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History of Parliament House

Early Buildings used by the Government in Western Australia

The first 'government' meetings were held by Lieutenant Governor Stirling in a tent on Garden Island in 1829 shortly after the arrival of settlers in the new colony.

When the site of Perth was determined as the location of the settlement (when Mrs Dance chopped the tree down in 1829), the "government" met in a tent at the Stirling Gardens site in Perth (eventually the corner of St George's Terrace and Barrack Street).

The tent was replaced with a temporary bough (*tree branch*) building until the Governor took temporary possession of the newly completed officers' barracks in St George's Terrace (site of current Council House).

Government moved to that location and remained there until 1870 when, after representative government was established, the Legislative Council held their first meeting on 5 December 1870 in the Legislative Hall, Town of Perth Chambers, located at the eastern end of the Perth Town Hall. The Legislative Council continued to meet there until 1890.

After establishment of Responsible Government, the Legislative Assembly used the Legislative Hall, and the Legislative Council returned to its original Chamber located in Council House in St George's Terrace. Both Houses of Parliament continued to meet in these locations until 1904.

From 1904, the original Council House continued to be used as government offices, until it was demolished and replaced in the early 1960s with the City of Perth Council House structure. The original Town Hall Chamber building from 1904 was also converted for use as government offices and eventually demolished in the early 1960s for the new R & I Bank building (since demolished).

The Executive Council eventually moved from Council House to the first Government House built in 1829 (eventually demolished in 1886) and shifted to the current Government House in 1863.



An early proposal for Parliament House

The New Parliamentary Building

In 1897, a Commission was established to report on the site and plans for the new parliamentary buildings.

A Joint Parliamentary Committee was appointed on 29 November 1900 to select a design for the new parliamentary buildings from the designs submitted under a competition. The closing date for a competition for the design of a new Parliament House was Tuesday, 16 April 1901.

The competition specified that the budget for the building was £100,000, with the initial stage to cost £20,000. Seventeen designs were received, but they were all disqualified for exceeding this budget. The best three designs were finally recompensed with prize money of £250, £100 and £50 (half the original prize money offered). Public Works Chief Architect John H. Grainger prepared the new plans (J.H. Grainger was the father of well-known musician Percy Grainger). W.L. Vernon, the Chief Architect of the Government of New South Wales, was brought over to judge the competition.

The foundation stone was laid on 31 July 1902, and after construction of part of the building, it was opened for the first parliamentary sitting in 1904 at a cost of £35,623/3s/1d. In addition to the partial completion of the building, a temporary corrugated iron building was constructed between the two Chambers to house parliamentary staff, Hansard and other amenities (demolished in 1964).

Other evidence of cost-saving measures made during the construction of the first stage were non-painting of ceilings, rudimentary mantle-pieces in staff offices, basic light fittings and plain light-green painted walls, which did not have any of the decorative friezes / highlighting normally featured in late Victorian / early Edwardian public buildings.

Early Problems

Some early problems encountered with the building included:

- stray horses and cattle grazed in the gardens;
- gunners firing salutes damaged the fence on Harvest Terrace; and
- parking inspectors had to be appointed to prevent unauthorised tying up of horses to trees at the original frontage of the building (Harvest Terrace).¹

1964 Extension

In 1962, construction commenced on the completion of the 1902 plans, with a modernist 60s façade. A budget of £140,000 was provided for this extension. The opening of the new extensions occurred on Monday, 23 March 1964 and was carried out by the then Governor, Major-General Sir Douglas Kendrew.

1978 Extension

After site works commenced in late 1977 the construction of two levels of the southern wing of the building created 12 new offices for members.

2004 Northern Extensions and Other Developments

The northern extensions to Parliament House commenced in 2002. They provided for members' offices and meeting rooms. Donnybrook Sandstone was used to match the existing stone on the southern and eastern façades.

When officially opened in 2004, an Aboriginal People's Room and Aboriginal Foyer became part of the modifications.

A new member's Library was also opened and the redevelopment of the parliamentary courtyard took place.

Artwork

New artworks were sought to enhance upgrading of the building. In 1949 when the Parliamentary Dining Room was renovated, Perth Society of Artists loaned Parliament a number of watercolours that replaced the group of photographs of members of earlier Parliaments.

In 1951 to mark the Jubilee of Federation the Art Patron, Claude Hotchin, presented a number of watercolours of south west scenes. When the House was completed in 1964, local government authorities were invited to donate paintings relating to their particular localities. Claude Hotchin advised on their selection and placement around the building.



The Barracks, by Leach Barker (1962)
from the Claude Hotchin Art Bequest

Stained Glass Windows

The stained glass windows adorning both chambers were commissioned and made in Albany, Western Australia. The following is an extract describing the opening of the Parliament as reported in the *Morning Herald*:

*"The eye alights upon a jarrah gallery, dark stained and varnished. Then comes a sort of inner wood partition, creating a small lobby on each side of the chamber. This too, is of jarrah, brightened with stained glass of elaborate design, into which the emblematic swan is prominently introduced..."*²

For more information about Parliament or to book a free tour of Parliament House, visit www.parliament.wa.gov.au or contact the Parliamentary Education Office on free call 1800 199 187 or (08) 9222 7829.

¹ Source: *House on the Hill*, 1991

² Source: *House on the Hill*, p. 87