

GOVERNMENT HOUSE

DARWIN

Government House Darwin

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A SOUVENIR ON THE OCCASION OF

THE ROYAL VISIT, 1963

BY

HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

AND

HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS

THE DUKE OF EDINBURGH

ISSUED BY

MAJOR A. E. LIMBURG
NORTHERN TERRITORY DIRECTOR
ROYAL VISIT, 1963

AT THE DIRECTION OF
THE HONOURABLE ROGER NOTT
ADMINISTRATOR

PREPARED BY

DON TREBLE

PRESS RELATIONS OFFICER

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ASSISTANT TOURIST PROMOTION OFFICER
NORTHERN TERRITORY TOURIST BOARD

Acknowledgments

WORLD WAR TWO, and the air attacks on Darwin which began in February, 1942, brought about a wide dispersal of local archive records. Twenty years after the first bombings, historical material on Government House was still almost non-existent in Darwin.

A dragnet of inquiries launched from Darwin in June, 1962, by His Honour the Administrator (The Honourable Roger Nott) brought a remarkable flow of historical information about Darwin, Government House, and the Territory generally, back to its original home source. This information, together with valuable photographs and references to almost-forgotten books, came from many organizations and private individuals throughout the Commonwealth. Acknowledgment of their assistance is due to:

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Entrance drive, Government House, Darwin.

Front entrance, with raised circular lawn and palms.



GOVERNMENT HOUSE, Darwin, the home of Administrators and Residents of the Northern Territory since 1870, has been a quiet witness to colourful and sometimes turbulent events in Australia's northernmost city during the past 80 years.

Darwin's dual status as first Australian touch-down for many overseas aircraft and last touch-down before leaving the Commonwealth, has made world news headlines several times in the last decade or two. Darwin is also a city of rugged individualists who have more than once expressed their feelings about current issues with—to say the least—vigour.

In 1919 unemployed labour forces marched on Liberty Square to abuse the then-Administrator, Dr. Gilruth. The mob smashed the picket fence of Government House and attempted to assault Dr. Gilruth who was working in his office at the time.

The Administrator escaped the rioters, but some strategy was called for to defeat further assaults. The Navy came to his help by placing a number of ratings in ambush. When the mob again marched on Government House, brandishing pickets torn from the fence, the Navy leapt to the defence with bayonets. The leaders of the riot stampeded their followers, and the result was a general rout.

Another result was a heavy slump in the practice of baiting Administrators.

February 19, 1942, was a date not-to-be-forgotten in Darwin's and Australia's history.*

Heavy air attacks by Japanese aircraft scored a direct hit on Government House. A concrete wall fell in and the Administrator, Mr. C. L. A. Abbott, and his family's lives were saved only by the support of a heavy iron safe in the office. A native member of the domestic staff in the same room was killed.

In 1946 a young Indonesian named Bas Wie (later the "Koepang Kid") went to live in Government House after a journey that made him probably unique in the history of stowaways.

Twelve-years old Bas Wie arrived in Darwin almost dead, after a flight from Timor huddled in the wheel nacelle of a D.C.3 airliner. The Administrator, Mr. A. R. Driver, took the twelve-year-old into Government House where he remained for the next five years.

Today, Bas Wie is a happy citizen of Darwin, married with a family, and lives in a Housing Commission home in the seaside suburb of Nightcliff.

* The flag flying from the flagpole outside Government House was riddled by Japanese machine-gun bullets. It has since become a relic in Canberra's War Museum as the first flag violated by war on Australian soil.

In 1950 Nature provided her own brand of drama in the form of an earth tremor which caused substantial cracks to appear on internal walls. These have now been re-rendered, and during the time of the present Administrator, The Honourable Roger Nott, the muted colour schemes and new paintwork have covered all traces of tropical earthquakes.

In 1954 Soviet political refugee Mrs. Vladimir Petrov stayed in Government House when she made her last-minute decision to leave a Europe-bound aircraft and remain with her husband in political asylum in Australia. Mrs. Petrov was freed by Northern Territory police officers from her armed Soviet guards, and taken into the temporary sanctuary of Government House to start a new life in Australia.

