‘A very handsome edifice and a credit to the colony for all time to come’
GOVERNMENT HOUSE
and Western Australian Society
1829–2010

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David Malcolm invited the governor-designate to take and sign the oath of allegiance and the oath of office, and once he had done so it was announced that Ken Michael had officially assumed the office of governor of Western Australia. A nineteen-gun salute was immediately fired by the 7th Field Battery of the Royal Australian Artillery from the saluting station in Langley Park; and the governor’s standard was broken. 2

A creation of the past adapted to the present: Western Australia’s oldest institution

The vice-regal commission appointing Ken Michael governor of Western Australia was the thirty-first to be issued by the monarch since March 1831, when King William IV first authorised ‘our trusty and well beloved James Stirling Esquire, Captain in our Royal Navy’ to be ‘our Governor and Commander in Chief in and over our Territory called Western Australia’. 3 Furthermore, Governor Michael’s swearing-in was, in its essential aspects, virtually identical to the ceremonies that formalised his many predecessors’ vice-regal positions. Together, the issuing of the commission and the taking of the oaths of allegiance and office serve as a reminder that the office of governor is the state’s oldest institution. The formalities conducted at the Government House ballroom on 18 January 2006 effectively reinforced a long, unbroken line linking King William IV and Governor James Stirling to Queen Elizabeth II and Governor Ken Michael; and demonstrated that for 175 years the vice-regal office had played an integral part in providing Western Australia with a continuous, stable and effective constitutional apparatus. At one level, these continuities with the past might have suggested to the assembled onlookers that the office of governor had changed little over that time, but several subtle but important features of the 2006 swearing-in ceremony clearly showed that a significant transformation in the nature of the governorship had taken place by the twenty-first century.

The first such feature was the Noongar ‘welcome to country’ extended by Kim Collard at Ken Michael’s request. As Collard was to point out, it was a major signpost in the political history not only of this State of Western Australia but also of Australia. This is the first time a representative of the Nyoongar Nation has been invited to welcome officially and formally a Governor of Western Australia.

He suggested that a similar welcome should have been organised in 1829 for the first governor, James Stirling, along with recognition of the political status of the country’s original inhabitants. However, it was important that it was happening in 2006, and Collard looked forward to the time when indigenous protocol

At Perth’s Government House on 18 January 2006, a ceremony took place that has been conducted regularly since the advent of European settlement in Western Australia. On that summer afternoon several state officials and dignitaries, including the chief justice and lieutenant governor, David Malcolm; the acting premier, Eric Ripper and the governor-designate Kenneth Comninos Michael made their way from the vice-regal residence’s drawing room to the stately ballroom on the western side of the main house. To the sound of fanfare played by students from Perth Modern School, the three men processed to the front of the room. The guests present were asked to sit; Kim Collard, representing the Noongar community, gave a ‘welcome to country’ speech; and the lieutenant governor, acting premier and governor-designate made their way to a signing table set up on the ballroom stage. Kevin Skipworth, Government House’s official secretary, then read a commission that had been issued on 22 November 2005:

ELIZABETH THE SECOND by the Grace of God Queen of Australia and Her other Realms and Territories, Head of the Commonwealth, To Our Trusty and Well-beloved Doctor Kenneth Comninos Michael, Member in the Order of Australia, Greeting: …We do, by this Our Commission under Our Sign Manual and the Public Seal of the State of Western Australia, appoint you Doctor Kenneth Comninos Michael to be, during Our pleasure, Our Governor of Our State of Western Australia in the Commonwealth of Australia, with all the powers, rights, privileges and advantages belonging or appertaining to the Office. …And We do hereby command all and singular Our Officers, Ministers and loving subjects in the State and all others whom it may concern, to take due notice hereof and to give their ready obedience accordingly.1
ceremonies were embedded in other government procedures. He went on to acknowledge how humbled and privileged he felt to represent ‘not only our present leaders, but my many Nyoongar ancestors who have come before me’.4

That a representative of Perth’s indigenous community should extend the hand of friendship and reconciliation to the governor inside his official residence is all the more significant when one remembers how in the nineteenth century a well-known indigenous woman named Balbuk (also known as Fanny Balbuk), who had been a child when Perth was colonised, ‘raged and stormed at the usurping of her beloved home ground’ to the end of her life; and would ‘stand at the gates of Government House, reviling all who dwelt within, because the stone gates guarded by a sentry enclosed her grandmother’s burial ground’.5

A second novel feature of Ken Michael’s inauguration was the background of the governor himself, for he is the first Western Australian viceroy with a non-British ancestry. While he was born in Perth, Governor Michael is the son of Greek migrants; his father arrived in Australia in the 1890s as a young boy, became naturalised in 1905 and later served with the Australian imperial Force in the First World War. His mother arrived in Australia in the 1930s and married his father soon afterwards.6 The Greek community’s particular pride in the appointment was evidenced by the presence of Archbishop Stylianos Harkianakis, Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia, who flew from Sydney especially to attend the ceremony. While it had taken 175 years for a person of non-British heritage to be appointed to the office, this belated change nevertheless reflected the increasingly multicultural composition of Western Australia. As Kim Collard emphasised, it was important to recognise how far the state’s multi-ethnic population had come, even if there was still some way to go: ‘today, as these many nations of peoples, we join together to celebrate and to welcome the son of a Greek immigrant to act as the Queen’s representative during the time of his office’.7

A third significant transformation in the vice-regal office, also reflected in the 2006-inauguration proceedings, was the extent to which it had become a community institution by the twenty-first century. For most of Western Australia’s history, the governor had represented the British crown and advanced Britain’s imperial interests. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that these imperial links began to loosen and the governor began to prioritise the interests of the state and its peoples over those of the United Kingdom. While the constitutional and ceremonial roles of the governor have remained largely unchanged since the late nineteenth century, the community role has greatly increased in importance over the past fifty years. It was this aspect of the job that Ken Michael together with his wife Julie – who he paid tribute to as his ‘support and encouragement for more than 40 years’ – pledged
to focus on. In his first speech as governor he acknowledged that Western Australia’s rich indigenous cultures, along with the many peoples who had arrived after 1829, had ‘added their own special elements and touches, and through good times and bad, we can claim to have a rich multicultural society’. This was the society that the Governor and Mrs Michael, working as a team, were committed to serving and ‘adding some value’ to: ‘This was the society that the Governor and Mrs Michael, working as a team, through good times and bad, we can claim to have a rich multicultural society’.8

A lens through which to view the past: a history of Government House and Western Australian society

If the story of the office of governor is one of both continuity and change, the same must also be said for the grand old Victorian mansion that for nearly 150 years has served as the governor’s official residence and which for generations has symbolised the viceroy’s unique status and position within Western Australian society. Since opening its doors in 1863, the present Government House has been lived in by every governor appointed to serve Western Australia. Furthermore, the spacious, beautiful domain in central Perth on which the house stands has been the site of two other vice-regal residences, now demolished, erected in the earliest days of European settlement. With a lineage stretching back to 1829, Government House and its grounds are among Perth’s most important and iconic historic monuments, and yet the residence has never been the focus of a full-length historical study.

