

20 Mathoura 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 (check) 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. Toorak in its heyday appeared as an impressive collection of large country estates within relatively close proximity in pleasant, undulating country but nevertheless a suburban setting. 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.

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 first section of Mathoura Road, at the Toorak Road end, was formed in the 1850s. The southern section was created with the subdivision of the Brookeville Estate in 1885. Brookeville was a mansion owned by Hastings Cunningham on the site of the current Toorak Primary School and Brookeville Gardens (Maddocks 2015: 6-7). Initially the mansion was retained and the allotments were carved out around the small remaining mansion block (Ham 1885). The mansion was eventually demolished. The subdivision was promoted for its superior suburban allotments.

The current house was erected in 1885. In 1884, Toorak builder Henry Everest owned an 8-roomed timber house on the site, rated at £50. He likely constructed and then on-sold the present house. In 1885, Charles White owned a 9-roomed brick house. He remained the owner in 1900 (RB).

The MMBW plan of 1900 shows a large residence with a bay window and front verandah. An upstairs bath serving the bedrooms indicates a degree of middle-class comfort. Access to the rear stables was via a rear laneway.

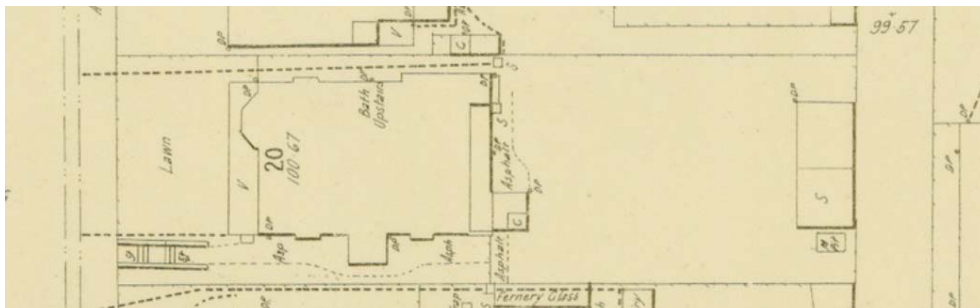


Figure 1. MMBW Detail Plan no. 980, dated 1900 (source: SLV).

In 1933, when the house was advertised for sale, it was described as a two-storey brick residence having an 'Exceedingly High Position. With Views Over Bay'. At the time it was 'used as two attractive flats, each containing 5 rooms and bathroom' (*Age* 12 December 1933). By 2002 it had returned to use as a single, four-bedroom dwelling (RT Edgar, Toorak, 2002).