In 1961, there was another march on Government House, but this time a somewhat tame affair involving an orderly 600. Townspeople of Darwin protested against the pending deportation of two Malayan pearl divers and pleaded with the Administrator, the Honourable Roger Nott, who passed their request to the proper authorities.

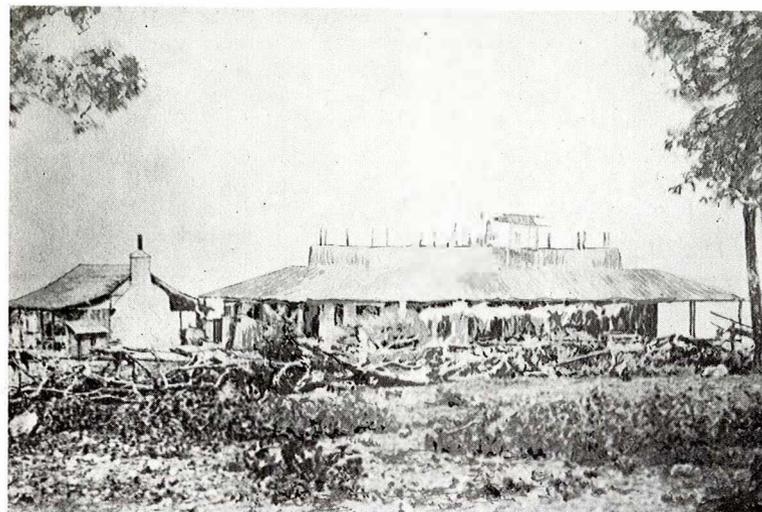
The First Residency

The first Residency was built in 1870. The site selected was a peninsula, flat-topped, with a commanding view of the south, east and west arms of Darwin Harbour. The cliff edge was about 60 feet above the beach and overlooked Fort Hill. It had a private roadway leading down to the water, and a natural plateau with excellent views of the harbour. The site was fringed with green gums and banyan trees, while the feathery foliage of wattles and stately palms, against a background of red poincianas and giant bamboos, promised a fine setting for the new Residency.

The first Government Resident had been Boyle Travers Finniss, who founded a settlement at the estuary of the Adelaide River and surveyed land sites for the Crown. The year was 1864, in the reign of Queen Victoria.

He was recalled, replaced by J. T. Manton, and in 1869 a fine new site was selected for the first town on the beautiful stretches of Darwin Harbour. This was to be called Palmerston, and the first Government Resident appointed at Palmerston was G. W. Goyder.

By 1870, development was on the way in Palmerston, and the choice of site seemed a happy one. Dr. J. Stokes Milner acted as Resident that year until the appointment of Captain W. Bloomfield Douglas. This was the year that the foundations of Government House were laid—the building which, through many vicissitudes, was to house the Administrators and Residents of the Northern Territory for the next ninety years.



The first Residency—1870.

The foundation stone was laid by Mrs. Douglas, wife of “His Excellency, the Administrator”, and the plans and building were personally supervised by the Administrator.

The nucleus of the first Government House was a large room, built over a cellar, fashioned in local stone (the only building material available) measuring 45 feet x 22 feet x 15 feet high.

The additions were to be bungalow style—six bedrooms, separate kitchens and laundry. The materials were pug-and-pole (in Colonial terms, mud reinforced with planking) and the roof over the extensions and encircling veranda was of thatched bark.

The main reception room boasted an almost flat roof, with hand-sawn timbers, topped by heavily painted canvas.