This book seeks to rectify this omission by presenting a social history of the governor’s residence and its place in the wider community from 1829 to 2010. Social history is, in essence, a study of the past that takes as its primary focus the lives of people and the societies in which they lived. Therefore the following pages not only describe the design, construction and furnishing of Government House, and the cultivation and landscaping of the surrounding domain, they also attempt to uncover something of the life stories of the scores of people who have lived and worked there. Furthermore, it will become clear that Government House played a crucial role in the creation and maintenance of Western Australia’s social order in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Well into the last century it continued to be recognised as one of the state’s most important society addresses; and while depression and war in the 1930s and 1940s diminished the vice-regal residence’s luster, and post-war urban renewal almost resulted in its destruction; over the past thirty years community interest, involvement and activism have resulted in a long overdue official heritage listing and renewed public interest in its chequered past.

From the historian’s perspective, this long-standing importance to the community since the early colonial era means that Government House and its grounds can be used as a useful and valuable lens through which to view the fascinating historical evolution of Western Australia and its people. The chapters that follow are both chronological and thematic; on one hand they tell lively stories of a distinguished mansion and its gardens, and of the vicereines, viceroys, householders, police orderlies, gardeners, butlers and aides-de-camp whose lives were spent there. On the other hand the book employs these stories to investigate some of the ways in which Western Australian society has changed over time; from an isolated, highly stratified, often prejudiced colonial community governed by a class-conscious autocratic elite in the nineteenth century, to a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic and increasingly tolerant and egalitarian democracy in the early twenty-first century.

Given the viceroy’s social position as the monarch’s representative, and his residence’s status and position on the capital city’s premier street, it is not surprising that the governor, his wife and Government House were instrumental in establishing a hierarchical social order in the nineteenth century. However, one of the surprises in this history is how quickly this elitism began to erode in the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1930s, the position of both the viceroy and his residence were challenged and then altered, so that by the 1950s the wider, local community’s interests began to take precedence over those of a fading imperial power and its agents. At much the same time, the post-war modernist juggernaut that was busy remaking Perth’s urban environment almost succeeded in destroying Government House, but a combination of good fortune and community activism succeeded in safeguarding it for future generations.

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the role of Government House bears a close similarity to that of its most recent vice-regal inhabitants. Much like Ken and Julie Michael, the residence continues to perform an important, long-standing constitutional and ceremonial role, but it has become much more community oriented. Government House is ‘the People’s House’, and it belongs to all the citizens of Western Australia.’9
James Stirling, Government House and the challenge to create social order in Western Australia 1829–1837
At around noon on 20 November 1837, inhabitants of the tiny, sandy town of Perth began to make their way towards the official residence of Sir James Stirling, founding governor of the fledgling settlement of Western Australia. Colonists had only recently heard of a momentous, ‘melancholy event’: King William IV of the United Kingdom was dead; and his niece, Victoria, was now Queen. Although the late monarch had passed away in June, this small, isolated Indian Ocean outpost had remained oblivious until the crew of the visiting brig sloop H.M.S Beagle shared the news nearly five months later. Stirling had immediately announced a ‘General Mourning’, to commence the day after Victoria’s accession was officially proclaimed. The proclamation ceremony itself was scheduled to take place ‘in front of the Government House, Perth, on Monday next, the 20th instant, at 1 o’clock P.M.’; and ‘all Civil and Military Officers, as well as the inhabitants generally’ were ‘directed to give their attendance’.

Stirling’s new stone house – built in a modest but stately Doric style and situated in cultivated government gardens on the eastern end of St Georges Terrace – was almost complete after three years of construction. A military guard waited in front of the entrance portico and once Stirling had been received and the townspeople assembled, Sheriff G.F. Stone read the proclamation affirming that the governor, the civil and military authorities, and the general population did ‘with one voice and consent of tongue and heart, publish and proclaim’ that Victoria was now ‘Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and of this Colony of Western Australia’. Furthermore, the assembly acknowledged all faith and constant obedience with all hearty and humble affection, – beseeching God, by whom Kings and Queens do reign, to bless the royal Princess Victoria with long and happy years to reign over us. GOD SAVE THE QUEEN!

The soldiers then concluded proceedings with a feu de joie before the crowd erupted with three hearty cheers.

Although simple, this brief ceremony in front of the seat of government was full of meaning. By proclaiming the death of one monarch and the accession of another, Western Australian settlers were also affirming ‘with one voice and consent of tongue and heart’ their membership of the British Empire and their unity and affinity with its manifold subjects scattered across the globe. In a peripheral, distant and newly occupied colony, one where violent dispossession and conflict between settlers and indigenous communities were ongoing, and where privation and failure had recently threatened its very existence, the oath also promoted belonging, unity and affinity within colonial society.

The proclamation had an added significance for James Stirling for it was a demonstration of vice-regal authority as much as it was a declaration of unity and loyalty to the Crown. In Western Australia, as in other Crown colonies, the governor represented the monarch and ‘embodied the full authority of the British government’; consequently, he was expected to be ‘detached from, and superior to, all groups in the local society’. For much of his tenure, though, Stirling had struggled to cultivate an appropriate level of social distance, hierarchy and deference; and his authority had been challenged. By swearing allegiance to the new Queen, colonists, soldiers and officials were also in effect acknowledging ‘all faith and constant obedience’ to her representative in Perth. Perhaps it was no coincidence that in the issue of the Perth Gazette in which the accession proclamation appeared, Stirling also directed that a ‘Table of Precedency, which has been ordered to be observed in Her Majesty’s Colonial Possessions, should be published for general information’. This list made it quite clear that Stirling’s vice-regal powers conferred on him the status and position of first-placed person in the colonial hierarchy. By right, he occupied the pinnacle of Western Australian society; ahead of military officers, religious leaders and judicial authorities, and far above the general settler population.

