

‘Ardvarnish’

65 Murphy Street, South Yarra

Place type: Residential Buildings (private), Villa

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 Girls' Grammar School (Merton Hall), and Melbourne Grammar School 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.

Place history

There was no building on the site in 1855, according to James Kearney's *Plan of Melbourne*. A dwelling appears to have been in existence here from 1872 when James Misken Bennet, butcher, was rated £54 for a 6-roomed brick house (RB). This house forms the ground floor of the current house.

Around 1881, Joseph Harris moved to the property at 65 Murphy Street (then number 49). This was a fashionable address and a prominent site at the elevated northern end of Murphy Street. The area is heavily built-up today, but in the 1870s and 1880s the house would have had views to the Yarra. The earliest reference to the house, named 'Ardvarnish', was in 1886 (*Argus* 30 January 1886). The name is likely taken from the town of Ardvarnish in County Tyrone, Ireland.

Harris was born in Bristol, England, the son of a nurseryman, and migrated to Victoria in the early 1850s. He was first elected to the Prahran municipal council in 1873, and served as mayor from 1874-76, after success as a nursery proprietor in South Yarra. He was elected to the Victorian Parliament in 1881, where he served until 1884.

Alterations were made to the building in 1887-88 for Harris. In 1887, architect Norman Hitchcock called for tenders for 'additions, alterations and repairs to Villa, Murphy Street, South Yarra, for J. Harris, Esq.' (*Age* 16 July 1887). The following year Hitchcock called for tenders for an 'additional storey & tower to villa' belonging to J Harris in Murphy Street, South Yarra (Lewis 2013). By the end of these works, the house had been converted from a single storey dwelling into a grand, double-storeyed Italianate villa with a balustraded tower.

Norman Hitchcock (c.1839-1918), born in England, the son of a carpenter, was a notable Melbourne builder and architect during the property boom of the 1880s and became a key proponent of the Boom style. Hitchcock developed a distinctive signature style, favouring modelled elements in cement and vermiculation. Hitchcock was based in Carlton but left a legacy of work in many parts of Melbourne. One of his finest early works is 'Melbournia Terrace', 1-13 Drummond Street, Carlton (1877, Significant in Melbourne HO1). Whilst a large proportion of his work was based in the suburbs of Carlton and surrounds, he also had

commissions south of the river. Other examples of his work in the City of Stonnington include a villa at 3 Hobsons Street, South Yarra (c.1888, demolished). The highly ornamented Boom-style semi-detached terrace pair at 11 & 13 Cromwell Road, South Yarra (1890-91) is also tentatively attributed to Hitchcock.

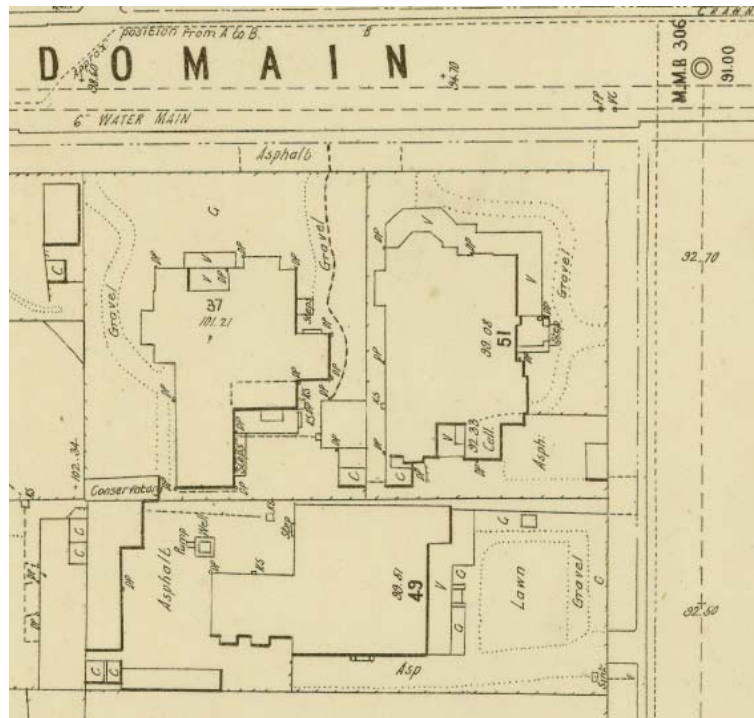


Figure 1. MMBW Detail Plan no. 946, dated 1895, showing the house as number '49'. (source: SLV)