Lime from Coral

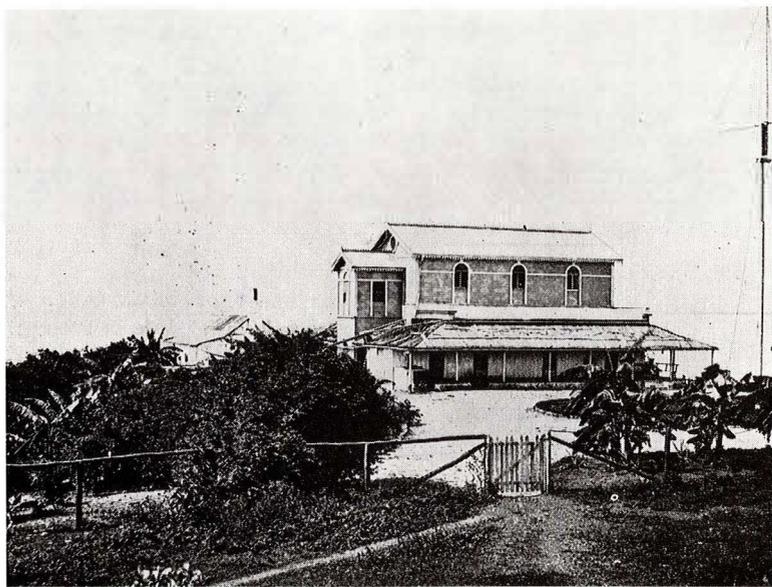
Building materials were (and still are) a problem in the Northern Territory. An early lack was lime. The resourceful overseers gathered coral from the water's edge at low tide, dried and burnt it to make the lime they needed.

Timber immune to white ants was eventually found in a cyprus pine forest some miles from the foreshores of the harbour along the coast. A ship was sent to carry it back, but the unseasoned timber warped and shrank alternately, according to weather. Local ironbark timber was available, but was too tough for hand-sawing.

During the building, the central stone room housed the Administrator, his wife and seven children, and as the pug-and-pole extensions grew, a second storey was contemplated. However, the additions, including the veranda, were hopelessly inadequate to keep out the "Wet".

In 1873, Mr. George Byng Scott was appointed Government Resident. He added the second storey in 1873-74 and described Government House as "ill-devised—resembling a dilapidated barn." He also disliked "sleeping in the rain." The Residency had also been called "unstable" by the Commissioner for Crown Lands in 1873.

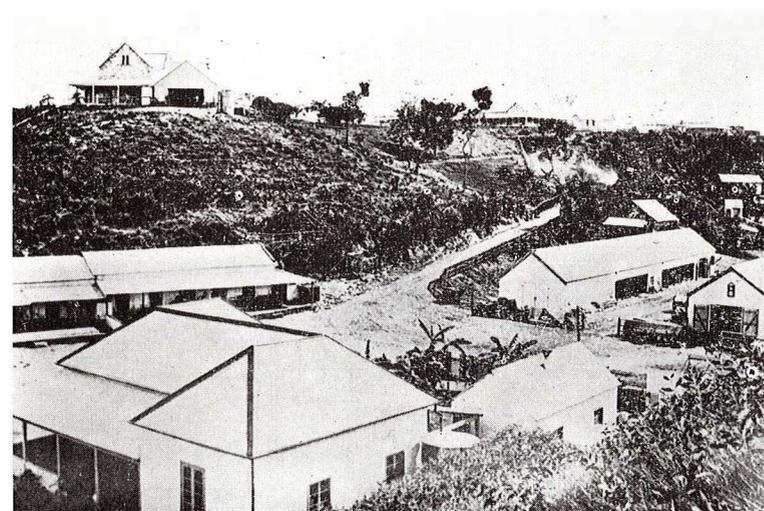
The second storey was hazardous, according to a report in the *Northern Territory Times* of 1877, which describes the constant terror felt by local inhabitants both for the Resident's and their own safety, lest the upper storey might "part company with the lower during a heavy squall."



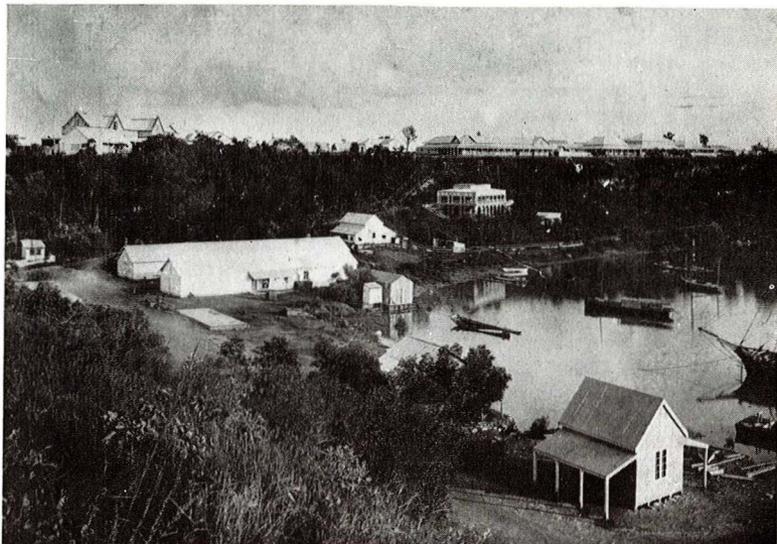
The Residency, April 1874, with its "hazardous top storey". (From the Foelsche Collection in the custody of the National Library of Australia, Canberra.)



