

High Court of Australia

History of the High Court

The High Court of Australia was formally established in 1901 under section 71 of the Australian Constitution. Its role is to interpret and apply the laws of Australia, to decide cases of federal significance, and to hear appeals from federal, state, and territory courts. While the High Court is the highest avenue of appeal in Australia, further appeals could be made to the Privy Council in Britain until 1975.

Following the passage of the *Judiciary Act 1903* the first appointments were made to the High Court bench:

- Chief Justice Samuel Griffith, former Premier (1883–88) and former Chief Justice (1893–1903) of Queensland
- Justice Edmund Barton, former Prime Minister of Australia (1901–03)
- Justice Richard Edward O'Connor, former Minister of Justice and Solicitor-General of New South Wales (1891–1903) and former Senator (1901–03)

By 1906, the High Court had become established as a viable, effective and necessary part of the Australian judicial system. The increasing demands on the High Court led to the number of justices being increased to five in 1906, and then to seven in 1913. The primary registry of the High Court was initially located in Melbourne, and from 1973 in Sydney. When the High Court building was finished in 1980 the administration was transferred to Canberra.

Records about the High Court

Records held by the National Archives about the High Court date from 1901, and include judges' notebooks, correspondence between High Court members, reports on issues involving the High Court, records of Court judgements and a range of images of the High Court. A selection of records created by the High Court, and records created by other Commonwealth departments and agencies about the High Court, are listed below.

To identify other records about the High Court, [search the collection](#).

Access to records of the High Court

Unlike most Commonwealth government records, the records of the High Court are only subject to the access provisions of the Archives Act under conditions agreed between the Court and the National Archives. Arrangements agreed in 1996 permit access to most records of the Court transferred to National Archives custody, including those listed below.

Inquiries relating to records still in the custody of the Court should be directed:

Registry Manager of the High Court
PO Box 6309
Kingston ACT 2604

Records created by the High Court

Correspondence registers

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
<u>Letterbooks of outwards correspondence – single number arrangement (1903–23); chronological arrangement (1923–73)</u>	1903–73	A10784
<u>Letterbooks of outwards correspondence – single number series</u>	1903–37	A10785
<u>Letterbooks of inwards correspondence</u>	1903–29	A10792
<u>Letter Register – Chief Justice</u>	1903–09	A10793

Case records

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
<u>Full court case records (Victoria); Court and Cause case records (1973–80)</u>	1903–80	A10074
<u>Court Book case records (Victoria)</u>	1907–73	A10117

Judges' notebooks

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
<u>Judges' notebooks – Justice Sir Edmund Barton</u>	1904–19	A10612
<u>Chambers notebooks – Justice Sir Isaac Isaacs</u>	1906–30	A10597
<u>General notebook – Justice Sir Isaac Isaacs</u>	1906–30	A10600
<u>Chambers and original jurisdiction notebooks – Chief Justice Sir Owen Dixon</u>	1929–41	A10669

Selection of records relating to the High Court

Administrative matters

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>An act to make provision for the exercise of the judicial power of the Commonwealth (the Judiciary Act) – assented 25 August 1903</u>	1901–03	A1559, 1903/6
<u>Acknowledgement by Britain of telegram reporting appointments to High Court of judicature and reconstruction of federal ministry</u>	1903	A1, 1903/6334
<u>High Court Procedure Act 1903–04</u>	1903–04	A1, 1904/1772
<u>High Court Procedure Bill, 1903</u>	1903	A6006, 1903/12/31
<u>Photograph of the justices of the first High Court of Australia</u>	1903	A12340, 1
<u>Return to be laid on the table of the House showing the amount of work performed by the High Court during the first year of existence</u>	1904	A432, 1929/2635
<u>Industrial – conciliation and arbitration judges of the High Court</u>	1926–31	A458, K502/1
<u>Photographic album of the opening of the High Court of Australia, Canberra, 26 May 1980</u>	1980	A5801, 1

High Court Justices

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Appointment of Sir Samuel W Walker Griffith as Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia</u>	1903–19	A432, 1950/481
<u>Judges of High Court – Mr Justice O'Connor</u>	1903–13	A432, 1950/483
<u>Judges of the High Court – appointment of Sir Edmund Barton (and arrangements for funeral)</u>	1903–20	A432, 1950/484
<u>Appointment of Sir Isaac Alfred Isaacs as (1) Justice of the High Court of Australia; (2) Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia</u>	1906–52	A432, 1950/469
<u>Appointment and resignation of Dr HV Evatt to the High Court bench</u>	1930–40	A432, 1950/476