The house, as shown in the MMBW Detail Plan of 1895, had outbuildings at the rear as well as a water pump and well. (As late as the 1870s the elevated parts of Melbourne were notorious for an unreliable supply of water from the Yan Yean reservoir and wealthy Melburnians in these elevated suburbs often had their own supply.) In 1898, J Edmund Burke and Schreiner, architects and surveyors, invited tenders invited for sewerage connections at 'Ardvarnish', 49 Murphy Street, South Yarra (*Age*, 20 Sept 1898).

Joseph Harris relocated to Mornington Peninsula in the 1880s and presumably the house was sold. In 1889 a sale notice of furniture at 'Ardvarnish', 49 Murphy Street, South Yarra, listed items for sale according to rooms. It gives an indication of the floor layout: including a dining room, drawing room, and library. By 1901 the house was available for boarding with rooms leased out.

By 1934 the house was occupied by one of Australia's most famous soldiers and horsemen, Sir Harry Chauvel, and his wife Sybil. The well-known writer of children's horse stories, Elynne Mitchell, was their daughter. Sir Harry Chauvel was the Inspector-General of the Australian Army, based at the military headquarters on St Kilda Road. He had led the Australian Light Horse in the First World War and the successful Battle of Bethsheba of 1915. The Chauvels had lived elsewhere in South Yarra prior to 1934, including another address in Murphy Street. This appears to be the house they retired to. In retirement, he continued to be a keen horseman and enjoyed taking his horse for exercise along the 'Tan'. Sir Harry Chauvel died in 1945 but Lady Sybil Chauvel continued to reside at the house at 65 Murphy Street until the 1960s (ER, 1934-1963).

Sources

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Age 11 May 1925 (obituary for Joseph Harris).

Argus 30 January 1886 (marriage announcement of Joseph Harris's daughter).

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Physical description



Figure 2. 65 Murphy Street in the late 1960s (source: John Collins Collection, SLV)

‘Ardvarnish’, at 65 Murphy Street, South Yarra, is a towered Italianate mansion set behind a generous front garden but with narrow side setbacks, particularly on the north side. At the front of the property is a sympathetic timber and ripple-iron fence (the same seen in the 1960s John Collins photo, but unlikely to be original).

The northern third of its façade is dominated by a three-storey balustrade tower, while the southern two thirds sit behind a corniced parapet. The walls are finished in cement render with a wide range of cast-cement ornament. The hipped roof is not visible from the ground, but it

comprises three parallel hips, running east-west. Chimneys are rendered, with deep cornices and curved wythes at the top.

The verandah stretches across the ground floor level and wraps around the projecting base of the tower. It is reached by a short flight of bluestone steps near the tower. At first-floor level there is only a balustrade, creating a large balcony. Verandah posts are of timber with a square profile, stop-chamfered middles, and built-up capitals. The verandah frieze sits within a timber frame with separate brackets below (the form of cast-iron typical of the 1870s). The frieze is in a rinceaux pattern with a flower within a circle. Posts are paired at the corners, with two brackets creating a Moorish arch between them. Above the ground floor is a deep cornice, enhanced by the use of an ogee-profile gutter at its top. The balustrade above has a heavy cast-iron pattern within a timber frame. Based on the materials and details, it appears that the ground-floor structure and elements have survived from the original 1872 stage of construction.

Windows to the first floor are typical one-over-one double-hung sashes, while the ground floor windows have very large four-over-four full-length sash windows with very large two-over-sidelights. These ground-floor windows also appear to survive from the 1872 house.

Cast-cement ornament is focussed below the first-floor cornice and parapet, so dates from Norman Hitchcock's extension (as does the entire tower). There are large brackets below the cornice, with bulbous swags between them. Below this is a band of vermiculation. On the console at the south end of the parapet is a bearded man's head, set above a large corbel. The same treatment continues around the tower. Above it, the third level has pairs of small round-arched windows on each side, framed with Corinthian pilasters. There is a repeat of the frieze details (brackets alternating with swags and a vermiculated band), but with a lady's head on the end consoles. At the very top is a balustrade.

