

81 St Georges Road, Toorak Heritage Citation Report



Figure 1 81 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*’.¹ 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.

After the collapse of the land boom, many mansions were put to other uses, subdivided or demolished. The suburb nonetheless retained its appeal as a wealthy enclave and some mansions were rebuilt in a more modern style.

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

The subdivision of the grand old estates of Toorak began to increase after World War I when the cost of maintaining the estates 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. Nevertheless, Toorak maintained its status as one of Australia's most prestigious suburbs.

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. 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.

Architects were particularly busy in Toorak in the boom years of the 1880s when newly prosperous merchants, businessmen and land speculators built mansions and grand villas 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 character of 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.

Place History

The area bound by present day Grange Road, Toorak Road, Orrong Road and the Yarra River was sold at the first Crown land sales in June 1840. Lot 15 consisting of 73 acres of land on the west side of Orrong Road was purchased by Charles Norris.² Although Norris subdivided the land into generous allotments, Kearney's 1855 map shows no development occurring in the area.³ In 1867 a 20 room Italianate style residence (later named Trawalla) was built near the corner of Toorak and Orrong Roads for Melbourne merchant George Stevenson. Further north, a house named Leighwood was built c1865 on land stretching down to the banks of the Yarra River.⁴ Leighwood was acquired by Suetonius Henry Officer in 1881 and he lived there until his death in 1883. Extensive alterations were carried out for Officer's widow in 1889, and the mansion was renamed Glenbervie after the Officer family's ancestral birthplace in Scotland.⁵

Around July 1902 approval was sought from Prahran Council for subdivision of the Glenberrie Estate.⁶ By September of that year, work on extending St Georges Road between Orrong and Grange Roads was almost complete but the land owners decided not to continue due to the unfavourable state of the Melbourne property market.⁷ A 1905 MMBW plan of the area shows the mansion labelled 'Glen Bervie' with its driveway entrance on Orrong Road and

² Stonnington Local History Catalogue. Reg. No. PH9405.

³ State Library of Victoria Map Collection. Online at: <http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/89107>

⁴ Miles Lewis, Melbourne Mansions Database. Rec No. 925.

⁵ Stonnington Local History Catalogue. Reg. No. PH 22972.

⁶ Stonnington Local History Catalogue. Reg. No. PH 1224.

⁷ Stonnington Local History Catalogue. Reg. No. PH 1224.

fifteen undeveloped allotments marked out on either side of St Georges Road.⁸ By 1915 the new land owner, Davey Garcia, continued with the subdivision. Thirty-nine house sites in the Glenbervie Heights Estate were offered for sale in December 1923.⁹ The estate was promoted as the '*Choicest Part of Melbourne's Choicest Suburb*'. The mansion was retained on a much reduced allotment and also offered for sale. Further improvements to St Georges Road, such as bitumen, drains and sewerage mains, had been undertaken by 1925.¹⁰ Glenbervie was run as a boarding house and then occupied by St Kevins College from 1931 to 1971. It was demolished the following year.¹¹

Lot 11 of the Glenbervie Heights Estate (ie present day 81 St Georges Road) was developed with a house c1934.¹² The corresponding MMBW house cover names Mrs Goodman as the owner and builders G C Dickson and Yorston Pty Ltd as the 'agent' (the agent typically being the house's builder or architect). Dickson and Yorston may have been responsible for both the design and construction of the house at 81 St Georges Road although they often worked in conjunction with well-regarded architects of the day. Their Redcourt Avenue estate, for example, included houses by architects A Mortimer McMillan, Gordon J Sutherland and RM and MH King. Dickson and Yorston created a number of distinctive bungalow court subdivisions in late 1920s and 1930s in Melbourne's eastern and south eastern suburbs, including Lempriere Avenue in East St Kilda. These subdivisions were targeted at the higher end of the residential market, making Dickson and Yorston's houses relatively costly in comparison with those of other builder-developers such as A V Jennings.

Description

The building at 81 St Georges Road is a substantial double-storey house in the English Domestic Revival style. It has clinker brick walls and a transverse gabled terracotta tiled roof punctuated by simply detailed brick chimneys. The picturesque asymmetrically composed façade has a central octagonal entry tower surmounted by a 'candle snuffer' roof with terracotta shingle tiles. The fall of land allows the house to have a low level driveway and garage below the house's ground floor. The half-timbered oriel window above the garage accentuates the house's romantic Old English character. The sash windows with diamond pattern leadlight glazing are also characteristic of the style. Bricks are typically laid in a plain stretcher bond apart from the dog-toothed soldier course forming the entry tower cornice. The façade is otherwise notably restrained in its use of ornament.

