

Name	<i>Idlewylde; Mary's Mount</i>	Reference No	
Address	41-45 Yarrbat Avenue, Balwyn	Survey Date	25 November 2005
Building Type	Residence	Grading	A
Date	1933	Previous Grading	B



Extent of Overlay

To title boundaries.

Intactness ☒ Good ☐ Fair ☐ Poor

Heritage Status ☐ HV ☐ AHC ☐ NT ☒ Rec. BPS Heritage Overlay

History

Oliver Gilpin applied for a building permit for a twenty-four roomed brick and timber dwelling in 1928, to be built by D.O. Gilpin at a massive estimated cost of £20,000,¹ however this project appears not to have gone ahead.²

In 1933 Gilpin again applied for a building permit, this time for a forty-one roomed brick and timber dwelling at an estimated cost of £40,000, a lodge, garages and sheds.³ The builder nominated on the application was M. Stanby.⁴ Directories first list Oliver Gilpin at this address in 1934 previously giving his place of residence as 50 Finch Street, Malvern.⁵

The Trustees of the Gilpin estate auctioned the property on 17th February, 1945.⁶ Then the residence was described as having five suites of bedrooms and bathrooms, glassed sunroom, a 28 feet wide kitchen, butler's pantry, strong room, indoor swimming pool and many extras including substantial servants' quarters.⁷ The building also contained music, billiard and card rooms and a ballroom.⁸ The 20 acres of grounds featured a concrete and glass conservatory, fish ponds, large artificial lake and fish hatcheries, 34 special Kraal aviaries and approximately two acres of covered orchards.⁹ A four roomed lodge, probably built in c1930, stood beside the imposing wrought-iron entrance gates.¹⁰ *Idlewylde* was passed in at auction on a bid of £38,500 from the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart.¹¹ The purchase of the property was finalised on 27th February, 1945 with an offer of £45,000 on behalf of the Sisters and they officially became owners on 21st April¹². The property, renamed Mary's Mount, was used to house the Provincialate and the Novitiate of the order and as a convalescent home for missionaries released from internment camps in the islands after the war.¹³ Late in 1945 the indoor swimming pool was covered over and the area turned into a chapel. The property was later sold to the Uniting Church.¹⁴

Oliver Gilpin, son of Diana and William John Gilpin, was born at Euroa in 1874 and educated at the local State School.¹⁵ At the age of seventeen he started his career with the drapery firm of Messrs. A. Miller & Company of Euroa. After two years with this firm he joined Messrs. A.P. Gardiner and

remained there for another two years before moving to Melbourne to work for Messrs. Ball & Welch of Carlton. In 1895, when only twenty-one years of age, he began his own softgoods business in Korumburra. By 1921 his mail order service boasted forty-eight country branches scattered throughout Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. The business grew to incorporate ninety-five stores throughout the above mentioned states as well as Tasmania. Goods were transported between the branches by the firm's own motor vehicles.¹⁶ On 17 February 1928, aged 54, Gilpin married Muriel Doris Longford-Round.¹⁷ A son was born to the couple in the early 1930s.¹⁸

(G Butler, Camberwell Conservation Study 1991, additional research by Lovell Chen, 2005)

Description & Integrity

Idlewylde, now the *Connaght* nursing home, was a huge house and landscape undertaking, rivaling that of the Douglas Fairbanks Senior house in Los Angeles designed ten years earlier and with a similar aura of the exotic utopia on the hill.

The house was, in fact, a group of connected buildings: the family was to live in the central part, a basically rectangular, roughly symmetrical block with a terracotta tiled roof in three hips, with a fourth hip over the north-facing apsidal balcony and a fifth hip over the square porte-cochere to the east side. The roofs were sealed with boxed eaves, each almost a metre deep. The walls and original outside balustrading were stuccoed and keyed to ceremonial steps down into the garden. The north porch entrance is approached by a flight of wide splayed stairs and has a mosaic floor inscribed in italics with the initials of the first owner, Oliver Gilpin. The porch walls are paneled to dado height in a combination of polished and unpolished grantite. The granite also frames the three arched entrance doorways – a pair of timber-framed glazed doors flanked by single leaf timber framed glazed doors which retain their beveled glazing. Above the porch is a thick-walled balcony, supported on a set of oddly primitive-looking untapered Tuscan columns. There was a balcony immediately overhead, and that was protected by a shallow-pitched, half conical roof, forming an apse. A porte-cochere juts off the main block to the east, carrying an extended bedroom of the main house out on its upper storey: this has leadlit glass in an Adam brothers' pattern on one side as a screen from the morning sun.

The porte-cochere leads into a service courtyard, framed on the south by a dormitory wing that contained what was probably servant's quarters and is now a ward, and on the east by a low conservatory wing, which reads to the service yard as a decorative and interesting elevation, and conceals another surprise: a triangular plan.