Accommodation for Government officials, known as "The Camp", near the foreshores of Darwin Harbour—March, 1878. (From the Foelsche Collection.)



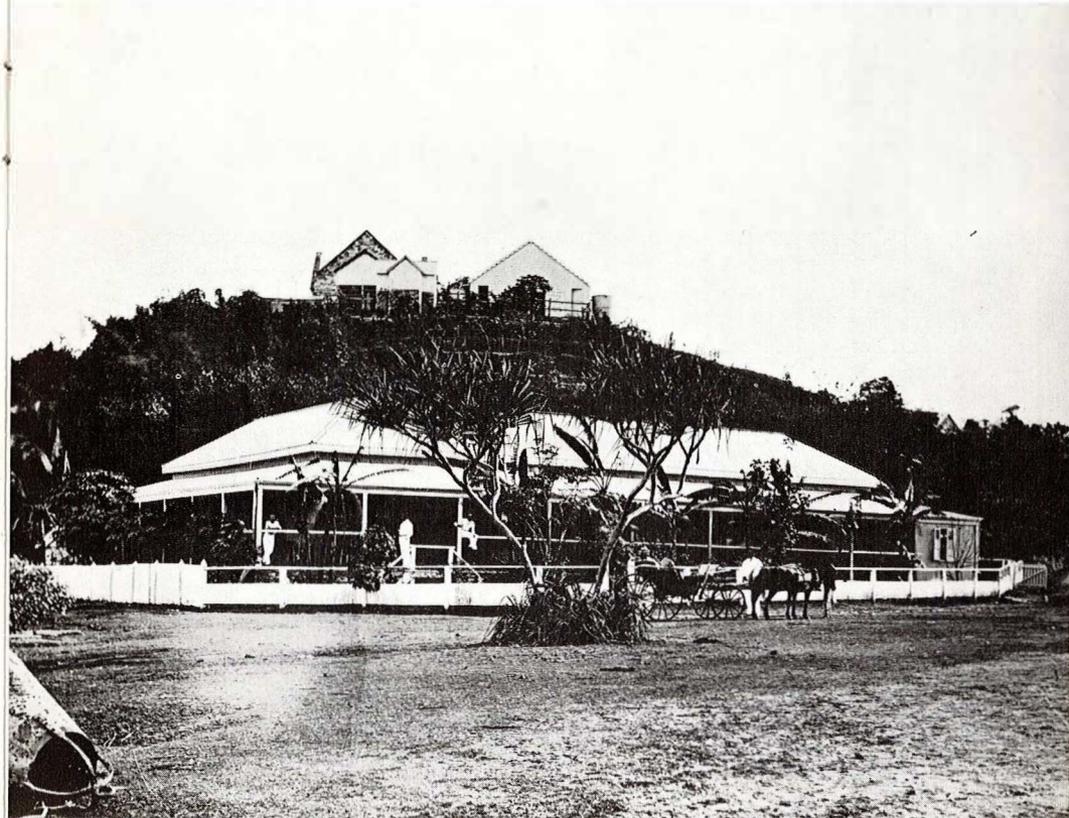
Another view of The Camp, with the Residency in top left background. (From the Foelsche Collection.)



High tide in Darwin Harbour beside The Camp. The stone buildings in background to right of the Residency are still standing, and today are used as Navy Headquarters, North Australia Area.



The new Residency in June, 1879—east side. (From the Foelsche Collection.)



