at the House or how they were recruited generally is unclear. The hiring policy at Government House seemingly was local recruitment to augment the party of key servants that travelled with the governor from post to post. While placing a

newspaper advertisement was a conventional way to fill domestic staff positions, no such advertisement has been found for Old Government House.

The hiring of recently arrived immigrants from Britain is the most commonly referred to staffing policy. Mary Lucetta Crow, for example, arrived in Brisbane on 14th August 1864 and was immediately employed as a nursemaid/nanny for the growing Bowen family. Atypically, Mary carried with her excellent references as her brother was married to a Lady-in-Waiting to Queen Victoria.¹² Alternatively, Robert Herbert, Queensland's first premier, recounted to his Mother in 1864 how he had assisted Elizabeth Wisken, a destitute immigrant from his home town of Ickleton, Cambridgeshire, to gain employment as a housemaid for Lady Bowen. Elizabeth was paid £12 a year, which Herbert deemed to be 'liberal wages for such a little thing. After paying for her clothes, the balance will be put with the savings banks.'¹³



Mr. William Wellington Cairns, circa 1875
Image courtesy of the John Oxley Library, SLQ

Probably the most intriguing employment strategy at Old Government House was that of Governor Cairns, Queensland's fourth Governor, who was somewhat politely referred to by his Private Secretary, Alfred Maudslay, as 'a very odd man'.¹⁴ A precursor to Cairns' odd approach to household management was a telegram he sent to Queensland's Lieutenant Governor, Colonial Maurice O'Connell. Lady O'Connell's diary entry for Monday 18 January 1875 outlined the contents of this telegram:

he [Cairns] hoped to be here on Friday – that he would not require the women servants!!...Mr Drury has told the two girls in charge of the house, they won't be required so they will leave the house on Thursday evening.¹⁵

Alfred Maudslay wrote a letter to his sister in 1875, reprinted in Maudslay's 1930 book *Life in the Pacific Fifty years ago*; while it ostensibly broke the privacy protocol it does provide a rare and intriguing insight into the importance of having good household servants. Maudslay detailed the 'chaotic' consequences of the governor's ad hoc hiring policy:

Of the five men who came out...three, including the butler, have already been discharged; they really were a bad lot. There remains Thomas, aged twenty-two years, the coachman, who drives very badly...Two men (stewards)...one, a scoundrel, has been sacked, and the other, Roberts, has been promoted to be House Steward. He is...rather imprudent, and with a queer temper...and has now been given by the Governor complete charge of the household, though the other servants dislike him. Next comes Hopper, a nice youth, age twenty-one...He came out intending to go up-country, but was captured on landing and taken into the household. He is a very good fellow, but knows nothing about waiting or housework....Cook we have none (the French cook engaged from the Café Anglais in Paris has gone); the wife of another

emigrant (who had been put to work in the stables although he had never touched a horse before) ruins a leg of mutton or a joint of beef in her attempts to prepare them for our dinner. The beefsteak she cooked for breakfast to-day was very cold when it came to table, and on inquiry we were told that it had been found necessary to wash it before bringing it in!.... And this is Vice-Regal life!¹⁶

Within a year, Maudslay not surprisingly left Cairns' employ to take up a post with Sir Arthur Gordon in Fiji.

Queensland's Old Government House is in many ways a well documented vice-regal residence but the slant of this documentation reflects and maintains it as place of power. Efforts continue to present the complete story of *all* who lived and worked in the House. In recent weeks, visitors to the House have revealed the identities of two more members of the household staff; Jane Head, a stillroom maid during the 1901 Royal Visit; and Luke Flood, a stable hand during Sir Henry Norman's 1888-1895 governorship. Though incomplete, a more inclusive account of the servants' life at Old Government House is slowly coming into focus.



Jane Head married Sid Anthony in 1903. Information and photo courtesy of Paul and Yvonne Watson.

¹ 'Editorial', *Brisbane Courier*, 13 April 1864.

² 'Public Works and Improvements', *Moreton Bay Courier*, 7 July 1860.

³ Joanna Besley, *Domestic Service in Australia* [Book Review] [online]. *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 78, 2003: 160-162.

<<http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.library.uq.edu.au/documentSummary;dn=808396550974645;res=IELHSS>> ISSN: 1444-3058.

⁴ Marguerite Hancock, *Colonial Consorts: The Wives of Victoria's Governors 1839-1900*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001:2-3.

⁵ Beaumont Featherston Journal 1891-1894, AJCP M1134.

⁶ "A Sydney Man", *News and Notes*, *Brisbane Courier*, 10 September 1864.

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Lady Lamington cited in TR 2111, Lady Mary Houghton Hozier Baillie Lamington Journal, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Australia: 98, 137.

¹⁰ 'Telegraphic Intelligence; Brisbane', *Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, 12 June 1875.

¹¹ 'Accidents and Offences,' *Brisbane Courier*, 29 May 1890.

¹² D. Hacker and M. Spinaze, *Lilies in the Field First Ladies of Queensland 1824 – 1914*. Brisbane: Self-published, 2006: 49.

¹³ Robert Herbert to his Mother, 17 September 1864, TR 1846, Robert George Herbert Letters, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

¹⁴ Alfred Maudslay, *Life in the Pacific fifty years ago*. London: George Routledge & Sons, 1930:62.

¹⁵ Gloria Bligh Tehan, *Dreams and Destiny: The Life and Times of Eliza O'Connell*. Brisbane: BCC, 2005:45.

¹⁶ Maudslay, *Life in the Pacific fifty years ago*: 65-66.