

'Stella'

174 Punt Road, Prahran

Place type: Residential Buildings (private), Villa

Significance level: Local



Recommended protection: Planning Scheme

Architectural style: Victorian period (1851-1901) Italianate

Locality history

Prahran is both a locality and a former municipality. When first settled the name was given to a much more extensive Parish of Prahran, but the locality of Prahran proper came to be associated with the area centred around Chapel Street. The name 'Prahran' is believed to have been adapted from an Aboriginal word for the Yarra River, *Birrarung*.

Victoria's Surveyor-General, Robert Hoddle, drew up the first plan of the Parish of Prahran in 1839, and the first land sales took place in the 1840s and 1850s (Wilde 1983: vii). The locality of Prahran developed at the western end of the larger Parish of Prahran. Much of it occupied low-lying and flood-prone land on the river bank. This was utilised for grazing stock, and for industry, including brickworks (Wilde 1993: viii).

Settlement intensified through the 1850s, centring around Chapel Street, which was a chief north-south route. Most of the houses built in this early period were simple one- and two-roomed timber (and sometimes brick) cottages, which were occupied by the working class and lower middle class (Wilde 1993: x). Little planning went into the early housing development in Prahran. James Kearney's 1855 plan of Melbourne shows a dispersed settlement across the area with a concentration along Chapel Street, between Commercial Road and High Street, and the adjoining streets (Kearney 1855).

Wealthier settlers were attracted to the larger blocks and elevated ground at Toorak and South Yarra. There were also clusters of substantial homes built in Prahran along the wider

thoroughfares such as Punt Road (with surviving examples at 170 and 174 Punt Road) and in purpose-designed subdivisions with larger allotments, for example Grandview Grove.

Together with Windsor, Prahran had a more diverse social and political make-up than other parts of Stonnington and this was reflected in the wide range of housing types. There were both large mansions and more rudimentary working-class cottages, the occupants of the latter serving those in the former. There was also modest housing that sat between the two. The houses of the poor, the small cottages, were often over crowded inside as well, with many having large families occupying a small number of bedrooms. A significant concentration of small workers' cottages in Prahran lies within the block broadly bounded by Williams Road, High Street, Malvern Road and Chatsworth Road. Prahran's significant working-class element encouraged a strong Labor following in the early 1900s, as well as some followers of socialism.

By the 1880s, many of the small and inferior older dwellings were being pulled down and were 'replaced by Victorian terraces and small villas' (Wilde 1993: viii). Many were constructed using the bricks that were available locally. The gradual improvement of Prahran through the twentieth century has seen large numbers of working-class houses removed. In the 1950s entire blocks east of Chapel Street were demolished to make way for high-rise Housing Commission flats.

Place history

Like its neighbour at 170 Punt Road, the residence known as 'Stella' at 174 Punt Road was a grand home built at a time when Punt Road (then Hoddle Street) was regarded as a prestigious address. The full street block, extending from Greville Street to High Street, was lined with comfortable homes set back from the road; many were double-storeyed and appear to date to a similar era. The row of houses from no. 170 through to no. 200 occupied the full deep block from Punt Road to the rear access lane (now Alfred Place). Many of these houses, including numbers 170 and 174, were owned from the 1880s to the early 1900s by the successful coal merchant Edward Newbigin (1848–1908).

Edward Newbigin and Elizabeth Harcourt were married in Melbourne in 1869. When they purchased the property at 174 Punt Road in 1873, a brick house stood on the site. Newbigin appears to have systematically increased the size of the house, adding extra rooms, so that it was rated at £75 in 1873 (for 9 rooms), £94 in 1880 (for 10 rooms) and £160 in 1885 (for 14 rooms) (RB). By 1888, the rates had leapt again to £220 with no change to the number of rooms (still 14) (RB). What began as what was probably a modest square-form layout gained several additional rooms over the years until it was transformed by the mid-1880s into a lavish Italianate mansion with a ballroom and extensive servants' wing.

There were presumably substantial additions carried out in 1884–85 that would have most likely necessitated the assistance of an architect, however no record of the architect's name has been found. There is, however, in July 1884 a notice calling for tenders for brick additions at 174 Punt Road (*Age* 1 July 1884). There was also a call for tenders in March the following year to construct a tessellated iron verandah (presumably the front verandah) at 174 Punt Road (*Age* 5 March 1885). In 1876 Newbigin had commissioned architects Crouch & Wilson for additions to one of his houses on Punt Road, raising the possibility that he may have used the same firm for subsequent renovations to 'Stella' in 1884–85 (*Argus* 8 Nov 1876).

