

28 CLENDON ROAD
TOORAK

INTRODUCTION

This report has been prepared by Bryce Raworth Pty Ltd to investigate the significance of the property at 28 Clendon Road, Toorak, in order to determine the appropriateness of its inclusion within the schedule to the Heritage Overlay within the planning scheme. The report builds on work carried out by John Curtis Pty Ltd for the *Toorak Residential Character Study*, 1991 and by Context Pty Ltd for the *City of Prahran Conservation Review*, 1993.

The *City of Prahran Conservation Review* graded the building as A1. It is not listed on the Victorian Heritage Register or the Register of the National Estate or classified by the National Trust.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This report finds that 28 Clendon Road, Toorak is of state significance and should be added to the schedule to the Heritage Overlay in the local section of the Stonnington Planning Scheme and nominated to the Australian Heritage Commission for inclusion on the register of the National Estate.

HISTORY

In 1852 Alfred Ross purchased Crown allotment 28, which included 55 acres between Irving Road and Clendon Road. Orrong, the first house to be built in the area, was located midway between Gardiners Creek Road (Toorak Road) and Commercial Road (Malvern Road). Orrong's large estate was gradually subdivided and Clendon Road was created in 1877¹. By this time Toorak was considered the 'vice-regal district'² and land in close proximity to Toorak House, Victoria's first Government House, attracted Melbourne's wealthy families. Grand homes, including Mandeville Hall, Dunraven and Coonac, were soon built on land facing the main roads.³ However, land at the south east corner of Clendon Road and Malvern Road remained undeveloped and dairyman James Swindell used the land during the 1860s to the 1880s.⁴ A subdivision of this land created the western end of Iona Avenue.⁵ It appears that 28 Clendon Road was part of this subdivision.

Wooragee, was built on the Clendon Road site in 1918-1919. It was an eight roomed brick house⁶ designed by Edward Fielder Billson, for his father, Alfred Arthur Billson.⁷ who named his new residence after his birthplace in northern Victoria. A.A. Billson (1858-1930) had enjoyed a successful career in the family brewing business prior to entering politics.⁸ Himself the son of brewer and politician George Billson, Alfred won the seat of Bogong in 1901 and began a parliamentary career that would span over twenty five years, including twenty three years holding the seat of Ovens. He served variously as minister of railways, minister of mines and forests and minister of public instruction before his retirement in 1927. Perhaps his most important contribution was made as the primary supporter of the enlightened policies of his director of education, Frank Tate, and particularly in setting the foundation for state high school development.⁹ He moved to Toorak in 1916, where he remained until his death in 1930.

DESCRIPTION

28 Clendon Road, otherwise known as Wooragee, is located on the corner of two quiet residential streets in Toorak near Toorak Primary School. The two storey house exhibits a variety of architectural

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- 1 Clendon Road. Proclamation 25.11.1877.
 - 2 E.M. Robb, *Early Toorak and District*, p.75.
 - 3 Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works Plan , 40' to the inch. 1895.
 - 4 Betty Malone, Section 14, unpublished manuscript, p.4.
 - 5 Iona Avenue was proclaimed in 1920 under a private street scheme.
 - 6 *Prahran City Council Data Sheet*- 28 Clendon Road.
 - 7 *Sands & MacDougall Directory*, 1920.
 - 8 Carole Woods, 'Alfred Arthur Billson', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol VI, p 289.
 - 9 *Ibid*, p 290.

influences and is noteworthy for the high standard of its detailing. Edward Fielder Billson's plan consisted, on both levels, of a defined circulation space leading to all the adjoining rooms¹⁰.



Illustration 1 Edward F Billson, architect. Alfred Arthur Billson house, Toorak, 1918.
Source: *Australian Architecture*, 1900-1951.

Wooragee draws inspiration from the popular contemporary Bungalow styles. The front elevation is dominated by two gabled roof elements. The first floor gable covers the two storey house proper while another, offset gabled roof shrouds the ground floor section and entry porch. The wide eaves are unadorned, with eaves linings rendered in the same continuous roughcast stucco finish as the walls. A low wall which surrounds the porch is capped in smooth render, a finish reiterated along with thin mouldings in a diamond pattern on the upper gables. The overall form and decorative detail is directly indebted to the influence of Walter Burley Griffin, to whom Billson was articulated during the design and construction of this house.¹¹ Decorative glazing bars, intact to most of the windows throughout the house, also recall Griffin's domestic work.¹² Generous areas of glazing contribute to the 'handsomely lit'¹³ interior of the house, an effect which to a large extent belies the house's heavy external appearance. This air of gravity is a consequence of the articulation of piers in the walls, coupled with the unusually massive appearance of the roof forms. A small semi-circular patio at the front of the house is railed in simple curved steel, a detail which might be seen to anticipate a Modern, streamlined aesthetic.

