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# GOVERNMENT HOUSE COMPLEX



1 government house complex  
birdwood avenue south yarra  
front view feb1985

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## Location

GOVERNMENT HOUSE DRIVE SOUTH YARRA, MELBOURNE CITY

## Municipality

MELBOURNE CITY

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H1620

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO397

## VHR Registration

August 20, 1982

## Amendment to Registration

May 23, 1998

## Heritage Listing

## Statement of Significance

Last updated on - November 12, 1999

What is significant?

Government House Complex features one of the largest and most beautiful mansion houses in Australia. Built between 1872 and 1876, the complex consists of the main house, outbuildings and substantial 19th century grounds. The main building consists of three parts: the extravagant single storey State Ballroom occupying the entire south wing; the three storey State rooms with their grand staircase hall; and the lavishly decorated two storey vice-regal apartments to the north. The different parts are unified by the richly decorated crowning cornice that continues round the whole building, carrying a finely detailed balustrade supporting urns, and by the porte-cochere and porticos which feature Doric orders. The building's most notable and instantly recognisable feature is its 145 foot tower, which consists of a plain shaft crowned by a finely detailed belvedere. Service quarters to the east of the main house consist of a large paved yard surrounded on three sides by a colonnaded verandah sheltering living quarters for the staff. Nearby are the mews, a paved area surrounded on three sides by stables, coach houses and living quarters. These outbuildings are an integral part of the complex but are architecturally attractive in their own right. The gardens were laid out at the time of the construction of the house and contain many fine mature trees. Their 19th century English character is still clearly evident.

How is it significant?

Government House Complex is of historical, architectural and aesthetic significance to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

Government House Complex is of historical significance for its role in the vice-regal history of Victoria and Australia. The house served as the residence of the State's Governor from 1876 to 1902 and from 1934 to the present day. It was the first purpose-built Government House, replacing the much smaller Toorak House, and its grandeur and size reflect the confidence and burgeoning wealth of the colony as a result of the gold rushes. After Federation of the Australian colonies in 1901, the house served as the residence of the Governor General of Australia, until the establishment of Canberra as the nation's capital in 1926. The continuing vice-regal use of the complex and the substantial intactness of its outbuildings and grounds provide an excellent illustration of the character of a 19th century governor's residence. The house's elaborate interiors, as well as the stables, servant accommodation and other outbuildings provide evidence of the kind of lifestyle enjoyed by 19th and early 20th century elites.

Government House Complex is of architectural significance as one of the grandest and largest residences, and one of the finest examples of 19th century residential architecture, in Australia. The three components of the house, the State, Private, and Ballroom wings, are expressed in a grand composition articulated by the belvedere tower, which has itself become a prominent Melbourne landmark and symbol. Designed in the conservative classical style, the superb Italianate composition appears to have been inspired by Queen Victoria's Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. The house features a rich variety of fine mouldings and other decoration, and the interiors are among the grandest in Melbourne.

Government House Complex is of architectural significance as the work of William Wardell, assisted by J.J. Clark and P. Kerr, all of the Public Works Department. Wardell (1823-1899) was the Inspector-General of Public Works in Victoria when he designed Government House. Whilst Government House is one of his most substantial and distinguished buildings, he is perhaps chiefly known as a talented exponent of the Gothic Revival style. Other important buildings designed by Wardell include St Patrick's Cathedral, St John's Church of England, Toorak and the Gothic Bank on the corner of Collins and Queen Streets.

Government House complex is of aesthetic significance for its garden, which is possibly the most intact 19th century mansion garden remaining in Melbourne. The garden generally conforms to the original design by amateur designer John Sayce of 1873, which is well documented. The garden is especially significant in that the

utilitarian areas remain relatively intact, although the kitchen gardens recently ceased operations. The garden's significance is accentuated by its association with William Guilfoyle, curator of the Melbourne Botanic Gardens, who refined and helped to implement Sayce's design. The design modifications recommended by Guilfoyle are well documented and his plan (superimposed in red on Sayce's plan), reports and sketches give insight into his design philosophy at the time he commenced work at the Botanic Gardens. The garden's aesthetic significance additionally derives from its close relationship to the Botanic Gardens and Domain, which are designed to be mutually complementary. The garden contains many fine mature trees, including conifers, Australian rainforest species and deciduous trees, which are characteristic of the era and which also reflect Guilfoyle's personal taste.

## Permit Exemptions

### General Exemptions:

General exemptions apply to all places and objects included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). General exemptions have been designed to allow everyday activities, maintenance and changes to your property, which don't harm its cultural heritage significance, to proceed without the need to obtain approvals under the Heritage Act 2017.

