

Serving the Governor

Household servants

Rear service wing

Working behind the scenes at Government House was a small army of servants who were crucial in keeping the lives of the governor and his family running as smoothly as possible. Though vital to the household few records exist that detail who the servants were or exactly what their work entailed.

Structurally, the rear service wing is visibly different from the front of the House. Less clear, and intentionally so, are the discreet means of access that servants had to all parts of the House. For instance, the smaller 'back stairs' to the upper floor ensured housemaids remained invisible as they went about their cleaning duties upstairs.

Servants were differentiated by task and title, within a hierarchy. The Butler or House Steward was the head of male servants – the hall porter, the valet and the footmen. The Housekeeper was second in charge and 'constantly on the watch to detect any wrong-doing on the part of the female domestics'.

SERVANT STAFF (Below) A rare group photograph of the servants at Government House in 1869. Their clothing identifies their roles within the household. The three men in uniform were orderlies or guards. The seated group of women were house, kitchen and scullery maids with the Housekeeper standing beside them to the left. The young man to her left is a footman and the older man is the Butler or House Steward.

Image courtesy of the National Library of Australia.



LINEN STAMP This 1896 stamp was used to distinguish the servants' linen from that of the main household.



AT THE READY Coachman Walter Hinton stands with Governor Blackall's horse and carriage in 1869. On the verandah outside their offices are Captain Walter Creagh, Aide-de-Camp (left) and Lieutenant Frederick Terry, Private Secretary.

Image courtesy of the National Library of Australia.



Hiring policy

The hiring policy at Government House was for local people to work with the few key servants who travelled with the governor between his different postings. Most of the locally hired servants were British or Irish assisted immigrants. Rachel Steele was 18 when the Queensland Government offered her free passage from London to Brisbane. Upon her arrival in April 1887 she was hired immediately as a lower housemaid in the House.

An 1875 letter by Alfred Maudslay, Private Secretary to Governor Cairns, gives rare insight into the value of good servants as he details 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 ... 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... Next comes Hopper, a nice youth ... He came out intending to go up-country, but was captured on landing and taken into the household ...

Cook we have none (the French cook engaged from the Café Anglais in Paris has gone); the wife of another emigrant ... 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 the 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!



CLEANING UP The dining room table at Government House set for a party of twelve in July 1908. It was the housemaids' duty to clean each room daily and to set the table for each meal. The Butler and footmen served the guests. The scullery maid, ranked lowest of the servants, had the arduous task of washing the dishes and scouring the pots.

Image courtesy of the State Library of Queensland.

SERVICE WING This late 1860s view of the House's rear service wing shows the lower ceiling height and smaller windows. Unidentified members of the household staff stand outside on the lawn.

Image courtesy of the State Library of Queensland.

