

3, 5, 7 & 9 Kensington Road, South Yarra

Place type: Residential Buildings (private), House (terrace row)

Significance level: Local



Recommended protection: Planning Scheme

Architectural style: Victorian period (1851-1901) Italianate

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 Grammar School, Melbourne Girls' Grammar School (Merton Hall), and Christ Church Grammar School (outside the municipality), 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

The row of four double-storey freestanding terrace houses at 3-9 Kensington Road, South Yarra, was erected in 1888. In 1887 two allotments of vacant land were owned by Robert G Benson, who owned a large amount of property in the cities of Prahran and Collingwood (RB) and was most likely a property developer. The following year, four brick houses, of 9 rooms each, had been erected and these were owned by Richard H Thatcher (no. 3), Joseph H Watkin (no. 5), Sidney P Akhurst (no. 7) and Phillippa Beecher (no. 9) (RB). These were comfortable middle-class residences with a desirable address. All four houses were leased out for considerable periods.

The MMBW Detail Plan no. 942, dated 1896, shows the four separate dwellings, each with a virtually identical layout and front gardens, though with different arrangements of outbuildings at the rear. For example, no. 3 Kensington Road had a path to a rear gateway to the adjoining open space behind it (later established as Rockley Gardens).

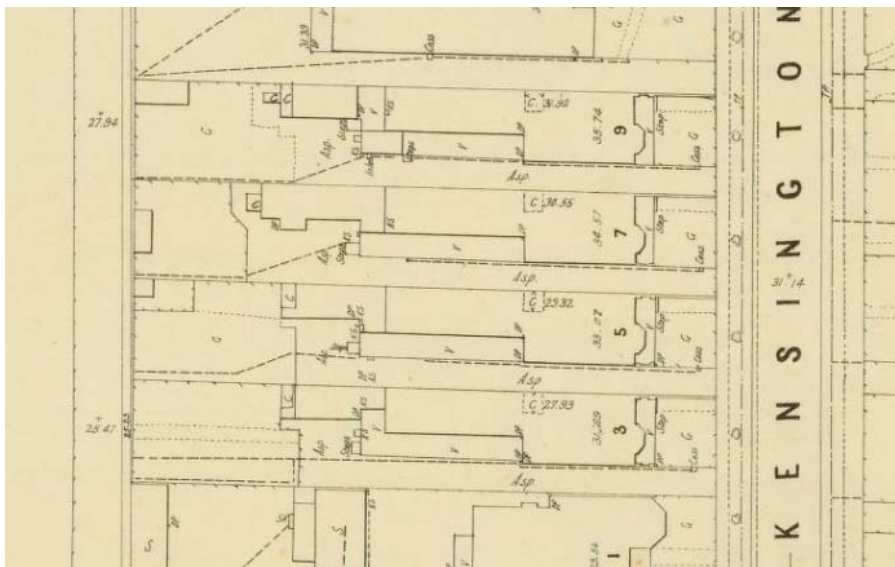


Figure 1. MMBW Detail Plan no. 942, dated 1896, shows the row of four dwellings at 3-9 Kensington Road (source: SLV).

In 1957, 9 Kensington Road was rented out as separate apartments (*Age*, 16 Nov 1957). In 1991 the residence was renovated (*Age*, 22 February 1992). In 1965 no. 5 Kensington Road was advertised as a 'renovator's unique opportunity' (*Age*, 18 September 1965). All four houses have since been renovated internally.

Sources

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Physical description

The four houses at 3-9 Kensington Road, South Yarra, are freestanding Italianate terrace houses, with blank side walls and wing walls enclosing the front verandahs, but with setbacks between them. The houses were built at the same time with minor variations between them, but all share the same overall form.

All are set behind a medium-sized garden setback. They are two-storey and are wider than usual, with three bays. Each has a simple hipped roof with bracketed eaves to the front and side elevations, and a narrower hipped wing to the rear. All have chimneys with a moulded rendered cornice at the top. All are constructed of brick; with nos. 3, 7 and 9 rendered (which

may be a later alteration for nos. 3 and 7, judging by the texture of the render), and the bichrome face brick of no. 5 overpainted (but remains visible on the north side wall).

All have a canted bay with full-length sash windows to the ground floor and three long double-hung sash windows to the first floor. The front doors have four fielded panels, with arched panels at the top, and heavy timber mouldings including corbels and a dentilated cornice around it. Ground floor openings have segmental arches, while the first-floor windows have square heads.