Places of worship: In some circumstances, you can alter a place of worship to accommodate religious practices without a permit, but you must **notify** the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria before you start the works or activities at least 20 business days before the works or activities are to commence.

Subdivision/consolidation: Permit exemptions exist for some subdivisions and consolidations. If the subdivision or consolidation is in accordance with a planning permit granted under Part 4 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the application for the planning permit was referred to the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria as a determining referral authority, a permit is not required.

Specific exemptions may also apply to your registered place or object. If applicable, these are listed below. Specific exemptions are tailored to the conservation and management needs of an individual registered place or object and set out works and activities that are exempt from the requirements of a permit. Specific exemptions prevail if they conflict with general exemptions.

Find out more about heritage permit exemptions [here](#).

### Specific Exemptions:

#### Standard Exemption 1: Maintenance

General maintenance works where 'maintenance' means continuous protective care without causing any damage to the existing fabric or the introduction of new materials.

Traditional finishes such as oils and waxes must continue to be used for timber surfaces rather than modern alternative protective coatings such as polyurethane or acrylic which may seal the surface and cause damage. Surface patina which has developed on the fabric may be an important part of the item's significance and if so needs to be preserved during maintenance and cleaning.

Typical maintenance works covered by this exemption include:

Cleaning out gutters and drainage systems  
Re-securing loose elements of roofs, timber work and decorative features in the original manner  
Straightening and re-securing fences and gates  
Minor servicing of equipment and services like lifts, air conditioning and fire services  
Maintenance of any existing power or pipe lines or other public services located on the property where this involves no alteration of the fabric of the place

#### Standard Exemption 2: Cleaning

Cleaning including the removal of surface deposits, organic growths or graffiti by the use of low pressure water (less than 100 psi at the surface being cleaned) and neutral detergents and mild brushing and scrubbing.

Surface patina which has developed on the fabric may be an important part of the item's significance and if so needs to be preserved during maintenance and cleaning.

For more information see Heritage Victoria's Technical booklet 'Cleaning Masonry'.

### Standard Exemption 3: Minor Repairs

Repair, which is minor in nature, such as refixing and patching or the replacement of missing, damaged or deteriorated fabric that is beyond further maintenance, which matches the existing fabric in appearance, material (including mortar, render and timber species) and method of fixing and does not involve damage to or the removal of significant fabric. Repairs should be carried out by tradespeople experienced in the conservation of heritage fabric.

This exemption is not intended to allow the cumulative replacement of large amounts or a high proportion of the fabric of a place or item. If replacement of large amounts of fabric is necessary a permit will be required.

Repairs must be based on the principle of doing as little as is necessary to retain and protect the element. Therefore replacement must only occur as a last resort where the major part of an element has decayed beyond further maintenance.

Repair must maximise protection and retention of fabric and include the conservation of existing detailing, such as vents, capping, chimneys, carving, decoration or glazing.

### Standard Exemption 4: Replacement of Services

The replacement of services such as cabling, plumbing, wiring and fire services that use existing service routes, cavities or voids or replaces existing surface mounted services and does not involve damage to or the removal of significant fabric.

### Standard Exemption 5: Painting

Internal and external repainting in the same colour and paint type as currently exists, where the existing is appropriate historically.

Internal and external repainting in a different colour scheme or paint type provided details are submitted to and approved by the Executive Director prior to the commencement of works.

Preference should be given to the re-establishment of historically significant paint schemes.

This exemption does not apply where it would involve applying an inappropriate finish, painting over an early exposed decorative scheme or where the registered place is particularly significant for its painted or decorative finishes (check the statement of significance for the registered place), or where previous layers of paint are mostly undisturbed and repainting would involve the loss of these earlier layers.

The painting of surfaces not previously painted requires a permit.

### Standard Exemption 6: Signage and Installations

The erection of a real estate sign with dimensions no larger than 3 metres by 4 metres indicating that the place is for auction, sale or let and removed within 21 days of sale or let of the place. Such a sign is to be erected for no more than 3 months unless otherwise agreed by the Executive Director.

Where details are provided to and approved by the Executive Director beforehand the following signage may be erected:

Signs for the sole purpose of providing information to assist in the interpretation of the heritage significance of the heritage place; Promotional signs and installations up to a maximum size of 2 metres by 2 metres providing information about forthcoming activities

Signage of the kind described in this exemption:

must not conceal or involve the removal of signage which has an integral relationship with the significance of the place; must be located and be of a suitable size so as not to obscure or damage significant fabric of the place; must be able to be later removed without causing damage to the significant fabric of the place; and where attaching to the registered building reuse existing fixing points or insert fixings within existing joints without damage to adjacent masonry.

