Tasmania’s first Parliament was established in 1825 as a nominee Legislative Council which met at Government House. In 1841 the Council relocated to the Long Room of the recently completed Custom House, designed by the colonial architect, John Lee Archer. Following the establishment of a bicameral parliament in 1856, the House of Assembly used the Long Room and the Legislative Council began meeting in its current chamber.

The Tasmanian Parliament houses many and varied items of interest collected since the early days of the Parliament. They are scattered through the building, some still occupying their original placement.

Parliamentary Museum

The Parliament has a small Parliamentary Museum housed in the basement of the building in a room with a beautiful vaulted ceiling. Some of the bricks used in the construction of the ceiling can be readily identified as convict made with the distinctive broad arrow marking.

The room began as the King’s Store where goods awaited payment of import duty and for the storage of rum which explains the former iron-barred windows that originally faced onto a yard. The workmanship of the basement is worthy of note. Daniel Herbert, a stonemason, was originally sentenced to death for highway robbery, but is now famous for carving the images on the Ross Bridge. He worked as overseer during the completion of the basement, so his skills can be seen throughout.

A parliamentary history museum was first suggested in March 1953 by Colonel Blacklow, MLC. Due to excessive damp the museum did not take shape until the early 1980s. Responsibility for the management of the Museum was delegated to the Parliamentary Librarian by the Library Committee in 1984.

The museum houses a collection of photos of government ministries, governors, premiers and members of Parliament, as well as other items associated with the Parliament. Early photos of the Legislative Council 1894-5 and the House of Assembly 1925 provide a record of some of the sittings of both chambers. Of particular note is a set of books written by, signed and presented to the Parliament in the 1860s by Queen Victoria. They are housed in a specially made wooden cabinet with a glass front and were presented to many of the colonial parliaments in memory of her deceased husband Prince Albert.

Also in the museum is an engraving presented to the Parliament by Jane, Lady Franklin, wife of Sir John Franklin, who was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen’s Land in 1836. It depicts a meeting of the Arctic Council assembled at the Admiralty with the principal commanders and men of note who have taken an active part in the research after a supposed North-Western Passage and the disappearance of Sir John Franklin. The original art work was painted by Stephen Pearce in 1851.

Copies of the proceedings of the Australasian Federal Convention are housed in the Museum. The convention was held in 1897/98 to consider federation of the states and create an Australian constitution.
Parliamentary Library

The library has some notable pieces of antique furniture which have been maintained by the Parliament. Two very early writing desks are of particular interest. The library also houses a rare book collection containing volumes brought from England for the library which was established in 1852.

Other items of interest

In the Long Room opposite the House of Assembly Chamber hangs a portrait in oils of Sir Richard Dry, a former Premier of Tasmania 1866 – 1869 and first presiding officer of the Parliament of Van Diemen’s Land. The portrait is by Conway Hart and was commissioned by public subscription in 1855. The size of the painting does not allow it to be removed from the room in its frame and it dominates one wall.

A painting of Queen Victoria hangs in the Legislative Council Chamber. It arrived in Tasmania in 1856 and is a copy from the original, which hangs in Windsor Castle, by Franz Xavier Winterhalter.

A very early leather despatch box is housed in the Speakers’ Rooms in the House of Assembly. It was used by the President and Clerk of the Legislative Council to transport legislation to Government House for Royal Assent in the 19th and 20th centuries.

(Based on research undertaken by the Parliamentary Historian)

Free tours of Parliament House are held on non-sitting days at 9.30 am and 2.30 pm depending on the availability of staff. For groups of more than fifteen a booking is required. Phone 6212 2248 or email tours@parliament.tas.gov.au.

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