



GOVERNMENT HOUSE
QUEENSLAND



A House for all Queenslanders



Foreword



The story of Queensland's Government House is inextricably linked to the history of this State and to the lives of the women and men who made it what it is today.

When 'Brisbane Town' closed as a penal settlement in 1839, it quickly became a gateway to opportunity for explorers, pastoralists, settlers, and entrepreneurs. Johann Heussler, the German merchant who built the original Fernberg villa in 1865, was among the first to seize this opportunity, as was Scottish pastoralist, John Stevenson, who developed Heussler's home into a grand Victorian mansion.

For the first quarter-century of its life, the house was a reflection of the young Colony's prosperity and optimism. Later, unoccupied and neglected, it became a symbol of the many dreams shattered during the economic decline of the 1890s.

It was a government decision in 1910 (the transfer of the State's original Government House to the newly established University of Queensland) that marked the beginning of the next chapter in Fernberg's story — its long and distinguished life as Queensland's Government House.

For more than a century, the house and grounds have seen contributions and changes made by successive governors and governments, the most recent being in 2015 when equitable access to the house was modified and extended, coinciding with the 150th anniversary of its construction.

Identified as a priority as early as 2007, this first major structural modification to the house since 1937 not only made the house compliant with disability legislation but enabled Fernberg to become a contemporary Government House where all Queenslanders can be welcomed as equals.

The Honourable Paul de Jersey AC
Governor of Queensland

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A Grand Hill-top House

1860s through to 1880s - the Heussler period



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A Governor's Residence

*1910s through to 1930s - a temporary
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A House for all Queenslanders

1930s onwards - an inclusive House for all Queenslanders

Cover image: The entrance to the original part of Fernberg built in 1865 is still used today.

A Grand Hill-top House



Among the most enterprising early residents of Brisbane was Johann Christian Heussler. Born near Frankfurt in 1820, he was working as a merchant in England when he decided to pursue business prospects in Australia.

Settling in Brisbane in 1854, Heussler quickly established a successful business as a wine merchant with prestigious premises in Queen Street. His success enabled him to purchase a portion of bushland in Paddington in 1860, and, two years later, an adjacent lot.



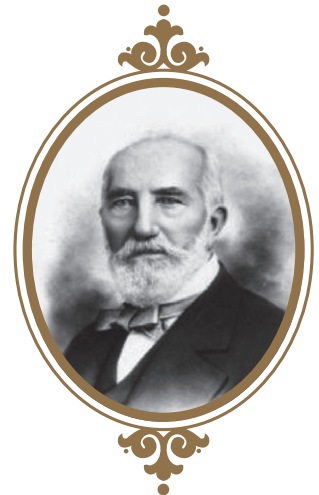
Ladies and gentlemen on the verandas and side steps of the original Fernberg villa, 1880s.



Massed Scottish pipe bands gathered outside the original Fernberg villa completed in 1865.

For this combined 16-hectare site, Heussler commissioned Benjamin Backhouse to design and build a grand villa. Built from brick, as well as schist and clay quarried from the site, the mansion was finished with cement and lime, and featured a slate roof, airy verandas, a kitchen and servants' quarters in the basement, drawing, dining and breakfast rooms on the ground floor, three bedrooms on the first floor, a large room on the second floor, and an attic in the small tower above a handsome sandstone entrance. When the house was completed in 1865, Heussler named it Fernberg ('distant mountain' in German), reflecting the distance that then had to be travelled from the town of Brisbane to the hill-top site.

Just seven years later, in 1872, Heussler's failed investments in the sugar industry led to bankruptcy and the consequent loss of the house to his creditors. Over the next 12 years, the house was acquired by a succession of owners (including Sir Arthur Palmer, one of the Colony's early Premiers) until, on 21 October, 1884, it was purchased by John Stevenson.



Despite several episodes of bankruptcy, Heussler (pictured above) was held in such high repute that he was appointed to Queensland's Legislative Council and served for a total of 38 years. Always an entrepreneur, Heussler had also secured appointment as the Queensland Government's first immigration agent in 1861, travelling widely through Germany and successfully recruiting thousands of his countrymen to settle in Queensland. In addition, he served as Queensland Consul for Germany and The Netherlands, and as a Commissioner tasked with promoting trade with Germany and encouraging further emigration. After the sale of Fernberg, Heussler continued to live in Brisbane until his death in Albion in 1907.