**Beginnings: Taking possession of Swan River**

If by 1837 Stirling could publicly demonstrate his vice-regal status and authority in front of an ‘extremely chaste’ but handsome residence designed in the style of the neo-classical Greek revival, his position had been far less secure eight years earlier. He departed the United Kingdom in 1829 to found the colony of Swan River without a clear mandate or strong imprimatur from the British government. Initially Stirling held the office of lieutenant governor, but had only obtained that title after protesting against the Colonial Office’s
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original designation of ‘Civil Superintendent’. Stirling had emphasised to Robert Hay, the Colonial Office under-secretary, that ‘my influence would be much increased in the opinion of those around me by altering that Style and naming me “Governor”’. He believed that if the change were made, his ‘hands would be thereby strengthened’.15

Furthermore, the vague instructions given to Stirling on the eve of the Parmelia’s departure did little to consolidate his authority. While Sir George Murray, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, fully anticipated the difficulties that would stem from ‘the absence of all civil Institutions, Legislative, Judicial and Financial’, he merely noted that until provision could be made ‘in due form of law’, these difficulties ‘must be combated, and will, I trust, be overcome by your own firmness and discretion’. Other than directing Stirling to select a site for a future capital, confirming his power to make ‘all necessary locations of land’ and enjoining him to ‘recommend by your counsels and example the habitual observance of Sunday as a day of rest and Public Worship’, Murray provided very little guidance. Until a ‘regular commission for administering the Government’ along with ‘all the requisite instructions’ were sent at some future date, the lieutenant governor was to be guided by a copy of the 1825 instructions given to Sir Ralph Darling, the governor of New South Wales.16 It would be early 1832 before an official commission and instructions – belatedly appointing Stirling governor and commander-in-chief of Western Australia – arrived in Perth; and it has been suggested that before that date it is ‘extremely doubtful’ that his administration had any legal foundation.17

the trials and tribulations suffered by the first settlers have been told many times.18 A recent account vividly described the conditions faced by the new colonists, many of whom were used to the comforts of home and had naively succumbed to ‘Swan River Mania’:

They arrived in June 1829 to the dismal onset of a rainy winter. No advance party had been sent to make essential preparations. No land had been allocated nor buildings erected, nor had any steps been taken to come to terms with the Nyungar[sic]. The settlers were dumped with their possessions on Garden Island and later on the beaches north of the Swan.19

It was in these tenuous circumstances that Stirling and his officials, many labouring without a salary, set about building the machinery of government from scratch. It took many years to establish an efficient civil administration, a fact reflected in the poorly constructed, temporary public buildings and rudimentary infrastructure that served the colony for the first five years of its existence.
Stirling initially situated his headquarters on Garden Island shortly after his arrival on the Parmelia in June 1829. As he explained in a letter to his brother, he erected makeshift buildings on the island because the weather was ‘too boisterous to admit of making a large settlement on the mainland at a great distance from the ships which were anchored under the lee side of the island’.20 Charles Fremantle, captain of HMS Challenger, thought this decision unreasonable, but nevertheless sent sailors ashore to back a road to the top of a high hill on the island and assist in putting up tents. By the end of June seamen and troops from the Challenger and HMS Sulphur had constructed a series of wooden huts for the civil administration.21

Thus the colony’s first, temporary, Government House on Garden Island was ‘perched atop Cliff Point, overlooking the beach below with the flagstaff on Signal Hill to the seaward side’.22 Home to Stirling, his wife Ellen and their two young sons for several months over the chilly, squally winter, it was a crude and leaky wooden structure; not at all ‘like houses in Grosvenor Square, being rather deficient in the article of defence against the wind and rain, the sun and cold’. Stirling confessed to his brother in September that he had been obliged to walk about with an umbrella in his hand to keep the candle burning, yet Ellen and his two boys had suffered no serious inconvenience.23

As far as they are applicable’.24 Stirling’s explanation for this action reveals his ongoing anxiety about his authority and the legitimacy of his governorship: Authority, doubts might arise as to the power of punishment and offences be committed in consequence. That the lieutenant governor was determined the colony’s inhabitants should submit to governmental authority is clear from his command that ‘due obedience and respect be shewn’ to all officials appointed to government positions, including those ‘filling the Offices of High Constable, Constables, Bailiffs, and Surveyors of the High Ways’.25

Creating the Capital: the planning and surveying of Perth and the establishment of a government domain

Shortly after this proclamation was read, Stirling led a small group of officials, soldiers and sailors up the Swan estuary towards Point Frazer, close to the foot of Mount Eliza. Landing near the site of the present Supreme Court – adjacent to what was to become the Government House domain – the party cleared land and erected tents on a patch of higher ground. It was from this rudimentary campsite that the city of Perth evolved; yet it was not until 12 August, the King’s birthday, that Stirling formalised the settlement with a ceremony during which Helena Dance, wife of the captain of the Sulphur, felled a tree to mark the occasion. There was little time for the civil officials, soldiers and naval personnel to celebrate; Stirling had decreed that all ‘Public Business in the several Departments of government’ should henceforth be conducted in Perth, beginning immediately. A number of tents had been set aside as temporary government offices, and it was from these tents over the coming months that the colony’s twelve civil officials, assisted by four clerks and seven artisans, set about exploring, charting and surveying the surrounding territory; laying out town sites and allotments, clearing roads, planting crops and erecting buildings.26

Surveyor General John Septimus Roe worked quickly, and in less than two weeks Perth’s streetscape had been planned and mapped out. On 25 August, ‘Regulations Relative to Town Lots’ were issued, dividing the new town site into a rectangular grid extending some two miles along the waterfront from the base of Mount Eliza to the Harrisson Islands. The individual town lots were each nine-tenths of an acre and were to be leased from the Crown until improvements had been made. From the very beginning, ‘Front Street’ – later named St George’s Terrace – was intended to be the town’s pre-eminent thoroughfare. T.B. Wilson, a Royal Navy surgeon who visited Perth briefly in October 1829, described an early morning walk through the newly created town, the intended principal street of which, named St George’s Terrace, – where the future beaux and belles of Western Australia may, in after
times, show off their reciprocal attractive charms – was, at present, only adorned with lofty trees, and a variety of lovely flowers.

Water access was of vital importance in the colony before the construction of reasonable roads and the proximity of St Georges Terrace to the Swan estuary ensured that it was prime real estate. This fact is borne out by regulations requiring that each private lot on the terrace should have a house worth at least £200 built on it within two years of the date of lease; while for other streets the requirement was for a house with a value of £100. Furthermore, the main street was surveyed first, well before ‘the back part of Perth’ and months before Roe began ‘marking out a second rate street’ behind St Georges Terrace. This ‘second rate’ thoroughfare was later named Hay Street, in honour of the Colonial Office under-secretary. It has been pointed out that the regulations governing town lots effectively excluded ‘all but those with ready capital from purchasing land in the town centre’, for, apart from servants, poorer settlers could not afford to live in central Perth. Furthermore, the £200 requirement for houses built on the terrace was ‘a clear indicator of social status and differentiation of wealth’, and ensured that the ‘class structure, expectations, accessibility and rights of proprietors’ were reflected in the built environment.

