

## High Branches, 38 St Georges Road, Toorak Heritage Citation Report



Figure 1 38 St Georges Road, Toorak.

### History and Historical Context

#### Thematic Context

The following is drawn from the *Stonnington Thematic Environmental History* (Context Pty Ltd, 2006).

#### *The End of an Era – Mansion Estates Subdivision in the Early Twentieth Century*

Toorak has been described as ‘*the only suburb to acquire and keep a name which was synonymous in the public mind with wealth, extravagance and display*’.<sup>1</sup> The suburb’s climb to fashionable pre-eminence was due to its pleasing topographic features and the presence of the Governor’s residence from 1854 (Toorak House, after which the suburb is named). Toorak and the higher parts of South Yarra were settled by pastoralists, army officers, high-ranking professionals, and ‘self made’ merchants and traders. Their wealth was manifested in the construction of a suitably impressive mansion, usually set within expansive grounds. As Victoria’s land boom progressed into the late 1880s, the mansions became more elaborate, one of the best surviving examples being *Illawarra* (1 Illawarra Crescent), built by land-boomer Charles Henry James in 1891.

<sup>1</sup> Paul de Serville, *Pounds and Pedigrees: The Upper Class in Victoria 1850-1880*, p.147.

After the collapse of the land boom, many mansions were put to other uses, subdivided or demolished. The subdivision of the old estates of Toorak began to increase after World War I when the cost of maintaining these large properties became prohibitive. This process of subdivision created a unique pattern of development which can still be understood and interpreted today. Although new subdivisions imposed new road patterns within the original grids, in many cases new estates and streets bore the name of the old properties, while the original houses were sometimes retained within a reduced garden. Toorak nonetheless retained its appeal as a wealthy enclave.

### *Creating Australia's most designed suburb*

Toorak is notable for the strong culture of patronage between architects and their wealthy clients, which existed from the earliest times of settlement. This has resulted in a much higher than average ratio of architect designed houses. In Albany Road alone, 47 of the 61 houses built since 1872 have been attributed to architects.

Architects were particularly busy in Toorak in the boom years of the 1880s when ever more prosperous merchants, businessmen and land speculators sought to create houses that would stand as testament to their wealth, status and fashionable taste. A great many examples of nineteenth century domestic architecture in the Municipality were lost through demolition, however many of these demolitions created opportunities for twentieth century architects.

After the turn of the century, architects continued to have a major influence on the wealthy suburbs in present day Stonnington. Walter Butler, Robert Hamilton, Marcus Martin and Rodney Alsop were among the notable architects whose work is well represented in Toorak. These architects built predominately in the fashionable architecture styles of the 1920s and 1930s, particularly the Georgian revival and Old English modes.

The consequence of this is one of the strongest concentrations of high quality residential architecture in Australia, which provides an important record of all major architectural styles and movements since the earliest days of settlement.

### Place History

A 1905 MMBW Detail Plan shows land at the south east corner of St Georges Road and Torresdale Road occupied by a large residence named 'Wolverton'.<sup>2</sup>Wolverton was the home of stock and station agent Edward Trenchard. Trenchard died on 28 April 1927 and in July the same year executors of his estate offered Wolverton for sale.<sup>3</sup> Auction notices describe it as a substantial two-storeyed family residence of 'chocolate brick' with bluestone foundations and a slate roof, commanding extensive views to the north and east with a well laid out garden and lawns. The property was auctioned again in August 1932, when it is described as having reception rooms, a billiard room, 5 bedrooms, 2 dressing rooms, 2 bathrooms, 3 maids rooms and a brick garage on 1 ¼ acres of land.<sup>4</sup>Wolverton was subdivided in 1936 and the estate offered for sale as '5 magnificent allotments'.<sup>5</sup>

A residence was built on lots 1 and 2 of the Wolverton subdivision in 1937. Architect Geoffrey Sommers is named as the agent on the MMBW house cover dated February 1937 (the agent was often the architect or builder).<sup>6</sup> The owner was Bonnie Ross Fenner, wife of wool merchant Clive Ross Fenner. Sands and McDougall directories first record the Fenners at 34

<sup>2</sup>MMBW Detail Plan No.934.