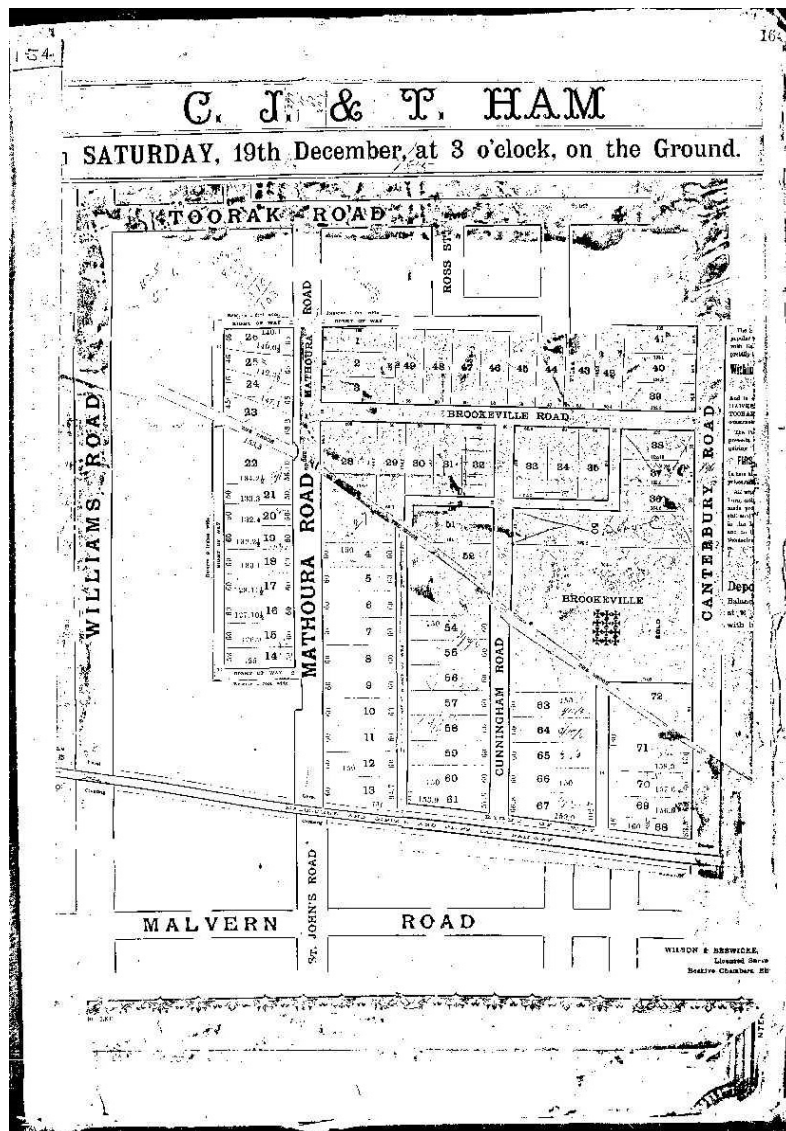


Figure 2. 'Brookeville Estate' subdivision plan, 1885, showing the creation of suburban allotments in Mathoura Road (source: SHC, PH 11205).

Sources

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Physical description



Figure 3. Detail of facade at 20 Mathoura Road, Toorak (source: Context 2016).

The house at 20 Mathoura Road occupies an elevated site on the east side of Mathoura Road, mid-block between Malvern Road and Edward Street in Toorak. The house has a medium-sized front setback to the street behind a garden and a high masonry front wall.

Constructed in 1885, the building is highly intact and is a notable example of a grand Italianate villa that fully expresses its architectural character to the front façade, comparable to a terrace house. It is also a variation on the more common Italianate asymmetrical footprint, in this instance presenting the illusion of a symmetrical façade arrangement with a two-storey ogee profile verandah sheltering a canted bay window to one side which is continuous to both levels.

The building has a hipped roof clad in slate tiles that is supported on a deep cornice with finely detailed eaves brackets. The two visible chimneys have a painted cement render finish with moulded and corbelled cornices. The cast-iron verandah has high quality, fine and integrated lacework patterns across both levels including the frieze, brackets and first floor balustrade. It is particularly distinguished by the unusual peacock motif to the balustrade pattern. The verandah composition is further embellished by the shaped sawtooth verandah beams to both levels.

A rectangular single-storey portico located at the centre of the southern (side) elevation contains the recessed entrance. Windows are round-arched double-hung sashes grouped in threes (also to the canted bays), with run cement hood moulds that finish at continuous moulded imposts. The painted cement render finish is otherwise unadorned.

The stable and outbuildings shown on the MMBW plan of 1899 do not appear to survive in 2016 aerials.



Figure 4. c1970s photo of 20 Mathoura Road, Toorak (source: CUA Collection, State Library of Victoria).

Comparative analysis

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).

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 pre-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.

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. 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.

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 a 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 (both in individual HOs and HO precincts) 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. 20 Mathoura Road (c.1885) is a transitional example that can be grouped with the early terraces built in the 1870s until about 1885 that have bracketed eaves to the front, and sometimes to the sides of end walls (as is the case at 20 Mathoura Road). These examples were usually of bichrome or polychrome face brick, and in this case, 20 Mathoura Road is also comparable with the late 1880s terraced-type houses that were almost always finished in cement render.