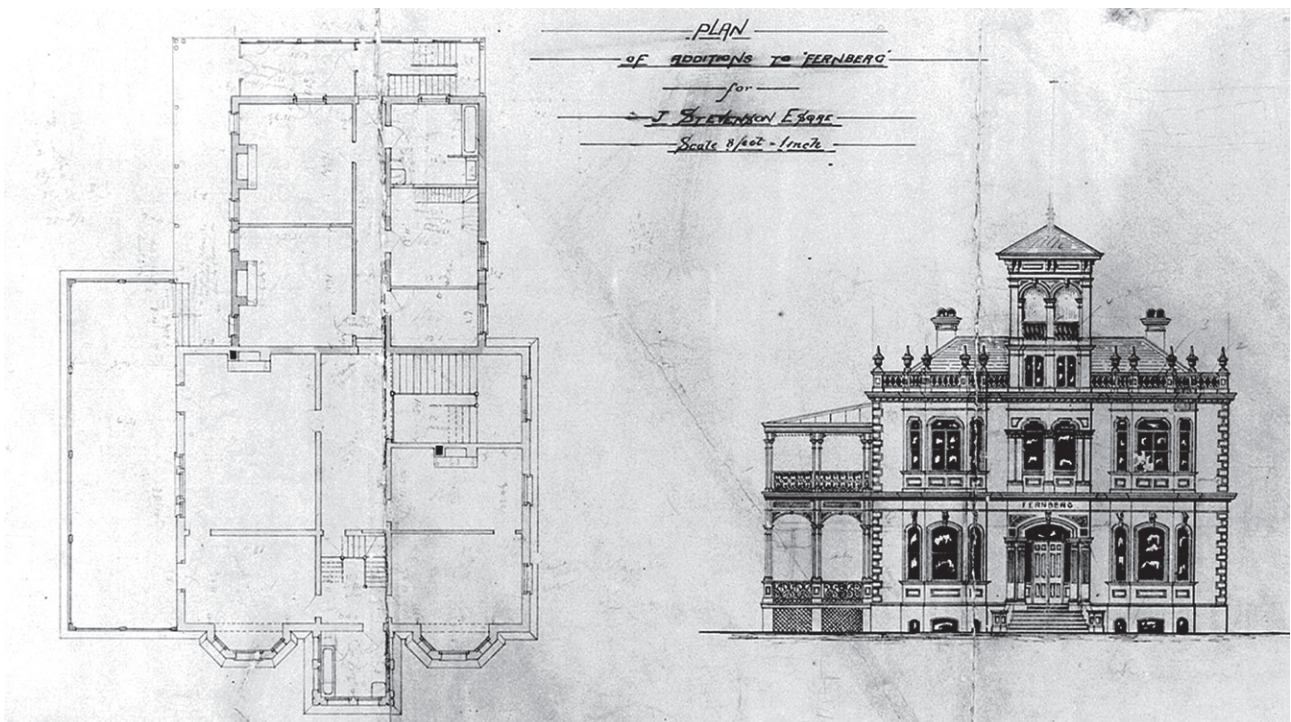
A Mansion in Paddington



Descended from generations of Scottish farmers, John Stevenson was just 21 when he came to Queensland in 1864 to manage Ravensbourne sheep station. He later became a landholder himself and, in 1875, was elected to Queensland's Legislative Assembly. He went on to become a successful stock and station agent and would eventually serve as an MP for a total of 18 years.

Stevenson's business success, boosted by the boom of the early 1880s, enabled him to purchase Fernberg and, in 1888, to engage prominent architect, Richard Gailey, to design additions.

When the extended house was completed in 1890, it was almost double its original size, transformed into an imposing, Italianate mansion with a four-storey tower marking the grand new entrance. Gailey's additions included a large foyer with a fireplace and a fashionable tiled floor, timber-panelled dados, a carved cedar staircase, and a magnificent stained glass window depicting Scottish hero, King Robert the Bruce.