In its heyday 'Stella' was a grand home. The Newbigins were a wealthy family who moved in fashionable social circles. They were fond of entertaining and they were mentioned in the social columns of the day. Edward and Elizabeth held a ball at 'Stella' in 1898 (*Table Talk*, 22 April 1898) and Elizabeth hosted an 'At Home' at the Prahran Town Hall in 1890 (*Australasian*, 2 September 1899). In 1890, the Newbigins took a trip to Europe and before they left they advertised the house for lease. The newspaper leasing advertisement refers to the house as 'Stella' – 'the residence of E. Newbigin, Punt Road' (*Argus*, 26 April 1890).

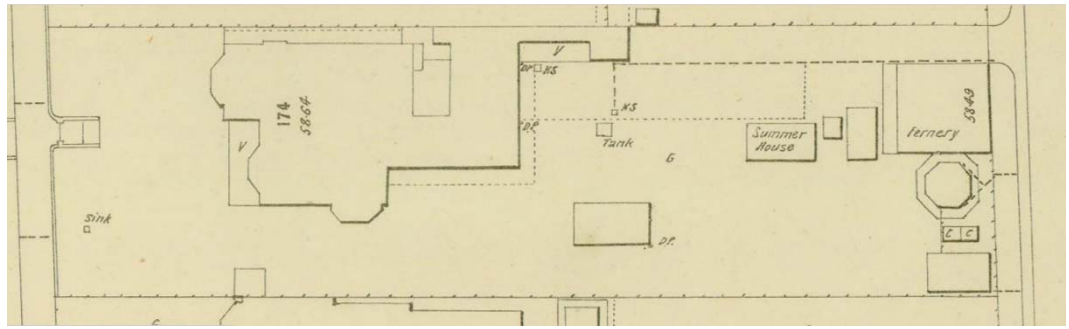


Figure 1. Layout from MMBW Detail Plan no. 962, dated 1896 (source: SLV).

The MMBW Detail Plan, dated 1896, shows a substantial residence occupying a deep block that extends to a rear laneway. The house has three bay windows, a front verandah, and what appears to be a servants' wing at the rear. The rear yard has a water tank and a wash house. The rear is also taken up with a large garden with the fashionable additions of a summer house and fernery. There is a pedestrian entrance at the Punt Road frontage and a gravel path leading to the house.

After the death of her husband in 1908, Elizabeth Newbiggin moved from 'Stella' the following year. The house was leased for several years, initially to Mrs Jardine (*Table Talk*, 8 Apr 1909). By 1940 it appears that the rear wing of the house had been much enlarged (Pratt c1925-40).



Figure 2. View of 174 Punt Road (centre) during the interwar period, with what appears to be a larger rear wing than in 1896 (source: Pratt, Charles D (c1925-40) detail of 'Aerial view along Malvern Road, Prahran', *Airspy Collection of Aerial Photographs*, SLV).

In the 1950s and 1960 the house operated as the Secondary Teachers' College Hostel, which provided residential accommodation for student teachers at the Melbourne Teachers' College in Parkville (*Age*, 4 May 1960 and 25 February 2008). The house had presumably been adapted with additional bathrooms added. In 1976 an advertisement appears for a housekeeper at 174 Punt Road, with a new house name given of 'Kurunda' (*Age*, 10 April 1976).

Sources

Age 1 July 1884.

Age 5 March 1885.

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Physical description

The residence at 174 Punt Road is a substantial two-storey Italianate villa that occupies a wide allotment on the east side of Punt Road, north of the intersection with High Street in Prahran. The building is set back from the street behind a contemporary landscaped front garden and the original and fine iron palisade fence with lion posts which are set on a high bluestone plinth with a central gate.

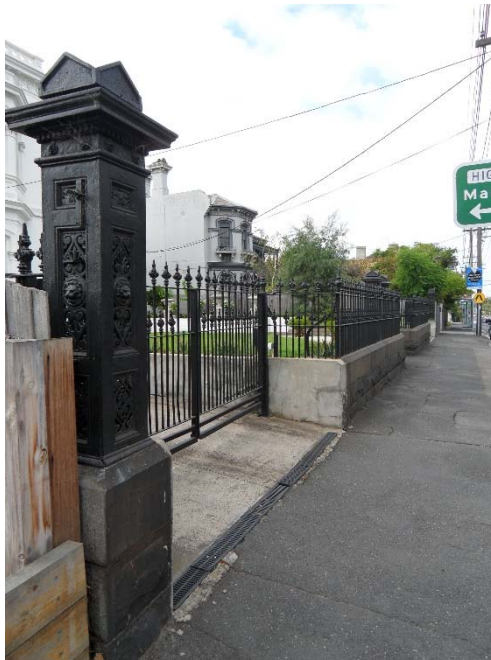


Figure 3. Detail of iron palisade fence with lion posts set on a high bluestone plinth (source: Context 2016).