#### Standard Exemption 7: Specific Conservation Works

Conservation works in accordance with a conservation policy or plan already endorsed by the Executive Director.

Where there is no pre-existing conservation policy or plan, conservation works may be provided with an exemption provided the details are first submitted to and approved by the Executive Director.

A conservation policy or plan is a document which analyses and explains the heritage significance of a place and provides guidelines for maintaining and enhancing the heritage significance of a place.

#### Standard Exemption 8: Internal Commercial Fit-out

Internal fit-out of commercial premises where the details are first submitted to and approved by the Executive Director provided it meets the following criteria:

the fit-out is largely self supporting and can be installed and removed without damaging or removing significant fabric. services are installed discretely, preferably within existing conduits or floor and wall mounted ducts. the fit-out retains the volume of larger spaces considered significant. the fit out does not damage or make new attachments to significant heritage walls, floors, ceilings and joinery.

#### Standard Exemption 9: Internal Works to New Buildings

Alterations to the interior of a new building which has been constructed since the listing of the place on the Victorian Heritage Register. Such interior alterations must have no visible impact externally.

#### Standard Exemption 10: Public Safety and Security

The erection (*for a period to be agreed with the Executive Director*) of temporary security fencing, scaffolding, hoardings or surveillance systems to prevent unauthorised access or secure public safety which will not adversely affect significant fabric of the place including archaeological features.

#### Standard Exemption 11: Landscape Maintenance

Mowing, hedge clipping, bedding displays, disease and weed control, and maintenance to care for existing plants. N.B. this does not include the use of artificially coloured mulch

Removal of dead plants and replanting to maintain the landscape character or planting theme identified in the statement of significance provided that; where the plant is a tree or where the plant is specifically mentioned in the statement of significance/extent of registration, the Executive Director must be provided with details of the plant and the reasons for its removal prior to its removal. Where the Executive Director is satisfied that such removal is appropriate the Executive Director shall notify the applicant the proposed works are exempt from requiring a permit.

Management of trees in accordance with Australian Standard; *Pruning of amenity trees* AS 4373

Repairs, conservation and maintenance to roads and paths, edges, fences and gates, drainage and irrigation systems.

Installation, removal or replacement of garden watering and garden drainage systems that occur at a distance greater than 5 metres from the canopy edge of a significant tree, plant or hedge.

Pruning of trees in accordance with the *Code of Practice for Powerline Clearance[Vegetation] 1996*, unless they are identified as significant.

Remove, destroy or lop a tree if the tree presents an immediate risk of personal injury or damage to property provided details of the works proposed are first provided to and approved by the Executive Director Heritage Victoria.

#### Standard Exemption 12: Minor Works

Anything which in the opinion of the Executive Director is of a minor nature and will not adversely affect the heritage significance of the place does not require approval under s.67 of the *Act*, more particularly, the following works involving non-significant fabric:

- (a) installation, removal or replacement of carpets and/or flexible floor coverings unless deemed a significant element;
- (b) installation, removal or replacement of curtain track, rods, blinds and other window dressings;
- (c) installation, removal or replacement of hooks, nails and other devices for the hanging of mirrors, paintings and other wall mounted artworks (N.B. this does not apply to picture rails);
- (d) installation, removal or replacement of electrical wiring provided that all new wiring is fully concealed and any original light switches, pull cords, push buttons or power outlets are retained in-situ. Note: if wiring original to the place was carried in timber conduits then the conduits should remain in-situ;
- (e) installation, removal or replacement of infrastructure connected with plumbing, provided that any significant items (such as early sinks...) are retained in situ
- (f) installation, removal or replacement of bulk insulation in the roof space; and/or
- (g) installation, removal or replacement of smoke detectors.

Exception to the above is where the works will impact on a significant element identified in the statement of significance. A person proposing to do any works affecting significant fabric must first write to the Executive Director and describe the proposed activity. If the Executive Director is satisfied that the proposed activity meets the criteria set out in this exemption the Executive Director shall notify the applicant the proposed works are exempt from requiring a permit.

#### Temporary structures

The erection of temporary structures does not require approval under s. 67 of the *Act*, provided that the criteria in (a) and (b) below have been met:

- (a) the temporary structure will be erected and remain on site for a maximum period of 14 days after which it will be removed and not be erected again for another 6 months; and
- (b) the temporary structure is not to be located where it could damage or endanger significant fabric including landscape or archaeological features of its curtilage or obstruct significant views of and from the heritage place.