10 D.L. Johnson, *Australian Architecture 1901- 1951*, p 120.

11 Context Pty Ltd, *City of Prahran Conservation Review*, Vol. 4, p 12.

12 *Prahran City Council Data Sheet- 28 Clendon Road*.

13 *Ibid*.

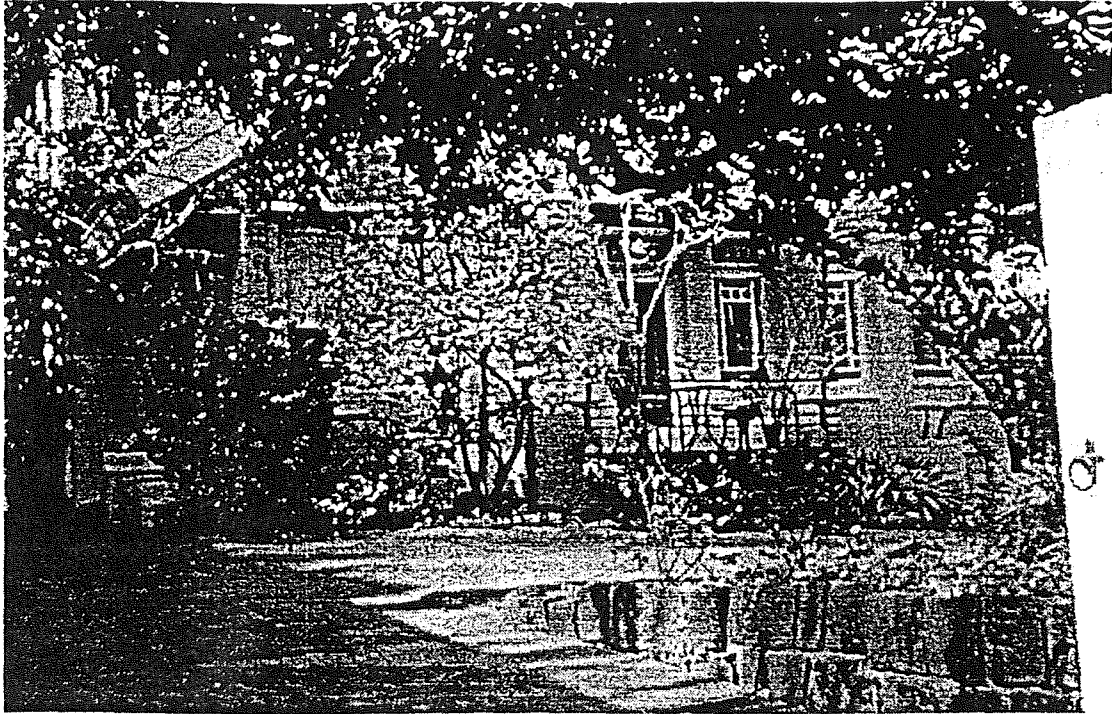


Illustration 1 *Edward F Billson, architect. Alfred Arthur Billson house, Toorak, Front Entrance, 1997.*
Source: Author's Collection.

The house is presently complemented, if somewhat obscured, by a garden containing long established trees, and a lawn bordered by flowering plants and bluestone. A white paling fence with a bluestone base fronts the property, but it is possible that this is a recent addition - council records indicate some fences were later added to the property, along with an in-ground pool.¹⁴

ARCHITECT

Edward Fielder Billson, the son of Alfred Arthur Billson, was a noteworthy Australian architect. He was the first person to enrol in the University of Melbourne Architecture course, the first Australian to serve articles under noted American architect Walter Burley Griffin, and eventually became a pioneering advocate and exponent of modernism in Australia.

