

Wilhelmi House

372 Punt Road, South Yarra

Place type: Residential Buildings (private), House

Significance level: Local



Recommended protection: Planning Scheme

Architectural style: Victorian period (1851-1901) Regency

Locality history

South Yarra, situated on the elevated south side of the Yarra River, emerged as a suburb of Melbourne in the 1850s. Before that, from the late 1830s and until the early 1840s, George Langthorne's Anglican Mission for the Aboriginal people was situated near present-day Anderson Street. The Botanical Gardens had been reserved in 1846 and the surrounding land began to be developed for large residential estates in the 1850s. The second director of the gardens from 1859, Government Botanist Ferdinand Mueller, resided in South Yarra, as did his deputy, Charles Wilhelmi.

Government House (1876) was situated close by in the Domain, and although situated outside the suburb of South Yarra, the vice-regal presence provided an influential social cachet to the area. On the elevated ground between the Yarra River and Toorak Road a number of mansions on large estates were established, including 'Como', 'Avoca', 'Redfern' and 'Airlie'. The Botanic Gardens, also outside South Yarra, lent a strong character to the area. Wealth enabled the development of extensive private gardens, and large properties were often laid out with gravel walks and beds, large expanses of lawn and orchards. Smaller villas were also embellished with garden beds, and also often sported a fashionable fernery.

At the southern end of South Yarra, between Toorak Road and Commercial Road, the land was subdivided with generally smaller allotments. Although a predominantly middle-class suburb, there were also narrow streets of small cottages that accommodated the working class and the lower middle class (including, for example, salesmen and shopkeepers). Here there were also a number of corner hotels established. Working-class men and women often worked

as domestic servants, groomsmen, drivers and gardeners for those in the big houses, where they were often accommodated in servants' quarters. Workers were also employed in factories along the river flats and lower-lying ground closer to Chapel Street. Industries operating in the 1880s included brickworks, jam and preserving works, and soap works (Whitworth 1879: 433). Some remnant industrial buildings survive along the river, although most are altered.

South Yarra was accessed from the city via St Kilda Road, and also by a punt across the Yarra. The South Yarra railway station was first opened on Toorak Road in the 1860s, servicing the private Hobsons Bay railway, but was expanded in the 1880s when the station was added to the new Oakleigh line. The strip along Toorak Road and along Chapel Street (bordering with Prahran) developed into a busy shopping and commercial area.

South Yarra was home to many of Melbourne's wealthiest and most influential people, including businessmen and merchants, professionals, academics, retired graziers and diplomats; the close proximity to Victoria Barracks also attracted military men to the suburb. Well-known families that lived in South Yarra in the nineteenth century included the Armytages and the Deakins. A number of fine churches and private schools, including Melbourne Girls' Grammar School (Merton Hall), and (outside the municipality) Melbourne Grammar School and Christ Church Grammar School, were established in the mid to late nineteenth century.

The suburb has a concentration of examples of fine architecture, from Victorian-era mansions through to Modernist styles, with a number of notable architects represented. From the early twentieth century and through the interwar period, many large estates were subdivided and grand homes were converted into flats and boarding houses. A number of fashionable interwar-era apartment blocks were erected in the Botanic Gardens area, along Alexandra Avenue and between Domain Road and Toorak Road. The breaking up of large properties continued into the 1950s and 1960s. Development threatened the character of the area in the 1960s when a number of 'high-rise' developments were opposed by a residents' action group.

Place history

This site forms part of Crown portion 38 in the Parish of Prahran, which was granted in 1850 to Peter Davis, an early settler in South Yarra (CT 146/134). A 4-roomed timber house was pre-existing in 1860 when Charles Wilhelmi was first listed as residing at this address. The rate books for 1861 record that a brick house was in the course of construction (RB). Part of the original timber house was possibly retained at the rear of the new building.

Wilhelmi and his wife Caroline (née Pfeiffer) resided at 372 Punt Road South Yarra from 1860 but may have been there as early as 1859 (after rates had been charged for that year); a birth notice announced their son's birth at Punt Road in 1859 but no address is given (*Argus*, 25 Aug 1859). They sold the house in 1865 and lived elsewhere in South Yarra before returning to Germany in 1869 (Ancestry.com).

