

10 Whernside Avenue, Toorak Heritage Citation Report



Figure 1 10 Whernside Avenue, 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 subdivision of the old estates of Toorak began to increase after World War I when the cost maintaining these large properties became prohibitive. This process of subdivisions created a unique pattern of development which can still be understood and interpreted today. Although new subdivisions imposed new road patterns within the original

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

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. 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 property at 10 Whernside Avenue originally formed part of Crown Allotment 25, which was bound by present day Toorak Road to the north, Glenferrie Road to the east, Malvern Road to the south and the line of Denham Place to the west. It was first purchased in 1849 for £151 by John Sullivan assistant to the Colonial Surgeon for the Port Phillip District. In 1853, English barrister Charles Skinner paid £10,972 for Sullivan's land, reflecting inflated gold rush property prices.

On Lot 25 Skinner planned a village to be named Ledbury after the market town on the southern slopes of the Malvern Hills in England. Skinner's Malvern Hills Estate was subdivided into mainly small allotments with streets named after family members. As an inducement to purchasers, Skinner built the Malvern Hill Hotel on the corner of present day Glenferrie Road and Malvern Road. However, Skinner's vision of an English style village, complete with church and school, did not succeed and much of the land eventually reverted to pasture. The area's proximity to fashionable Toorak attracted mansion development in the later decades of the nineteenth century. In Albany Road, 'Belcroft', an imposing brick mansion of twenty rooms, was built for merchant, company director and politician, James Lorimer in 1877. Belcroft's extensive grounds extended east to Hopetoun Road and included a tennis court, stables, orchard and coach-house, surrounded by nineteen acres of partly cultivated land and shrubbery.²

When Sir James Lorimer died in 1889 part of the 'Belcroft' estate was subdivided and Lady Lorimer sold the mansion, with ten acres of land to Albert Miller, who re-named the house 'Whernside'.³

² Stonnington Local History Catalogue Reg. No. MP13053

³ Stonnington Local History Catalogue Reg. No. MH204

The subdivision of Whernside Estate commenced in 1916 with the creation of Whernside Avenue.⁴ Around 1918, a house was built for Ronald Buchan on Lot 8 of the Whernside Estate (present day 10 Whernside Avenue).⁵ Copies of the original floor plans are held at the Stonnington History Centre.⁶ The plans do not have a title block identifying the designer although it has been attributed to noted interwar architect Rodney Alsop.⁷

The first listing for Ronald Buchan on Whernside Avenue occurs in the 1919 Sands and McDougall directory. Buchan held a position at the family firm John Buchan and Co Buchan real estate agents and auctioneers. His Whernside Avenue house was named 'Aloha'.⁸

In 1927 architect Rodney Alsop prepared plans for alterations and additions to the house.⁹ The works were detailed to match the existing house and involved double-storey rear additions containing a ground floor billiard room and maid's alcove, and first floor bedrooms. Around the same time Alsop designed a house on the opposite side of Whernside Avenue at no.13 (now demolished).

Rodney Alsop

Rodney Howard Alsop (1881-1932) was born on 22 December 1881 at Kew, Melbourne. He showed great gifts as a child in both drawing and model-making, skills encouraged by his poor health which kept him in passive convalescence. While still at school he worked on Saturday mornings for the architects Hyndman and Bates, to whom he was articled in 1901. After admission to the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects in 1906, Alsop entered partnership with Frederick Louis Klingender, an older well-established architect. With Alsop as the designing partner, the practice drew heavily upon the English vernacular revival and its medieval sources but evolved to combine English and American idioms in a distinctive Arts and Crafts oriented mode.

Alsop was a foundation member of the Victorian Arts and Crafts Society and a respected designer of furniture. He also shared a skill in landscape design with his wife Dorothy Hope whom he had married in June 1912. Their only child died in 1915.

After World War, Alsop turned towards an arcaded Italian Renaissance mode, which, by the 1920s after his travels to Spain, developed into the popular Mediterranean style. Alsop promoted a synthesis of Mediterranean idioms with an acceptably British Georgian or Colonial style to create a uniquely Australian hybrid.

In his mature years, Alsop was a fellow of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects. He was an active member of its board of architectural education, and in 1919 was appointed first director of the University of Melbourne's architectural atelier.

In 1927, Alsop and Conrad Sayce won first place in a limited international competition for the design of the Hackett Memorial Buildings at the University of Western Australia. Built in 1931 in an early Renaissance style with the towered Winthrop Hall at its centerpiece, the design is considered Alsop's crowning achievement. Rodney Alsop died suddenly of bronchitis and asthma on 26 October 1932, not long after having been awarded the 1932 bronze medal by the Royal Institute of British Architects for Winthrop Hall. Survived by his wife, he was buried in Brighton cemetery.

⁴ Stonnington Local History Catalogue Reg. No. MH204.

⁵ Stonnington Local History Catalogue. MH 555.

⁶ Stonnington Local History Catalogue. MH 555.