“The House of Seven Gables” in June, 1883, overlooking the Officers’ Quarters in The Camp. The old Officers’ Quarters building is also still standing and in use. (From the Foelsche Collection.)

Before the second storey was completed, white ants had moved up through the mud-and-pole portions of the walls and started eating the upper storey.

The white ants devoured veranda timbers every six months or so, so Portland cement was imported—although it was not until Cyprus pine later replaced the existing timber, that white ant destruction was brought under control.

Not even diligent carpentry could counteract the Territory’s white ant scourge, so the precarious top storey was pulled down in 1877 and a new Residency was designed.

The House of Seven Gables

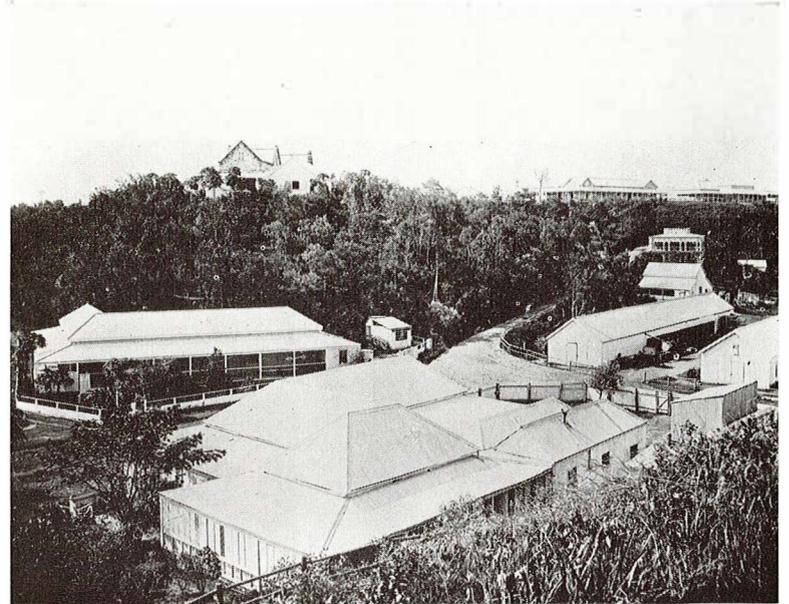
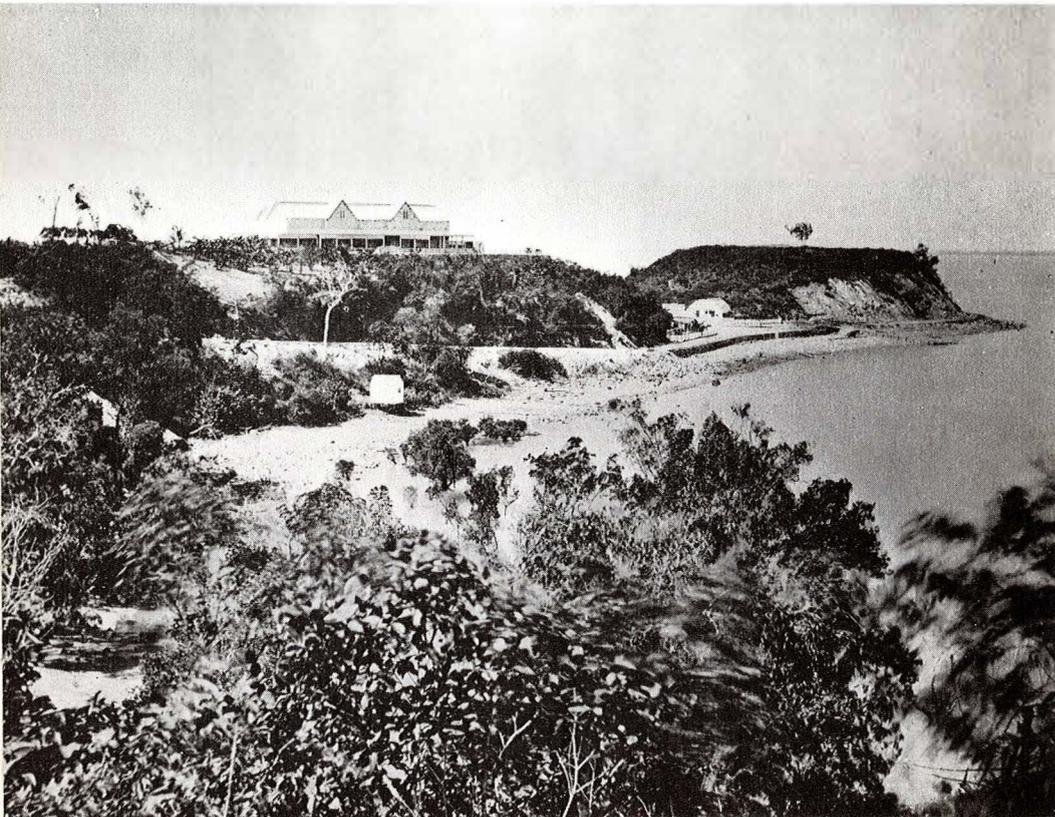
Government Secretary John George Knight, a qualified architect, and Surveyor McMinn, designed and supervised construction of the new stone and cyprus pine Residency, which was given the picturesque name of "House of Seven Gables."

