

1 Towers Road, Toorak Heritage Citation Report



Figure 1 1 Towers Road, Toorak (Source: www.realestate.com.au)

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 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.

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

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 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 line of Toorak Road was first shown on a map drawn by surveyor Robert Hoddle in 1837, when Prahran was surveyed into sixteen main blocks. The north-east corner of Toorak, bounded by present day Orrong, Toorak, Kooyong roads and the Yarra River was divided into three large allotments and sold to speculators at the first Crown Land Sales in June 1840. Sylvester Brown purchased Lot 16, consisting of 70 acres of land between Orrong Road and a line drawn midway between Lansell Road and St Georges Road. Lot 17 was sold to James Campbell. It encompassed 78 acres of land on the east side of lot 16 with its eastern boundary lying midway between St Georges Road and Heyington Place.

Successful merchant James Jackson soon purchased lots 16 and 17 and built a mansion on high ground there in 1849-50. Jackson named the property 'Toorak House', giving the area its name. Kearney's map of 1855 shows the property extending from Orrong Road to the east side of present day St Georges Road. Jackson died at sea in 1851, having never lived at Toorak House. It was leased for use as Government House from 1854 until the current Government House was completed in 1873.

By November 1874, Toorak House had been acquired by George Lansell, a Bendigo mining entrepreneur. Lansell subdivided the estate into 137 allotments and created the elegantly winding Lansell and St Georges Roads. Toorak House remained on a much reduced allotment.

George Lansell's 1875 subdivision was intended 'specially for the gentry of Victoria'.² The sale attracted wealthy pastoralists, merchants and professionals who chose this prestigious area to build their mansions. One of the largest of these mansions was built on the west side of Lansell Road in 1882 for Sir Mathew Davies, solicitor, politician and notorious land speculator.³ Originally named Bracknell, Davies' mansion was a towered Italianate style edifice, standing at the end of present day Kingsley Court. In 1887-1888 the mansion was enlarged and its original cast iron verandahs replaced by grand arcades of masonry construction. A second tower was also constructed. The mansion's sixteen-acre grounds were laid out with vine trellises, a fernery, fish ponds, an aviary, two summer houses, a tennis

² 'Governors Park Vice Regal Estate' 1874. State Library of Victoria.

³ Stonnington Local History Catalogue. Reg. No. PH9396.

court with an octagonal pavilion and paths meandering among statues.⁴

Following Davies' bankruptcy in the 1890s depression, Bracknell and all its furnishings were offered for sale.⁵ The mansion remained empty several years apart from a resident caretaker. It was acquired by wealthy widow Mrs Silas Harding in 1895, by which time the mansion had been renamed 'The Towers'.⁶ Most of the estate, including land to the north of the mansion was subdivided in 1912 to create '14 choice building sites' on Towers Road and the south side of St Georges Road.⁷ The Towers was eventually demolished in 1927 and its remaining grounds subdivided creating 11 residential allotments on Kingsley Court.

Despite its attractive Toorak location, land in the 1912 Towers Estate appears to have been slow to develop. It was not until c1937 that a large double-storey house was erected on lots 12 and 13 of the estate, on the corner of Towers and Orrong Roads (ie 1 Towers Road).⁸ The house was built for Dr Julian 'Orme' Smith and reputedly designed by architect Bernard Sutton.⁹ Sands and McDougall directories first list the house at 1 Towers Road in 1939 with Dr Julian Smith as the occupant. The son of eminent Melbourne surgeon Julian Augustus Smith, Dr Smith enlisted in the AIF soon after the outbreak of the Second World War and served with distinction in casualty clearing stations in the Western Desert. His wife Amy (sister of Sir Clive Baillieu) died at their Towers Road house in May 1948.¹⁰ Dr Smith resided there until c1950.¹¹

Description

The property at 1 Towers Road is occupied by a stately double storey Georgian revival style house. It is sited close to the front boundary and stands behind a tall wrought iron fence with brick piers topped by rendered 'pineapple' motif finials. The house has a hipped slate roof and mottled cream brick walls with rendered dressings. The façade is composed from two distinct parts, being a symmetrical parapeted front wing and a recessive lower height wing to the east side. Ornament is generally focused on a central pedimented bay rising above the main entry, which is defined by an elegant Adamesque entry portico. Above the portico is a tripartite window with a rendered architrave and 'broken' pediment. The main triangular pediment above is plainly adorned apart from a louvred circular vent and rendered cornices. A plain rendered frieze runs across the parapet providing a strong horizontal emphasis. The front entry wing is flanked by symmetrically arrangement timber-framed sash windows with louvred shutters characteristic of the Georgian revival mode.