Given the high status attached to St Georges Terrace it is not surprising that Roe and his survey staff reserved its northern side from Barrack Street to its eastern extremity for government offices and the residences of high officials, government employees, artisans, doctors and other important settlers connected with the establishment. This part of the town’s pre-eminent street was clearly intended to form the administrative heart of the settlement.

The town plans drafted by Roe in 1829 and 1830 also show that the eastern section of St Georges Terrace was designed with an open prospect to the estuary; initially it was intended that no buildings would be constructed on the southern side of the terrace east of Barrack Street. Had these initial plans not been altered in 1834, it is conceivable that the colony’s public buildings, including the governor’s residence, would have overlooked the Swan estuary, easily visible to water-borne traffic, and been separated from the river by a large, open government domain.

In spite of Roe’s intentions to keep the government domain free of buildings, the colony’s second temporary Government House was erected on this land in late 1829. Alfred H. Stone, who in later years would become a Crown solicitor, recorded in November 1829 that the Governor at present holds his Court, in a tolerably capacious tent. All the great officers of state live in huts of as rude a structure as you
can well imagine, merely branches of trees stuck into the ground and covered with canvas. The Governor, however, has a wooden house nearly built, of which he will soon take possession, with his lady, who is a very affable and pleasant woman, and makes herself quite at home. 55

Designed by Henry Reveley, the colony’s civil engineer, Stirling’s new residence was a small wooden building with walls and roof covered with weatherboards, and was situated alongside five similarly built public offices. Apart from a small verandah at one end, ‘designed to shelter the entrance and give a degree of formality to the building befitting its public function’, it was extremely modest. 56 The house and adjacent offices were clearly never intended to be permanent, which perhaps explains why they were located on the domain and not on the designated government plots on the northern side of St Georges Terrace. In an audit of public buildings compiled in early 1831, Reveley himself described ‘A House and offices for the temporary residence of His Excellency the Lieutenant Governor framed and boarded – cost about £200.0.0: the above is provisional only being wholly unfit for the Governor’s residence’. 57

The domain’s proximity to the river made it a promising place to experiment with imported crops and plants and Stirling and his officials intended to bring it under cultivation as soon as circumstances permitted. As an experiment with imported crops and plants and Stirling and his officials intended to bring it under cultivation as soon as circumstances permitted. As early as March 1830 a Swan River settler mentioned the governor’s ‘garden’ in a letter, although he complained that there was ‘not a green leaf in it’. 58 In June the following year George Fletcher Moore wrote in his diary of a ‘Walk in the Botanic Garden (lately made) with Govr. & Mrs Stirling’, indicating that some progress had taken place. 59 By 1832 Perth’s principal streets had been laid out and named, and its central town lots surveyed and valued. As we have seen, the capital of the colony had been planned carefully so that colonists with wealth and social status would congregate alongside the governing establishment on St Georges Terrace. In spite of these plans, just three years after Stirling took possession of Western Australia, economic stagnation, agricultural failure, food shortages and falling public revenues threatened to destroy the Swan River experiment altogether.

The Colonial Office instructed Stirling to abolish Drummond’s position on parsimonious grounds, but the lieutenant governor responded by urging the Home authorities to maintain Drummond’s services at an annual salary of £100. While he waited for a definitive answer, the naturalist was left to run the garden without remuneration, although he was permitted to sell its produce for profit. He lived in one of the wooden offices erected near the governor’s residence on the domain, in which he stored his tools, seed stocks, horticultural books and catalogues. 60

The slow development did not make a good impression on visitors to Perth. On a return trip to Western Australia in 1832, Captain Charles Fremantle diarised that he had been asked ‘to spare the Colony all the provisions I could as they were much in want’. He also confessed that he was much disappointed at the Appearance of the Capital as it does not appear to have made much progress, very few houses having been built, & many of those scarcely worthy of the name, being mostly of wood & very small. The only good one of brick was built by Captain Irwin & is now let to Government for a Store; two or three boat builders were established & they build good boats. Perth has not kept pace with Fremantle. 61

James Henry had described Perth in 1830 as being ‘entirely in a Wood and it is difficult at first to ascertain its position. It consists at present of about twenty Wood Houses, the Remainder Marquees, Tents and Huts’. 62 From Fremantle’s diary entry it would seem that little had changed over the
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The reality was that relatively few lots in the capital had been ‘improved’. Civilising the Settlement: The governor, Government House and colonial society in early Perth

In spite of these rudimentary conditions, members of the small governing and economic elite in Western Australia did their best to reproduce the stratified, class-conscious social order they had left behind in the united Kingdom; and it did not take long for the lieutenant governor and Government House to become the lynchpin of what has been called the colony’s ‘shabby-genteel society’. The first vice-regal social function in the colony had taken place on board the Parmelia a few days after the vessel had dropped anchor at Garden Island in early June 1829, when Stirling hosted a thanksgiving dinner party for ‘all the officers and their wives’. The following month the first-ever Western Australian race meeting took place on Garden Island when ‘Captain Currie riding a “poney” belonging to Stirling defeated Lieutenant Preston, who rode his own mount’. In subsequent years horse races were organised every June by the Perth Amateur Jockey Club, ‘which was mostly composed of the gentlemen of Perth and the officers of the regiments stationed in Perth’. Dances and dinners were also popular entertainments; Fremantle’s ‘several very agreeable families’ celebrated their first Christmas in 1829 by organising a subscription ball at a local ‘hotel’. Balls – in particular those hosted by Stirling and his wife Ellen at their official residence – quickly became essential social events for all well-to-do settlers who wished to enter ‘high society’ in colonial Western Australia. While on the surface balls might appear to be light entertainment, attendance ‘carried heavy implications for personal and political status’ and so invitations were eagerly sought after and highly prized.

One of the most memorable and spectacular balls from the early years took place in Perth at the temporary, wooden Government House in September 1831. This ‘very grand entertainment’ was an exclusive affair, to which ‘all persons in the Colony of a certain rank were invited’. However, the ball was more than a ‘mere social occasion’, for it took place in difficult economic times when ‘prospects in the colony had never been lower’, and it seems the Stirlings were attempting to boost morale among the settler elite. The prominent colonist George Fletcher Moore, who at this time had been in Western Australia for less than a year, was one of the select 180 ‘ladies and gentlemen’ who accepted the lieutenant governor’s hospitality. He confessed in his diary a week before the party that he ‘had no idea there would be so
much society here, so much gaiety, so much dressiness. I thought I had bid farewell for ever to slight shoes, silk stockings & kid gloves but I was wrong.

