

‘Thornfield’

17 Brookville Road, Toorak

Place type: Residential Buildings (private), Villa

Significance level: Local



(Source: Marshall White, 2013).

Recommended protection: Planning Scheme

Architectural style: Victorian (1851-1901) Queen Anne Revival

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

Brookville Road (formerly Brookeville Road) was formed as part of the development of the 'Brookeville Estate' in 1885. The estate took its name from 'Brookeville', which was a large mansion owned by Hastings Cunningham that stood on the site of what is now the Toorak Primary School. Initially the mansion was retained and the allotments were carved out around the small remaining mansion block (Ham 1885). The mansion 'Brookeville' was eventually demolished. The house at 17 Brookville Road occupies lot 44 of the Brookeville Estate subdivision plan of 1885. The site was vacant in 1888 but the next year an 8-roomed residence had been erected.

The house was erected for gentleman Edmund Denbigh, who owned and occupied the house from 1889. When Denbigh returned to England in 1898, his furniture was auctioned on site at 'Thornfield', Brookville Road (*Argus* 1 July 1898). Denbigh continued to own the house until at least 1900, when it was leased to James T Caldwell (S&McD 1898, 1900).

'Thornfield' is shown on the MMBW detail plan of 1900 as a large residence with a row of outbuildings, presumably servants' quarters, at the rear. The interior of the house had been renovated by 1976 (*Age*, 24 April 1976).

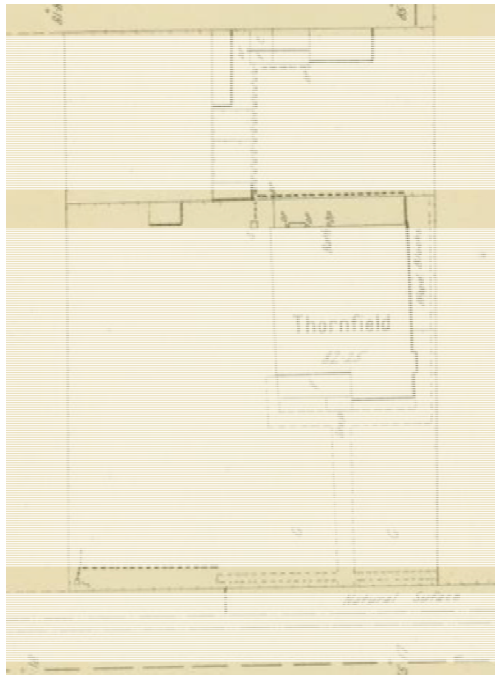


Figure 1. MMBW Detail Plan no. 980, dated 1899. (source: SLV).