Charles Wilhelmi was the anglicised name of notable German botanist JFC Wilhelmi (1829-1884), who was Assistant Government Botanist for Victoria from 1857 until 1865. He was the deputy to Ferdinand Mueller and was based at the Melbourne Botanic Gardens and Botanical Museum. Wilhelmi served as Acting Government Botanist while Mueller was absent on botanising expeditions from 1855-57 (Cohn, 2002:643). While living at 372 Punt Road, he also published an important early work entitled *Manners and Customs of the Australian Natives* (1862), concerning the Aboriginal people of Port Lincoln in South Australia, where Wilhelmi had travelled on botanical expeditions with Mueller from 1849 until 1853.

The entry on Carl Wilhelmi in the *Encyclopedia of Australian Science* notes his significance:

Carl Wilhelmi, a German botanist, sailed from Hamburg to Port Adelaide in 1849. His contributions as a botanist and natural scientist in general were significant and he was a prolific writer. He is known as the first botanist since Robert Brown to explore and collect the plants of the Eyre Peninsula, and the first to publish a detailed account of the Victorian Grampians. He was acquainted with Joseph Hooker, and as assistant to Ferdinand von Mueller collected many botanical specimens. Carl Wilhelmi returned to Germany in 1869.

The MMBW Detail Plan no. 955, dated 1896, shows a house built to the side boundaries but set well back from the roadway, with a small garden laid out at the front with asphalted paths and a circular bed. There are verandahs at the front and rear and various outbuildings, as well as an outside toilet. The house is slightly skew in relation to the street, indicating its early date.

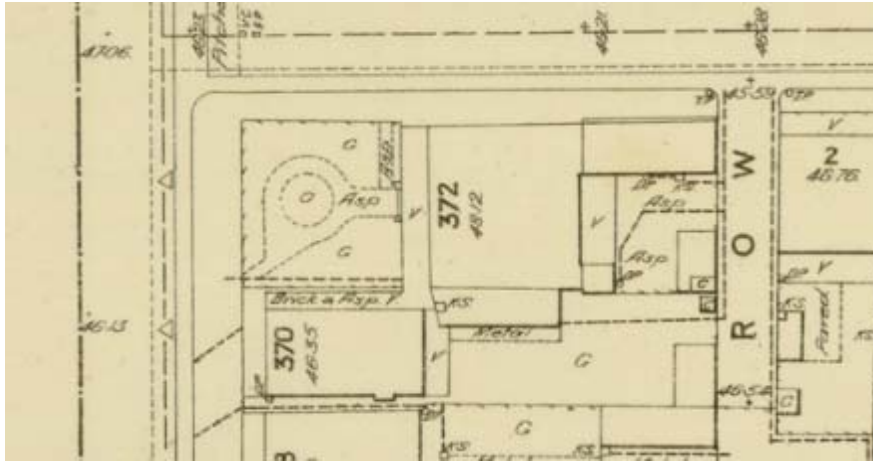


Figure 1. MMBW Detail Plan no. 955, dated 1896 (source: SLV).

The house was purchased by James Gatehouse in 1866, when it was described as a brick house of 5 rooms. In 1877 it was acquired by Thomas Lloyd. After the Wilhelmi family moved from the house in 1865, it was tenanted for many years (RB). The house has been re-numbered several times. The current number, 372, was allocated in 1899. A real estate advertisement in 1936 described 372 Punt Road, South Yarra, as a ‘Very well-built double-fronted brick and weatherboard villa ... Containing 5 rooms and all conveniences’ (*Age*, 15 August 1936).

Sources

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Physical description

The house at 372 Punt Road, South Yarra, is a small Victorian Regency house which is freestanding, but built to the side boundaries. It is set back behind a large front garden at the corner of Alexandra Street.

The house sits beneath two parallel slate-clad hipped roofs, a larger and taller one over the front rooms and a narrower one over the back rooms (hidden by a simple parapet). It retains two chimneys with a simple corbelled top resting on cream brick brackets. Each has two tall patterned terracotta pots.

The façade is dominated by a rendered parapet with a simple dentilated cornice, in the Regency manner. Below it is an elegant concave hipped verandah. It rests on cast-iron columns and has a combined cast-iron frieze and brackets (a c1880s addition).



Figure 2. View of the façade and north elevation of 372 Punt Road, c1970s (source: CUA collection, SLV).