The two pairs differ in their verandah cast-iron. The verandah beam above the ground floor has a large applied scallop detail and a sawtooth detail along the edge, while that above the first-floor just has the sawtooth detail. The cast-iron to nos. 3 & 5 is of three patterns clearly produced as a set, as they share a range of Aesthetic Movement motifs including a sunflower in a vase, a stylised sun, and foliage on a backdrop of a bamboo screen. The cast-iron panels used for the balustrade are particularly interesting.



Figure 2. 3 Kensington Road (source: City of Stonnington 2016).



Figure 3. 5 Kensington Road, above (source: City of Stonnington 2016).



Figure 4. 7 Kensington Road (source: Context 2016).



Figure 5. 9 Kensington Road (source: Context 2016).

The houses at nos. 7 & 9 have different verandah iron, but the intricate detail to the verandah

beams is the same. The cast-iron patterns differ for the two houses, though they both have first-floor balustrades of particularly attractive patterns. The cast-iron frieze and brackets to no. 7 may have been replaced, as they use a very typical rinceaux pattern that is frequently reproduced, and this is the only house in the row with a cast-iron column to the ground floor verandah. It is also the only house in the row with label moulds to the canted bay window, making it an interesting variation.

All four of the houses sit behind a high brick fence. In 1999, at no. 3 a side carport was built and alterations made to the rear wing, installing folding doors along the south elevation and demolishing an earlier ground floor extension, bricking up three windows on the north side of the rear wing (Building Permit P500/99, City of Stonnington, 1999). These changes were part of works converting it back to a single-family residence (from three apartments). None of the changes, apart from the recessive carport, are visible from the public domain.

Comparative analysis

The terraced house form was introduced from Britain and characterises inner suburban development from the 1850s to the 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).

Terrace houses typically have a full-width front section two rooms deep, with a narrower rear wing with a cut-back to one side allowing windows along it. The privy was located at the rear of the site, often built in pairs. Early examples (generally up to the mid-1880s in Melbourne's suburbs) of terrace rows and semi-detached pairs often have a continuous roof, eaves and verandahs unbroken by party walls. Later in the century, suburban building regulations dictated visible party walls extending out and up to divide verandahs and roofs, as well as parapet walls. These regulations dictated the form of what is now considered a 'typical' terrace house: single or two-storey dwelling with a strong vertical line defining the extent of each dwelling and the parapet used as the focus for cast-cement and cement-render ornament.

The very earliest terrace houses, in early suburbs such as Fitzroy, followed the British model and did not have a front verandah. As this form was adapted to the hotter Australian climate, timber-framed verandahs were added at ground floor level (even for two and three-storey houses). From the 1860s to the 1890s, a distinctive Australian terrace idiom emerged, embellished with cement decoration and full-height verandahs employing cast-iron posts, balustrades, and decorative brackets and frieze (Tibbits & Goad 2012:695-7). Some of the more prestigious examples used masonry arcading (usually rendered brick) instead of the mass-produced cast-iron verandah construction.

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.

Almost all Victorian terraces could be described as Italianate in style, though some lean toward the more substantial Renaissance Revival. There are also a very small number of Gothic Revival examples.

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 (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.

As the style evolved to accommodate less substantial residential types, the deliberate asymmetry and rambling form inspired by the Picturesque massing of wings and towers of buildings such as 'Osbourne' became less central to the mode. So much so that the Italianate terrace forms of the 1880s were not substantially different to their forebears of a generation earlier apart from an appliqué of 'Italian' detailing.

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.

Examples of Italianate terrace houses that are of individual significance in Stonnington's Heritage Overlay can be divided into a number of groups according to the number of dwellings (attached or detached), their size, ornament and level of architectural sophistication.

