



**GOVERNMENT HOUSE**

DARWIN  
NORTHERN TERRITORY





## *Welcome*

Welcome to the official residence of the Administrator of the Northern Territory – Government House.

With the stunning tropical gardens as a fitting backdrop, the gracious rooms and tiled terrace of Government House are used by the Administrator to host official functions. Government House is also opened to Territorians and visitors at least once a year during the Top End's Dry Season.

Government House embraces a history as panoramic as the view it commands from its location on a natural plateau about eighteen metres above Darwin Harbour. It has endured cyclones, earthquakes, enemy bomb raids and frequent infestations of white ants.

Over the years *The House of Seven Gables* as Government House is also known, has reflected the resilience and determination of the people of the Northern Territory. Government House is regarded as one of the most significant elements of the Territory's cultural heritage.

Government House is declared a protected heritage place under the *Heritage Conservation Act*. It remains a house for the people of the Northern Territory and stands as an iconic symbol of both endurance and adaptability.

Please visit [www.nt.gov.au/administrator/](http://www.nt.gov.au/administrator/) for more information on the history of Government House and its occupants.





## *A Brief History*

Government House was first completed on this site in 1871 and originally known as The Residency. The structure contained a central hall with stone walls, six bedrooms, bathroom, a pantry and a kitchen built of poles with a stone chimney and fireplace, and a verandah all around. In 1874, a second storey was added but white ants destroyed this within 12 months.

In 1878, a new residency was designed by John George Knight; a prominent architect who also became the 6th Government Resident. This new building, referred to as "The House of Seven Gables", used materials of cypress pine, local porcellanite stone and lime taken and converted from local coral reefs, and was completed in 1879.

In 1897, a cyclone caused severe damage to the House. Repairs were made and in 1911, when the Commonwealth took control of the Northern Territory, more substantial renovations took place.

Dr John Gilruth was appointed 1st Administrator in 1912 and he renamed The Residency "Government House". Improvements included new bathrooms, servants block, modernised kitchen and a rebuilt tennis court.

In 1937 another cyclone caused widespread damage to the house. A new office, planned to double as a bomb shelter, was built. The office sustained a direct hit during the bombing of Darwin in 1942.

The House suffered wind and rain damage in Cyclone Tracy in December 1974; the roof was loosened but remained intact.

In 2003, a decision was made to refurbish Government House to reflect the late 1930s and 1940s; the time during the incumbency of Administrator Charles Abbott and Mrs Hilda Abbott.

This was achieved through detailed descriptions made by Mrs Abbott of the colours that the rooms had been painted, how furniture was placed, what floor coverings were used and how each room was used for activities. The refurbishment was completed in November 2010.

The exterior of Government House remains today as it was in 1937.



## *The Verandahs*

The verandahs have always been an essential part of the House. Historically, seagrass matting was used to cover the original polished concrete. The current tiles were added during Administrator Muirhead's term. The verandahs were originally open to the elements however, they were later enclosed with bamboo slatting and shutters. The existing louvres were installed in 1937 during a major refurbishment of Government House. This included rendering of the porcellanite walls that were exposed to the elements.

## *The Queen's Bedroom*

The main guest suite is named in honour of Her Majesty The Queen who stayed here on 5 October 1982. The bedroom was referred to as the Royal Suite for this occasion. The room underwent careful restoration that began in 2008 and was completed in 2010. Furniture and fittings that you see today emulate the period of Administrator Abbott's term.

The ensuite was refurbished in 1997 and reflects a more Victorian style. The Queen's Bedroom hosts official visitors to the Northern Territory, which include Governors-General, Judges of the High Court of Australia and State Governors.





## *The Drawing Room*

The Drawing Room is the oldest known European-style structure in Darwin and was the central stone room of the original 1871 residence. At first it was a family living area, then the backdrop for court cases and church services. Today it serves as the principal room for official functions hosted by the Administrator.

## *The Prince of Wales Room*

For many years, the two openings between the Drawing Room and the Prince of Wales Room were bricked-up to create a separate room. A bathroom and a dressing room were added so that it could be used as a self-contained bedroom suite.