The ball itself, he noted afterwards, was kept up with the greatest spirit until six in the morning; and the dancing almost without interval – contredanses, quadrilles, Spanish dances, and gallopades. I never before witnessed such gaiety at a ball, nor ever before danced so much in one night. Four rooms and an arcade were all filled, and connected with the verandah. A superb tent was fitted up, decorated and festooned with naval flags and in this we had supper – an elegant and abundant one.52

Eliza Shaw described banqueting rooms ‘so tastefully arranged that all seemed the effect of magic. There large tables groaned with delicacies that would not have disgraced our Mother Country’. In fact, she continued, ‘for that evening at least you might have fancied yourself in reality at Home. The champagne sparkled and so did the eyes and jewels of many of our Australian dames’.53

It was not only local settlers who were impressed with the festivities. Two illustrious visitors from the hms Cruizer were ‘astonished, for they had heard the most glossy reports’. Lord Frederick Beauclerk, a midshipman on the Cruizer, and Lieutenant-Colonel J. Hanson, Quartermaster-General at Madras, were feted by the class-conscious colonists. Hanson, who was to spend two months of his recreation leave in Western Australia, recorded that he, Beauclerk and the commander of the Cruizer were received with the most unbounded hospitality by Captain and Mrs Stirling, and indeed by the whole Settlement, and as the Governor gave a Ball a few days after our arrival we had an opportunity of seeing nearly the whole of the Aristocratical population in the immediate vicinity.55

Hanson was also treated to a dinner party with the vice-regal couple at the rustic residence of John Septimus Roe, where he sat down to as good a repast as I could have had in India. You may fancy the sensation I experienced when I saw ladies of fashion and high education inhabiting a wooden building containing but four small rooms, and those divided by nothing but sawed unsplashed planks. This thank God is but a temporary habitation ... 16

Swan River’s senior officials and leading colonists have been characterised as ‘men of means’ whose economic success ‘depended as much on influence on arrival and family connections as it did on possession of a talent for business matters’. Exclusive social gatherings thus formed part of the ‘goodwill and patronage’ dispensed by Stirling and his civil officers to consolidate their authority, determine the membership of high society and forge networks with the settler elite.57 It has also been suggested that women were principal actors in the ‘rituals of exclusion and inclusion that marked the boundaries of this competitively genteel’ colonial world.58 Certainly, Ellen Stirling was as heavily invested as her husband in creating a restricted, hierarchal society in Western Australia, although her role in this process was circumscribed and guided by the early nineteenth century gender and class conventions she brought with her from Britain. In addition to organising and hosting vice-regal balls, dinners, the annual King’s birthday levee, and smaller tea parties for prominent wives, in 1830 she established a Perth Literary Society with Matilda Roe, wife of the surveyor general. Only those who could afford the two guinea subscription fee – a substantial amount of money – were able to join. Ellen Stirling also patronised the children of well-to-do families. When the children of a leading settler were struck with typhus fever, ‘she sent her “lady”, Mrs Brown, to call on the family, and “Wine, Porter, and every thing they wanted was sent in great abundance’.59 Furthermore, it seems at least one settler’s child, Emma Purkis, was educated with the Stirlings’ son at Government House.60

While James and Ellen Stirling effectively used patronage and goodwill to determine the membership of the colony’s upper echelon, the lieutenant governor was less successful at cultivating a sense of social distance, respect and deference amongst those settlers who did not belong to Western Australian high society. Part of Stirling’s difficulty in this respect stemmed from the circumstances in which the colony was founded. The disorganised, sudden and at times chaotic arrival of shiploads of colonists in 1829 strained his leadership abilities. Scores of settlers of all classes and backgrounds found themselves dumped on desolate, seemingly barren shores with little idea of how to proceed and so looked to the lieutenant governor for practical assistance and guidance. He in turn found himself ‘labouring cheek by jowl with strangers whose frustration and disappointment quickly eroded their deference and respect for the office he held.

An illuminating and amusing example of how quickly familiarity could breed contempt was recorded – in a rather patronising fashion – by T.B. Wilson, the class-conscious navy surgeon who visited in late 1829. One morning, while sitting on the bow of Arthur’s Head in Fremantle, he noticed Stirling walking close by. Within a very short time newly arrived settlers had crowded around him and, having ‘never before seen a levee held in the open air’, Wilson took up a favourable position to observe the ‘ceremony’. The surgeon thought he noticed ‘in the Governor’s countenance, some annoyance that he...
had been thus caught”; nevertheless, ‘he assumed an air of determination to be as civil and condescending as possible’. Stirling was then buttonholed by – in turn – a self-important ‘gigantic, force-looking gentleman’, a pert, smartly dressed man who Wilson thought would be more comfortable ‘behind the counter of a fashionable London repository, distributing ribbons and face to the fair damsel, than wandering about the wilds of Australasia’; a ‘stoat-looking personage, having all the appearance of a substantial English yeoman’, and many others. His Excellency was evidently tired long before the conclusion of the levee; but, as he could not bow his clients out of the drawing-room, he was obliged to back astern, which he did, with much dexterity, until he came to a spot of swampy ground, where he could not be surrounded, which he jumped over, bowed courteously to the assembled throng, and walked away, as fast as decorum would permit, fearful that he might be overtaken before he reached the boat; which, as soon as he entered, was pulled with all speed towards Perth. To make matters worse, ‘His excellency the Governor was walking in his dressing gown in the garden, as it is called, though not a green leaf in it) without shoes or stockings, when the party from our vessel waited upon him’. Stirling’s standing was clearly also affected by the imperial government’s initial failure to provide him with a proper commission and clear instructions. One settler noted that the ‘Governor – frequently chose to employ military modes of punishment. Even minor breaches of the peace that stemmed from privation, such as the theft of food, were met with an iron fist; and safeguarding the produce raised by the settler community and so the governor sailed from Fremantle in July 1832. Later that month the reverend J.B. Wittenoom wrote home to explain this sudden departure. It was the churchman’s assessment that the instructions Stirling received from the British government were ‘totally incompatible with the welfare, nay, the existence of the Colony’. Furthermore, as the governor was ‘unwilling to go beyond the letter of those instructions, he endeavoured to palliate the evils by half measures and to reconcile all parties’ to his decisions relating to financial stringency, taxation and land purchases. But all of this was in vain, for Stirling became embarrassed and scarcely knew how to act. At length finding his hands so completely tied that he could not render the Colony any service, he came to the resolution of going immediately to England to lay before the Home Government and the British public the real state of the Colony, which, it is evident, is not known in England. Economic depression and indigenous resistance threaten the colony Economic conditions in Western Australia continued to stagnate during Stirling’s two-year absence and in these straitened circumstances the colonial elite became increasingly concerned about criminal activity. In dealing with threats to social order and stability, Captain Irwin – the newly appointed lieutenant governor – frequently chose to employ military modes of punishment. Even minor breaches of the peace that stemmed from privation, such as the theft of food, were met with an iron fist; and safeguarding the produce raised by Drummond in the government garden became increasingly important. In December 1833, the Western Australian Journal reported that four ‘young urchins’ had been apprehended and brought before the magistrate for ‘robbing the Government garden, of grapes, peas, &c’. As punishment, two of the boys ‘were placed in the stocks, with a label stuck over their heads, indicating the nature of the offence’; they were then ‘all delivered over to their parents, with the understanding that they were to receive a severe flogging’. The Journal did not criticise this draconian form of retribution; rather, it implied that the sentence was lenient, commenting that ‘the next offender, we should hope, will be prosecuted with rigour, as it is of the greatest importance, that
the various exotics, fruit-trees and plants, now coming to maturity, should be protected.

