

THE HOUSE ON THE HILL





Produced by the Northern Territory Department of Education,
Education Policy and Programs,
Quality Teaching and Learning, 2019
Contact: christine.collins1@nt.gov.au

A story
of man
versus
beast...



The first Administrator



The second Administrator



The architect



The first Administrator of Palmerston (as Darwin used to be called) was Captain Douglas. He decided that Government House needed to be built somewhere that was separate from the main camp of Palmerston. He chose up on the hill, overlooking the settlement of Palmerston below.

Captain Douglas then planned his new home:

The Residence on the hill will contain ten rooms. The interior walls will be of stone, with sleeping apartments and verandah of wood. The roof will be of thatch and the floors of cypress pine.

Left: View from the hill.

Harriet was Captain Douglas' daughter. She explained the new house further:

There was to be a centre room of stone, with bedrooms, bathrooms and pantries, made of wood, opening off it on either side. The kitchen was detached and built of logs some little distance away. The roof went through many changes...a flat roof was found... practicable.

Planning the house was one step but building it was much more difficult. Harriet explains:

We had "difficulties in obtaining building material... We literally had to begin at the very beginning of everything. The only material at hand was stone.



Above: Harriet on a picnic with her family. Mr Douglas is on the far right.



Lime was the first problem. They needed lime to make the cement to hold stone walls together but there was no limestone anywhere. They decided to collect coral at low tide and grind it. Then they had to build a kiln to bake the coral to make the lime.

The next problem was lack of suitable timber for building. There was Iron Bark, but it was too hard for hand-sawing. After much searching, they found a forest of Cypress Pine at Bynoe Harbour. A ship, 'Gulnare' was loaded with as much as she could carry.

A saw pit was made, and the beams and planks required were at once put into hand.

Once the wood was sawn, it was used to build the roof but that was not the end of the problems.

Left: Men with a two-man saw.

*K*eeping the rain out appeared hopeless (the) timber was cut before being properly seasoned and (it) warped and shrunk... Canvas was laid down (over the roof), stretched tightly, and well saturated with paint; but that did not succeed. The pitiless vertical sun dried up the oil, and blistered the paint into huge bubbles. At last, having tried everything else, a cement covering was made, and laid over the planked ceiling. This plan succeeded, and notwithstanding the weight and strain of such a heavy roof, it answered remarkably well.

By April 1871, Captain Douglas said that the:

Residence will be completed in about a month. There will be a stone hall in the centre which will be used as a courthouse or for public purposes.

Right: Government House on the hill, with one storey.



Building the house cost 12,000 pounds, which was a lot of money in those days.

When the Douglas family finally moved into the new house, Harriet described it as ‘delightful’ because people would no longer be able to see her laundry hanging on the line. She said,

No one rejoiced more in the move to the hill than my mother, for at last she had a suitable fowl house, and was able to secure greater comfort for the poultry.