Plans of Gailey's additions to Fernberg, including the iconic façade.



Stevenson's additions almost doubled Fernberg's original size.

Stevenson's pride in his Scottish heritage was not confined to commissioning the window; he also purchased the 324-hectare Perthshire estate where he was born, and visited there as the new Laird in 1889 while the Fernberg renovations were being undertaken.

The depression, drought, and collapse of the pastoral industry in the 1890s ended Stevenson's good fortune. Fernberg was mortgaged in 1895 and ten years later, Stevenson sold his magnificent collection of furniture and art works by auction — an event which took four days.

The family continued to live in the house until the Queensland Government leased Fernberg in February 1910. Stevenson was initially retained as caretaker but was then transferred to the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum for the poor and destitute on Stradbroke Island. He later returned to Brisbane where he lived with family members in a cottage in West End until his death in August 1912.



"It affords us the highest gratification that the transfer has been made to one whose early days were spent among us, and whose record is so pure and honourable and stimulating, and we greet you today as our proprietor with this demonstration of our unfeigned and affectionate respect."

From the illuminated address presented to John Stevenson by the villagers of Aberutbven - 2 March, 1889. Now held in the John Oxley Library, Brisbane



A Governor's Residence



When The University of Queensland was established in 1909, the government decided that Government House at Gardens Point should become the nucleus of the new institution. The resultant search for temporary accommodation for the Governor led to the decision to lease Fernberg in February 1910 while planning for a new Government House began.

As there had been little progress with these plans by the end of June 1911, the government purchased Fernberg as a temporary Government House and set about making renovations and transferring auxiliary buildings to the site from Gardens Point.

For almost three decades, the building remained as a temporary Government House. Finally, in 1937, the government abandoned plans to construct a new Government House and focused instead on making the major changes to Fernberg which would make it an appropriate permanent vice-regal residence.

In that year, the Department of Works constructed a new, three-storey wing on the eastern side of the building, providing a billiard and supper room in the basement, a spacious ground floor drawing room, and accommodation for both the Governor and guests on the first floor, as well as improved staff facilities.

While numerous auxiliary buildings on the Estate were erected or renovated in the ensuing years, and the colour of the house was changed from its original ochre to cream in 1937 and then white in 1951, only three other changes were made to the structure and appearance of Fernberg until 2015: in the early 1950s, a porte-cochère and covered walkway were installed; in 1953 a balcony was erected on the eastern end of the drawing room; and, in 1986, the balcony was extended and a roof added.



In 1910 the Honourable Sir William MacGregor GCMG became the first Queensland Governor to reside at Fernberg.



The spacious three-storey eastern wing (above) was added in the 1930s; (above, top) under construction.

A House for all Queenslanders



Fernberg has witnessed Brisbane's development from an isolated outpost of the British Empire to the thriving, twenty-first century city it is today, and has played a key role in the history of both the city and the State.

Not only has it served as Government House for more than a century, but it remains the only substantial residence and villa estate in Brisbane dating from the 1860s and one of the finest examples of a Victorian Italianate villa in Brisbane.

This unique history earned Fernberg a permanent place on the State Heritage Register when the Queensland Heritage Act was introduced in 1992.

Paradoxically, in the same year as the house was entered on the Heritage Register, disability legislation was introduced, requiring public buildings to have equitable access.

This posed a challenge for the Queensland Government, as owners of Fernberg, because any changes to the house needed to comply with heritage legislation.

Limited provisions for wheel-chair access were introduced as temporary measures, and complex and extensive consultation about a permanent solution began in earnest in 2007. Numerous options were considered before the final solution was adopted and funding secured in 2014. The resultant Equitable Access Project was a major undertaking which saw two lifts, a new porte-cochère and other improvements installed in 2015.

These important changes ensured that Fernberg will remain a Government House for all Queenslanders and a place where visitors feel warmly welcomed, whatever their level of physical ability.



The porte-cochère and accessible lift on the western-facing side of Government House were installed in 2015.



A second lift was also installed on the eastern-facing side of Government House in 2015.



In 2015, two disability lifts were installed providing access to all levels and ensuring that Government House can be enjoyed by all Queenslanders, regardless of their physical ability.





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