Having thus demonstrated his authority as lieutenant governor and the supremacy of the colonial state, Irwin set about tackling settler vigilantism. A week after Midgedgeooroo’s execution he issued a public notice expressing regret that ‘frequent unwarranted aggressions’ had been committed ‘on the aborigines [sic] of this colony, by some evil disposed persons of the white community’. These ‘natives’ had been ‘wantonly fired upon, and without provocation on their part’ even though in 1829 Stirling had proclaimed the ‘Aboriginal race of Inhabitants’ to be British subjects and therefore ‘under the protection of the laws’. The consequence of such attacks had been to subject unoffending settlers to retaliation and to undermine the government’s efforts to establish cordial relations with indigenous communities. There was now an urgent necessity to enforce the law and put ‘an effectual stop to such gross and dangerous outrages’. Magistrates were ordered to investigate all persons, both civil and military, credibly accused of such conduct and to commit them to trial if due evidence was adduced to substantiate the charges against them. The irony of declaring all indigenous inhabitants to be protected by law from extra-judicial violence while the outlawed Yagan was still at large seems to have escaped Irwin. Just six weeks later the Noongar leader was treacherously shot dead by a teenage settler named William Keates who, in all likelihood, had been motivated by the £30 bounty that the lieutenant governor had placed on Yagan’s head. In spite of these martial methods, the pattern of attacks and reprisals continued, even after the 63rd Regiment stationed in Western Australia was replaced by a larger force sent from Hobart, the 21st Regiment, in September 1833.

Governor Stirling reasserts vice-regal authority and builds a permanent Government House

Stirling’s return to the colony in 1834 heralded a number of far-reaching changes that would, in time, transform the administration of the colony and strengthen the status and position of the governor. The Colonial Office’s insistence that significant cuts to expenditure needed to be made resulted in the termination of several civil establishment positions. The regulations governing land grants and sales were tightened up considerably. More popular was the commitment to make government more efficient and accountable; new procedures for conducting public business were published, the membership of the Legislative Council was increased and its sessions opened to the public. Even Stirling made himself available every weekday between 7 and 8 a.m. to meet members of the community. However, these changes had little impact on the major challenges facing the colony: high unemployment, a sluggish economy and continuing violence between settlers and Noongars.
Until these challenges were overcome, Stirling realised that prospective immigrants would continue to avoid Western Australia, government revenue would be insufficient to pay for essential public infrastructure works and the long-term survival of the colonial state would remain in jeopardy.

In the months following his return, the governor turned his attention to addressing these difficulties. The limits on government expenditure meant that he could do little, although provision was made to hire out-of-work settlers on existing public works projects. However, Stirling was far more willing to intervene decisively in the realm of indigenous relations. The governor’s first priority was to drive a wedge between the two most threatening communities, the Upper Swan led by Weeip and the Murray under Calyute. Stirling set about forging an alliance with Weeip, who promised that none of his group would align themselves against the colonists. While it has been suggested that Weeip did not have the authority to give this undertaking, there is some evidence that some Noongars from the Perth area were prepared to regard Stirling as an ally. In October 1834, it was reported that a large party of ‘natives’ had ‘held a corrobora in the barrack yard, adorning His Excellency Sir James Stirling’s temporary [wooden] residence’. Repeated inquiries were made to ascertain ‘whether the Governor and white man would befriend them’ so that they could obtain ‘protection from a distant tribe, who were in pursuit of them’. Stirling now trained his sights on Calyute. At the end of October he and twenty-four soldiers and settlers ambushed the main Murray River force at Pinjarra, inflicting severe casualties, among whom were women and children. This punitive attack did not immediately crush Noongar resistance, but it demonstrated that the governor was prepared to use overwhelming force to uphold the authority and interests of the colonial state. By the early 1840s overt, armed opposition to colonisation had come to an end in spite of Drummond’s success and the garden’s importance to the colony. However, Stirling had quickly and successfully reasserted his political power after his return to Perth. His old, temporary, termite-ridden residence was still being used as the Legislative Council chambers, and he and his family were being lodged in the officers’ barracks. He informed his councillors that, ‘considering the necessity of erecting a Residence for himself’ he intended to erect a house, at his own expense, in Perth. Stirling’s offer to use his own funds was motivated by his belief that the British government would veto any proposal to finance a new Government House from the public purse. Furthermore it also seems that he ‘gambled on the home government taking over the building and buying out his interest’.

Stirling’s decision was to have serious implications for the survival of the government garden that Drummond had carefully tended since 1831, and led to the acrimonious resignation of the government naturalist before the end of the year. By the middle of 1834, the government garden in front of the wooden former Government House was in a ‘high state of cultivation’ and partly enclosed by a paling fence. The one and a half acre plot had thrived in Stirling’s absence overseas and was described in the 1835 edition of J.C. Louden’s prestigious Encyclopaedia of Gardening as ‘really worth the inspection of the curious’. It contained ‘several rare specimens of various descriptions of plants’ including tea trees; melons ‘raised in great perfection’, and ‘fine shoots from the cocoa nut’. Furthermore, it was asserted that bananas and pineapples would ‘flourish here’ and that a ‘superabundance of vegetables’ at very low prices could be expected in the following year.

In spite of Drummond’s success and the garden’s importance to the colony as a whole, Stirling was determined to appropriate the domain as the site for his new Government House as ‘no other Position than the one formerly used for the despatch of Business’. His Excellency Sir James Stirling’s temporary [wooden] residence had come to an end in the south-western corner of Western Australia. Stirling had quickly and successfully reasserted his political power after his return to Perth, and was determined to appropriate the domain as the site for his new Government House as ‘no other Position than the one formerly used for the despatch of Business’.