The house appears to remain largely intact externally aside from a single storey garage addition on the east side (presumably built in front of the original garage). Various alterations were made to the house in 2004 but these were mainly confined to the interior apart from changes to some windows on the east side elevation and rear elevation.¹² These works have not diminished the integrity of the house as it presents to the street.

Comparative Analysis

The interwar Georgian revival style is closely related to the Colonial revival and Mediterranean styles. It was particularly fashionable during the interwar period in the wealthy middle ring suburbs of Toorak, South Yarra and Armadale when it become synonymous with upper middle class concepts of good taste.

⁴ Stonnington Local History Catalogue. Reg. No. PH6028.

⁵ *Argus*, 6 August 1891, p.2. & 16 June 1892, p.2

⁶ *Australasian*, 8 June 1895, p.26

⁷ Stonnington Local History Catalogue. Reg. No. PH11283.

⁸ Sands and McDougall directories, 1937-1939

⁹ *The Age*, 15 May, 1986, p.26.

¹⁰ *The Argus*, 25 May 1948, p.5.

¹¹ Sands and McDougall directories, 1950-1951.

¹² City of Stonnington Building Permit No. 2004 0022/01.

The interest in the Colonial Georgian resulted in part from a continued desire for the creation of a national idiom through a search for a local vernacular, which in Australia was equated with Colonial buildings of the early nineteenth century. The inspiration for the re-investigation of Colonial and Georgian modes was drawn from a number of factors, first was objective of marrying Colonial and Mediterranean idioms into Australian vernacular, the second was the well known precedent established by British architects such as Edwin Lutyens of abandoning medieval inspiration of the Arts and Crafts style for a return to classicism and the international revival of interest in the classical modes. Australian architects also looked to the United States where a vigorous Colonial Georgian revival had been underway since the late-nineteenth century.

By the First World War, the revived Georgian style was well established in Britain, often being used for houses, blocks of flats and commercial buildings of modest size. In Australia, William Hardy Wilson is credited with a major role in popularising the Georgian revival idiom through his rediscovering and recording of early nineteenth century architecture in New South Wales and Tasmania, and through his admiration for American Colonial architecture encountered on his overseas travels.

Georgian revival buildings began to appear in Melbourne from about the end of the First World War. Architects drew eclectically from British, French and even Spanish architecture for motifs which to aggrandise the basic Georgian box. Almost invariably the idiom was represented by a two storey rectilinear form of brick or stucco with simple hip or single ridge gable roofs, symmetry or near symmetry in the arrangement of doors windows and balconies, and restrained classical or Adamesque detailing, quoins at corners and around entries, a porte cochere, often with balconies above. Gabled porticos and simple wrought iron were also common. Occasionally elements of the Mediterranean or modern styles might be introduced in an attempt at variety of expression but the end result was always suitably restrained.

Individually significant interwar Georgian revival style houses in Stonnington include: 7 Glenbervie Road (1924) [HO311] and 8 Glyndebourne Avenue, Toorak (c1926) [HO265], both by Marcus Martin. 8 Glyndebourne Avenue is tempered by modernist tendencies towards simplification and is a noticeably more restrained version of the Georgian revival than 1 Towers Road. 7 Glenbervie Road is closer to 1 Towers Road in its fully expressed Georgian character but is not as grand. The Georgian revival style house at 17 St Georges Road, Toorak by architects Hughes and Orme (1936) [HO98] appears to be a more visually imposing than 1 Towers Road but is otherwise of a similar design quality. The house at 1 Towers Street is also of interest for its similarities to architect Harold Desbrowe Annear's former M H Baillieu's house at 729 Orrong Road, Toorak - particularly in the arrangement of the pedimented entry portico and brick and render materiality (the former M H Baillieu house has been recommended for an individual heritage overlay control).