The house appears to be substantially intact insofar as it presents to the street. The only apparent changes are the modern metal garage door and a single-pane fixed sash ground floor window (presumably replacing leadlight glazing). Recent aerial photographs of the site appear to show a double-storey rear addition but this is concealed in views from the street.

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.

⁸ State Library of Victoria Map Collection. MMBW Plan No. 924.

⁹ *Argus*, 28 November, 1923, p.24.

¹⁰ Stonnington Local History Catalogue. Reg. No. PH 1224.

¹¹ Stonnington Local History Catalogue. Reg. No. PH 13148.

¹² Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works House Connections, Application No. 194740. South East Water.

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 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.

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. Houses in this style with individual heritage overlay controls currently include: 3 Hopetoun Road, Toorak (HO327), 429 Glenferrie Road, Malvern (HO313), 3 Illawara Crescent, Toorak (HO62), 8 Monaro Road, Kooyong (HO277) and 4 Struan Street, Toorak (HO168). The house at 81 St Georges Road compares favourably with these examples in terms of its design quality and level of intactness. It is distinguished by the 'candle snuffer' turret – this being a feature more typically associated with domestic architecture of the Edwardian era.

Thematic Context

The house at 81 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?

The large double-storey English Domestic Revival style house at 81 St Georges Road, Toorak was built c1934 on land subdivided from the grounds of the nineteenth century mansion Glenbervie. The house was constructed by, and possibly also designed by, prestige builders Dickson and Yorston.

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

- The original external form, materials and detailing.
- The unpainted state of the brick and terracotta elements.
- 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 undeveloped front setback.
- The low height brick front fence.

Modern fabric, including the garage door and rear additions, is not significant.

How is it significant?

The house at 81 St Georges Road, Toorak is of local architectural significance to the City of Stonnington.

Why is it significant?

The house is architecturally significant as a fine and largely intact example of an interwar English Domestic Revival style house with a distinctive turreted facade (Criterion D).

The house 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 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). It also illustrates the role of houses generally, and Old English 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. External paint controls, internal alteration controls and tree controls are not recommended. The place should retain its current A2 grading.

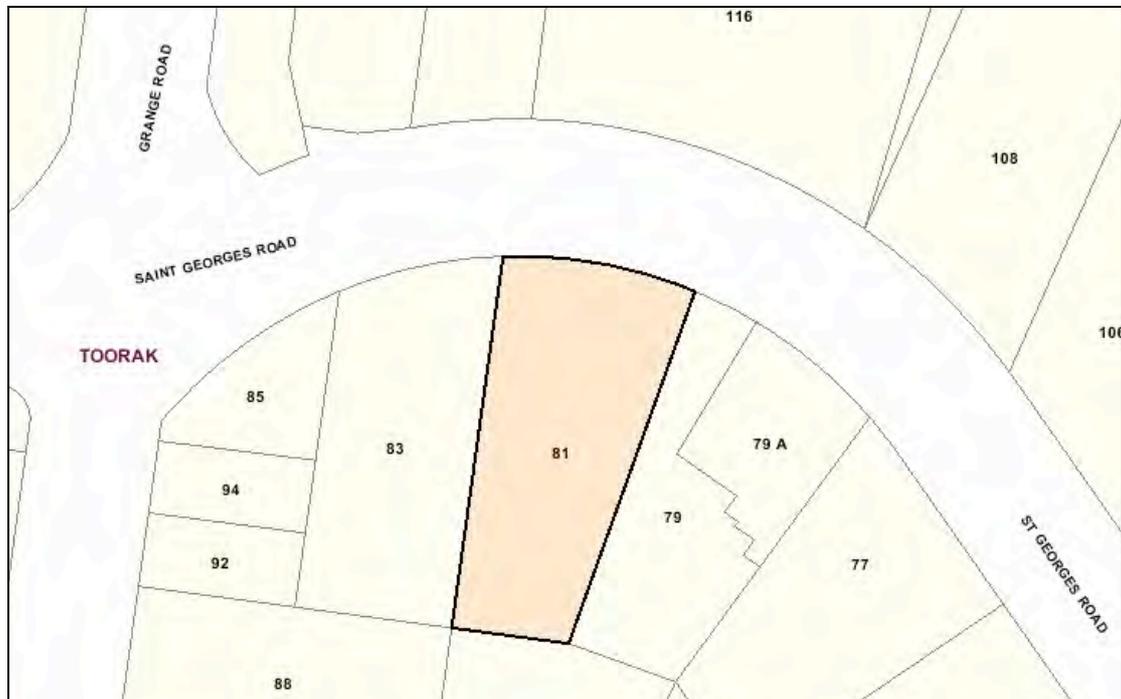


Figure 2 Recommended extent of heritage overlay for 81 St Georges Road, Toorak.