

Government House



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First Government House Site, New South Wales

Australia's First Government House was the earliest major building to be constructed on the Australian mainland.

Started only months after the 11 ships of the First Fleet sailed through Sydney Heads in early 1788, it sat on the most prominent site on Sydney Cove just back from Circular Quay and on what is now the corner of Bridge and Phillip Streets in Sydney.

Merchants, soldiers, Aboriginals, foreign visitors, explorers, settlers and statesmen all passed through its doors, making it the hub of a new antipodean world.

It remained one of the centres of power through the terms of nine governors until its state of disrepair, and the growing pressures of expanding waterfront activities, forced its demolition in 1845. Some 217 years after its foundations were laid, the remains of some of its structures have been preserved and illustrated on site at the Museum of Sydney in Sydney's central business district.

Using convict labour the construction of the new home and headquarters of Australia's first Governor, Arthur Phillip, took just over a year. Built with 5000 bricks imported from England, the site also used bricks made locally from clay, imported lime and shellfish from Darling Harbour.

The First Government House was a centre of power and decision making for the developing New South Wales colony, which, at that time, covered two thirds of the continent. It witnessed major milestones such as printing of the colony's first Government Orders in 1795 and Australia's first newspaper, the *Sydney Gazette*, in 1803; Governor Bligh's arrest during the Rum Rebellion in 1808; and the first Legislative Council meeting in 1824.

Once the first Government House was demolished, the site was used variously as a carter's yard, a fruit shop, a confectioner's and tobacconist's shop, government offices, accommodation for nurses during the Second World War and a car park. At one stage it was to become the site of the city's town hall and later was mooted as the location for a multi-storey office block.

In 1983, before commencing construction on the multi-storey building, remains of the First Government House were discovered in an archaeological excavation, sparking debate on the future of the site. Following public protest to save the area, planning approval for the development was rejected. Soon after, an international architectural design competition was announced to create a development that would conserve and present the archaeological remains of the site while still enabling the construction of office buildings.

Following the discovery of the remains, further high-profile archaeological exploration – the largest urban excavation undertaken at the time in Australia – uncovered the vestiges of drains, privies, foundations, walls and cuttings. In addition, excavations also revealed artefacts including Australia's first locally made bricks, window glass, roof tiling, china, bottles, broken tobacco pipes, printing remnants and dog bones.

Although mostly covered today, the archaeological remains of the building still have the potential to reveal much about the earliest efforts to build a nation.