A person proposing to erect a temporary structure of the kind described in paragraphs (a) and (b) must write to the Executive Director and set out the nature of the temporary structure, its appropriateness, the use for the structure and how long it will remain in place and the next occasion on which it is anticipated that the structure will be erected. If the Executive Director is satisfied that the proposed development meets the criteria set out in paragraphs (a) and (b) the Executive Director shall notify the applicant the proposed works are exempt from requiring a permit

#### Archaeological places

The following activities, if undertaken at an Archaeological Place, do not require approval under section s 67 of the *Act*:

#### Fire Suppression Duties

- a) fire suppression and fire fighting duties provided the works do not involve the removal or destruction of any significant above-ground features or sub-surface archaeological artefacts or deposits;

b) fire suppression activities such as fuel reduction burns, and fire control line construction, provided all significant historical and archaeological features are appropriately recognised and protected; Note: Fire management authorities should be aware of the location, extent and significance of historical and archaeological places when developing fire suppression and fire fighting strategies. The importance of places listed in the Heritage Register must be considered when strategies for fire suppression and management are being developed.

A person proposing to do anything of the kind described in this exemption must first write to the Executive Director describing the proposed activity. If the Executive Director is satisfied that the proposed activity meets the criteria set out in this exemption, the Director shall notify the applicant.

#### Signage and Site Interpretation

a) signage and site interpretation activities provided the works do not involve the removal or destruction of any significant above-ground structures or sub-surface archaeological artefacts or deposits;

b) the erection of non-illuminated signage for the purpose of ensuring public safety or to assist in the interpretation of the heritage significance of the place or object and which will not adversely affect significant fabric including landscape or archaeological features of the place or obstruct significant views of and from heritage values or items;

c) signage and site interpretation products must be located and be of a suitable size so as not to obscure or damage significant fabric of the place;

d) signage and site interpretation products must be able to be later removed without causing damage to the significant fabric of the place;

NOTE: The development of signage and site interpretation products must be consistent in the use of format, text, logos, themes and other display materials.

NOTE: Where possible, the signage and interpretation material should be consistent with other schemes developed on similar or associated sites. It may be necessary to consult with land managers and other stakeholders concerning existing schemes and strategies for signage and site interpretation.

#### Mineral Exploration

a) mineral exploration activities provided the works do not involve the removal or destruction of any significant above-ground features or sub-surface archaeological artefacts or deposits;

b) preliminary non-intrusive exploration, including geological mapping, geophysical surveys, and geochemical sampling and access to shafts and pits;

c) advanced forms of exploration (drilling), including the location of drill pads and access tracks where this has been the subject of on-site negotiation and agreement with representatives of Heritage Victoria, DSE and Parks Victoria, and where all significant historic site features have been identified and protected as part of an approved work plan.

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Construction dates	1871,
Architect/Designer	Wardell, William W.,
Heritage Act Categories	Registered place,
Hermes Number	1074
Property Number	

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## History

Contextual History:History of Place:

There have been five vice-regal residences in Victoria. The first was virtually a wattle and daub hut, erected on the north-east corner of Little Collins and Spencer Streets in 1837, and used by the Police Magistrate and Commandant of Troops for the Port Phillip District, Captain Lonsdale. Lonsdale's successor, C. J. La Trobe, erected his house, a pre-fabricated timber structure imported from England, in 1840 in Jolimont. La Trobe became Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria after separation from NSW in 1851 and by 1854 a grander Government House was being sought for the burgeoning colony. Accordingly, Toorak House was leased in 1854, and served as the vice-regal residence until the construction of Government House in 1876. Government House has served as the Governor's residence ever since, except for the period between 1901 and 1931, when it functioned as the residence of the Governor General of Australia, and Stonnington in Malvern housed the State's Governors. There was a brief hiatus in vice-regal occupation, between 1930 and 1934, when the Ballroom and State Drawing Room were used as classrooms for the Melbourne Girls High School.

## Extent of Registration

Amendment of Register of Government Buildings

Melbourne City

Birdwood Avenue, South Yarra.

Government House Complex.

[*Victoria Government Gazette* No. G39 12 October 1988 p.3090]

Transferred to the Victorian Heritage Register 23 May 1998 (2 years after the proclamation of the Heritage Act 1995 pursuant to the transitional provisions of the Act)

*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.*

*For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>*