Consequently, the wooden buildings Drummond used as a residence and storeroom, along with all the other temporary public offices, would have to be destroyed to make way for the new edifice. Drummond was aggrieved, and although he was invited to lease the unaffected portion of the domain ‘for such term as he may undertake personally to superintend its cultivation’, he tendered his resignation in September 1834. Stirling subsequently hired a new gardener, but it would be many years before the garden was again productive. As Drummond himself claimed with some justification in 1842, ‘if I had the garden ‘been ½ a mile from the site of Government House, it would have been at this time in a prosperous state’. Hundreds of plants would have been distributed to settlers ‘without costing the Government an additional sixpence and instead of an enemy, that had the power and wish to crush, it would have had no firmer friend than Sir James Stirling’.
Stirling justified his appropriation of the domain by asserting that he had never taken up the town allotment in Perth to which he was entitled and was willing to pay compensation for the premises, as the ‘former Improvements’ on the site had been effected ‘at the public Expense’. J.S. Roe, the surveyor general, and Captain Danelli, the senior military officer, supported him in the Executive Council. Roe believed there could be ‘no reasonable objection’ to Stirling’s proposal, as ‘a Building site could be claimed by the Governor for the erection of a Dwelling House’, the amount chargeable ‘for existing Improvements’ should be restricted to the ‘estimated value of the Buildings and Government Garden’.91 Having thus obtained the backing of his Executive Council, Stirling wrote to the Secretary of State seeking the colonial office’s ‘sanction and approbation’ and asking if it was ‘incumbent on me to pay for the land as well as for the Buildings or only for the latter’. As it would take many months for an answer to reach Perth, he would ‘in the mean while lay out upon the improvement of the premises’ but would limit expenses to £1000; if his proposal was rejected he trusted this money would be refunded to him.92 The formalities dispensed with, the governor immediately set to work. Drummond’s interest in the domain was bought out, Henry Reveley was instructed to draw up plans, and builders and labourers were contracted.

In a little over three months Stirling spent several hundred pounds of his own money. It was becoming increasingly clear that he would need to pay a lot more before his residence was completed and by year’s end he was entertaining serious doubts about his decision to build Government House privately. On the first day of 1835 he again penned a despatch to undersecretary Hay in the Colonial Office. In the several months since his return to Perth, he wrote, he and his family had been forced to reside in the officers’ barracks ‘at much inconvenience’. Furthermore, although considerable progress had been made on a new Government House, he had already ‘expended out of my private funds the sum of £800’ and as a consequence was experiencing ‘great personal inconvenience’. Since being appointed to his position in 1828, ‘every Shilling of my Income both Public and Private has been spent in the execution of my Office’. He therefore had ‘no stock of accumulated savings’ to build a House which being calculated for the accommodation of a Public Officer is neither in the position nor of the description which would render it valuable to me as a private person whenever my present employment shall cease’.93 Furthermore, the truth was that he no longer had funds available to carry on construction, which ‘although planned upon a very economical scale’, would require ‘three Hundred Pounds more before it will be completed’. Stirling’s only choice was either to finish the building using public funds so that it could be used without delay, or to ‘desist from all further outlay’ and await the Secretary of State’s instructions ‘which may not reach me for a Year and a half from the present time’. He had therefore authorised the Commissariat Department to appropriate £900 towards construction and at the same time requested the Colonial Office to cancel the arrangement whereby the governor was provided with an annual rent allowance of £300 and instead finance a permanent Government House in Perth that could be used by subsequent governors. In making this request, Stirling wrote that it was not important to him personally whether or not the residence should remain his private property or instead become a public possession.

Three months later, still awaiting word from London, Stirling presented his superiors with a fait accompli by transferring the building to the Crown.94 A special warrant reimbursing the £900 Stirling had spent on the residence had already been issued some time beforehand.95 While these actions were, as usual, subject to the approval of the Secretary of State, Stirling recognised that it would be very difficult for the Colonial Office to reverse his decision; Government House, still incomplete, along with the domain on which it was situated, had effectively become a public institution. Furthermore, the estimated costs of the project had ballooned: in providing the Colonial Office with a detailed building plan and budget, Stirling now estimated that the ‘ultimate expense of completing the Design will be about £2000’ with a further £500 required to ‘fence in and clear the ground’, and build a road. Even so, he argued that this significant outlay was justified because a substantial and suitable Residence will be provided and an annual Expenditure of £300 saved, the seat of Government will be fixed and no longer subject to the caprice or circumstances of the Individual holding the Office, while other Persons connected with the Establishment will have less reason to complain of being required to reside in Perth when the Residence of the Governor shall be thus limited to that place.96

The Executive Council unanimously endorsed this reasoning but estimated that £4000 would be needed to complete the building. In April 1835 Stirling formally asked its members if the location and design of Government House appeared ‘to combine the essential qualifications in such a Residence’ and, furthermore, whether it would be advantageous to the Crown to accept the transfer in ownership and the revised cost estimates. J.S. Roe replied that both the site and house were suitable ‘in every point of view’, being ‘centrally situated in Perth and convenient to the site of the proposed public offices’. In fact, ‘having been erected on the most economical scale in point of size and convenience’ the house was ‘deficient in many small but most essential
comfunds and conveniences which the Governor of this Colony might in justice and fairness look for in a Residence provided him in lieu of his allowance of House Rent. Nevertheless, the design was one that with various alterations ‘might be made to answer for a suitable and permanent’ vice-regal residence. Roe reiterated that it was highly desirable that the government’s establishment be situated in Perth where there was ‘at present no House suitable for his Reception, and pursuant of which any future Governor may be put to extreme inconvenience’. The erection of a building was also ‘much more advantageous to the British Treasury than making an annual allowance’ for rented accommodation.97

Colonial Secretary Broun also felt that if a suitable house was not built, the governor would experience difficulties ‘arising from the circumstance of there being very few good Houses in Perth of any dimensions’ and be ‘subject to the caprice of the Proprietors and liable to a very exorbitant Rent, without possessing the comforts and accommodation due to his Station’. Captain Danell concurred and also considered the government domain site to be ‘the most desirable in Perth’. With this display of support Stirling resolved to send all the documents along with the members’ opinions to the Secretary of State for his approval, in the meantime he would ‘direct the Engineer to proceed with the minor items’ that still needed to be completed to make the building habitable.98