Examples built in the 1870s until about 1885 have exposed eaves to the front (and sometimes to the sides of end walls), and the walls are usually of bichrome or polychrome face brick. Examples include modest single-storey examples such as the semi-detached double-fronted pair at 4-6 Frederick Street, Windsor (in HO138); the terrace rows at 13-17 McIlwrick Street,

Windsor (in HO138); 69-77 Hornby Street, Windsor (in HO129); 21-25 Portland Place, South Yarra (in HO145); and 15-27 Greville Street, Prahran (in HO456); the semi-detached pairs at 16-18 Donald Street, Prahran (in HO456); and the terrace row of two-storey double-fronted houses at 58-68 Caroline Street, South Yarra (in HO355). Larger houses with exposed eaves and face brick are two-storey detached houses at 10 McIlwrick Street, Windsor (in HO138); 85 Rose Street, Armadale (in HO130), 118 Williams Road, Prahran (in HO155); 36 Hawksburn Road, South Yarra (in HO137); and 8 Cromwell Crescent, South Yarra (in HO147); and two-storey semi-detached houses at 21-23, 29-31 & 38-40 Hawksburn Road, South Yarra (in HO137). Less common are examples with walls finished in cement render include the two-storey terrace row at 200-210 Williams Road, Toorak (in HO380); the two-storey semi-detached pair at 52-54 Chatsworth Road, Prahran (in HO127); and the very grand detached two-storey house at 80 Williams Road (in HO155).

The row of detached terrace houses at 3-9 Kensington Road are similar to freestanding examples at 34 & 36 Hawksburn Road, and 8 Cromwell Crescent, all in South Yarra. The Hawksburn houses have polychrome brickwork (overpainted) and the front verandahs have no wing walls. The houses at 3-9 Kensington Road are of a similar level of intactness, but are larger (wider) and have the added visual interest of the canted bay window and usual cast-iron patterns to nos. 3 & 5.

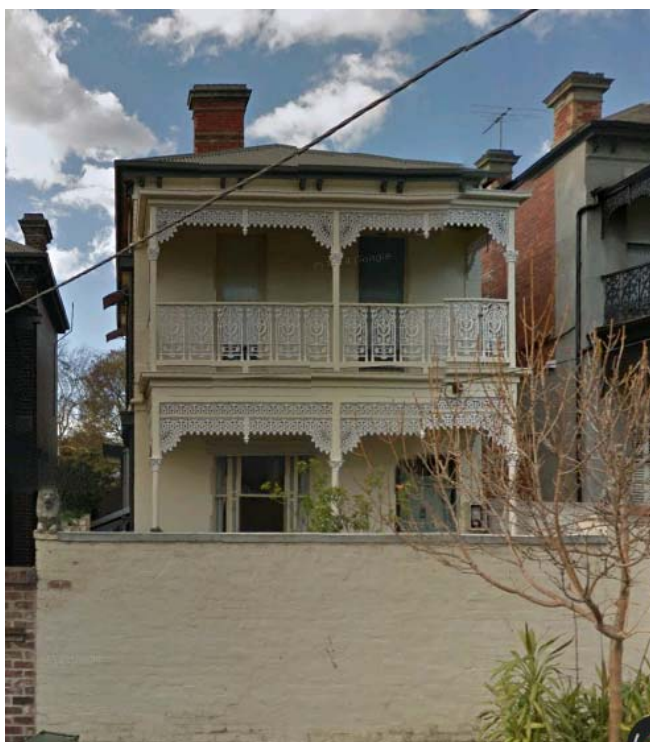


Figure 6. 36 Hawksburn Road, South Yarra (Significant in HO137) (source: Google Streetview).

The house at 8 Cromwell Crescent is more similar in form, with verandah wing walls. While it is also smaller and has less interesting cast-iron verandah detail than 3-9 Kensington Road, its fine polychrome brickwork has not been overpainted.



Figure 7. 8 Cromwell Crescent, South Yarra (Significant in HO147) (source: Google Streetview).

In their generous size 3-9 Kensington Road compares more closely to three-bayed semi-detached pairs at 29-31 Hawksburn Road, and the very grand 31-33 Cromwell Road, South Yarra (Significant in HO137).

In conclusion, the terrace houses at 3-9 Kensington Road compare well in their intactness to other Significant houses of this type, and are distinguished by their large size and details such as the canted bay windows, Aesthetic Movement cast-iron verandah detail, and the label mouldings to no. 7.

Thematic context

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

3.3.3 Speculators and land boomers

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?

The row of four freestanding terrace houses at 3-9 Kensington Road, South Yarra, is significant. They were built for property developer Robert G. Benson in 1888, and sold on to four different owners who then leased them out.

They are two-storey masonry Italianate houses of bichrome face brick (no. 5, overpainted) and rendered brick (nos. 3, 7 & 9), with wing walls bracketing the two-storey verandahs with cast-iron frieze, brackets and balustrades. They have slated hipped roofs with bracketed eaves on three sides, and typical Italianate corniced chimneys. They are a bit wider than usual, with three

sash windows to the first floor, above a canted bay window to the ground floor. The four-panel front doors have elegant arched upper panels.

