

‘Airlie’

**627 Malvern Road, Toorak**

Place type: Residential Buildings (private), Villa

Significance level: Local



Recommended protection: Planning Scheme

Architectural style: Victorian period (1851-1901) Italianate

**Locality history**

Toorak is situated on the elevated south side of the Yarra River, with views across the river to the city of Melbourne. Toorak has played a key role in Melbourne’s social and cultural history, and is regarded Australia-wide as a symbol of wealth and influence. It has long been recognised as Melbourne’s most affluent suburb. Although it was elevation and topography that established Toorak as a fashionable address, its name in fact comes from an Aboriginal word for ‘reedy swamp’.

The first Crown land sales south of the Yarra took place in the 1840s and 1850s. ‘Toorak House’, built by merchant James Jackson, along with its extensive grounds, was acquired by the newly established Victorian government in 1851 as Victoria’s first Government House. The creation of a vice-regal seat in 1851 set the tone for social exclusivity and was the foundation for Toorak’s development as a desirable address.

As Melbourne developed and industrialised in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the wealthy middle-class – including merchants, industrialists, professional men, military men, politicians, and men and women of ‘independent means’ – sought to escape the bustle of the city and to settle in a quieter, more spacious environment. Paddocks and native bush gave way

to large estates and substantial homes. The approach to Toorak was via the Gardiners Creek Road (later Toorak Road), which was the chief east–west route; the drive along it was described as ‘very pleasant’ in 1879 (Whitworth 1879: 390). Toorak was also accessed from the private punt at Grange Road that linked the two sides of the Yarra and also, from 1879, via the Oakleigh railway line.

During the 1870s and 1880s, many large mansions were erected, usually to an architect’s plan. Many adopted the Italianate style of architecture and, like ‘Toorak House’, were surmounted with a decorative square tower. The scale and extravagances of these residences reached a peak during the land boom of the 1880s as merchants and others among Melbourne’s expanding *nouveaux riches* sought a prestigious address. Toorak’s mansions were often sumptuously and exquisitely decorated in the latest styles.

At its height, from the 1870s and up until the dawn of the First World War, Toorak society represented an unusually high concentration of wealth, power and influence not seen elsewhere in Australia. This was home to many of Melbourne’s wealthiest and most influential families, including the Baillieu, Clarke, Grimwade, Fairburn, Fink, Miller and Myer families. The salubrious environs of Toorak also provided a seasonal base in Melbourne for wealthy landed families (predominantly Western District graziers).

The population of Toorak was dominantly British and overwhelmingly Protestant. St John’s Church of England was a lynchpin of Toorak social life in the Victorian era; it was the preferred venue for Society weddings and became a symbol of social aspiration. Other ‘English’ influences in the development of Toorak can be seen in the Tudor Revival style of a number of the interwar-era shopfronts along Toorak Road.

Some large estates were subdivided in the 1880s during the frenzied period of the property boom. Other parts of Toorak were developed with more typical middle-class homes of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. There was very minimal, if any, industry in Toorak proper, although many of its elevated homes had clear views across the Yarra of the factories with their chimney smoke that were concentrated on the Richmond flats.

### Place history

The house known as ‘Airlie’ was built c1889-90 for Frank Rowley, accountant. The architect has not been identified. Rowley was first rated £220 for a brick house in 1890 (RB). In 1893 the 8-roomed brick house was owned by Emily Harrison, who was rated £140 at post-‘land boom’ rates. She remained the owner in 1900 (RB).

The MMBW Detail Plan of 1899 shows a large house on the corner of Malvern Road and St Johns Lane set in spacious grounds. There is an extensive garden with two summer houses and large rear stables, accessed from a rear lane.