Figure 3. Front façade of 372 Punt Road, c1970s (source: CUA collection, SLV).

The façade is symmetrical with a central doorway (no sidelights and possibly no highlight), with a simple double-hung sash window (probably with a bluestone sill) to either side. The façade is of face brick which has been bagged and painted. The north side elevation is rendered, and there is a single window at the rear which has a moulded render surround.

Alterations to the house itself include the bagging of the face brick, replacement of the verandah floor with concrete, and replacement of the front door with a glazed unit. The rear narrow rear wing was demolished and replaced with a conjoined two-storey rear unit in the former back yard (2A Alexandra Street, built in 2000). It is clearly a separate structure from the house and is set well back from the front, so is only visible in oblique views when viewed from Punt Road, but is clearly visible on Alexandra Street. The house sits behind a tall timber paling fence around its front yard.

Comparative analysis

While technically a free-standing house, 372 Punt Road is built to the side boundaries like a terrace house and shares the same two-dimensional focus on the front façade.

The terraced house form was introduced from Britain and characterises inner suburban development from the 1850s and 1890s in Australia's capital cities. A terrace house is defined as a dwelling with blind boundary walls, designed to fit on a narrow building block. While the most common type of terrace house in Melbourne is the terrace row, of three or more houses sharing party walls, the terrace house was also built in pairs (semi-detached) and even singly where more space was available (Tibbits & Goad 2012:695).

While Windsor had by far the densest nineteenth-century development in Stonnington, inner-suburban South Yarra also had a number of semi-detached terrace house pairs, which was an intermediate density. Further to the east, in Armadale and Malvern, as well as Windsor and South Yarra, we see large single terrace houses on wider blocks with space between them. While not attached, they were often built in rows.

The earliest architectural styles to be used in Australia were the Georgian and Regency, which were interlinked classically derived styles imported from Britain. The more refined Regency style can be considered the final expression of Georgian architecture. While the reign of King George III ended in 1811, and the Regency period ended in 1820, these styles continued to be used in the colonies for both simple and grand houses until the 1850s and even the 1860s (Apperley et al. 1989:28).

Georgian buildings, as seen in Victoria, was characterised by symmetry and pleasingly harmonious proportions based on classical antecedents. Roofs were generally hipped, with exposed eaves or continuing into a front or encircling verandah (often with a change of pitch, creating a broken-back profile). Two-storey buildings had a verandah only to the ground floor (if at all), supported on simple timber posts or columns. Due to the high price of large sheets of glass at this time, windows were often multi-paned, typically six-over-six (Apperley et al. 1989:42).

The Regency variant of Georgian shared similar proportions and symmetry, but with a greater sophistication of detail. Apperley et al. (1989:46) describe its typical features as follows:

... Victorian Regency buildings continued to exhibit clearly defined rectangular masses arranged symmetrically with, more often than not, the outer edges of the roof finished behind a simple parapet. The masonry walls of stone or brick were usually stuccoed and lined to imitate quality stonework ... Projecting mouldings of simple, classical design were gently modelled in stucco ...

The stucco (or cement render) classical details most common seen on Regency buildings was a cornice to the roof parapet, quoins to the corners of the building, classical pilasters to define bays, and architraves around windows (some with entablatures as well). Many houses had a concave or ogee-profile verandah roof, though grander houses might have a portico and frontispiece. Again, due to the cost of large panes of glass, windows were often six-over-six pane double-hung windows, or multi-paned French windows.

As South Yarra is one of the earliest suburbs of Melbourne, it retains an unusually rich collection of both sophisticated and simple examples of Victorian Georgian and Regency houses. More modest examples survive in Windsor and Prahran as well. These range from very simple Georgian cottages such as 5 George Street, Windsor (HO39), and 30 MacFarlan Street, South Yarra (HO74). More sophisticated examples with quoins and other classical embellishments typical of the Regency style are the preeminent Como House (16 Como Avenue, VHR H205), as well as 75 and 76 Caroline Street (in HO355), all in South Yarra.

Buildings of this type were once common in South Yarra but are becoming increasingly rare.