On 2 February 1988, Their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales were accommodated in this room during their tour to celebrate Australia's bicentenary. Following their visit, the room was officially named the Prince of Wales Room.

In 1998, the bricks were removed to reveal the two openings (as was originally intended by architect John George Knight) in order for the room to be used as a reception area. The Administrator uses the Prince of Wales Room for receiving courtesy calls and other smaller functions.



## *The Dining Room*

The Dining Room is used by the Administrator to host formal luncheons and dinners. Each meal is preceded by the *Loyal Toast* where the Administrator and guests stand and toast "To the Queen and people of Australia".

The dining room table, chairs and sideboards were commissioned by Mrs Hilda Abbott in 1946, and are the first furniture pieces that were specifically designed for Government House. The timber is Queensland cedar and the table can be reduced to seat eight or extended to comfortably seat twenty people.

In 1982 during the term of Administrator Johnston, *Wedgwood* was commissioned to provide crockery with the *Connaught* pattern and *Northern Territory Crest*. The "Ma Maison" design Christofle silverware was purchased in 2001. Ten years later during Administrator Muirhead's term, the collection of Lismore style Waterford Crystal was purchased to complement the crockery and silverware. All of these items are still used for luncheons and dinners.

Over the years, royalty, vice-regal representatives, heads of state, political and military leaders and many citizens of the Northern Territory and Australia have been hosted by the incumbent Administrator in this dining room.





## *The Gardens*

The gardens at Government House were established by John George Knight in the 1890s. They cover about 1.3 hectares, and are one of the few hillside gardens in the Top End.

Extensive work on the gardens was undertaken in the late 1930s under the direction of Mrs Abbott.

Today, a team of horticulturists maintain the gardens, including the gardens surrounding the two historic buildings that are the offices of the Administrator of the Northern Territory.

The gardens are continually evolving with an emphasis on the use of a diverse range of plants to suit both extreme shade and full sun.





## *The Lawn and Carriage Loop*

This area is one of the oldest features of the grounds, and the lawn was famous for many years as one of only two green lawns in Darwin.

The flagstaff currently in use is not the original Government House flagpole that was destroyed in a cyclone in 1897. Nor is it the one on which Mrs Mitchell first hoisted the Commonwealth Ensign on 2 January 1911 and on which the flag was strafed by Japanese machine guns on 19 February 1942. (The flag was rescued by Administrator Abbott and is currently housed at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.)

That flagstaff was very tall and constructed of two spliced pieces of timber. Flags were often caught in the pulley due to poor quality sash cords, which swiftly deteriorated in the tropics. In 1960, a roll of proper naval signal halyard made of hemp was acquired.

The replacement flagstaff survived until Cyclone Tracy when, again, it had to be replaced. Subsequently the present steel flagstaff, with yardarm, was installed and was pivoted at the base for ease of maintenance.

The cannon is believed to have belonged to South Australian Surveyor-General George W. Goyder who arrived in Port Darwin on 5 February 1869. It is a 12-pounder carronade, or ship's cannon, manufactured by gun founder William North at Woolwich, England, in 1843. It bears the cipher and crown of Queen Victoria.

CLIX denotes the gun's serial number (159) and the figures 6-0-24 denote the cannon's weight – 6 hundredweight, 0 quarters and 24 pounds (316 kilograms). The initials GM are those of Sir George Murray KCB who was the British Master-General of Ordnance 1841-46. The initials are surrounded by the circlet and insignia of a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath (KCB) in the Military Division.

The cannon was traditionally fired to commemorate the arrival of new Government Residents and special events. It was last fired on the departure of Administrator Dean in 1970, which was also the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the first permanent Government Resident in Darwin, William Bloomfield Douglas.



Government House  
29 The Esplanade  
Darwin NT 0800

GPO Box 497  
Darwin NT 0801

Telephone: (08) 8999 7103

Website: [www.nt.gov.au/administrator/](http://www.nt.gov.au/administrator/)

Email: [governmenthouse.darwin@nt.gov.au](mailto:governmenthouse.darwin@nt.gov.au)