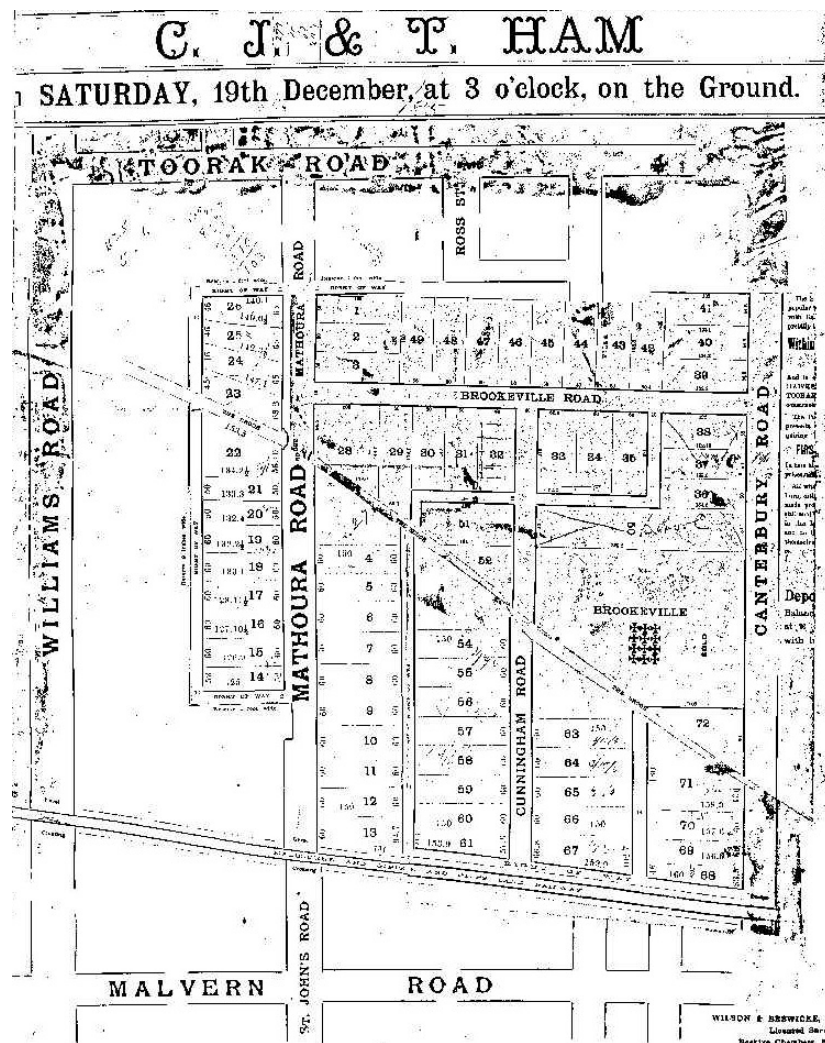


Figure 2. 'Brookeville Estate' subdivision plan, 1885. (source: Stonnington History Centre, PH 11205).

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Physical description

'Thornfield', at 17 Brookville Road, Toorak, stands on a somewhat elevated site on the north side of the street, behind an unusually deep garden setback. On the front boundary is a sympathetic metal palisade fence on a rendered plinth which appears to have been installed c1970s.

The house is two-storeys in height with an asymmetrical façade. It is constructed of polychrome bricks with slate cladding to the roof. The roof takes an M-hip form, typical of the Victorian Italianate, with a central valley, and bracketed eaves. This is combined with a projecting gable to the façade. Set beside this gable is a two-storey verandah. The house has four chimneys which are of Hawthorn brown bricks with vertical cream-brick bands, a run cement cornice and paired terracotta chimney pots.

The polychromatic brickwork is in a Flemish bond with the remnants of a white tuckpointing ribbon. Most of the wall comprises brown Hawthorn bricks with cream, red and black brick accents. The cream and red bricks are used as narrow bands across each level and also as banded voussoirs in the segmental and flat arches to the windows and doors. These arches also incorporate stone or concrete blocks, including keystones with an incised curvilinear design. Window sills appear to be bluestone. Above the pair of double-hung sash windows, with flat arches in cream and red bricks, is a blind segmental arch with a cream and red brick border and tympanum filled with black, cream and red headers in a chequer-board pattern. The gable above these windows has a decorative bargeboard with an incised quatrefoil on each lobe, notched edges, and a pendant-finial and decorative cross-brace. There are also run cement-render beltcourses corresponding to the top of the front door and between the two floors.

The front entrance retains its front door with four fielded panels, bolection mouldings and hardware. Around it are elaborate leadlights in the sidelights and highlights. It sits below the verandah, adjacent to the projecting gabled bay. The verandah has a hipped roof and is reached via a short flight of bluestone steps (possibly renewed). The verandah beams are dentilated and are supported on paired fluted cast-iron columns. The verandah is ornamented with a cast-iron rinceaux frieze in a stop-chamfered timber frame with separate cast-iron brackets. The brackets are an uncommon concave design. Where paired between the pairs of columns they create a Moorish arched motif. At the first floor level, the verandah retains cast-iron balustrade panels with a flower bouquet motif.

Externally the house appears to be highly intact, with no alterations visible from the street.

Comparative analysis

Victoria's economic crash of the early 1890s creates an obvious boundary between the excesses of the ornate 'Boom-style' architecture, characterised by exuberant cement-coated facades and cast-iron detail which draw upon classical forms, and the simpler Federation-era houses with their more natural palette of face brick and timber fretwork influenced by the Arts & Crafts movement. In fact, some architects had already been experimenting with this materials palette and new forms of massing in the late 1880s.

The residential style known in Australia as Queen Anne Revival was dominant by the turn of the century, and formed the builder's vernacular by 1915. The origins of the Queen Anne Revival style, in its more traditional form as well as its transformation into the recognisably Australian Federation villa, were English Domestic Revival designs by English architects Richard Norman Shaw and William Eden Nesfield. They drew their inspiration from traditional English rural buildings and Tudor architecture (Tibbits 1989:52).