Examples of this style that are Significant in the Stonnington Heritage Overlay (both in individual HOs and HO precincts) include:

- 15 Darling Street, South Yarra (HO32) – late 1860s double-fronted single-storey house with narrow eaves and Regency timber verandah detail, face brick has been painted.
- 75 Caroline Street, South Yarra (in HO355) – c1855 brick cottage with rendered walls and quoins. It has a timber-framed verandah with a concave roof. Altered in 1969.
- 354 Punt Road, South Yarra (in HO313) – double-fronted two-storey terrace house with narrow front eaves and Regency timber verandah detail, built date unknown.
- 372-374 Malvern Road, Prahran (HO77 & HO78) – 1863-64, a two-storey semi-detached terrace pair built of bluestone with a parapeted front and two-storey concave verandah on Regency-style paired posts.
- 24 Murphy Street, South Yarra (HO165) – 1866, a Regency single-storey rendered brick house with a slate-clad hipped roof and render quoins to the corners. It has a hipped verandah with a concave profile, with timber joinery which may be twentieth century replacements.
- 30 Darling Street, South Yarra (HO33) – c1856, a two-storey house designed by architect David Ross, with French doors to the ground floor and six-over-six double-hung sash windows to the first floor. The two-storey verandah features late nineteenth century cast-iron elements.

The house at 372 Punt Road is at the more modest end of the spectrum in South Yarra, with its two main stylistic features the front parapet with a dentilated cornice (also seen at 372-374 Malvern Road), and the elegant concave hipped roof verandah (as at 24 Murphy Street and others). Unlike a number of the other examples, it does not retain its original verandah posts

and frieze (which were likely of timber open-work), instead has cast-iron elements from later in the nineteenth century. In this it is like 30 Darling Street, which was built c1856 but has a later cast-iron verandah. In its size, 372 Punt Road is larger than the most architecturally modest examples, such as the timber 5 George Street and 30 MacFarlan Street and the rendered masonry 75 Caroline Street, and is closer in scale and level of pretension to small masonry villas such as 24 Murphy Street and 15 Darling Street.



Figure 4. 24 Murphy Street, South Yarra (HO165) (source: Google Streetview).

The use of a corniced parapet it is not commonly seen in Stonnington, though it is one of the defining characteristics of the Regency style. The finest example of its use is the grand Como House (VHR H205), with the only other examples identified the semi-detached pairs at 372-374 Malvern Road and 52 Albion Street, South Yarra (the latter assessed as part of the Victorian Houses Heritage Study, 2016).



Figure 5. 372-374 Malvern Road, Prahran (HO77 & HO78) (source: Google Streetview).

In its intactness, 372 Punt Road sits at the lower end of the Georgian and Regency houses in the Stonnington HO, though most houses of the 1850s and 1860s have undergone a good deal of incremental change over the decades. Other examples have alterations such as overpainting of brick (15 Darling Street), replacement of verandah elements in the late nineteenth century (30 Darling Street) or twentieth century (24 Murphy Street), and unspecified general remodelling in 1969 (75 Caroline Street).

In conclusion, the Regency house at 372 Punt Road is a good example of a modest early villa, of a comparable intactness to houses such as 30 Darling Street, 24 Murphy Street and 75 Caroline Street. While modest in its details, it displays two characteristic features of the Regency style: a parapeted form with a simple cornice, and an elegant hipped concave verandah.

Thematic context

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

3.5 Immigrating to seek opportunity

8.2 Middle-class suburbs and the suburban ideal

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?

Wilhelmi House at 372 Punt Road, South Yarra, is significant. It was built in 1861 for Charles Wilhelmi and his family, replacing (or extending) a previous timber house.

It is a small brick villa, built to the side boundaries, and set behind a generous front garden. The roof is in the form of two parallel hipped roofs, covered in slate, and retains two chimneys with a simple corbelled top resting on cream brick brackets and tall patterned chimney pots. The façade is dominated by a rendered parapet with a simple dentilated cornice, in the Regency manner. Below it is an elegant concave hipped verandah. It rests on cast-iron columns and has a combined cast-iron frieze and brackets (a c1880s addition, which is contributory). The front door and sash windows are arranged in a symmetrical fashion.

The face brick front wall has been bagged and painted in the twentieth century, obscuring the handmade bricks. This element is intrusive and not of heritage significance.

How is it significant?

The Wilhelmi House is of local architectural and historical (associational) significance to the City of Stonnington.

