

The tale of a white elephant

A marine residence for the Governor of Natal

When the British annexed Natal in 1843 Pietermaritzburg was already the administrative centre of the territory. By building Fort Napier they made it also a military base. When the first lieutenant-governor arrived he took up residence in Pietermaritzburg, the officials constituting the executive council functioned from there and in 1846 a district court was set up. The priority of Pietermaritzburg over the coastal village of Durban was thus firmly established.

A social consequence of the acquisition of metropolitan status was the early emergence in Pietermaritzburg of a colonial élite composed of the officials, military officers and the more affluent citizens, presided over by the queen's representative, the lieutenant-governor, one of whose functions was to overawe the indigenous peoples and impress and gratify the settlers by a display of pomp and ceremony.

The influx of colonists by sea between 1849 and 1852 stimulated the development of Durban but it still had a smaller white population than Pietermaritzburg in 1852, 1 140, as against 1 520.¹ Durban was forging ahead, however. When Marianne Gillespie got back in 1861 from a visit to England she found that much had happened during the year she was away: there were many new arrivals, more respectable houses were being built, many with two storeys, some large shops had appeared and there was 'a greater variety of business and usefulness' than there had been.² Marianne Gillespie was the wife of Hugh Gillespie and the sister of Joseph Fleetwood Churchill, whose wife was Gillespie's sister. Both men were fifties immigrants, both highly successful Durban merchants. Churchill became a member of the legislative council and Gillespie twice served as mayor of Durban. By the 1860s both were in a position to indulge upwardly mobile social inclinations: Churchill retired at the age of 33 to devote himself to public affairs, Gillespie set about building a residence more appropriate to his status than the modest wood and iron house he was occupying. He relied on his brother-in-law William Churchill in England to send out essential material for the large house he was building in St Andrew's Street. He was hoping to have it finished in time for the arrival of the new Lieutenant-Governor, Colonel John Maclean, in mid-1864 because he wanted to give a ball in honour of his arrival.³ Much to his annoyance the material from England was slow in arriving; essentials like felt roofing, lead piping, a water closet and banisters had not even been sent off by September 1863, meaning at best another six months' delay. By the following April the house was habitable but the temporary stairs were so steep that his pregnant wife went up and down only once a day, spending the daytime in the old house.⁴

It was not until December 1864 that the Gillespies were able to hold a housewarm-

ing party. But at last they had a superior house. Joseph Churchill said it was quite a mansion, very cool and comfortable, and undoubtedly the finest house in Durban. There was a splendid view over the bay from the balcony on one side and a ‘picturesque’ one on the other. When Lieutenant-Governor Maclean and his lady called on the Gillespies they were enchanted with the beautiful view from the portico and thought the house very superior for a colony. This is the house that was to become the governor’s maritime residence.⁵

Interest in the provision of a Durban residence for the governor was expressed in two



*The Governor’s Marine Residence – front elevation with the main entrance.
The side elevation visible faces on to St Andrew’s Street.*

quarters, by the leading citizens of Durban and by some of the governors themselves. As Durban grew in population, wealth and sophistication an élite with social ambitions became increasingly aware of how disadvantaged they were in comparison with their counterparts in Pietermaritzburg through not having the governor more frequently among them. Equally, some of the governors, notably the long-serving Pine, expressed a desire to spend at least a portion of their time in what by the end of the seventies had become the larger of the two centres of population.

The first lieutenant-governor, Martin West, had no official residence, even in Pietermaritzburg. He lived in rented accommodation there, but when his successor, Benjamin Pine, arrived in April 1850 it was said that he intended spending half the year in Durban to prevent jealousy between the two places.⁶ Nothing came of the suggestion, however. When Pine went to Durban in pursuit, his enemies said, of his womanising inclinations, he stayed in a boarding house.⁷ His successor, John Scott, showed no interest in Durban; he was criticised for scarcely ever visiting it.⁸ It was more than twenty years before the matter came up again but when it did it was more than a speculative rumour: The Durban town council’s address of welcome to the newly-arrived Lieutenant-Governor Musgrave

in 1872 referred to the necessity of a marine residence for the governor in Durban.⁹