The first Queen Anne Revival houses in Australia, dating from the late 1880s to mid-1890s, were mostly architect designed and show a more direct British influence as well as a greater stylistic eclecticism than the Federation Queen Anne houses that filled Melbourne's suburbs after 1900. These houses often had a pronounced vertical massing and gabled roofs, showing a strong medieval influence. This contrasts with later sprawling Federation bungalows with hipped roofs extending over encircling verandahs. Apart from medieval (mainly Gothic and Tudor) influences, architects of this period drew upon styles as diverse as Romanesque (with muscular round arches and banded voussoirs), Scottish Baronial (with its pointed towers and crow-stepped parapets), Anglo-Dutch (with curvilinear gable parapets), Art Nouveau (with its sinuous ornament), and Japanese design (with overlapping line patterns of verandah fretwork). A correct, 'academic' use of historical forms was rare, instead they were employed and combined to suit the architect's fancy in a manner often referred to as 'Free Style'.

One of the biggest changes from Victorian Italianate to Queen Anne houses was in the form of the roof and verandah. The low-line M-profile hipped roof was supplanted by high gabled and hipped roofs with complex forms, turrets and gablets at the top. Tall chimneys of corbelled red brick, often with roughcast detail, were another distinguishing feature. Eventually the separate verandah structure, set below the eaves, was replaced by an unbroken roofline that swooped down to incorporate the verandah. Another transition seen in the late 1880s and

1890s was in cladding materials, moving from brown Hawthorn and cream brickwork to simpler red face brick with render bands, and from slate roofs to terracotta Marseille tiles with decorative ridgecapping and finials. Red brick combined with lighter bands, of cream brick or smooth render, is referred to colloquially as 'blood and bandages'. Howells (1989:16) believes this wall treatment was derived from the polychromy of English Gothic Revival architects.

The early Queen Anne houses made use of decorative window treatments such as margin glazing and tiny square panes of coloured glass for highlight windows. By about 1900 this was supplanted by curvilinear Art Nouveau leadlight patterns.

More modest early examples displaying a Queen Anne Revival influence often retained the Italianate M-profile hipped roof and asymmetric façade, but the projecting hipped roof bay, typical of the Italianate, was replaced with a gabled bay with half-timbering or decorative trusses at its peak. One of the earliest (and easiest) elements to change from the Italianate model was the verandah detail. The iron-roofed verandah set below the eaves was retained from the Italianate, but slender cast-iron columns were replaced with chunky turned timber posts. Often the cast-iron verandah frieze and brackets were superseded by timber fretwork, though new flatter patterns of cast-iron that emulated fretwork were still used until the 1910s.

Examples of these early Federation houses of the late 1880s and 1890s graded Significant in the Stonnington Heritage Overlay can be divided into several groups according to size and stylistic advancement. The largest are mansions such as 'Redcourt' at 506 Orrong Road, Armadale (HO166), 6 Mayfield Avenue, Malvern (HO275), 'Edzell' at 76 St Georges Road, Toorak (VHR H691), and 'Illawarra' at 1 Illawarra Court, Toorak (VHR H701).

The greatest number are large houses, some on tighter inner-suburban blocks and others on sprawling sites where the building could be designed 'in the round', with more than one main facade. Significant examples include the duplex at 3 & 5 Mercer Road, Armadale (HO327), 15 Avondale Road, Armadale (in HO123), 190-192 Wattletree Road, Malvern (in HO156), 10 Manning Road, Malvern (in HO133), 92 Finch Street, Malvern East (in HO133), 3 Forster Avenue, Malvern East (HO260), 15 Forster Avenue, Malvern East (HO310), 33, 45 & 49 Grandview Grove, Prahran (in HO135), 59 Kensington Road, South Yarra (HO64), 280 Domain Road, South Yarra (in HO122), 18 & 20 Hawksburn Road, South Yarra (in HO137), and 70 Clendon Road, Toorak (in HO143).

Finally, there are the modest single-storey villas that exhibit the transition from the Victorian Italianate to Edwardian Queen Anne. Often they retain the Italianate M-profile hipped roof and cast-iron verandah detail, but with a gabled projecting bay to the façade instead of the hipped bay seen on Italianate houses, and they are always finished in the newly fashionable red face brick. Significant examples of this type include 103 Kooyong Road, Armadale (in HO130), 12-16 Mercer Road, Armadale (HO328-330), and 38 Gladstone Street, Windsor (in HO134).



Figure 3. 70 Clendon Road, Toorak (Significant in HO143). (source: Google Streetview).