Billson applied for admission to the Melbourne University Architecture course in 1913. The university was initially reluctant as it had been planning the architecture course for some time but had received no previous applicants. A makeshift course was organised¹⁵ and Billson commenced a course of architectural study at the faculty of engineering. He received the first Diploma of Architecture awarded

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Johnson, op cit, p 118.*

by the University of Melbourne in 1916 and began working for Walter Burley Griffin, thus becoming the first Australian articulated within Griffin's office.¹⁶

During his time with Griffin Billson became part of a circle of architects which was instrumental in establishing the Prairie School in Melbourne.¹⁷ Wooragee, in which Prairie School influences are clearly visible, was the result of Billson's first independent commission. Other important buildings by Billson showing Griffin and Prairie school characteristics include the Margaret Armstrong house, Caulfield (1918-19), Woodlands Golf Club House (1925-1929) and the George Silcock house, Hawthorn (c. 1926).¹⁸

In 1921, Billson and the head draftsman in Griffin's office, Roy Lippincott (Griffin's American brother-in-law) won the competition for the arts building at the University of Auckland.¹⁹ Billson took this opportunity to travel through Europe and it was here and in later similar trips that Billson first encountered the Modernist architecture that was to become an enduring influence in his work. After the depression, when he had established his own Melbourne practice, Billson became one of Melbourne's foremost exponents of Modernist architecture. Notable examples of his work from this later, post-Griffin period include the Sanitarium Health Foods Co. and Signs Publishing co. buildings, Main Street, Warburton (1936).²⁰

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The introduction of Prairie School architecture to Australia is largely credited to the work of Walter Burley Griffin and that of colleagues and students working at his influential Melbourne practice. J.F.W. Ballantyne, Edward Billson, Roy Lippincott and Eric M. Nicholls were each associates of Griffin and each developed an early architectural style combining, Prairie school design, the emerging bungalow styles and Walter Burley Griffin's own domestic work. By the time Walter Burley Griffin left Australia in 1935 a sizeable body of local architecture had been created by Griffin and his circle. Wooragee, the Alfred Arthur Billson house at 28 Clendon Road (1918), is a key and relatively early building to survive from this important body of work.

The Alfred Arthur Billson house is an early example to show Billson's proficiency in this field. Several other houses designed by Billson, notably, the Margaret Armstrong house, Caulfield (1918-19), the George Silcock in Hawthorn (c. 1926), with their dominant gable roofs and heavily buttressed external walls are also characteristic of the mode. Many of Griffin's North American buildings had evidenced a

16 Robin Boyd, *Australia's Home*, p 84.

17 Nigel Lewis, *City of Malvern Heritage Study, Appendix 1: Architects of Malvern*, Billson.

18 Johnson, *op cit*, p 120.

19 *Ibid*, p 117.

20 Registered historic place H384.

similar interest in bold gabled roofs poised over horizontal building forms and his influence on these early buildings is unmistakable. Roy Lippincott's own house in Eaglemont, also of 1918-19, shows a similar leaning toward the gabled form, in this instance with the raked gable eaves characteristic of Griffin's own designs.

Other Australians within Griffin's office, notably Nicholls and Ballantyne, were more heavily indebted to the blocky, prismatic forms and low hipped or flat roofs of other Griffin designs, particularly the houses at Castlecrag, Sydney, rather than the gabled forms favoured by Billson. Ballantyne began to practise independently in 1923 and completed a house for his mother in Malvern and the Mrs Craig Dixon house, Malvern in 1924. Nicholls is remembered for buildings such as the A.M. Herborn house, Toorak (1928-1931). Nicholls became Griffin's partner in the late 1920s and consequently, his work retained far more of Griffin's influence than that of his Melbourne contemporaries. Later projects by Billson such as the Woodlands Golf Club House (1925-1929) and Ballantyne's house for Dr Carl Stephens in Healesville, signal their growing independence from Griffin.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Wooragee, 28 Clendon Road, Toorak, designed by noted Australian architect Edward F. Billson for his father, brewer and politician Arthur A. Billson, is of state significance through its associations with the distinguished Billson family and as an important and very early exemplar of the domestic work of Griffin's office in Melbourne.

Edward Billson, the first graduate in Architecture of the University of Melbourne, was articled within the office of Walter Burley Griffin during the design and construction of this house, and was to become a proficient exponent of a Griffin influenced, Prairie School idiom before turning to modernist modes in the 1930s. Through his work in Griffin's office and then in his own practice, Billson was instrumental in the introduction and dissemination of the American Prairie style in Victoria. Wooragee is possibly his first independent commission and appears substantially intact to its exterior, and has high architectural significance both as an early example of the work of a notable architect and as one of the earliest surviving Victorian houses to emanate from the circle led by Griffin.

REFERENCES

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E. M. Robb, *Early Toorak and District*, Robertson & Mullens, 1934.

Sands & McDougall Directories.