⁷ *The Age*, 17 December 1986, p.7

⁸ *The Argus*, 7 October. 1936, p.14

⁹ Stonnington Local History Catalogue. MB 4187

Description

The building at 10 Whernside Avenue is an imposing double-storey Arts and Crafts style house. It has sparsely ornamented rendered masonry walls and a gabled terracotta shingle tiled roof. The main transverse gable roof has exposed rafters at the eaves, bracketed gable ends and simply detailed chimneys. Two smaller gable ends facing the street contain narrow slots with louvered vents. The façade is asymmetrically composed with an irregular fenestration pattern of shuttered multi-pane timber framed windows. There is a broad arched verandah opening at the eastern end of the façade (since enclosed) and a narrow arched opening under the gable ends forming the main entry. Walls are plainly finished apart from a moulded string course above the ground floor windows.

The house appears to be substantially intact externally apart from the first floor balcony and arched ground floor verandah having been enclosed with glazing.

Comparative Analysis

Arts and Crafts Style

The Arts and Crafts movement had its origins in the mid-1800s in England, with writer and designer William Morris as its figurehead. Morris strove to address the lowering of standards of design and the loss of craftsmanship resulting from industrialisation and the ascendancy of cheap mass produced goods. Arts and Crafts designers were concerned with the integration of art into everyday life through the medium of craftsmanship, and had a strong moral tone with a stress on the truthfulness of expression. In Australia, the Arts and Crafts style emerged in the eastern states in the late 1890s and continued to exert a strong influence on the English Domestic revival architecture into the 1930s.¹⁰

The Arts and Crafts movement was defined more by a set of ideals and principles than an adherence to a uniform style, but its buildings have many common characteristics. They are typically domestic in scale and make free use of traditional vernacular motifs to create something that was homely but at the same time distinctive and 'modern'. Artful informality and picturesqueness are strong characteristics, with symmetrical formality occurring less frequently. Buildings were typically conceived as objects 'in the round' rather than concentrating all architectural effect on a single street facade. The roof is a dominant element and could be either gabled or hipped or a combination of the two. Roughcast rendered walls, bay windows, timber shingles, battered piers and tall tapering chimneys are common. Art Nouveau inspired details are also common, both externally and internally.¹¹ A characteristic of Melbourne Arts and Crafts architecture was the diversity of approach and the high quality of design and craftsmanship.¹² Major figures in the Melbourne Arts and Crafts scene include architects Harold Desbrowe Annear, Walter Butler, Rodney Alsop and Robert Haddon.

One of the finest Arts and Crafts Style houses in Victoria can be found in the City of Stonnington - Glyn at 224 Kooyong Road, Toorak by Rodney Alsop (1908). It cemented Alsop reputation as one of the foremost practitioners in the Arts and Crafts mode. Another of the municipality's extraordinary Arts and Crafts style houses is Thanes at 13A Monaro Road, Kooyong (1908). Designed by Walter Butler, Thanes has a distinctive Elizabethan character. Thanes and Glyn are both included on the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR H953 & H735). The house at 10 Whernside Avenue is not of the same standard as these places of State significance but still compares favourably to Arts and Crafts houses in the municipality that have been found to be of local significance. Examples include 13 Tintern Avenue, Toorak, by architect A S Eggleston (HO170) and 11 Tintern Avenue, Toorak (HO285), which was

¹⁰ Harriet Edquist, *Pioneers of Modernism – The Arts and Crafts Movement in Australia*, p.xii.

¹¹ Apperly et. al., *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture*, p.140.

¹² Harriet Edquist, 'Arts and Crafts' in *Encyclopaedia of Australian Architecture*, p. 45.

constructed c1915 to designs by Rodney Alsop. Another individually significant Alsop house in the Arts and Crafts mode is Tongaboo at 6 Stonnington Place, Toorak (HO285). The house at 10 Whernside Avenue has a more commanding presence than these examples and is more intact externally than 6 Stonnington Place and 11 Tintern Avenue – the latter having been converted into apartments with a substantial rear addition. The house at 10 Whernside Avenue typifies Arts and Crafts principles in its picturesque massing, simplified austere planar wall surfaces, strongly modelled roof forms and references to English vernacular architecture. The house is also strongly evocative of the work of leading English Arts & Crafts architect Charles Voysey.

Thematic Context

The house at 10 Whernside Avenue, 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 Arts and Crafts style house at 10 Whernside Avenue, Toorak was constructed c1918 on land subdivided from the grounds of the nineteenth century Whernside mansion estate. The house was sympathetically extended at the rear in 1927 to designs by noted architect Rodney Alsop – the same architect is believed to be responsible for the original design.

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

- The external form, materials and detailing of the original house and 1927 additions.
- The high level of external intactness to its 1927 state.
- The legibility of the original built form from the public realm.
- The domestic garden setting (but not the fabric of the garden itself).
- The undeveloped front setback.

How is it significant?

The house at 10 Whernside Avenue, Toorak is of local architectural significance to the City of Stonnington.

Why is it significant?

Architecturally, the house at 10 Whernside Avenue is significant as an impressive, notably large and highly intact interwar Arts and Crafts style residence (Criterion D).

The house is of some historical interest as evidence of a major phase of development beginning around the end of the First World War 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).

The place also illustrates the role of large architect designed houses as symbols of wealth, status and taste for Melbourne's middle and 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. An A2 grading should be assigned to the house



Figure 2 Recommended extent of heritage overlay 10 Whernside Avenue, Toorak.