‘Thornfield’ compares most closely with the smaller houses that retain a strong Italianate massing and details, while exhibiting a transition to the Queen Anne forms that would characterise the early 1900s. In this sense it is most similar to 70 Clendon Road, Toorak, which shares a very similar massing: two-storeys, asymmetrical façade with a two-storey cast-iron verandah aside a projecting gabled bay. Like ‘Thornfield’ the walls of 70 Clendon Road are mainly of brown Hawthorn brick, with bands of red brick. It is a more sober building, without the level of visual interest provided by ‘Thornfield’s’ polychromy.

In this aspect, it can be compared to fully-fledged Italianate houses with interesting polychrome brick, for example, 62 Tivoli Road, South Yarra, which uses extensive areas of cream brick with red brick accents. In comparison, 17 Brookville Road is more restrained in its brick patterning, but equally unusual for its time.



Figure 4. 62 Tivoli Road, South Yarra (Significant in HO149). (source: Google Streetview)

Thematic context

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

8.2 Middle-class suburbs and the suburban ideal

8.4.1 Houses as a symbol of wealth, status and fashion

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?

'Thornfield', at 17 Brookville Road, Toorak, is significant. The house was built in 1888-89 for owner-occupier Edmund Denbigh.

It is a two-storey polychrome brick house with an asymmetrical façade and cast-iron detail to the double-storey verandah. Walls are primarily of brown Hawthorn brick with red, cream and black brick accents.

The restoration front palisade fence is not significant.

How is it significant?

'Thornfield' is of local architectural and aesthetic significance to the City of Stonnington.

Why is it significant?

Architecturally, it is a highly intact example of a polychrome brick villa that demonstrates the transition from Victorian Italianate to Queen Anne Revival. The low M-profile hipped roof, clad in slate, is typical of the Italianate, as is the asymmetrical composition of the façade with a projecting bay beside a two-storey verandah. The verandah detail, with cast-iron posts and a framed cast-iron frieze with brackets, is also typical of the Italianate. A medieval influence and transition toward the Federation Queen Anne, common after 1900, is seen in the use of a gable to the projecting bay, as well as the use of a lobed bargeboard with a decorative truss and pendant-finial. (Criterion D)

Aesthetically, it is notable for the lively polychromy of the brickwork, particularly the relieving arch over the first-floor windows filled with an unusual chequerboard pattern of red, cream and black headers, as well as the incorporation of cast-stone blocks into door and window lintels. (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

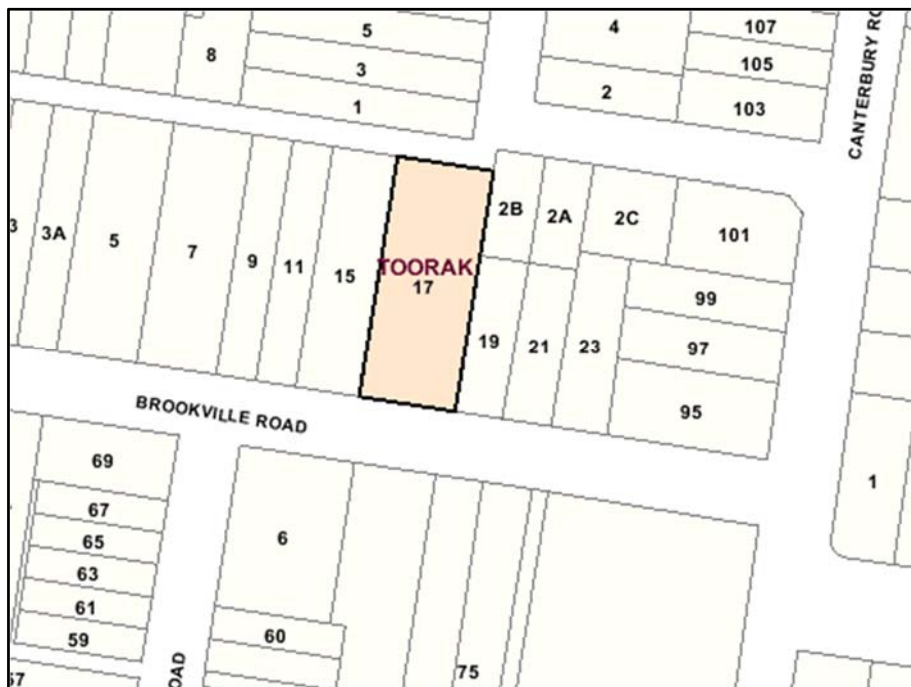


Figure 5: Recommended extent of heritage overlay for 17 Brookville Road, Toorak (source: www.land.vic.gov.au).

Recommended grading: A2