The dormitory block balances one side of the house against the south entrance; and on the other side (to the south-west), to balance, is an indoor pool with a square floor plan. The pool has been treated in a more decorative manner when compared with the restrained detailing of the former mansion. Notable is the wide stepped parapet, central steel framed circular lantern and main walls with regular fenestration pattern of multiple elongated metal arched windows with settings consisting of Art Deco Style capitals and a pair of dolphins to the arch. The northern most opening on the west elevation is a doorway with a later porch with steel poles and a gable roof. Internally, the elaborate tiling appears to be original.¹⁹

A group of garages stands to the south-east of the site at one side of a large concrete yard, rather as the asphalt and concrete service yard works on *Idlewylde's* east side. This concrete paving is weathered and of long standing, though whether it is original or was added a few years later is hard to tell. The former concrete drive and parking area at the north side in front of the semicircular porch has been asphalted, and paling fences now close in the north garden just beyond the car park. The garden has been subdivided close in at the northeast side as well, and down the entire west side. Here, a lake is placed in a hollow at the centre of this tract of garden, now owned by others. Butler notes that the grounds once also held a concrete and glass conservatory (on the eastern side), fish ponds, fish hatcheries, 34 kraal aviaries, and two acres of covered orchards.²⁰ While documentation is not complete, it is thought that a four-room lodge may have been located on the property, next to an imposing wrought iron set of entrance gates.²¹ The aviaries were along the east side of the site, where Yarrbat Avenue curled round before climbing the Hill toward the Maranoa Gardens.

In plan the house had its share of oddities and surprises. The entry to the main living room was unexpectedly abrupt, through a shallow entrance vestibule. The living area was paneled in a rich Art Deco, not unlike the interior of contemporary ocean liners. This sense was heightened as the living

room had no external windows, being instead, a semi-circulation space, leading variously to a music room and library on either side of the north entry, a billiard room, card room, dining room, powder and bathrooms, through which the principal stair went. The main bedroom, interestingly, was on this floor as well. The porte-cochere entry, as broad as that for a suburban cinema, led simply into the dining room, and the large balcony above it was an extension of the one major upstairs bedroom not to have an ensuite bathroom. The back or service stair was, again surprisingly, on the main general axis from the north porch, and led up to another curious combination of spaces. Clockwise these were, via a centrally placed ballroom over the living room below, four bedrooms, interspersed with the service stair, a vestibule, two more bedrooms, a small lounge opening onto the north balcony, and two more bedrooms on the east side. All but one of the major bedrooms had its own bathroom, virtually unheard of in the 1930s. The servants' rooms, their bathrooms, the kitchen and scullery areas were distributed through a rectangular wing stretching south toward Yarrbat Avenue. The basement held three cellars, a group of workrooms and plant rooms serving both the house and the pool.

When the house was taken over by the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, and adapted for use as a residential care facility, extensive internal alterations were made. A 1997 study of existing conditions at *Idlewylde* showed that all first floor rooms surrounding the ballroom had been turned into wards, as had the servants' wing to the immediate south. The ground floor of the main house had been re-used for administrative rooms, and the former dining room was turned into an extra lounge. The eastern conservatory was turned into a day room. External alterations appear to be relatively minor, and to be generally limited to changes to door and window openings, with the main building forms reasonably intact. Later stairs have been added to the south and west sides of the main block.

Historical Context

This area of Balwyn had been partly developed by the interwar period, the c. 1932 MMBW Detail Plan showing a mix of standard, regular building blocks, interspersed with more generous allotments. The plan appears to show an earlier Victorian house with return verandah on the subject site, but no trace of this remains. The surrounding houses were in the main bungalows of standard size, though quite a number of these have been demolished. Robin Boyd's D&J Gillison house of 1951-2 graded A, is 200 metres east up Yarrbat Avenue at the Kireep Road corner.²²

Comparative Analysis

There are few, if any, direct Melbourne comparisons for this building. In scale and bulk it compares with Hollywood or Long Island Mansions and with some of the 'Cretan Palaces' that appeared to designs by Neville Gruzman, Peter Muller and Douglas Snelling on the Sydney Harborside and Pittwater regions in the 1950s.²³ In its amalgam of Colonial and Mediterranean style, as applied here, *Idlewylde* has something of Neville Hampson's 1933 *Boomerang*, by Sydney Harbour, another utopia in the hollow, or other interwar precincts such as Bilgola on Sydney's Northern Beaches. In its lavishness, scale, and ornamented grounds, it can be compared in the Melbourne region with other large interwar mansions such as *Ilyuka* at Portsea or *Burnham Beeches* at Sassafras, both by Harry Norris. The apsidal north porch and balcony recall the porch at Henry Robertson's *Fernhill* of 1840-1, a well-known and published house at Mulgoa, NSW, and the east side recalls Bates, Peebles and Smart's *Netherby* in Studley Avenue Kew, of 1915, rated A in the Kew survey of 1988.²⁴ However, it lacks the general assurance of these earlier and contemporary examples. *Idlewylde* also lacks Norris' constant formal experimentation and interweaving of structure and surface expression. It is, by comparison, an assemblage of 'completed' forms, a generally austere and rather ungainly composition without real assurance in its application of style.