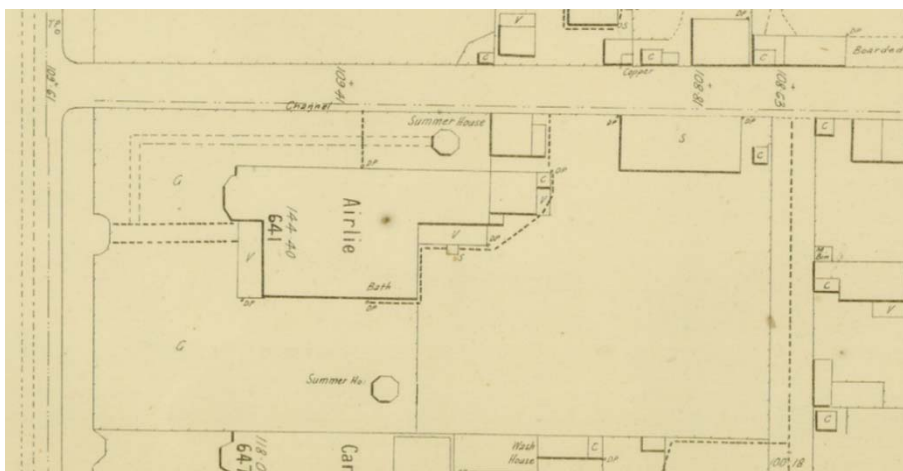


Figure 1. MMBW Detail Plan no. 980, dated 1899 (source: SLV).

As was the case with many other Toorak mansions in the early twentieth century, ‘Airlie’ was converted for use as a boarding house. It was fitted with four ‘kitchenettes’ (Age, 6 March

1954). In the 1950s it was purchased by Dr Norman Long, who used the building for a medical practice (*Age*, 10 Nov 1993).

The house was adapted for office use in the 1990s (*Age*, 7 Oct 1995), and in 2016 operated as a dentistry clinic.

### Sources

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*Age* 10 November 1993.

*Age* 7 October 1995.

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### Physical description

The residence at 627 Malvern Road is a grand two-storey Italianate villa that occupies a deep allotment on the corner of Malvern Road and St John's Lane in Toorak. The building is set back from the street behind what was once a large garden which has been replaced by a modern car park.



*Figure 2. 'Airlie' at 627 Malvern Road, Toorak c1970s (source: Committee for Urban Action collection, SLV).*

Constructed c1889-90, the building is a notable example of the common late-Victorian two-storey asymmetrical Italianate villa, which in this instance employs a stepped projecting bay to one side of a two-storey arcaded loggia. The model is varied by the adoption of a large central tower and a balustraded parapet that conceals the building's hipped roof. The most unusual feature of the house is perhaps the second loggia to the left-hand side of the façade, which imitates the more typical two-storey canted bay window in an open form. The parapet has Classical turned balusters set between piers that have vermiculated panels. The cornice below is elaborate with a range of Classical details including modillions, dentilation, and festoons set between garlands. The elaborate parapet and cornice detail is continuous across the stepped and canted projecting bays to the front façade.

The masonry loggia to the other side of the facade is detailed with vermiculated panels, and Corinthian pilasters and an unusual unadorned arcaded balustrade to the first floor level. Openings, such as the round-arched front door, arched double-hung sash windows, and arches to the canted arcaded loggia feature a bold sawtooth pattern to their reveal, and the arches rest on linking impost mouldings of Acanthus leaves. Unusual projecting sill treatments are also incorporated to the canted bay loggia. Other openings beneath the canted loggia are square-headed full height which appear to accommodate pairs of French doors to each level. The elaborate four-panelled front door is highly intact retaining the decorative leaded glazing to the multi-light highlight and sidelights.

The arcaded loggia retains red and cream biscuit (paving) tiles to the ground floor.



Figure 3. Detail of canted masonry loggia to the projecting bay fronting Malvern Road (source: Context 2016).



Figure 4. Detail of Classical detailing including the balustraded parapet and central tower (source: Context 2016).



Figure 5. Detail of the highly intact and elaborate front door (source: Context 2016).

The central tower is set back from the parapet line of the main building and features many of the Classical details incorporated in the main façade including Corinthian pilasters to the corners, Acanthus leaf impost mouldings to round-arched double-hung sash windows, and cornice detailing. Research undertaken to date has not uncovered the name of the house's designer, although the scale and quality of the building detail suggests the involvement of a fashionable architect or designer-builder.

The villa remains highly intact in terms of its presentation to the street, except for the loss of the front garden, that was still somewhat intact in the c1970s (although altered from the original extent of the estate, CUA c1970s) (see Figure 2). A modest extension has been constructed to the western elevation which is set well back from the front of the building providing a new entrance to the dentist surgery that now occupies the building.