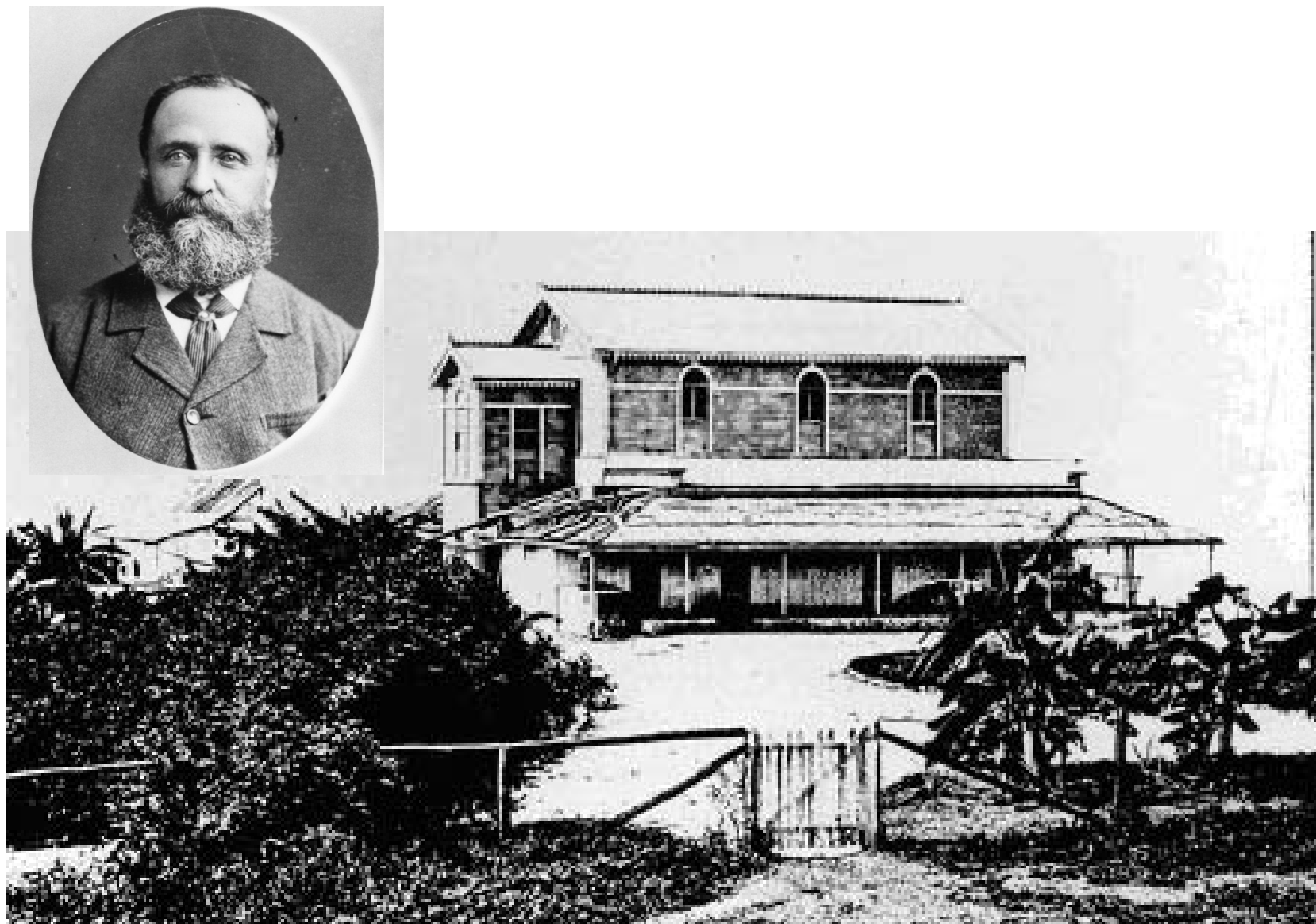
A flagpole was erected and a small signal cannon was put in the garden.

The cannon had originally been owned by George Woodroffe Goyder, the founder of Darwin. It is still at Government House today, making it the oldest object there.

Another problem presented itself at Government House; one that they hadn’t planned for. There were one million invaders secretly hiding nearby under the ground, getting ready to strike!

Right: Government House with two stories.





In just one year, there were more problems with the building. All the cement that they put on the roof was too heavy. The wooden beam in the main room had cracked and all the cement also cracked. That meant that the rain came in. In fact, it became so wet inside that the family couldn't use the main room or the side rooms.

Captain Douglas left the office of Government Resident in 1873 and the next person, Mr George Scott, moved in. He described Government House as having:

a wretched appearance, and as the verandah is merely covered with bark, it reminds me of a dilapidated barn.

Another level was built on top of the house but the inhabitants were in constant terror of the upper storey parting company with the lower during a heavy squall.

Left: Mr Scott, the second Administrator.



