

INSIGHTS

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TALES OF VICE-REGAL LIFE





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During a recent radio interview with the ABC's Deb Cameron, I found myself describing the complex and intriguing roles of an HHT curator as a combination of amateur architect, conservator, professional housekeeper, sleuth, voyeur – but in a positive way – and finally storyteller.

In the last of these roles, Robert Griffin and I – principal curators of Government House, Sydney, since 1996 – have been writing a new history of the house from an insider's perspective. The book provides a historical overview of Government House, drawing together for the first time both our own research and that of others, including the comprehensive studies of the history, fabric and cultural significance of the buildings and site commissioned by the

HHT from 1997 to 1998.² It also draws on our experience of the curatorial management of this property over the past 15 years, during which we have balanced the Governor's need to use the State Rooms for vice-regal functions with programs for public access, the long-term program of conserving the building and refurbishing the interiors, and the day-to-day responsibilities for presentation of the property, continuing research and acquisitions.

Government House was designed in the mid-1830s as the home of the sovereign's representative and the seat of power and British authority in the colony. We explore in depth the building's origins and architectural history, the evolution of its historic interiors and furnishings to accommodate changing lifestyles and tastes, and the development of the outbuildings, gardens and grounds.

Our research has revealed the fascinating history of the house's diverse collection of art, decorative arts, gubernatorial memorabilia and ordinary household paraphernalia, as well as broadening our knowledge of vice-regal taste, artistic patronage and the government's determination to uphold the status of the house as a 'vice-regal palace'. This new understanding has led to a deeper appreciation for the exceptional significance of Government House as a major public showcase for Australian art and craftsmanship in the state, a tradition we

have continued by commissioning contemporary Australian art, furniture and furnishings for the State Rooms.

While researching and writing the book, Robert and I discovered as much about people as about the house's physical construction and contents. There are new insights into the remarkable vision of men such as Lieutenant Governor Sir Alfred Stephen, architects Edward Blore, Mortimer Lewis, James Barnet and Walter Liberty Vernon, and a host of unsung heroes, including colonial artisans, artists and craftsmen who made skilled and creative contributions to the building's architecture, interior decoration and furnishings.

A particular interest of mine has been to tell the largely undocumented but important stories of the colonial and modern governors' wives and families, of life in the private domain at Government House. A great deal of information has come from the study of unpublished correspondence, pictorial records, diaries and papers in both public and private collections, and the extensive gubernatorial archives generously donated to Government House by the late Sir Roden Cutler, Lady Rowland and the Hon Gordon Samuels. These provide rich insight into the public and private lives, dominated by vice-regal protocol and colonial social mores, of the governors, their consorts and families.

Our research has also given us an important perspective on the roles of the personal and household staff at the property. Due to the scarcity of personal letters, diaries and memoirs written by 19th-century domestic staff, much of our knowledge has been pieced together from archaeological excavations, colonial shipping notices, classified advertisements, government records, household inventories and the diaries and letters of governors, consorts and their colonial guests.

I have also collated personal reminiscences from a series of interviews recorded with retired and current staff. Their recollections, memoirs and treasured photographs provide a fascinating picture of how the house

'... here we are in the Land of Philistines and a very queer lot some of them are ... but there we must not grumble, three years will soon pass.'¹

F A LOVE, LORD BEAUCHAMP'S HOUSE STEWARD



operated 'below stairs' until 1995 and detail about the traditional roles and private lives of staff at a time when this type of service had become anachronistic in most great houses in Australia.

One of the great joys of working at Government House is to observe the property's continuing use as a place for vice-regal ceremony and official entertaining. Our knowledge of colonial vice-regal life is based primarily on archival

records, including private letters, diaries and colonial newspapers. However, the 20th-century history has been informed by detailed interviews with former governors, their families, diverse members of the personal and household staff, and craftsmen and contractors working on site.

This publication is timely, as there is no comprehensive book presently available on Government House, Sydney. With magnificent new photography by Richard Glover and others, this book will represent a fitting and valuable legacy of the HHT's 15-year stewardship of Government House, Sydney, and its associated buildings, collections and surrounds. The project has been generously supported by Her Excellency Governor Marie Bashir ac cvo, the Office of the Governor, and the New South Wales Premier's Department. *Government House, Sydney* will be launched in November this year.

¹ F A Love to the Hon Edward Lygon, 13 June 1899, quoted in J Mulvagh, *Madresfield: the real Brideshead*, Doubleday, London, 2008, p226.

² B McGregor, 'The Government House, Sydney, conservation and management plan', 1997; R Aitken & C Morris, 'The Government House, Sydney, master plan for garden and grounds', 1999.