### Comparative analysis

Although many single-storey villas were built in Melbourne and its suburbs during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the 1840s the grandest houses were almost always of two storeys, or occasionally three as at Government House and 'Cliveden'. 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 one (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. 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 Lorrain 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.

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.

As Melbourne's land boom reached its height in the late 1880s and early 1890s, both grand and small houses in the Italianate mode were covered with increasingly florid and extravagant ornament, some of it straying beyond Italianate's traditional classical vocabulary. These houses are often referred to as 'Boom Style', particularly small terraces houses with enormous showy parapets. While the most common type of 'Boom Style' house is related to the Italianate, it can also be applied to other types of buildings of that era, including the Gothic Revival Olderfleet Buildings and the Renaissance Revival Block Arcade, both in Melbourne. Kohan and Willis (2012:97) note that the 'Boom Style' is not a definable style but instead a compositional approach with richly adorned facades.

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.

Examples of substantial Italianate houses that are of individual significance in Stonnington's Heritage Overlay (both in individual HOs and HO precincts) can be divided into a number of groups according to architectural composition and plan form, their size, ornament and level of architectural sophistication.

Two-storey Italianate houses with a projecting bay used to create an asymmetric composition include examples such as 760-762 Malvern Road, Armadale (in HO130), the semi-detached pair of houses at 27-29 Wattletree Road, Armadale (HO251), 31 Grandview Grove, Prahran (in HO135), 35 Grandview Grove, Prahran (in HO135), and 21 William Street, South Yarra (HO462, verandah replaced). Larger houses incorporate a return verandah set between two perpendicular projecting bays and include examples, 'Montrose House', 38 Huntingtower Road, Armadale (HO367, verandah demolished), 'Carrington', 58 Kooyong Road, Armadale (HO318), 29 Grandview Grove, Prahran (in HO135), the polychrome brick villa 'Dunrobin', 9 Isabella Street, Malvern (in HO374), 72 Elizabeth Street, Malvern (HO309), and 'Glenayon', 19 Pine Grove, Malvern (HO278).

Less common are examples with arcaded front verandahs, or loggias, often only used at the ground floor with slender masonry or cast iron columns supporting arches. Examples include, 768 Malvern Road, Armadale (in HO130), 67 Avoca Street, South Yarra (in HO355, graded B) and 1 Hawksburn Road, South Yarra (in HO137). None of these examples incorporate a parapet, which is an unusual addition to 'Airlie's' asymmetrical plan form, but was very popular in the late 1880s when it was built.

'Airlie' can most closely be compared to 768 Malvern Road, Armadale which adopts a similar composition of a canted projecting bay to one side of a two-storey masonry arcade, along with a parapet concealing the roof. The range of Classical cast and run cement render detailing is remarkably similar, suggesting the involvement of the same architect or builder designer. The

detail to the cornice, window treatments and the first floor balustrade detail is almost identical. 'Airlie' is a more substantial example with a broader composition and a bolder version with the inclusion of the balustraded parapet, tower and very unusual canted loggia to the projecting bay. They are of a similar level of intactness.



Figure 6. 768 Malvern Road, Armadale - significant in HO130 (source: Google Streetview).



Figure 7. 1 Hawksburn Road, South Yarra, significant in HO137 (source: Google Streetview).

'Airlie' also compares well to the grand two-storey villa at 1 Hawksburn Road, South Yarra, which also incorporates an arcaded verandah, although in this instance as slender masonry columns to the ground floor only, with cast iron to the first floor, and a balustraded tower presumably centred over the entrance at the side (south elevation).

In conclusion, 'Airlie' is one of a limited number of substantial Victorian residences in Stonnington that varies the typical Italianate asymmetrical plan form with the addition of a number of unusual elements including the masonry arcaded verandah to both levels set to one



side of the arcaded canted bay loggia, the balustraded parapet, and a central tower. The rendered finish combines high quality cast and run rendered cement details, including an ornate cornice below the parapet, Corinthian pilasters, vermiculated panels, and Acanthus leaf impostes, which further distinguish the villa from others of its type. The loss of its front garden is by far outweighed by its unusual and accomplished form and detail.