Thematic Context

The house at 1 Towers 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

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

What is Significant?

The substantial double-storey interwar Georgian revival style house at 1 Towers Road, Toorak was built c1937 on land subdivided from the grounds of the nineteenth century mansion 'The Towers'. The design is attributed to architect Bernard Sutton.

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 from the public realm.
- The unpainted state of the face brick and rendered elements.
- The domestic garden setting (but not the fabric of the garden itself).
- The front fence.

Modern fabric, including the garage addition, is not significant.

How is it significant?

The house at 1 Towers 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 highly intact interwar Georgian revival style residence (Criterion D).

The house is of some historical interest as evidence of a major phase of development that took place in first few decades of the twentieth century when many of Toorak's large 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 large architect designed houses in the fashionable Georgian revival style 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 known as 1 Towers Road, Toorak. External paint controls, internal alteration controls and tree controls are not recommended. It is further recommended that an A2 graded be assigned to the house.

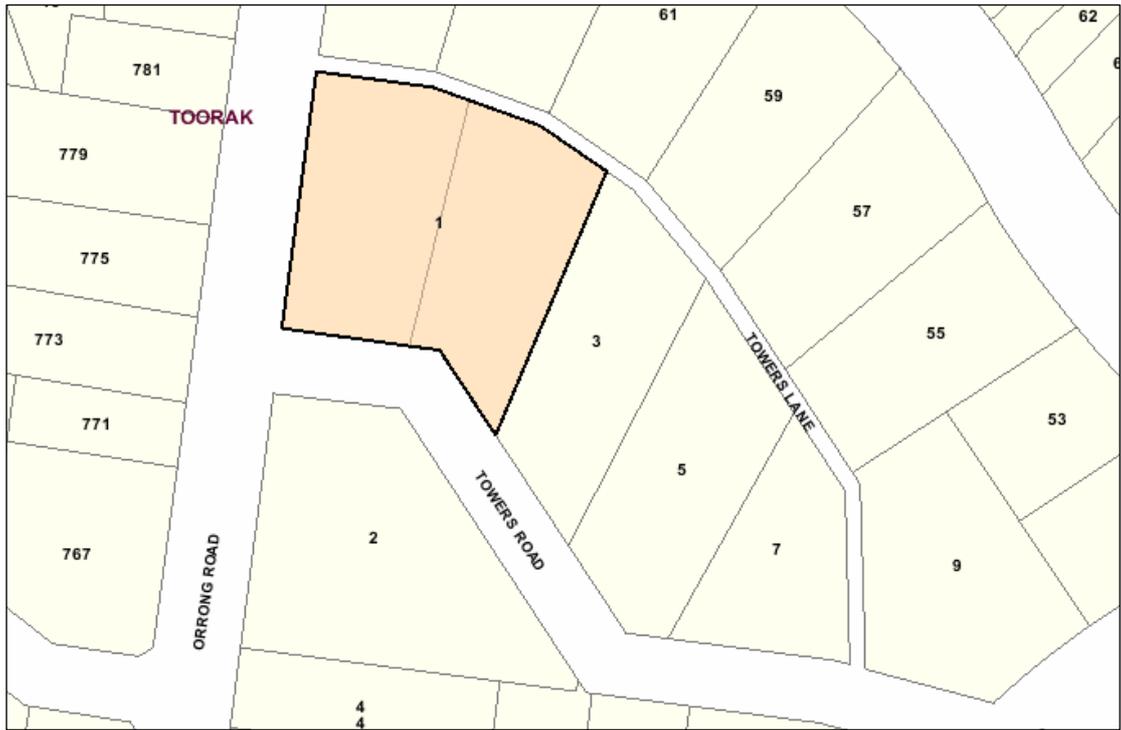


Figure 2 Recommended extent of heritage overlay at 1 Towers Road, Toorak.