<sup>3</sup>*Argus*, 16 July 1932, p.2

<sup>4</sup>*Argus*, 13 August 1932, p.2

<sup>5</sup>Stonnington Local History Catalogue PH13213

<sup>6</sup>MMBW Application No: 201809.

St Georges Road in 1938. The house was renumbered 38 St Georges Road in 1942, by which time it was occupied by Arthur Debenham.

### Geoffrey Sommers

Geoffrey Newton Sommers (1904-1984) was a Geelong born architect, best remembered for his 1930s and post war domestic work in wealthy suburbs like Toorak and South Yarra. He commonly blended a discrete Georgian flavour with the simple gable roofed asymmetrical house, often painted white. He attempted to achieve a stylistic compromise between the strong Georgian tradition of the Melbourne area and the influence of international modernism. Sommers was still practising as an architect into his seventies.<sup>7</sup>

### **Description**

'High Branches' at 38 St Georges Road is an extremely spare but elegant double-storey English Domestic Revival style house. It has a steeply pitched terracotta shingle roof with gently curving bellcast eaves. The walls are plain white painted brick with a subtle dogtoothed detailing at the eaves line. The broadly symmetrical St Georges Road façade has tall gabled ended bays at either end, pierced by narrow louvred vents. The north and south ends of the principal gable support tall Voyseyan brick chimneys with terracotta pots and dogtoothed corbelling replicating the eaves detailing. Window frames are typically Georgian style multi-pane and double-hung with louvred shutters. The house appears to be highly intact in terms of its streetscape presentation. The wrought iron pedestrian and driveway gates and supporting brick piers appear to be contemporary with the house.

### **Comparative Analysis**

#### *English Domestic Revival Styles*

Sometimes referred to as Tudor, interwar Old English was an offshoot of the Arts and Crafts medievalism of the late nineteenth century, and shared that movement's values in terms of dark, natural colourings, a predominance of brickwork, the use of half timbering and a love of wrought iron and leadlight windows. Old English architecture was typified by the use of red or clinker brick, brick nogging and/or half timbering in gables or upper storeys, boldly modelled brick chimneys and terracotta tile roofs.

Steeply pitched roofs with gables rather than hips were a typical characteristic of the larger, two storey examples, though small suburban houses often had a combination of hips and gables. Walls were usually sheer rather than textured and ended flush with the gable of the roof. Sometimes manganese bricks or tiles or tapestry bricks were used to highlight openings and to decorate walls. Picturesque asymmetry was attained through double or triple fronts to the facade, arched porch entries, large, prominent chimneys and, in larger examples, oriel windows and towers.

Porches were generally small, and the traditional Australian verandah was not included except in some hybrid examples. Windows were of the sash or casement types, and often featured twelve panes or diamond pattern leadlight. Muted colours were appropriate to this style. Cream, off-white, buff, stone, terracotta and dark brown were most popular. Dark stained timber and red brick were the dominant materials, and cast iron painted black or a dark chocolate brown was also common.

A number of new economies in materials facilitated the rise of the English Domestic revival. The increasingly availability of seasoned hardwoods made possible the use of brick nogging

<sup>7</sup>*The Age*, 30 September 1980, p.19.

and half-timbering, even in the most modest house. Added to this was the introduction of terracotta shingle tiles, manufactured by the Eureka tile company in their Ballarat kilns.

By the late 1920s, the inclusion of imitation half timbering in the black and white tradition declined although buildings continued to achieve medieval associations through picturesque massing of gabled and hipped roofs and through the application of elements such as leadlight windows. Architects also looked to the vernacular of Normandy for inspiration.

Architect Robert Hamilton was recognised as the foremost practitioner in this style, designing large and impeccably detailed houses and luxury flats. Other architects strongly associated with Old English/Tudor Revival include Philip Hudson, Eric Beedham, Arthur Plaisted and Cedric Ballantyne.

The use of an external expression drawing heavily from medieval precedents became a means of expressing the solidity and longevity of British traditions. Old English or Tudor styled houses were associated with a profound Empire consciousness. Larger houses of the type exploited the associations of the manor to convey wealth and social status. A large Tudor house, no matter how new, somehow conveyed a sense that wealth, even recently achieved, was permanent. So common was the use of this idiom within the nouveau riche enclaves of Toorak and South Yarra that the essentially British term 'Stockbroker Tudor' gained popular usage.