Figure 4. Detail of pedestrian gate to iron palisade fence (source: Context 2016).

The building in its late 1880s expression, adopts a common late-Victorian asymmetrical form with a two-storey canted bay to one side and a two-storey verandah to the other. This form became popular during the 1880s, and in this respect the house at 174 Punt Road stands as a large but relatively typical suburban Italianate villa. In this instance the common model is varied by the adoption of a parapet that conceals the building's hipped roof and the secondary single-storey canted bay window to the ground floor beneath the verandah. The building's massing is more sculptural than usual with additional two-storey canted bays to the north and south side elevations (the northern one was constructed after 1896). The two-storey canted bay window fronting Punt Road also terminates in its own parapet. The main parapet returns along the northern elevation to encompass the northern canted bay and is finished in an open guilloche motif set between piers with tablet flower cast elements.

The house is distinguished by its elegant run and cast cement render work, including beltcourses of a bas-relief rinceaux pattern (also used at the canted bay window parapet), slender colonnettes recessed in corners, and engaged Corinthian columns to the round-arched bay windows beside the front door. Other cement embellishments include the frieze of closely spaced eaves brackets set between rosettes below the cornice and Acanthus leaf impost mouldings to the windows of the front projecting bay to an otherwise plain render finish. The eaves detailing continues with the parapet along the northern elevation.

The verandah cast-iron work (c1885) is particularly delicate in design, incorporating a number of lacework patterns in the frieze, brackets and first-floor baluster. The cast-iron posts have fine cast capitals.



Figure 5. Detail of two storey cast iron verandah with canted bay window to the ground level (source: Context 2016).

Permit documentation from the City of Stonnington for minor alterations in 2003 indicates that the building was converted into four apartments prior to this date, which may have occurred as early as the 1950s and 1960s when the house was occupied as the Secondary Teachers' College Hostel (City of Stonnington Planning Permit 0056/03, 2003). An additional division of units occurred in 2008 (City of Stonnington Planning Permit 677/08, 2008). The exterior appears substantially intact, including those parts of the side elevations that are visible from the public realm, apart from the removal of the chimneys, the construction of a garage to the north side of the façade, and the addition of verandah brackets at first floor level.

Comparative analysis

Although many single-storey villas were built in Melbourne and its suburbs during the nineteenth century, after the 1840s the grandest houses were almost always of two-storeys, or occasionally three as at Government House and 'Cliveden'. Owners often added a-storey to their single-storey house as their fortunes improved, of example, 'Como' in South Yarra had a second storey added by 1855. Towards the end of the century, there was an increasing tendency to prefer the higher status of a two-storey house over that of a single-storey house (Jordan 2003:117 as cited in Statham 2008).

The architectural expression of a grand two-storey Victorian house could reflect any one of a range of fashionable British antecedents drawing their inspiration from classical Greek, Roman or Georgian sources to the more picturesque, such as Gothic or Tudor. British country houses of the mid-nineteenth century drew predominantly from the range of Picturesque styles. About a third of these grand Victorian houses adopted an Italianate style combining informal massing with a plain rendered expression enriched by classical motifs. The balance adopted a formal symmetrical classical expression. The Italianate was seen to combine the stateliness of a classical style with a picturesque and fashionable asymmetry (Jordan 2003:117 as cited in Statham 2008).

The Italianate style had its origins in the landscape paintings of Nicholas Poussin and Claude Lorraine over a century earlier. These two French artists were enamoured with the landscapes

and architecture of rural Italy, depicting it as a vision of Arcadia. Their efforts inspired a broader pursuit of ‘the Picturesque’ in architecture (Statham, 2008).

Through the first half of the nineteenth century, the Italianate style spread widely in Britain fuelled by the works of architects such as John Nash and Charles Barry and through designs promoted in pattern books such as Charles Parker's *Villa Rustica* (1832). In 1845, the style received Royal endorsement when Prince Albert, working with architect Thomas Cubitt, designed ‘Osbourne’ on the Isle of Wight as a retreat for Queen Victoria and the Royal family. ‘Osbourne’ with its plain stuccoed expression and tall balustraded tower would become the model for many large residences throughout the Empire including Government House in Melbourne.