The proposal was so much to Musgrave's liking that he did not wait for an official residence. In February of the following year he and his family left Pietermaritzburg for a two or three months' stay at *Overport*, the grand residence on the Berea in Durban of William Hartley, one of Durban's wealthiest citizens, which was taken over by the lieutenant-governor, his suite and his servants. He was formally received by the mayor of Durban, J. Goodliffe, the Secretary for Native Affairs, Theophilus Shepstone and Mr Hope, Hartley's son-in-law. There the Musgraves held weekly at-homes and performed public functions like a visit to Mr Clarence's sugar mill at *Clare*, to the Point and to the Botanic Gardens. A new road across the Berea was nearing completion at the time and the town council decided to call it Musgrave Road in honour of the visit. Towards the end of March Shepstone sent down the government mule wagon to bring them home.¹⁰ Musgrave's tenure of office was brief; after only nine months he was appointed to South Australia, but Durban had one more viceregal occasion, for the Musgraves stayed in *Overport* again in April *en route* to Australia and Mrs Escombe, the wife of the town solicitor and standing counsel, was able to give a quadrille party in the masonic hall for the governor's party and 180 guests.¹¹

When Sir Benjamin Pine was appointed to succeed Musgrave for a second term of office, the *Natal Mercury* announced that he intended to live mainly in Durban, that he had taken a house on the Berea for a long term and that he had purchased property there.¹² Pine lost no time in pursuing his objective. In his speech at the opening of the legislative council a month later he spoke of the need for a marine residence. In reply the council expressed its willingness to vote £2 500 for the building of a house in Durban and asked him to approach Durban town council about a site. Meanwhile, the executive council was ready to sanction £250 for hiring a house.

After Pine had raised the matter again in the executive council a figure of £3 000 was put on the estimates for 1875.¹³ This and a government notice inserted in the press led to a number of properties being offered for sale to the government. The recall of Pine over the Langalibalele affair delayed proceedings for a few months but after the arrival of Sir Henry Bulwer as lieutenant-governor the executive council referred four of the offers to a committee: a building and land in Field Street, Durban owned by the attorney J.R. Goodricke, William Hartley's *Overport House*, a house belonging to H.E.C. Behrens, a businessman and banker, and the house in St Andrew's Street which Hugh Gillespie had built, Gillespie having died in a drowning accident in 1869. Goodricke wanted £10 000 for his house, an amount 'out of the question' in the opinion of the committee, especially as the buildings were unsuitable, *Overport* was thought to be too far from the town and expensive at £6 000; Behrens' house was 'altogether unsuitable' so Gillespie's house was chosen on the grounds of its 'eligible site, convenient accommodation and moderate price'. By 13 votes to 8 the legislative council agreed to the purchase of the house for £4 600 and a further £1 000 was approved for furniture.¹⁴ The deal was agreed on 7 June 1876.

Just a year later serious misgivings were being experienced. Two sets of problems had emerged, one relating to the governor's reservations about a Durban residence and the other to the house itself. At Bulwer's request a committee of the executive council, consisting of the Colonial Secretary, the Colonial Engineer and the Colonial Treasurer, was set up to advise on the matter. Bulwer had felt duty bound to use the house on a

number of occasions, including a protracted stay of almost three months at the end of 1876 and beginning of 1877; the experience left him concerned about the inconvenience and extra work his absence from the capital entailed for officials and civil servants; he feared, too, that he would be obliged to make his coastal visits at the least desirable times of the year because he had to be in Pietermaritzburg during the cooler season for the meetings of the legislative council; and most serious of all, he believed that his salary simply would not enable him to duplicate in Durban the sort of hospitality he was expected to provide in Pietermaritzburg. The suitability of the house itself was also called in question by Bulwer; he found neither its location nor its accommodation good.

The committee, nevertheless, recommended the retention of the house, though it agreed with Bulwer about entertainment, stipulating that the governor must not be expected to provide hospitality on the scale he did in Pietermaritzburg, especially balls, which cost hundreds of pounds. The inconvenience caused by his absence from headquarters was not considered insuperable. The house itself, the committee thought, was structurally sound, though repairs were required to ceilings and windows; ideally, it needed a larger dining room, new stables and an improved kitchen, but it was not an unhealthy site or more unpleasant in warm weather than the neighbouring houses on the Bayside. The bad smell from a kitchen drain could be put right. Besides, there was nothing better available and since few people in Durban could afford to live in such a house it could not be sold for anything like the price paid for it. The small house on the property could be let for £8 or £9 a month to offset maintenance costs.