They used as their foundations the original central stone room of Captain Douglas' time—" rubble stone walls, stuccoed, 45 feet x 22 feet x 15 feet high " with its lofty ceiling and part of the original roofing.

Chinese workers squared the stones. European and Chinese workers and local prisoners comprised the major labour force, and the building took six years to complete.

The original estimate of costs was given at £3,817 19s. 11d. in 1879, but we are not told whether building costs remained firm during that period.

The Residency and Fort Hill. (From the Foelsche Collection.)



The Residency in March, 1887, overlooks a growing camp. (From the Foelsche Collection.)



Private theatricals at the Residency about 1895. (From the Foelsche Collection.)

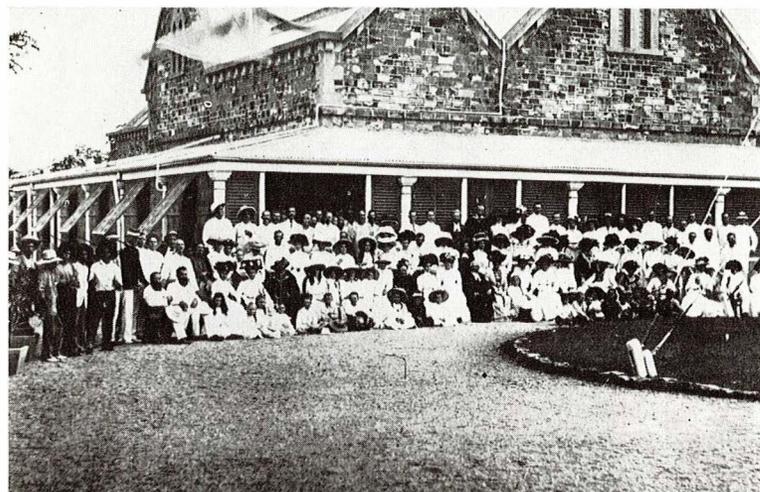


Mr. N. G. Stretton, Chief Protector of Aborigines, addressing his charges in front of the Residency, 1900. (From the Foelsche Collection.)

The new building had additional kitchens, store-rooms, servants' rooms and stables, and the *Northern Territory Times* of the period claimed it was "not a model of architectural skill, but is well-suited to the climate."

The main structure has remained unaltered for more than 80 years, although climate, custom and history have made additions and eliminations.

Government Resident S. J. Mitchell wrote a lengthy letter in 1910 on the dilapidated condition of the inside of the Residency, the unsuitability of its furniture and the general unattractiveness of its dark, moist paint-work. The roof was leaking again, but the original cementwork on floors and verandas was excellent. Much of the furniture (he complained) was shattered, the china incomplete and lighting was so inadequate it was impossible to read at night by the kerosene lights. He further wrote that he felt the Residency did not need renovating, but that a piano should be supplied, as the existing one was old, warped and toneless! Mr. Mitchell's account was addressed to the Minister for the Northern Territory, South Australian Government.



A gathering at the Residency to mark the transfer of the Northern Territory to the Commonwealth, 1911. (From the Foelsche Collection.)