Examples of substantial Italianate terrace houses of the 1880s with exposed eaves to the front include:

- 8 Cromwell Crescent, South Yarra (in HO147) – a two-storey double-fronted detached terrace with bold and characteristic polychrome brickwork and a two-storey cast-iron verandah set between wing walls with a canted bay window beneath.
- 34 Hawksburn Road, South Yarra (in HO137) – a two-storey double-fronted detached terrace with a two-storey cast-iron verandah contained by a masonry wing wall to one side.
- 36 Hawksburn Road, South Yarra (in HO137) – a two-storey double-fronted detached terrace-type with a two-storey cast-iron verandah expressed to the front only. The building has a hipped roof, face brick and cement render chimney and paired eaves brackets.

In comparison with these three examples, 20 Mathoura Road is a much grander example presenting a triple-fronted façade to the street and a pair of chimneys to either side of the transverse hipped roof. The use of grouped (threes) rounded-arch windows with run cement hood moulds supported on moulded impost is also more elaborate than these examples. It is further distinguished by its location and siting which occupies a wide and raised allotment on Mathoura Road.



Figure 5. 34 Hawksburn Road, South Yarra, individually significant in HO137 (source: Google Streetview)



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

20 Mathoura Road's unusual composition, containing a canted bay beneath the verandah, is an additional distinguishing feature. It can be compared to other substantial Italianate villas particularly found in Grandview Grove, Prahran. For example, 35 Grandview Grove, Prahran (in HO135) retains its symmetrical expression to the street despite canted bays beneath the verandah to both levels, although this is a slightly grander example than Mathoura Road. The two-storey Italianate villa at 29 Grandview Grove, Prahran (in HO135) adopts a similar approach, although in the more typical asymmetrical plan of a canted bay to one side of the two-storey return verandah. 80 Williams Road, Prahran (in HO155) is also a close comparison in scale, presenting a triple-fronted verandah to the street although in this instance returning to one side from a masonry wing wall. In comparison, 20 Mathoura Road appears to be of a similar level of intactness and they share equally ornate cast-iron verandah detail. The recessed side entrance porch to Mathoura Road is an unusual feature in comparison to other houses of this type. The level of prominence afforded to 20 Mathoura Road by its raised siting, distinguishes it from these other examples.



Figure 7. 80 Williams Road, Prahran, significant in HO155 (source: Google Streetview).

In conclusion, 20 Mathoura Road is a grander and more architectural sophisticated example of the detached terrace type house. It is at the higher end of interest for details such as the cast-iron patterns and unusual massing including a recessed entrance porch to one side. Its prominent siting distinguishes it from other examples in the City of Stonnington.

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

8.6.1 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?

The freestanding house at 20 Mathoura Road, Toorak built in 1885 for Charles White, most likely by its first owner Toorak builder Henry Everest, is significant.

The residence is two-storeys in height and fully expresses its architectural character to the front façade, including unusual massing beneath a full height cast-iron verandah. The house is high set, reached by a short flight of stairs. It is highly intact and retains its original cast-iron verandah detail.

How is it significant?

20 Mathoura Road, Toorak is of local architectural and aesthetic significance to the City of Stonnington.

Why is it significant?

20 Mathoura Road, Toorak is architecturally, an intact representative example of a substantial house built for middle-class residents of Toorak during the boom years of the 1880s. The house adopts the architectural character more typical of a terraced house that were most commonly constructed with blind boundary walls and verandah wing walls in rows in the densely packed inner suburbs. In the better part of Stonnington, particularly Toorak, there were many free-standing houses that followed the terrace typology on more spacious sites. Mathoura Road is a transitional example that expresses exposed eaves to the front, more typically seen on earlier terrace examples. (Criterion D)

Aesthetically, 20 Mathoura Road is distinguished by its unusual massing which is a variation on the common Italianate asymmetrical footprint with a canted bay to one side, in this instance set within the symmetrical composition of the two-storey cast-iron verandah. The recessed entrance porch to one side is also an unusual feature. The cast-iron verandah has high quality fine and integrated lacework patterns across both levels including the frieze, brackets and first floor balustrade, which is particularly distinguished by the unusual peacock motif to the balustrade pattern. (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 20 Mathoura Road, Toorak (source: www.land.vic.gov.au).

Recommended grading: A2