As viewed from the street, 'Ardvarnish' is highly intact to its 1888 form and details. The house is generally in a very good condition, though there is some deterioration visible to the cast-cement ornament at the top of the tower.

Comparative analysis

Although many single-storey villas were built in Melbourne and its suburbs during the 19th 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 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. 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.

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 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.

In its 1888 form, as created by architect Norman Hithcock's addition of a second storey, three-storey tower and cast-cement ornament, 'Ardvarnish' is a classic Italianate Victorian villa with a level of ornamentation typical of the Boom-style 1880s. The integration of the earlier house has been carried out skilfully so that the house hangs together as a visual whole, though many 1872 elements, such as the ground-floor windows and verandah have been retained.

'Ardvarnish' can be compared to other towered Italianate villas in the Stonnington Heritage Overlay. Most are single-storey dwellings, including 116 Kooyong Road (HO240) and 1043 Malvern Road (HO324) in Armadale; 32 Grandview Grove, Prahran (Significant in HO135), and 3 Evelina Road (Significant in HO380), 78 Clendon Road (Significant in HO143), and 3 Lansell Road (Significant in HO143) in Toorak.

Two-storey towered Italianate villas are less common and are most commonly mansions of State significance (A1 grade and/or on the VHR), such as 514 Orrong Road, Armadale (HO84), and the Boom-style 'Illawarra' at 1 Illawarra Court, Toorak (VHR H701). Two of a similar 'large villa' scale like 'Ardvarnish' are 1 Hawksburn Road (Significant in HO137), 74 Caroline Street (Significant in HO355, built c1857 but noted as extensively altered so the tower may be a later addition), both in South Yarra.

In comparison to the other towered Italianate houses, 'Ardvarnish' compares very well in terms of intactness. For example, 78 Clendon Road and 1043 Malvern Road have both lost their front verandahs (and 1043 Malvern Road has lost the tower balustrade). It is one of the larger and more imposing houses of this type, closest to 1 Hawksburn Road, though smaller than 'Illawarra'.



Figure 3. 1 Hawksburn Road, South Yarra (Significant in HO137). (source: Google Streetview)

None of the above comparisons exhibit a similar range and quantity of cast-cement ornament to ‘Ardvarnish’. In this, it is more closely comparable to 768 Malvern Road, Armadale (Significant in HO130) which also features details such as cast swags and vermiculated panels, though its overall form is different. Both this house and ‘Ardvarnish’ have a more planar, applied use of the ornament, without the level of deep layering seen at 11 & 13 Cromwell Road, South Yarra (HO228 & HO304). The rather naïve use of cast-cement ornament seen at ‘Ardvarnish’ is considered a hallmark of Hitchcock’s work (Taylor 2014).



Figure 4. 768 Malvern Road, Armadale (Significant in HO130). (source: Google Streetview)

In comparison with these examples, as well as the towered Italianate houses, 'Ardvarnish' is much more unusual in its design and detail than houses such as 1043 Malvern Road, 116 Kooyong Road, 78 Clendon Road, and 3 Lansell Road, and compares very well to them.

In summary, 'Ardvarnish' is a highly intact example of a substantial Victorian Italianate towered villa, with a picturesque asymmetrical composition created by the projecting three-storey tower to the façade. It is distinguished by the exuberant use of applied cast-cement classical ornament in a somewhat naïve manner, characteristic of Norman Hitchcock's work. The design is also of interest for its skilful integration of the 1872 ground floor and front verandah into the enlarged 1888 house.

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

8.1.2 Seats of the mighty – Mansion estates in the nineteenth century

8.4.1 Houses as a symbol of wealth, status and fashion

It is also of historical interest for its association with later owner Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Chauvel (1865-1945), Australia's greatest cavalry leader, who led the Battle of Bethsheba in 1915, and his wife Lady Sybil Chauvel.

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?

'Ardvarnish', at 65 Murphy Street, South Yarra, is significant. It was built in two major stages. A single-storey, six-room brick house was constructed here in 1872 for butcher James Bennet. Around 1881 Joseph Harris moved to the property and in 1887-88 he engaged architect-builder Norman Hitchcock to remodel and enlarge the house, adding an upper storey and three-storey tower. The house has rendered masonry walls and a verandah to the ground floor only, with a balustrade terrace above.