The style, which emerged as the preferred expression for Melbourne's grandest mansions of the mid-century, was quickly adapted to suit more modest suburban villas and terraces. As Hubbard (2012:357) notes:

Flexibility and adaptability were the secrets to the success of the Italianate style. It could range from the simplest of buildings to the grandest. It was not a precise style and could accommodate different levels of architectural sophistication. It could be formally symmetrical or informally asymmetrical. While towers were standard, they might be reduced to just a porch. The style was easy to copy and could be used by speculative builders buying stock items for decoration. Most importantly, the Italianate style used the vocabulary of classical architecture freely but sparingly, generally with relatively plain expanses of wall and hipped roofs with bracketed eaves.

The Italianate house is so common in the Melbourne area that this is the standard image people hold of the ‘Victorian house’. Condensed to its key features, they would be a hipped roof with an M-profile (i.e. having a central valley to the rear half, which allows a low ridgeline), bracketed eaves, chimneys with a cornice at the top (a run cement-render moulding), and a timber or iron-framed verandah with cast-iron ornament to all but the grandest houses. Common extras included a faceted (canted) bay used to create an asymmetric composition (or occasionally used symmetrically), and windows that had a round or segmental arched opening, some of which were embellished with run cement-render mouldings or delicate hood moulds.

There were three general types of cladding for Italianate houses. The most modest were clad in timber weatherboards or blocked boards emulating expensive ashlar. The two most common types were finished in cement render or face brick. Rendered houses could obtain a high level of run and cast ornament at an affordable price, leading to some highly embellished examples. All, even the most modest, had ruled render with incised lines to emulate the more expensive stone construction. Face brickwork was also common, usually dark brown Hawthorn bricks with cream brick dressings (bichrome) from the late 1860s, and later in the century with red brick accents as well (polychrome). Some architects and designer-builders created bold patterns with the coloured bricks. As good building stone was not common in Victoria, very few houses were built of stone. Early examples were of bluestone, such as the grand ‘Bishopscourt’ in East Melbourne.

The development of the former City of Prahran and the western part of the former City of Malvern coincides with the emergence of the Italianate forms of expression in Victoria. Consequently, the City of Stonnington retains a disproportionate number of Melbourne's better examples of the mode. A number of these, typically the grandest and most elaborate mansions or those associated with Victoria's most notable families, have been added to the Victorian Heritage Register. These include: ‘Toorak House’, ‘Greenwich House’ and ‘Mandeville Hall’, in Toorak; ‘Stonington’ in Malvern; and ‘Malvern House’ in Glen Iris.

Generally, 174 Punt Road can be compared with other substantial houses of the 1880s that demonstrate Italianate massing and detailing. Comparable examples that are Significant in the Stonnington Heritage Overlay (both in individual HOs and HO precincts) include:

- ‘Montrose House’, 38 Huntingtower Road, Armadale (HO367) – a substantial two-storey Italianate villa with an asymmetrical composition consisting of a projecting stepped and canted bay to one side of what was originally a two-storey cast-iron verandah (removed).

The building has fine cast and run cement render details including paired eaves brackets and quoins to the building corners.

- 760-762 Malvern Road, Armadale (in HO130) – a substantial two-storey Italianate villa with an unusual two-storey cast-iron verandah to one side of a projecting stepped and canted bay fronting Malvern Road. Plain façade treatment other than the fine cast-iron lacework.
- 29 Grandview Grove, Prahran (in HO135) – a substantial two-storey Italianate villa with an asymmetrical plan. The building is an unusual variation of the typical two-storey return verandah to one side of a canted projecting bay arrangement, where in this instance the cast-iron verandah is continuous across the front façade of the building.
- 35 Grandview Grove, Prahran (in HO135) – a substantial two-storey Italianate villa with a stepped and canted projecting bay to one side of a two-storey cast-iron verandah. The building has a hipped roof and refined cast and run cement render details. A garage has also been constructed to one side of the front façade, as at 174 Punt Road, Prahran.



Figure 6. 'Montrose House', 38 Huntingtower Road, Armadale HO367 (source: Statbam, John, 2008, Heritage Assessment 'Montrose House' Armadale').



Figure 7. 29 Grandview Grove, Prahran, individually significant in HO135 (source: Google Streetview).