Western Australia’s early settlers. His father, Willey Reveley, had been an engineer and architect in charge of the Government House project, Henry Willey Reveley, had by 1835 already designed most of the colony’s public buildings, including the Fremantle jail popularly known as the Round House, and a jail, barracks and commissariat buildings in Perth. By the time he left Australia in 1838 he had added to his resume a courthouse, public offices and other important works that would serve the needs of the colony for decades to come. Reveley’s education and background set him apart from many of other important works that would serve the needs of the colony for decades to come. Reveley’s education and background set him apart from many of other important works that would serve the needs of the colony for decades to come. Reveley’s education and background set him apart from many of other important works that would serve the needs of the colony for decades to come. Reveley’s education and background set him apart from many of other important works that would serve the needs of the colony for decades to come. Reveley’s education and background set him apart from many of other important works that would serve the needs of the colony for decades to come.
In different but complementary ways Revelley’s panopticon Round House and his neo-Grecian Government House were intended to signify the power and pre-eminence of a rational, progressive, enlightened colonial state, as well as the potential of that state to improve humanity and establish an antipodean Arcadia by creating order from chaos and civilisation from savagery. The panopticon was the embodiment of enlightened rationality and order, designed specifically to ‘improve’ the convicts imprisoned there; in Bentham’s words a ‘mill for grinding inguys honest, and idle men industrious’. If it also highlighted the central role designated for architecture within the Enlightenment; ‘morals reformed, health preserved, industry invigorated, instruction diffused, public burthens lightened, economy seated as it were upon a rock, the gordion knot reformed, health preserved, industry invigorated, instruction diffused, public

The Greek Revival took place in the context of imperial conquest and so it is not surprising that Greek architectural forms, long admired as both monumental and rational, were often associated with government offices in the British Empire. One scholar asserts that the Greek Revival’s supremacy in the early nineteenth century is evidenced by its dominance over ‘one particular building type: the public building for legal, administrative or cultural purposes’. He goes on to characterise neo-Grecian architecture as a product of both classic and romantic impulses. On one hand the rediscovery of Greece ‘was a Romantic quest for Arcadia’; while on the other hand, ‘rationalizing the architectural discoveries which flowed from that quest’ was an attempt to reorganise the rules of architectural design. The composition of British Greek Revival buildings was in turn ‘controlled by a similar duality of inspiration’ which can be summed up in the aesthetic philosophies of the Sublime and the Picturesque.

Wolley ‘Athenian’ Revelley certainly believed that sublime qualities were inherent in ancient Greek architecture. In particular, he associated pure Doric forms with majesty, dignity and strength. In the third volume of Antiquities of Athens, which he edited, he wrote that there was ‘a certain appearance of eternal duration’ in Grecian Doric edifices that ‘gives a solemn and majestic feeling, while every part is perceived to contribute its share to this character of durability’. This order was often censured for clumsiness, but it was applied ‘only where the greatest dignity and strength were required’. He challenged those who rejected the Grecian Doric to try to ‘produce the chaste and solid grandeur of the Parthenon, or the still more masculine character of the great temple of Pesto ...’ While living and working in Western Australia in the early 1830s, Henry Revelley clearly shared his father’s passion for the Doric order; and it is likely that in selecting it for Government House, he hoped to imbue the vice-regal residence – however modest – with some of these sublime, eternal characteristics. The chaste simplicity of Doric forms was also practical in a young colony with limited resources and few skilled artisans. Although Revelley’s Government House no longer stands, the original specifications and plans that remain enable a detailed description. Built from ‘rough Quarry Stone faced and pointed in regular Courses’, it consisted of a double storey corps de logis with a single storey wing on either side. The main entrance was through a stately Doric portico, hexastyle in antis, which faced north onto St Georges Terrace; a private verandah faced south and overlooked the Swan estuary. Both the portico and verandah were ‘plastered with rough faced Stone coloured Straw’ and their floors paved with slate slabs; the stone Doric columns were fluted in plaster. The corps de logis and wings were each covered with a flat ‘M’ roof, concealed by parapets, while the entablature incorporated an architectonic and cornice that extended across the front of the residence. Two horizontal beams capped the cornice above the portico to form a parapet in the shape of a primitive pediment, a single capstone rested on the cornice of each wing.

The residence’s interior was spacious in comparison to existing houses in Perth. The ground floor contained a vestibule and a ‘Drawing Room with Fire Place 25 ft by 15 ft and 12 ft high’ behind the portico, a dining room with fireplace measuring eighteen feet by twelve feet and three smaller rooms in the west wing; and a large kitchen, also measuring eighteen feet by twelve feet, along with a scullery, larder, servant’s room, butler’s pantry and additional room in the east wing. The upstairs living area contained two bedrooms with river views and a smaller chamber. All rooms were ‘finished and fitted in the usual English style’ with moulded skirting boards, moulded doors, and moulded architraves framing the windows and doorways; the ‘inside Walls and partitions’ were ‘finished with rough faced Stone coloured Straw’. The staircase and wooden floors were fashioned from ‘Swan River mahogany’ or jarrah. Stirling’s intention to build a permanent vice-regal residence elicited favourable comments from the editor of the Western Australian Journal, who noted in September 1834 that the demolition of the old temporary wooden Government House had commenced and that labourers were busy clearing the ground adjoining the late Government Garden. The following month it was reported that the foundation stone of the new residence had been laid by Lady Stirling and that the ‘design for the Building, which will be
of faced stone, is extremely chaste, as well as appropriate to the situation, and, at a comparatively modest expense, will present the elevation of an edifice of considerable size.112 However, not all of Perth’s residents were as well disposed to the new Government House, which in mid 1837 was still incomplete. This delay was a result of the slow communication between London and Perth; Stirling had notified the Secretary of State in 1835 that he would only authorise expenditure required to make the building habitable and would not finish the residence until his proposal to transfer ownership to the Crown had been approved. This approval would only arrive in Perth at the end of 1837, but in June of that year Stirling informed the Executive Council that it had become ‘absolutely necessary not only for the shelter of his family, but also for the security of the building itself, that it should be completed’.113 His councillors unanimously agreed and called for tenders for the proposed alterations as well as repairs to a leaking roof. The call for tenders raised the ire of Stirling’s opponents; the anti-establishment Swan River Guardian claiming that the building had ‘fallen into a state of dilapidation’. It concluded that it ‘must have been built in a very insufficient manner, when it became Public property’ and demanded an investigation. The newspaper also characterised the residence as the ‘ill contrived building called “Government House” (which reminds one of a Lunatic Asylum [sic], or a County Jail)’, an unfair designation that nevertheless shaped opinions of the edifice for decades to come.114

At the time of Queen Victoria’s accession proclamation in November 1837 these repairs and alterations were still in progress, and it was not until the following year, just before Stirling’s final departure from Western Australia, that Government House was completed. It would become abundantly clear in the coming decades that Reveley’s successful design of a modest, yet stately, residence was unfortunately not matched by adequate construction methods and materials; nor was it large enough for succeeding governors whose aspirations and status grew as the colony developed. However, in spite of these deficiencies, the building and surrounding domain would house the governor’s establishment until 1863 and symbolise vice-regal power and authority in Western Australia for nearly two decades.