The veranda of the Residency, Darwin, in 1912.

A lengthy survey was made after this Report of 1911. Political changes saw transfer of the Northern Territory to the Commonwealth Government, and the new powers found much to be improved.

The tennis court looked like a metal road. The original cement of the early 1880's had been laid less than 2 inches deep, and the prepared ground underneath it had subsided. Tropical banyan trees and other tropical shade-spreaders had forced roots up under the thin coating and cracked it. The court was relaid in 1912 and finally demolished some years later.

The original stonework of Government House was starting to fret, though hewn from the same quarry as that used in the Customs and Land Office and the Commercial Bank, built by Mr. Henry Ruthven in 1883. It was necessary to cement exposed exterior areas of Government House and to replace guttering and roofing.

Mr. Mitchell's Report had further recommended demolition of Chinese shanties which belonged "in Chinatown, not at the rear of Government House." They were there to provide sleeping quarters for Chinese servants, who used one of the Resident's bathrooms. Servants' bathrooms and sleeping quarters were rebuilt and increased, the kitchen modernized and plans for a complete servants' block were put in hand.

Government House To-day

The shape of the land on which Government House stands invokes enormous expense in building additions, as large amounts of filling are needed. Rambling additions must halt, and give way to ingenuity in rearranging the existing buildings to suit the current needs of the growing city and of the Administrator.

During the Administration of The Honourable Roger Nott, Mrs. Nott has brought about just such a re-arrangement with skill, taste and good judgment.

The visitor is welcomed on the original veranda of the 1880's, with its long length and white-painted louvres which disclose the beauty of Darwin Harbour.

The thick stone walls of the central part of the house make a feature background wall for settings of cane chairs, tables and mats arranged in conversation groups to seat 100 or more guests. These generous proportions and the natural coolness of the veranda provide a pleasant meeting place for any hour in any weather.



East end of the drawing room, Government House, Darwin, today—restored and redecorated under the direction of Mrs. Roger Nott.



West end of the restored drawing room, Government House, Darwin.

Climatically, Darwin lends itself to informal outdoor entertaining, and Government House has been adapted to informality without losing the stateliness of former years. The charm of outdoor tropical entertaining is exemplified too, in the fine courtyard on the east side of Government House. Here, films are shown during the "Dry" and garden parties are held. It is flanked by the house on the one side, and screened by a tall hedge growing from the old hand-hewn stone retaining wall on the other. Giant pink and white frangipannis are dwarfed by aged, gnarled trees, towering from the slopes beside the terrace, and providing a haven for multitudes of chattering coloured birds and pheasants.

The courtyard is spacious enough to entertain 300 or more guests, and for daytime functions, coloured umbrellas are used.

Beside the old hand-hewn stone retaining wall, the steps cut into the slope are the hard, well-trodden original ironwood planking, sawn and laid in Captain Douglas' day.

Interiors

The elegance of the original reception and drawing room has been heightened by chartreuse walls, and the architraves around the twelve-foot high walls are framed in white to highlight the classical 19th-Century setting of the drawing and dining rooms.

The best of the original antique pieces in the drawing room have been carefully chosen and restored—inlaid walnut and mahogany tables with carved centre legs hold delicate china and bric-a-brac, and the long white-and-gold shelves add to the length and proportions of the drawing room and feature more objets d'art.

Dominating the walls is a formal portrait of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Works by Northern Territory aboriginal artists, Albert Namatjira and Zannalis, are also displayed.

The ceilings in both drawing and dining rooms are vaulted and lofty with cross-beams picked out in white. Gilt and crystal chandeliers add to the beauty and sense of period of these beautiful rooms.

The polished cyprus pine flooring is the original, and could have been laid only yesterday.

The dining-room, slightly smaller than the 45-foot drawing room, is set off by a long rosewood Queen Anne dining table, seating 30, and a polished sideboard with large crystal punch bowls.

Four French doors lead to the verandas at each end of the dining-room. The veranda, encircling the house, overlooks the gardens and Darwin Harbour at one end of dining-room; the other entrance leads through a fernery to the courtyard.