The front fence is sympathetic but not significant.

How is it significant?

'Ardvarnish' is of local architectural, aesthetic and historic (associational) significance to the City of Stonnington.

Why is it significant?

Architecturally, 'Ardvarnish' is a highly intact example of a substantial Victorian Italianate towered villa, with a picturesque asymmetrical composition created by the projecting three-storey tower to the façade. (Criterion D)

Aesthetically, it is distinguished by the exuberant use of applied cast-cement classical ornament in a somewhat naïve manner, characteristic of Norman Hitchcock's work. This includes swags below the eaves, vermiculated panels, Corinthian pilasters, tower balustrade, and human faces. The design is also of interest for its skilful integration of the 1872 ground floor and front verandah into the enlarged 1888 house. (Criterion E)

Historically, the house is significant for its associations with notable Melbourne architect Norman Hitchcock and with his client, notable local resident Joseph Harris (1833-1925), horticulturalist, nursery proprietor, local Justice of the Peace, Mayor of Prahran (1874-1876), and MLA for South Yarra (1880-1894). (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

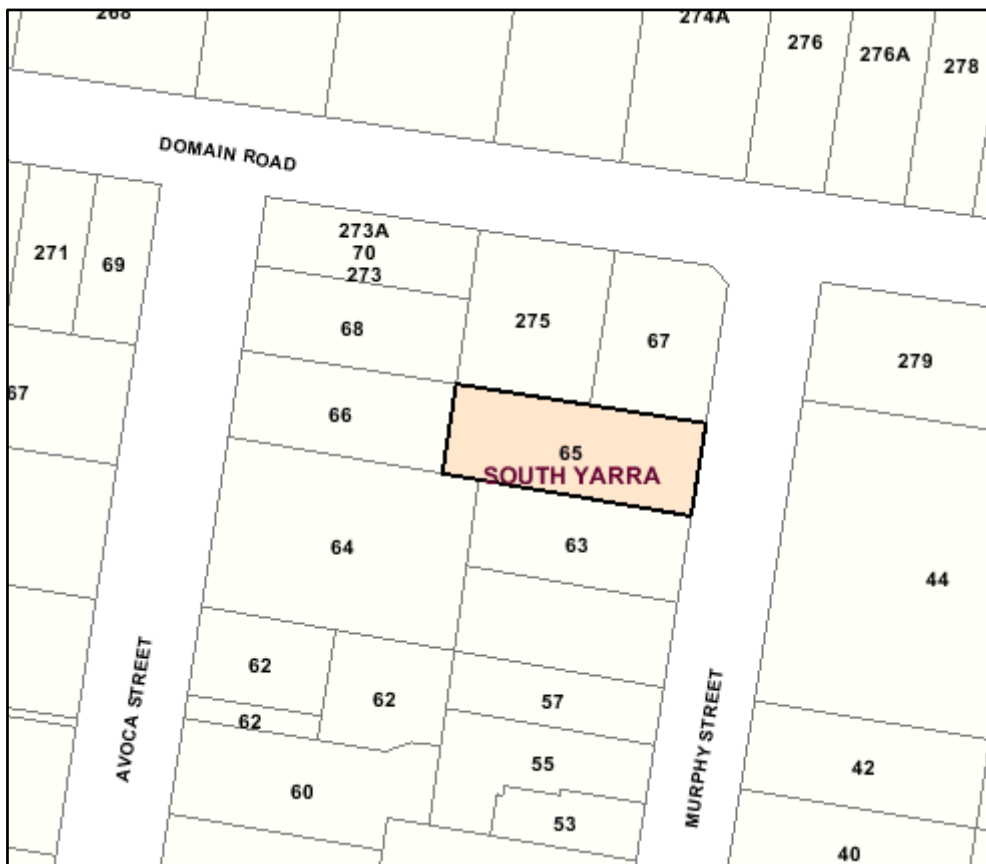


Figure 5. 65 Murphy Street, South Yarra (source: www.land.vic.gov.au)

Recommended grading: A2