### **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*

*8.2 Middle-class suburbs and the suburban ideal*

*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?**

‘Airlie’, at 627 Malvern Road, Toorak is significant. It was built c1889-90 for accountant Frank Rowley.

It is a two-storey Italianate villa with rendered masonry walls and an asymmetrical plan form incorporating a projecting bay to one side of a two-storey masonry arcaded verandah. It has a highly decorative central tower and its hipped roof is concealed by a balustraded parapet. The projecting bay incorporates a canted masonry loggia.

‘Airlie’s’ presentation to the public realm, including setback from the street contributes to its significance.

The modern alterations and additions, such as the concrete paved carpark and contemporary side entrance, are not significant.

#### **How is it significant?**

‘Airlie’, at 627 Malvern Road, Toorak is of local architectural and aesthetic significance to the City of Stonnington.

#### **Why is it significant?**

‘Airlie’, at 627 Malvern Road, Toorak is a distinguished and intact example of a prestigious and substantial Victorian residence built for middle-class residents of Toorak during the boom years of the 1880s and 1890s. The house adopts strong characteristic elements representative of the Italianate style, including the asymmetrical plan form, M-profile hipped roof (not visible from the street), arched windows, and classicising detail executed in cement render. It represents the extravagance and confidence of boom-era housing in the municipality shortly before the great crash and Depression of the 1890s. (Criterion D)

Aesthetically, it is distinguished by the addition of a number of unusual elements, in particular the very creative two-storey canted bay in the form of a loggia, as well as the masonry arcaded verandah to both levels, the balustraded parapet, and the highly decorated central tower. The rendered finish combines good quality cast and run rendered cement details, including a highly ornate cornice below the parapet, Corinthian pilasters, vermiculated panels, and acanthus leaf impostes. (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: None

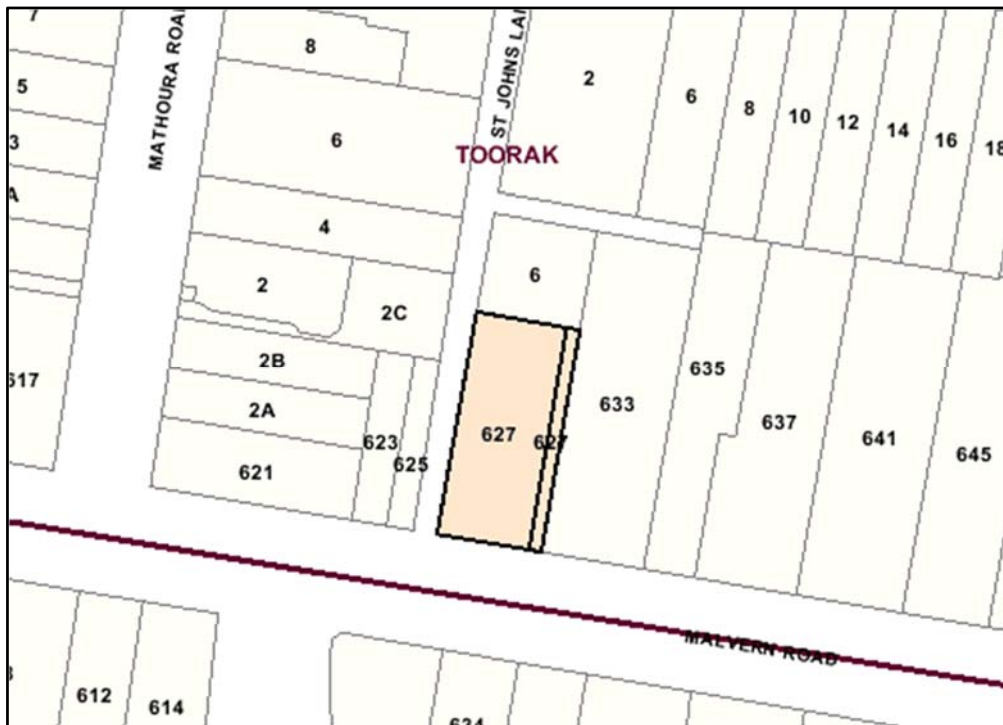


Figure 8: Recommended extent of heritage overlay for 627 Malvern Road, Toorak (source: [www.land.vic.gov.au](http://www.land.vic.gov.au)).

Recommended grading: A2