A great improvement to the light and spaciousness of these rooms has been the removal of the heavy scarlet drapes of the Edwardian era, and the hanging of cool green Regency stripes and white terylene over the French doors.

The main guest suite, facing the front of the house, is huge by modern standards. The bedroom is about 43 feet square. It leads through French doors to the veranda and its harbour views, and encompasses a reception-room-study through another doorway. It is furnished in fine Queen Anne period furniture, and has muted pastel tonings in walls and furnishings.

Gardens

The site where the Administrator's Office was bombed in 1942, has become rich green lawn, with an overhead shelter and circular barbecue spit—further concession to outdoor informality in entertaining.

The garden is planted with brilliant pink, white, mauve and orange native Bauhinias which can be seen from the harbour. It is terraced, and held firm in sloping areas by paved stonework, with colourful creepers projecting from pockets in the stonework.

Bougainvillea grows around the archway leading to the front entrance of Government House.

In 1962, the charming colonial style of Government House was enhanced by coating the exterior cement-rendered stone walls of "The House of Seven Gables" in white, and painting the iron roof and gables a brilliant turquoise. The colour scheme fits perfectly into the atmosphere of Darwin's tropical climate, with giant flame trees, scarlet poincianas, yellow cassias providing a riot of colour and wide areas of coolness.

Although fashions and tempo of living have changed in the ninety years of Government House's history, fine proportions and intelligent planning show good taste to be ageless.

Government House of 1880 is still a fitting and handsome home for the Administrators of the Northern Territory.

ADMINISTRATORS AND RESIDENTS OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

- 1864 Boyle Travers Finniss, the first Government Resident. Arrived at estuary of Adelaide River on board "Henry Ellis" to survey land sites for the new settlement.
- 1866 J. T. Manton succeeded Finniss, but was later ordered to abandon the settlement.
- 1869 New site selected for settlement. It was called Palmerston and later renamed Port Darwin. The first Government Resident appointed was G. W. Goyder.
- 1870 Dr. J. Stokes Milner, Acting Resident.
- 1870 Captain W. Bloomfield Douglas. First stone of Government House was laid and Captain Douglas was called "His Excellency, the Administrator."
- The same year the police force was established and Trans-continental Telegraph (linking Port Darwin to Adelaide and Australia to Singapore and the world) was commenced.
- 1873 Dr. J. Stokes Milner, again Acting Resident.
- 1873 Mr. George Byng Scott took the title of Government Resident.
- 1876 Edward William Price.
- 1880 G. R. McMinn, Acting Government Resident.
- 1884 J. L. Parsons, Government Resident.
- 1890 John George Knight, Architect and Government Secretary. In the same year the Northern Territory was enfranchised into South Australian Government.
- 1892 C. J. Dashwood, Government Resident. This was the year of the first aboriginal reserves.
- 1905 C. E. Herbert.
- 1910 Judge S. J. Mitchell appointed Government Resident. During his term the Northern Territory was transferred to the Commonwealth.
- 1911 Judge S. J. Mitchell, Administrator.
- 1912 Dr. J. A. Gilruth, Administrator.
- 1919 H. E. Carey acted in capacity of "Director of the Territory".
- 1919 The Honourable M. Staniforth Cater Smith, Acting Administrator.
- 1921 F. C. Urquhart, Administrator.

- 1926 E. Copley Playford, Acting Administrator. The title of Government Resident was revived to simplify divided administration of Northern Territory. Similar office of Government Resident was created at Alice Springs.
- 1927 Lieutenant Colonel R. H. Weddell, Government Resident, North Australia.
- 1931 Lieutenant Colonel R. H. Weddell, Administrator for the Northern Territory.
- 1937 The Honourable C. L. A. Abbott, Administrator.
- 1942 Darwin under military rule.
- 1946 L. H. A. Giles, Acting Administrator.
A. R. Driver, Administrator.
- 1951 The Honourable F. J. S. Wise, Administrator.
- 1956 J. C. Archer, O.B.E., Administrator.
- 1961- The Honourable Roger Nott, Administrator.

Sturt's Desert Rose (illustrated on the back cover) is the official floral emblem of the Northern Territory. It resembles but is not a true hibiscus, and has a pink flower with a deep-red throat.