Ann Toy, Curator



(top) Governor Lord Belmore in his buggy, Government House, Sydney. Photograph Freeman Bros, late Dalton's, 1868–72. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW P1/2127 (above) Lady Cutler and her sons Richard, David and Mark decorating the tree for their first Christmas at Government House, 1966. Cutler Archive, Government House collection.

Years of research by HHT curators culminates in a new history of Government House



(top) Lady Rachel Dudley, wife of the Governor-General, in her study, Government House, Sydney. Photograph A J Perier, c1908–11. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW Home and Away - 34441 (above) Garden party at Government House; 'Refreshments', showing the Government House arcade, Sydney Mail, 8 December 1900. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW BN336 (background) Plan and elevation of the Governor's stables and offices at Sydney, Francis Greenway (attrib), 1820. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW V1/Pub/Gov.S./1

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VICE-REGAL ONE

BALANCING STATE USE AND PUBLIC ACCESS

Behind the scenes at Government House

As the principal state house of New South Wales, Government House must be available to the incumbent Governor, and on special occasions to the Premier and government ministers – at short notice and in its full stately grandeur and splendour – to host state functions and to recognise extraordinary work done by charities and individuals. The general public should also have opportunities to see this majestic building, with its rich colonial history and treasure of a collection, performing a contemporary vice-regal role.

Since 1996, when the HHT became involved in the management of the property, vice-regal functions have increased from

80 in 1996 to 250 in 2010. Each year almost 40 non-vice-regal functions and 25 cultural programs are held and approximately 25,000 people attend educational programs and guided public tours. The number of visitors has increased from 62,000 in 1995–6 to nearly 165,000 in 2009–10. The house has also been the venue for several prestigious Commonwealth Government events such as the inaugural Asia-Pacific Climate Change Conference in 2006, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders' Meeting in 2007, and Official Welcome for His Holiness Pope Benedict XV in 2008. The HHT's core responsibilities are to maintain and conserve the building and its collection while at the same time facilitating and increasing public access. Managing such extensive use of the house, while fulfilling these requirements, necessitates a particularly fine balancing act.

When wearing the mantle of 'house museum', Government House requires 'do not touch' signs, directional signage, crowd-control barriers and interpretive props. Guides monitor the visiting public and curators keep a close eye on 'wear and tear'. When it is operating as a 'state house', on the other hand, all these barriers are removed and guests can use both the historic and commissioned furniture. The constant shifting between these two modes of operation provides the real challenge. In one day there may be several changes – from a vice-regal function to tours, to an educational program and then back again. In the evening the house may need to be set for a cultural program, or a reception for a major Australian charity hosted by the Governor, the Premier or a state minister. The staff need to move fast, be alert to arrival

and departure times, be aware of protocol and have an eye for detail. Each time the Governor's car 'Vice-Regal One' is expected, the red carpet has to be rolled out, and on Her Excellency's arrival the 'vice-regal standard' is raised on the flag tower to indicate that the Governor is in residence. These steps are reversed following her departure.

After each function or guided tour the dedicated team ensures that there are no fingerprints on the glass, no drooping flowers, no pollen or petals on the floor, that the cushions are fluffed, furniture is dusted, curtains are 'hooshed', chairs are in a straight line, table decorations are centred, props and furniture relocated and placed symmetrically, and no light bulbs blown. The house is then made ready for the next group of guests.

Intense planning and organisation takes place behind the scenes for every function. Every minute is accounted for, movement mapped and protocol discussed in an event sheet issued a week in advance. The sheet advises museum assistants which pieces of vice-regal linen to use, informs the florist of the week's various functions so that suitable flower arrangements can be prepared, and tells the caterers and wait staff the sequence of events so they can plan food, tableware and catering equipment. Even though the Governor does not currently reside at the

house, it remains the vice-regal house and the HHT must ensure that conservation, building maintenance and the upkeep of the gardens and grounds take place around the program of the Governor. So as soon as the radio message 'Vice-Regal One five minutes away', or '... two minutes away' or '... on approach', is received, florists, gardeners, guides, museum assistants, curators, conservators, tradesmen and building maintenance staff must ensure that they have withdrawn. The Governor's office works collaboratively with the HHT to accommodate public tours, education programs, exhibitions and music concerts, conservation, refurbishment and building maintenance programs within the busy vice-regal calendar.

Government House is thus a dynamic house, a working house and a busy house. When the governors were in full-time residence, teams of butlers, footmen, housemaids and maintenance staff attended to these duties. Now every member of the HHT team, in collaboration with staff from the Office of the Governor, the Royal Botanic Garden and the NSW Police, understands the complexities of public access and state use of Government House, and plays a role in the balancing act that allows both to coexist in harmony.

Mantej Singh
 General Manager, Government House



... on Her Excellency's arrival the 'vice-regal standard' has to be raised on the flag tower to indicate that the Governor is in residence.

