Old Government House lies in the heart of Belair National Park, 11 kilometres south of Adelaide. It was the summer cottage residence of some of the early governors of South Australia and stands as an excellent example of Victorian-style architecture. It is looked after by a dedicated group of volunteers, the Friends of Old Government House, with the support of the Department for Environment and Heritage.
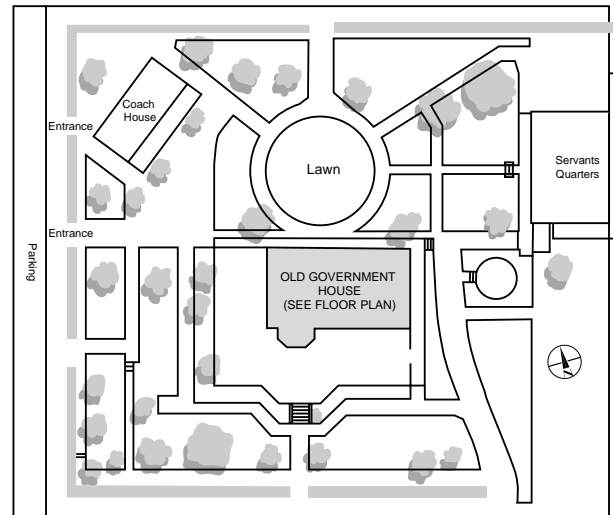

Old Government House from south

The Vice-regal Residence

Old Government House was built on the Government Farm as South Australia's first official vice-regal summer residence (1860-1880), and was used by governors MacDonnell (1855-62) and Daly (1862-68). It was superseded by a larger summer residence at Marble Hill, built in 1878. The former governor's cottage on the Government Farm was then used as the residence of an adjacent Woods and Forests Nursery set up in 1886. In 1961, after vacation by the Woods and Forests Department and partial restoration, the building was opened to the public. It was fully restored in the 1970s as a mid-Victorian vice-regal residence. Further structural renovation and re-interpretation of the interior occurred in 2001 as a Centenary of Federation project.

The Old Government House buildings now reflect how the wealthy of the Victorian era lived, with the main house displaying the style and accoutrements of the well-to-do and the servants' quarters the more modest furnishings of a working family. A garden of mid-Victorian style is an added attraction.

Old Government House Complex

The Garden

About one acre in extent, the garden when the governors were in residence was natural bushland surrounded by a post and rail fence. The Woods and Forests Nursery curators developed it as an early 20th century hills garden, and now it has been designed as a mid-Victorian garden of Anglo-Italianate style to complement the restored complex. It features cottage plants and flowers as cultivated in Victorian times, heritage roses and mature trees.

History

1840
The Government Farm was set aside by Governor Gawler in the valley of the Upper Sturt to grow pasture for and to agist government stock. The governor also considered it a place suitable for use as an occasional retreat close to Adelaide.

1841
Governor Grey, facing a financial crisis in South Australia, put the farm up for auction. This was hastily cancelled because of a defect in the title, preventing sale of the land for private use.
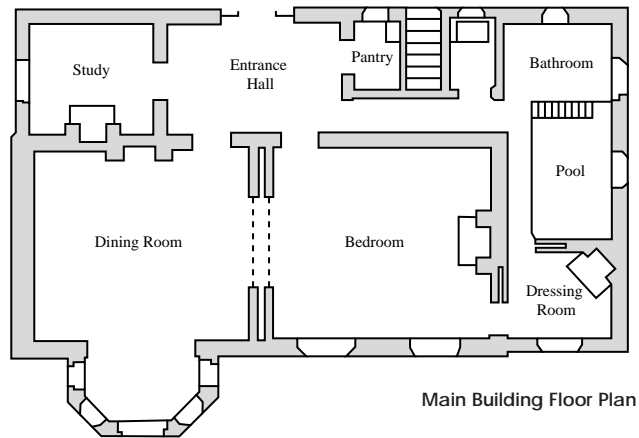
1848
A stone cottage (the present servants' quarters) was built for the supervisor of the Government Farm. At that time it consisted of two main rooms and two lean-to rooms at the back.