The Colonial Secretary Charles Mitchell shared the governor's qualms about the maritime residence. It was proving to be of no practical use, it was falling into disrepair, it was costing £84 a year for a caretaker/gardener – in short, it was 'such a perfect white elephant' that he was glad to make a stop-gap arrangement with a gentleman who was looking for accommodation in Durban. This was Captain Edward Baynton who had been commodore of the Union Steam Ship Company's fleet and who had just arrived in Durban to become the company's agent. Under the agreement, which dated from the beginning of 1879, Captain Baynton rented the two houses on the property on the understanding that while the smaller house was to be his residence he would have the use of the larger one except when it was required by the governor or for a distinguished visitor; he might then be required to vacate it on two days' notice.¹⁵

While the arrangement with Baynton was under discussion the house was used to accommodate Sir Bartle Frere when he came to Durban in mid-September 1878 in his capacity as high commissioner for discussions on Zululand. General Thesinger and Colonial Secretary Mitchell decided at the last minute to install him in the new Government House and not, as originally intended, at the Belgrave Hotel in West Street. However, the catering arrangements during his seventeen-day stay were entrusted to Mr Frye of the Belgrave.¹⁶ Six months later the Prince Imperial of France arrived and from 3 March to 19 April was the guest of Captain and Mrs Baynton in Government House. When his mother, the Empress Eugénie, made her pilgrimage to Natal the following year she too was the guest of the Bayntons in appreciation of their kindness to her son. The governor, Sir Garnet Wolseley, came down from Pietermaritzburg to meet the empress and stayed in the small house on the property, dining with the company in Government House. Wolseley expressed concern about Mrs Baynton who, he said, was a lady of about 20 stone and was so agitated by the prospect of her royal visitor



The Governor's Resident – front elevation, taken from across the waters of the bay.

that he feared apoplexy. The house had official occupants again when General Colley and his wife arrived in Durban to take up his governorship on 28 June 1880 and spent two days in it before proceeding to Pietermaritzburg.¹⁷

When Sir Henry Bulwer returned to Natal in 1882 for his second term as governor he found the Bayntons still in occupation of Government House in Durban. No governor or administrator ever had, or in his opinion ever would, exercise the right of evicting them on two days' notice. It was unbecoming the dignity of a colonial governor to place him in such a position. He was further annoyed to hear that Baynton had sublet the smaller house at £15 a month – a rate of £180 a year, though he paid only £100 a year for the two houses. The whole arrangement was not to the advantage of the government and should be terminated and the houses sold or let at an economic rent. The Colonial Secretary agreed with him.

All that could be said for the arrangement was that Baynton's rent had paid for new stables and had put and kept the house in repair.

There followed a great spurt of activity, inquiring into expenditure on the property, its current value, whether to sell or lease, whether to dispose of it in one lot or two, whether an alternative use could be found for it. Sir Bartle Frere had suggested it might be used by the army for officers' quarters. A proposal that it might serve as a court house for the Umlazi magistracy was rejected on the grounds that it was too far from the jail and the Durban courthouse. It was not until 7 June 1887, eleven years to the day since it had been bought, that the property was purchased by John Millar on behalf of Mrs Natalia Grice for £3 000. It had cost, with transfer fees and interest £4 858-4-7 and an estimated £700 had been spent on it.¹⁸

There is an appendage to the tale: the sale of Government House in Durban was not the end of the quest for a seaside residence. Long before the house was disposed of, it had largely ceased to function as the governor's Durban headquarters. It did not figure in Bulwer's leave-taking of Durban in October 1885. A farewell banquet was hosted

by the mayor in the Durban Club and afterwards Mrs Harry Escombe held an at-home to which upwards of 300 guests were invited. When the next governor, Sir Arthur Havelock, arrived in the following February he was taken by special train straight to Pietermaritzburg after a welcoming ceremony in the town hall.¹⁹ When he returned for a three-day visit the following month he and his party stayed at the Royal Hotel²⁰, though a reception at the conclusion of the visit was held in the St Andrew's Street house which had been 'put in a proper state for the occasion'.²¹ Havelock revived the practice of renting accommodation in Durban, although he still had an official residence there; when he went with his family to Durban in June 1886 it was to Hartley's *Overport House*.²² *Overport House* was used on subsequent occasions but so too were other places. When Governor Mitchell was contemplating a visit to Durban in July 1890 he was expected to take J.J. Grice's house on the Bayside (i.e. the former Government House).²³ In the event, he went instead to the port captain's house at the Point.²⁴ The Durban Club and hotels like the Alexandra and the Royal were also sometimes chosen. The advent of the railway also made it possible for a governor on his way to Zululand to pass through Durban and be the guest of some prominent person on the north coast.