In comparison with other substantial Italianate villas listed above, 174 Punt Road is as intact and architecturally sophisticated as these examples, if not with more elegant Italianate detailing. It is a richly detailed and substantial example of the typical late-Victorian suburban type with an asymmetrical plan and some comparatively unusual elements, most obviously the fully fledged cement rendered parapet and the secondary single-storey canted bay window to the ground floor beneath the verandah. The intactness of these elements offsets the loss of the original chimneys. The parapet is an unusual addition to the asymmetrical plan form which is more commonly adopted for terrace-type rows (or detached houses) that fully express their architectural character to the front. Its presence may reflect the series of renovations and extensions Newbiggin carried out in the late nineteenth century.

In conclusion, the villa at 174 Punt Road is an excellent example of the substantial Italianate type residence which is distinguished by its unusual massing and detailing, in particular the main parapet that returns along the northern elevation which is finished in an open guilloche motif set between piers with tablet flower cast elements. The elegant run and cast cement render work, including the beltcourses of a bas-relief rinceaux pattern (also used at the canted bay window parapet), slender colonnettes to corners, and engaged Corinthian columns to the round-arched bay windows beside the front door further distinguish the villa from others of its type. Other cement embellishments include the frieze of closely spaced eaves brackets set between rosettes below the cornice and Acanthus leaf impost mouldings to the windows of the front projecting bay to an otherwise plain render finish. It is also distinguished by its relatively sculptural massing for an Italianate house of this type, with two-storey canted bays to the side elevations as well as the façade.

Thematic context

This place illustrates the following themes, as identified in the *Stonnington Thematic Environmental History* (Context Pty Ltd, rev. 2009):

3.3.3 Speculators and land boomers

8.4.1 Houses as a symbol of wealth, status and fashion

8.6.1 Sharing houses

Assessment against criteria

Assessment of this place was carried out in relation to the HERCON model criteria as set out in the VPP Practice Note 'Applying the Heritage Overlay' (2015).

Statement of significance

What is significant?

The Victorian villa at 174 Punt Road, built c.1884, is significant. The house was occupied and expanded by Edward and Elizabeth Newbigin from the 1880s to the early 1900s. Edward Newbigin (1848-1908) was a successful coal merchant and his family moved in fashionable social circles, often mentioned in the social columns of the day. He owned a number of properties in the area, including 170 Punt Road next door.

The house is significant to the extent of its late nineteenth century external form and fabric, and the house's presentation to the public realm in terms of its setback from Punt Road contributes to its significance. The early iron palisade fence, gate and bluestone plinth are significant.

The twentieth century alterations and additions such as the garage and contemporary paving and landscaping are not significant.

How is it significant?

The house and fence at 174 Punt Road, Prahran are of local architectural and aesthetic significance to the City of Stonnington.

Why is it significant?

170 Punt Road, Prahran is a fine representative example of a grand home built at a time when Punt Road constituted a prestigious address. The full street block, extending from Greville Street to High Street, was lined with comfortable homes set back from the road; many were double-storeyed. Many of these houses, including numbers 170 and 174, were owned from the 1880s to the early 1900s by Edward Newbigin. Newbigin acquired the house at 174 Punt Road in 1873 and remodelled and expanded it systematically in the 1870s and 1880s. The Newbigin family resided there from 1873 until Edward Newbigin's death in 1908. In the post-war era, the house, along with many others in the area, was converted to shared accommodation, reflecting the general decline in the social status of the once prestigious properties on Punt Road. (Criterion D)

Aesthetically, the house is significant for its expression of the principal aesthetic characteristics of the nineteenth century Italianate villa type of housing. Its typical asymmetric design is varied by the adoption of a parapet that conceals the building's hipped roof and the secondary single-storey canted bay window to the ground floor beneath the verandah, as well as two-storey canted bays to the side elevations. The house is distinguished by its elegant run and cast cement render work, including beltcourses of a bas-relief rinceaux pattern (also used at the canted bay window parapet), slender colonnettes recessed at corners, and engaged Corinthian columns to the round-arched bay windows beside the front door. Other cement embellishments include the frieze of closely spaced eaves brackets set between rosettes below the cornice and Acanthus leaf impost mouldings to the windows of the front projecting bay to an otherwise plain render finish. The verandah cast-iron work is particularly delicate in design, incorporating a number of lacework patterns in the frieze, brackets and first-floor balustrade.

The cast-iron posts have fine cast capitals. The fence is an intact surviving example of a nineteenth century iron palisade fence with gate and bluestone plinth. (Criterion E)

Recommendations

Recommended for inclusion in the Heritage Overlay to the extent of the whole property as defined by the title boundaries.

HO Schedule controls: Fence Controls: Iron palisade fence and pedestrian gate



Figure 8: Recommended extent of heritage overlay for 174 Punt Road, Prabran (source: www.land.vic.gov.au).

Recommended grading: A2