1852-1853
The Government Farm was used by the Gold Escort after bringing gold from the Victorian diggings to Adelaide.

Main bedroom in Old Government House

Main Building Floor Plan

1856-1860
Governor Sir Richard MacDonnell, with the colony's economy flourishing, was able to seek more imposing vice-regal residences. A new summer cottage was proposed and supported by parliament, on the Government Farm. This building, although small by vice-regal standards, was constructed of local dressed stone with brick quoins and featured a bay window with a turret and flagpole to distinguish it from other domestic buildings. It contained two main rooms, a small library/office and a large indoor bathroom with a plunge pool, reputed to be the first in South Australia. A spacious terrace surrounded the building and the adjacent older cottage became a kitchen annex.

1860-1868
Used by governors MacDonnell and Daly.

1870-1874
Tenanted by Major J.A. Fergusson (brother of Governor Sir James Fergusson).

1878-1884
The governor's cottage was taken over by the Survey Department for the manufacture of rabbit poison. The supervisor of works, chemist Max Bernbaum, used the house as living quarters and the older cottage became the chemical factory.

1886
All buildings on the site were transferred to the new Woods and Forests Department. The Old Government House, re-named "The Rest", was occupied by the curators of the nursery from then until 1958.

1891
The Government Farm became the National Park, except the Woods and Forests nursery.

1958
Old Government House was transferred to the Commissioners of the National Park.

1961
Old Government House Main Building was opened to the public after partial restoration.

1975-1982
Major restoration took place on both the main house and the servants' quarters. The garden was completely redesigned.

2001
Reinterpretation of the interior was done as a Centenary of Federation project.

Dining room, displaying period furniture

Rear entrance (tour entry) to Old Government House

Visiting Old Government House

The buildings are open on Sundays and public holidays from 1 pm to 4 pm. Guides from the Friends of Old Government House conduct tours and show the different styles and furnishings in each building. Visitors can also wander through the heritage garden.
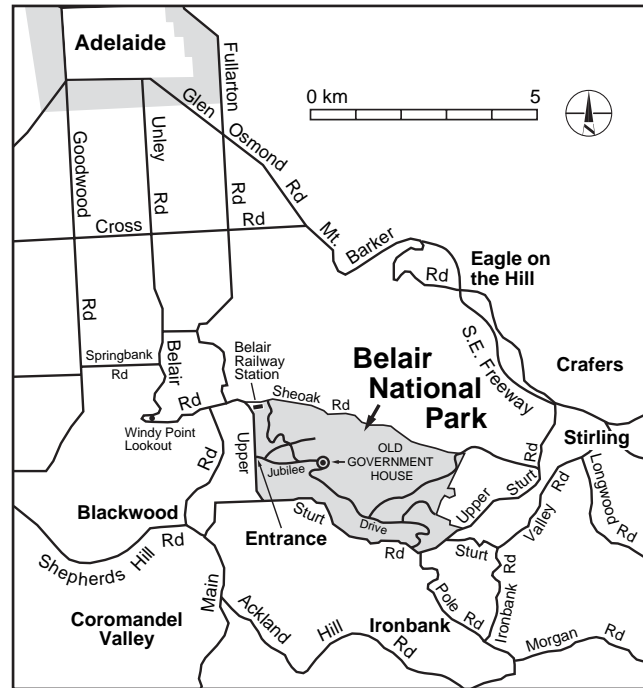
Closed Good Friday and Christmas Day

Weekday tours and special interest groups are welcome by appointment. Gold coin donation to support Friends Group activities applies.

Weddings

The garden is a very popular and attractive venue available for hire for wedding ceremonies and photographs.

For group tour and wedding enquiries phone (08) 8278 5477

For further information

Please contact:
Friends of Old Government House
Belair National Park
Upper Sturt Road
PO Box 2 Belair SA 5052
Phone (08) 8278 5477