None of these arrangements was acceptable to the maritime residence lobby. Greater wealth, expanding ambitions and a livelier interest among later governors favoured their cause. Yet it took fifteen years for Durban's second governor's residence to materialise.

The process began just two years after the St Andrew's Street house was sold, when the government purchased a leasehold site on the Berea which had originally been part of William Hartley's *Overport* estate. The sum of £15 000 to build a house was then put on the estimates for 1890. But there was considerable opposition both to the site and to the proposed expenditure. Though it commanded a splendid view the site was said to be difficult of access, about four miles from the town and so exposed that it would be ten years before a protecting screen of trees made it liveable on. It was likely to cost guests 20 to 50 shillings to hire a trap to get there and they would be exposed to the dangers of going so far on a dark night. Upcountry members especially were concerned about the initial cost of the building and about the cost of equipping, staffing and maintaining it. After proposing first to reduce the estimate figure to £6 000 it was eventually decided instead to provide in the meantime a grant of £400 a year to enable the governor to hire accommodation for a season in Durban.²⁵ In 1897 the corporation was still pressing the government to accept its offer of freehold and build a governor's house but it was not until the wartime session of 1901 that the legislative assembly at last agreed to proceed. Though the plans were ready by October 1901 the house was not finished until 1904, much to the annoyance of the governor, Sir Henry McCallum, who said the work could have been carried out in a third of the time.²⁶ A luncheon to celebrate the opening on 29 June 1904 was presided over by Sir Henry Bale, the chief justice of the supreme court who was acting as administrator in the absence of the governor. A note from the prime minister's secretary on 21 December 1904 informed the postmaster general that in future the house would be called King's House, Durban.²⁷

NOTES

1. *Statistical tables relating to the colonial possessions of the United Kingdom*, H.C. 1856 (2127)
2. Killie Campbell Library, Churchill papers, Ms 30 (8), Marianne Churchill to William Churchill, May 1861.

3. D. Child, *A merchant family in early Natal: Diaries and letters of Joseph and Marianne Churchill*, Cape Town, 1979, p. 162. Hugh Gillespie to William Churchill, 2 July 1864.
4. Killie Campbell Library, Churchill papers, Ms 34(12) and Ms 39(13), Hugh Gillespie to William Churchill, 28 September 1863 and 1 April 1864.
5. Killie Campbell Library, Churchill papers, Ms 33(8) and Ms 33(9), J.F. Churchill to William Churchill, 31 July 1864 and 29 August 1864; Ms 28(8), Emma Churchill to William Churchill, 29 December 1868.
6. Killie Campbell Library, Ms 99/45, Diary of William Todd, 20 April 1850.
7. Child, *A merchant family in early Natal*, p.14.
8. Alan F. Hattersley, *A camera on old Natal*, p.73.
9. W.P. Henderson, *Durban: Fifty years of municipal history*, Durban, 1904, p.81.
10. *Natal Colonist*, 21 and 25 February 1873; South African Archives, Pietermaritzburg, A96, Shepstone's diary, 17 and 18 February and 25 March 1873; Killie Campbell Library, Ms 89/20 Hartley papers, files 1 and 2; Colenso papers, file 21, Mrs Colenso to Lady Lyall, 12 February 1873.
11. *Natal Colonist*, 10 April 1873
12. *Natal Mercury*, 11 September 1873
13. *Votes and proceedings, legislative council*, 1874, p.323, 30 October 1874 and p.441, 18 November 1874; *ibid*, 1875, p.18, 13 May 1875.
14. South African Archives, Pietermaritzburg, Executive Council papers, Minutes of executive council, vol. 10, p.146, 18 June 1877; CSO 599.
15. South African Archives, Pietermaritzburg, CSO 599; CSO 1125.
16. *Natal Mercury*, 25 and 27 September 1878.
17. *Natal Witness*, 29 June 1880.
18. South African Archives, Pietermaritzburg, CSO 1125 and AGO 1/8/35.
19. *Natal Witness*, 19 and 24 October 1885
20. *Natal Witness*, 17 and 18 February 1886
21. *Natal Witness*, 18 March 1886
22. *Natal Witness*, 22 May and 12 June 1886
23. *Natal Mercury*, 9 July and 4 September 1890
24. *Natal Witness*, 21 January 1890
25. *Votes and proceedings, house of assembly*, 1889, xiii.379–380, 399–401 and 440, and *Assembly debates, 1889*, pp.379–380, 388 and 397–401.
26. *Natal Mercury*, 4 October 1902
27. South African Archives, Pietermaritzburg, PM/51/2102

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