Why is it significant?

Architecturally, Wilhelmi House is an example of one of South Yarra's rich collection of Victorian Georgian and Regency houses, which are rare in the eastern parts of Stonnington and metropolitan Melbourne more generally. It is a modest villa, which retains much of its original character and fabric, including typical features of the Victorian Regency style: a symmetrical form and placement of openings, a corniced parapet to the front, and a front verandah with an elegant convex hipped roof. (Criteria B & D)

Historically, it is significant for its association with notable German botanist J.F.C. ("Charles") Wilhelmi (1829-1884), who served as Assistant Government Botanist in Victoria under Ferdinand Mueller, from 1858 until 1865. Wilhelmi published an important early work while living here, entitled *Manners and Customs of the Australian Natives* (1862), concerning the Aboriginal people of Port Lincoln in South Australia. (Criterion H)

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

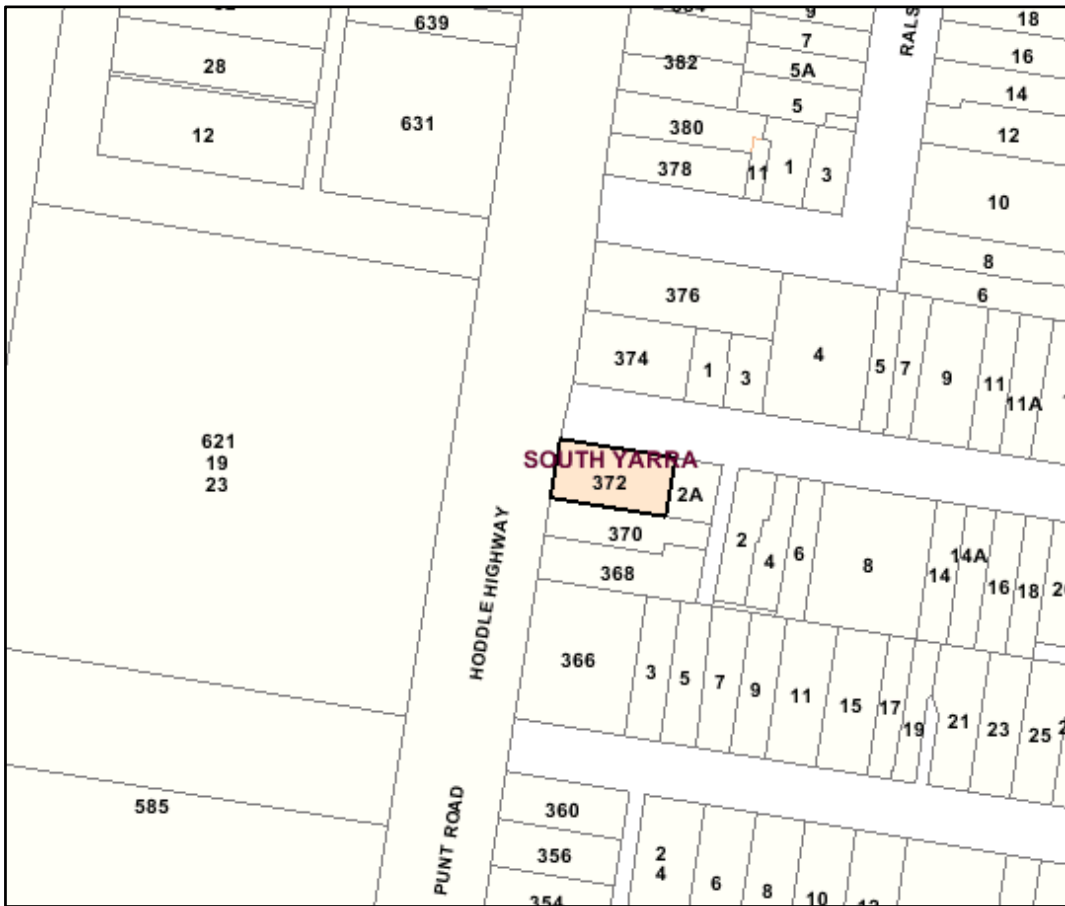


Figure 6: Recommended extent of heritage overlay for 372 Punt Road, South Yarra (source: www.land.vic.gov.au)

Recommended grading: A2