How is it significant?

The houses at 3-9 Kensington Road are of local architectural and aesthetic significance to the City of Stonnington.

Why is it significant?

Architecturally, they are largely intact representative examples of the substantial houses built for the middle-class residents of South Yarra during the boom years of the 1880s and early 1890s. The terrace house form, with blind boundary walls, designed to fit on a narrow building block, was most commonly built in rows in the densely packed inner suburbs. In the better part of Stonnington, particularly South Yarra, there were many free-standing houses that followed the terrace typology on more spacious sites. The houses at 3-7 Kensington Road exhibit typical features of this type, including the blind boundary walls and verandah wing walls creating a focus on the front façade. (Criterion D)

Aesthetically, they are distinguished by their large size and details such as the canted bay windows, the Italianate label mouldings to no. 7, and verandah detail. The ground-floor verandah beams have a large applied scallop detail and a sawtooth detail along the edge. The cast-iron to nos. 3 & 5 is a set of three patterns with Aesthetic Movement motifs including a sunflower in a vase, a stylised sun, and foliage draped over a bamboo screen. (Criterion E)

Recommendations

Recommended for inclusion in the Heritage Overlay to the extent of the whole properties at 3-9 Kensington Road as defined by the title boundaries.

HO Schedule controls: None

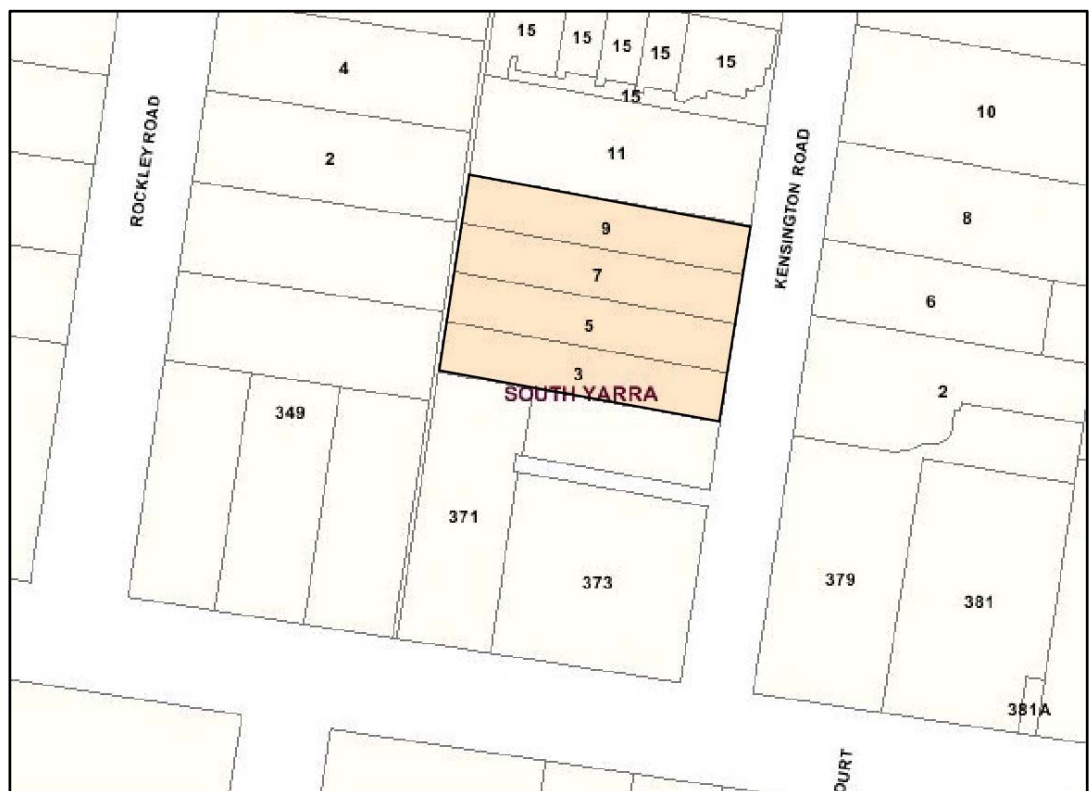


Figure 8. Recommended extent of heritage overlay for 3, 5, 7 & 9 Kensington Road, South Yarra (source: www.land.vic.gov.au)

Recommended grading: A2