Design in a true Old English mode runs right through the 1920s but it gained much greater momentum from the early 1930s as the bungalow and Spanish Mission began to wane in popularity. From this time it was taken up by a far greater proportion of the architectural profession, and began to appear as a builder's expression. Some of the more progressive designers in this mode, such as Edward Billson and Osborn McCutcheon, incorporated modern planning with careful zoning of spaces according to function. Few houses designed by either architects or builders took the opportunity to break away from revivalism in Old English design other than through the process of progressive simplification, the hallmark of late 1930s stylism. As the decade drew to a close the sentimentality and strong British associations of the academically detailed Old English style were replaced by an expression which drew ever closer to the post-war multi-fronted multi-hipped and unadorned Australian suburban vernacular.

A substantial number of residences drawing inspiration from the English Domestic revival were built in the well-heeled suburbs of Stonnington during the interwar period. The examples listed individually on the heritage overlay schedule show a diversity of approaches within the broad spectrum of the English Domestic Revival idiom, ranging from the conventional Old Tudor style houses at 3 Hopetoun Road, Toorak (HO327), 8 Monaro Road, Kooyong (HO277) and 3 Illawara Crescent, Toorak (HO62), and the more inventive and eclectic Arts and Crafts approach of 48-50 Irving Road (HO158) and 9 Mernda Road, Kooyong (HO244). 38 St Georges Road is a sophisticated, late iteration of the English Domestic Revival mode with simplified detailing reflecting the emerging influence of modernism. It evokes a romantic Old English atmosphere without resorting to an appliqué of half-timbering or other overtly Medieval elements.

### **Thematic Context**

High Branches at 38 St Georges Road, Toorak illustrates the following themes, as identified in the *Stonnington Thematic Environmental History* (Context Pty Ltd, 2006):

- 8.1.3 - The end of an era – mansion estate subdivisions in the twentieth century
- 8.4.1 - Houses as a symbol of wealth, status and fashion

## Assessment Against Criteria

Assessment of the place was undertaken in accordance with the HERCON criteria and the processes outlined in the Australian ICOMOS (Burra) Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Heritage Significance.

## Statement of Significance

Note that the relevant HERCON criteria and themes from the *Stonnington Thematic Environmental History* (TEH) are shown in brackets.

### *What is Significant?*

High Branches at 38 St George Road, Toorak is a double-storey English Domestic Revival style building erected in 1937 to designs by noted architect Geoffrey Sommers.

Elements that contribute to the significance of the place include (but are not limited to):

- The original external form, materials and detailing of the building.
- The high level of external intactness.
- The legibility of the original built form in views from the public realm.
- The domestic garden setting (but not the fabric of the garden itself)
- The wrought iron gates and brick piers on the St Georges Road frontage.
- Vehicle accommodation discretely located in the side setback of the house.

### *How is it significant?*

High Branches is of local architectural significance to the City of Stonnington.

### *Why is it significant?*

High Branches is architecturally significant as a fine and largely intact example of an interwar English Domestic Revival style house demonstrating the trend towards simplification in the 1930s (Criterion D). It has an elegant, sparsely detailed façade with strong steeply pitched gables recalling the work of leading English Arts and Crafts architect Charles Voysey (Criterion E).

High Branches is of some historical interest as evidence of a major phase of development that took place in the 1920s and 1930s when many of Toorak's grand nineteenth century mansion estates were subdivided to create prestigious residential enclaves (TEH 8.1.3 The end of an era – mansion estate subdivisions in the twentieth century, Criterion A). Additionally, High Branches illustrates the role of houses generally, and English Domestic Revival style houses in particular, as symbols of wealth, status and taste for Melbourne's upper classes of the interwar period (TEH 8.4.1 - Houses as a symbol of wealth, status and fashion).

## Recommendations

Recommended for inclusion in the Heritage Overlay of the Stonnington Planning Scheme to the extent of the whole property as defined by the title boundaries as shown in figure 2 below. External paint controls, internal alteration controls and tree controls are not recommended. The building should retain its current A2 grading.



Figure 2 Recommended extent of heritage overlay for 38 St Georges Road, Toorak.