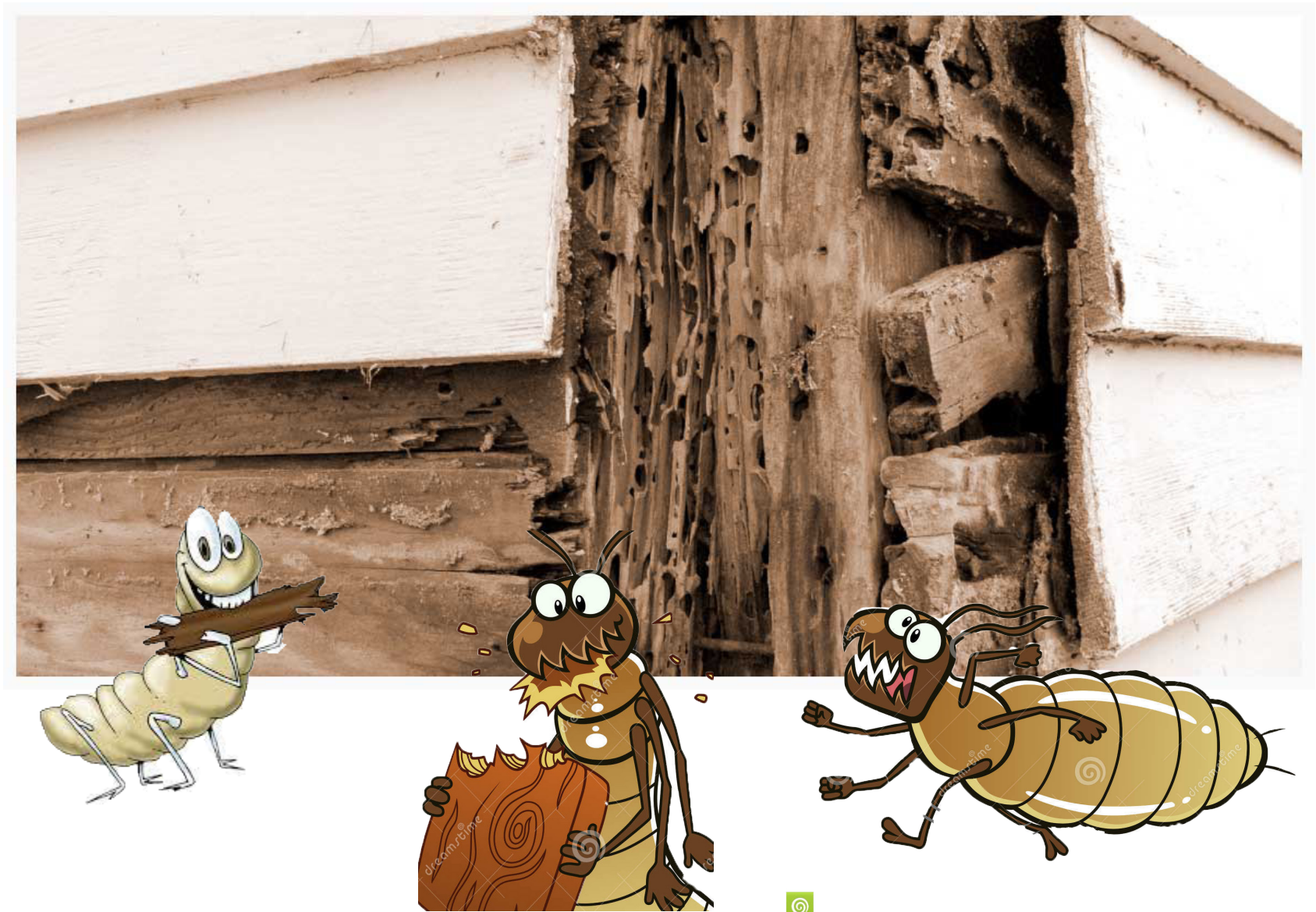
Poor Mr Scott. Things were about to get a lot worse. The one million invaders decided it was time for them to attack, so they marched in, munching and crunching on all the wood of the house as they went. They were literally eating the whole house!

The pests in Darwin were termites or white ants and they were very destructive. They secretly destroyed the walls, floor, ceiling and the roof by burrowing into the wood. Mr Scott would not have even known they were there until it was too late and the damage was done.

In 1874, Mr John George Knight, newly arrived Government Secretary and architect, arrived. He said,

The Government Residence appears to have been built upon a great bed of these destructive pests.

Left: Termite mounds in Darwin.



Many of the rooms were so badly damaged that they needed to be pulled down and rebuilt. The ceiling had fallen in and needed fixing and some rooms were now leaking so badly that they were covered with canvas.

A year later, it was totally unfit to live in and the top storey was very dangerous. Mr Knight said that using wood for buildings in the Top End was 'useless'. He said that all buildings in Palmerston should be made from stone and that:

This unfortunate building which appears to have been raised upon huge stratum of white ants of extra size and destructiveness... has had to undergo further repairs. The imported hardwood framing of the upper storey erected only 12 months ago has been completely riddled by these fearful pests...