Assessment Against Criteria

Amended Heritage Victoria Criteria

CRITERION G: The importance of the place or object in demonstrating social or cultural associations

Idlewylde, at 41-45 Yarrbat Avenue, Balwyn is one of the largest and most lavish interwar mansions in Victoria. In its original form, the house and grounds, including elaborate and extravagant outbuildings and garden, combined to demonstrate one version of the lifestyle of the very wealthy in the early 1930s, with extremely lavish entertaining and recreational facilities. As is the case for the Nicholas residence, *Burnham Beeches*, the complex was all the more extraordinary for having been constructed

at a time when Australia was still in the grip of economic depression. The ability of the place to demonstrate the interests and aspirations of its original owner, Oliver Gilpin, has been diminished by the truncation of the grounds and the removal of many of the original features.

Statement of Significance

Idlewylde, at 41-45 Yarrbat Avenue, Balwyn is of municipal historical and architectural significance. Though architecturally relatively undistinguished, as constructed, it was one of the largest and most lavish interwar private residential complexes in the state, with elaborate and extravagant outbuildings and garden, including a lake. In its original form, *Idlewylde* demonstrated one version of the lifestyle of the very wealthy in the early 1930s, with extremely lavish entertaining and recreational facilities.

As is the case for the Nicholas residence, Burnham Beeches, the complex was all the more extraordinary for having been constructed at a time when Australia was still in the grip of economic depression. The ability of the place to demonstrate the interests and aspirations of its original owner, Oliver Gilpin, have been diminished by the truncation of the grounds and the removal of many of the original features, though the lake remains. The indoor swimming pool is of note for its intactness and elaborate decoration and tiling.²⁵

Grading Review

Unchanged

Recommendations

Recommended for inclusion in the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay of the Boroondara Planning Scheme.

Identified By

G Butler, Camberwell Conservation Study, 1991.

References

General: G Butler, Camberwell Conservation Study, 1991.

Specific:

¹ Building Application (cited by Butler) 1928, # 2436.

² Building Application (cited by Butler) 1928, # 2436.

³ Building Application (cited by Butler) 1933, # 3681.

⁴ Building Application (cited by Butler) 1933, # 3681.

⁵ *Sands & McDougall Directory of Victoria*, 1935; 1932.

⁶ Kane, K.D. *The M.S.C. Sisters in Australia*, 1928-1978, p.62f.

⁷ Kane, K.D. *The M.S.C. Sisters in Australia*, 1928-1978, p.62f.

⁸ [National Trust of Australia (Vic.) File no. 4760.

⁹ National Trust of Australia (Vic.) File no. 4760.

¹⁰ National Trust of Australia (Vic.) File no. 4760; City of Camberwell Rate Books, 1930-31, 5271.

¹¹ National Trust of Australia (Vic.) File no. 4760; City of Camberwell Rate Books, 1930-31, 5271.

¹² National Trust of Australia (Vic.) File no. 4760; City of Camberwell Rate Books, 1930-31, 5271.

¹³ [Kane, K D. *M.S.C. Sisters in Australia*, 1928-1978], p.63f.

¹⁴ [Kane, K D. *M.S.C. Sisters in Australia*, 1928-1978], p.63f. Building Application (cited by Butler) 1945, # 17118.

¹⁵ *Who's Who in Australia*, 1935, p. 201.

¹⁶ *Victorian Centenary Book, Section 1*, p.158.

¹⁷ National Trust of Australia (Vic.) File no. 4760

¹⁸ National Trust of Australia (Vic.) File no. 4760.

¹⁹ Further detail relating to the poolhouse is taken from the peer review by RBA Architects and Conservation Consultants, October 2008.

²⁰ G Butler, *Camberwell Conservation Study* 1991, vol. 4, pp. 321-2.

²¹ G Butler, *Camberwell Conservation Study* 1991, vol. 4, pp. 321-2, G Butler, Camberwell Conservation Study 1991, p. 321.

²² Butler, *Camberwell Conservation Study* 1991, vol. 4, p. 152. Its actual address is 43 Kireep Road.

²³ Discussed in material being prepared by P Goad, C Hamann, and G London for *An Unfinished Experiment in Living: the Architect-Designed Detached House in Australia, 1950-1965*, Miegunyah, Melbourne, scheduled for publication 2007.

²⁴ *Fernhill* had been published in Ure Smith's *Domestic Architecture in Australia*, Sydney, 1919, and in Hardy Wilson's *Old Colonial Architecture in New South Wales and Tasmania*, Privately published, London, 1928. Norris' work was well known in the Melbourne area and had been published in *Home Beautiful* and elsewhere. For *Netherby*, also well-known, see Philip Goad et al., *Bates Smart*, Thames and Hudson, Melbourne, 2004, esp Julie Willis' Part 3, pp. 116-7, 119, and Pru Sanderson, City of Kew Urban Conservation Study, 1988, Citation 51.

²⁵ Specific reference to the pool has been included on the recommendation of the Panel for Amendment C64. Additional descriptive material on the pool (based on the RBA Architects peer review of October 2008) was also added under Description and Integrity.