



Government House, 11 Langton Hill



Aerial view of Government House taken from the northeast.

BUILT HERITAGE | MAY 2024

By Linda Abend and Margie Lloyd, Bermuda National Trust

This is part of a series of architectural articles by the Bermuda National Trust that will highlight some of Bermuda's endangered historic buildings.

In October 2023 it was reported that Governor Rena Lalgie and her family and staff had moved into temporary accommodation because of the deteriorating and unsafe condition of Government House. The 2023 budget had listed \$5.2 million in total authorised funding for improvements with \$1.7 million having been spent as of March 2023. Windows needed to be replaced at a cost of almost \$2 million and the roof replacement was estimated at \$450,000. Minister Walter Roban admitted that water damage would likely continue until the repair projects could be funded.

In a February 2024 follow-up article the Minister emphasised that repairs were expected to be long term and would incur "substantial capital investment". The article attracted a slew of comments, one of



them calling for the building's demolition with another person suggesting it be replaced by a mini village with housing complex, after-school facility, IT training centre, child support/development facility, underground tram to Hamilton, and seniors' facility and rest home.

While some may consider Government House to be a white elephant and a financial burden to Bermuda, others consider that it is extremely important for Bermuda's head of state to live in a dignified building suitable for entertaining distinguished visitors as well as Bermuda's residents. It is not unusual for leaders of state to reside in grand historic buildings. The White House in Washington, DC, built in Neoclassical style, has been the residence and workplace of every US president since 1800. King's House in Jamaica, the residence of the governor until Independence in 1962 and now the official residence of the governor-general, was built in 1909 after an earthquake and then a fire destroyed the ones built in 1872 and 1907.

Construction of Bermuda's Government House was begun in 1882 and it was ready for its first occupant, Lieutenant General Thomas Casey Lyons, in July 1892. It replaced the partly wooden Mount Langton which was located further west and had been the governors' residence since 1815 when the seat of government was officially moved from St George's to the new town of Hamilton.



Construction of Government House began in 1882. *Internet image.*



The building was designed by architect William Hay who was also responsible for the rebuilding of Trinity Church (now the Anglican Cathedral) after it was destroyed by an arsonist attack in 1884. It was built in the Italianate style with its footprint being an elongated T-shape. Its façade faces an upper terrace and consists of a two-storey arched arcade flanked by three-storey square towers. This was a massive building by Bermuda standards at the time. The Italianate style was a distinct 19th century phase of Classical architecture and the design was continued in buildings abroad long after its popularity declined in Britain. This building, with its typical features of towers based on campaniles, loggias, pedimented windows etc is a perfect example. Like it or not, it should be appreciated as the very progressive building it must have been in 1892.



Government House had been completed by the time this photograph was taken by visitor Colonel John A M Passmore in 1899. Courtesy of the Bermuda Archives.

Lighting was originally provided by kerosene lamps and candles. In 1908 electric lights were installed by the Bermuda Light Power and Traction Company. In anticipation of the visit of the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII) in 1922 the lower storey of the south verandah was enclosed in glass. In November 1945 an electrical short-circuit caused fire damage to the dining and drawing rooms and to the bedrooms and bathrooms above them. Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie was a guest at Government House during his 1963 and 1967 visits. Queen Elizabeth



stayed there several times. Other visitors included Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and John Major, and various other members of the Royal Family.

In 1998 electrical and plumbing renovations as well as window replacements required Governor Thorold Masefield and his wife to relocate to the former residence of the captain-in-charge known as The Cottage at Ireland Island. During the renovations it was discovered that bees had got into one of the towers and hundreds of pounds of honey had become trapped between the walls. The Masefields returned to Government House in April 1999. There does not appear to have been any repairs or maintenance in the last 20 years.



Government House photographed for Stark's Guidebook in 1897. Its acreage has decreased from 73 acres in 1832 to approximately 33 acres in 2015.

Governor Lalgie is to be credited for re-establishing the use of the grounds for sporting events. Although historically used for equestrian events, last November the opening round of the One Communication Mountain Bike Series was held on the northern hillside. “I’m just really keen that these grounds can be used a lot more to be able to support community activities and in particular giving young people the opportunity to do things that they perhaps wouldn’t be able to do normally.”



It was encouraging to hear Premier Burt announce that \$2.684 million had been allocated in the 2024 budget for repairs to the building. He acknowledged that “Bermuda does retain full responsibility for the upkeep of Government House through the Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of Bermuda and the Government of the United Kingdom.”

A planning application has recently been submitted for work to replace the leaky roof with full remediation expected to take three to five years. The relevant planning application, B0064-23, for a new roof covering is currently marked “rejected” on the Government website, possibly because it lacked particulars. We hope that such problems will soon be sorted out and that work to renovate the house will proceed rapidly so that Governor Lalgie or her successor will be able to return to a house worthy of her position and Bermuda’s status in the world.



Government House serves as the residence and offices of Bermuda’s governor since 1892. *The Royal Gazette* photograph.

Sources: *Bermuda’s Architectural Heritage Series: Pembroke*; *The Royal Gazette* 20 Nov 1945, 10 Oct 1963, 14 Apr 1967, 2 Jun 1992, 7 Apr 1998, 3 Aug 1999, 23 Nov 2022, 31 Oct 2023, 26 Feb, 11 Mar & 8 Apr 2024.