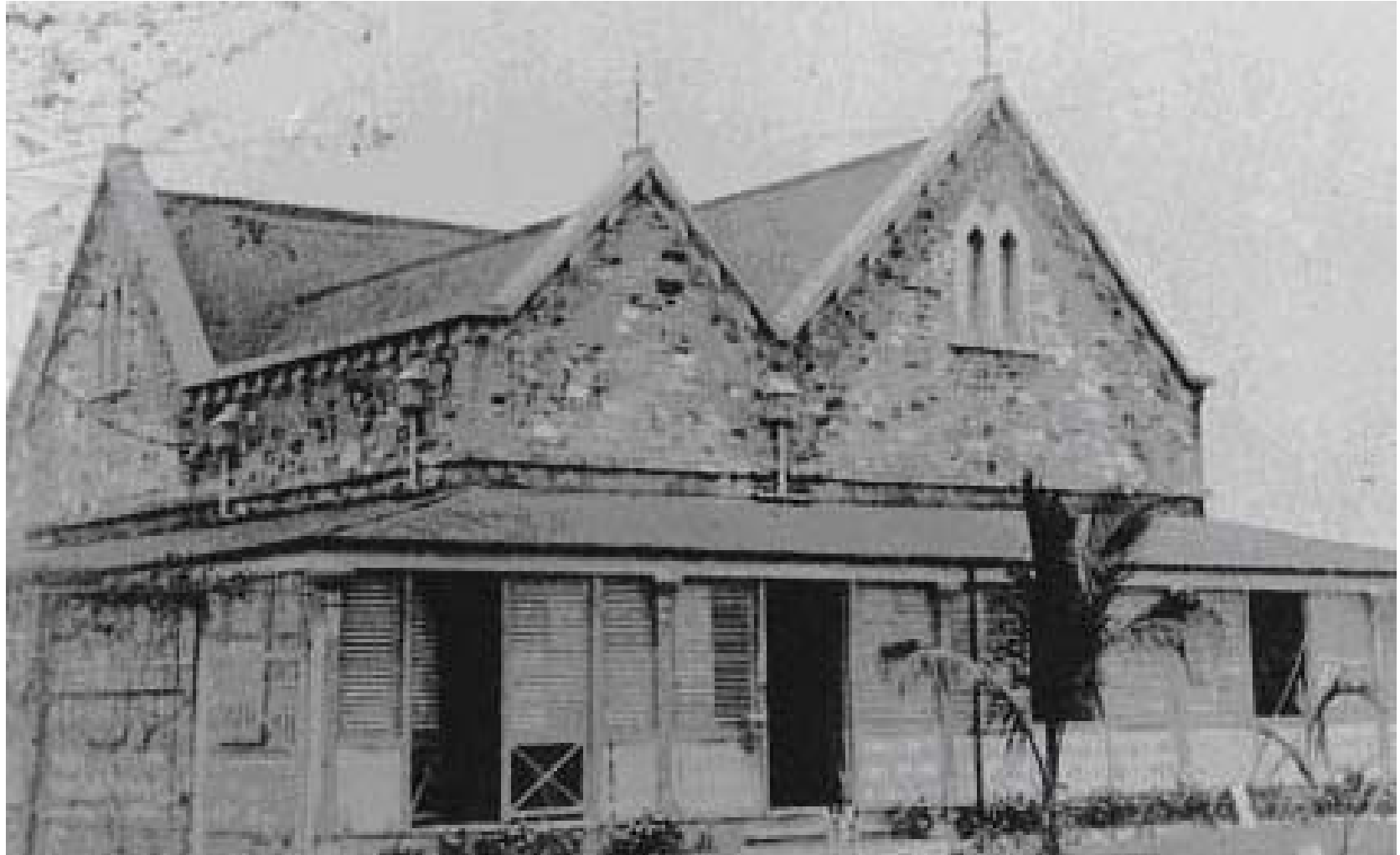
Left: Termite damage.



The third Government Resident, Mr Edward Price, moved into the house, in 1876. The poor man had lost his wife and five children the year before, when the ship 'Gothenburg' was wrecked off the Queensland coast in a cyclone. Now he lived in the building alone. He said that it was an 'unsightly and uncomfortable old wooden building'. Mr Price needed to employ a carpenter fulltime to stop the top storey from falling down and he said that it was a waste of money to keep repairing the building.

On 19th January 1877, a cyclone caused the roof to fall in completely, and some of the iron walls blew away. Guess what Mr Price saw without the walls and roof? The awful damage done by the termites! He described what he saw:

The rafters had been completely eaten away and the roof had only hung by the rivets. To give you some idea of what white ants can do here, I may mention that they have found their way up through about 18 feet high of stone wall of the new building on to the timber of the roof.



Mr Price worked with the architect, Mr Knight, to design and build a new building. The first job was to remove the dangerous top storey. The wooden beams were so rotten that when the builders undid the bracing that held them together, they fell and badly injured two of the men. Then bricks that were made at a factory in Fannie Bay were too brittle and crumbled away, so they had to make new ones.

The rebuilding took nearly two years and many more thousands of pounds. Finally it was finished. The 'House of Seven Gables' as it was called, is the same house that we see today. (A gable is the triangular upper part of a wall at the end of a ridged roof.) The only part left from the original building was the main room, which was built of stone and not destroyed by termites. So the building was complete and the termites were defeated? Well, not quite.

Left: The House of 'Seven Gables'.



Above: Government House today.

Even though the building was finished, the white ants continued to attack it. Every piece of timber that was not Cypress Pine was destroyed, no matter how well they tried to stop them. The verandah of Government House was the only part that was NOT Cypress Pine, so it was eaten. To reach it, the white ants had first to go over many bricks and solid lead but it was easy for them.

Finally, all the repairs were made and it seemed that the enemies had called a truce. There were reports that the termites had moved on to other buildings that were easier to eat than the new Government House. So a happy ending seemed possible but...

It may not have been termites anymore but Government House still faced other challenges in the years to come. Some would say the challenges were even worse than the termites, but that is another story...

