

14 St Georges Road, Toorak Heritage Citation Report



Figure 1 14 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 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

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

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

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 aimed 'specially for the gentry of Victoria'.² The sale attracted wealthy pastoralists, merchants and professionals who chose this prestigious area to build their mansions.

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

A further subdivision of the Toorak Estate occurred in 1900 when 45 allotments were auctioned. Around the same time other subdivisions occurred along St Georges Road and Lansell Road. This reduced the size of the allotments of the 1870s and 1880s mansions built on Lansell's 1874 subdivision. St Georges Road then underwent another stage of building development on these smaller allotments, many of which still survive today. Much of this development occurred in the interwar period and took the form of architect designed homes. This included a large double-storey residence at 14 St Georges Road, which was designed by architect A J Ainslie for Sidney Wolton Gullet. The earliest MMBW property service plans for the house is dated 1928³ and the first Sands and McDougall listing occurs in 1930, indicating a 1929 construction date. Edna Walling prepared a garden plan for Gullet which included a formal circular driveway in front of the house.⁴

The house, named 'Welwyn' was featured in *Australian Home Beautiful* of June 1931. The article, entitled 'One of Toorak's Dignified Homes', describes the house as follows:

Toorak has to its credit many stately and dignified homes, and 'Welwyn', the residence of Mr and Mrs Sidney Gullet, is a notable example of the more solid type of present-day home. Its restrained and well proportioned exterior conveys the comforting assurance that its architecture will stand the passing of the decades.

The architect, Mr A. J. Ainslie, has conceived an unusual design, in that it is actually the back of the house which faces the road. The garden front, with its loggia, its graceful Georgian pillars and arches, is at the back...

... The colors[sic] used in the exterior of the house give it a pleasingly mellow look, despite its newness. The walls are plastered a dull yellow tone, with which the dark red of the shutters blends excellently. The flat tiles of the roof are in the varied dull tones of the clinker bricks, which are used for the tall chimneys. The entrance, of course, is at the "back", and the car drive takes a broad sweep round under a wide portico.⁵

The house's first owner Sidney Wolton Gullet was an industrial engineer and director of several Melbourne companies, including the Union Can Company and Holeproof Ltd.⁶ He rose to the rank of captain during World War I and was mentioned in dispatches. Gullet died in July 1953 leaving an estate valued at £438,643.⁷

14 St Georges Road subsequently became the home of Cecil McKay, the fourth son of wealthy industrialist Hugh Victor McKay, the founder of the Sunshine Harvester Works.

In 1955, Cecil McKay had a pool and change rooms built at the rear of 14 St Georges Road to designs by architect Marcus Martin.⁸ The associated MMBW plan of drainage suggests that Martin also undertook some works to the main house, possibly including an extension to the front of the garage.⁹

A J Ainslie

A J Ainslie is perhaps one of the lesser known architects practising in Melbourne in the interwar period. He nonetheless seems to have been sufficiently well regarded to attract prestigious commissions for large houses in Melbourne's wealthy suburbs. Ainslie's work includes houses in Kooyong Road, Toorak (1922), Bay Street, Brighton (1929), and Glenferrie

³MMBW Plan of Drainage No. 171754. South East Water.

⁴Trisha Dixon & Jennie Churchill, *The Vision of Edna Walling*, p. 141.

⁵*Australian Home Beautiful*, 1 June 1931, pp. 37-39.

⁶*Argus*, 28 July 1953, p.5.

⁷*Argus*, 24 October 1953, p.6.

⁸Bryce Raworth, *Marcus Martin: A Survey of his Life and Work*.

⁹MMBW Plan of Drainage No. 171754. South East Water.

Road, Malvern, (1932) and a motor showroom at the corner of Elizabeth and A'Beckett Streets.¹⁰ He also had designs published in *Real Property Annual* and *Australian Home Builder*. Ainslie became an Associate of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects in 1920 and was elected Fellow in 1938.

Description

The property at 14 St Georges Road is occupied by a very large, double storey residence displaying a hybrid interwar Georgian revival/Mediterranean character. It has rendered walls and a multi-hipped terracotta shingle roof punctuated by robust face brick chimneys with corbelled caps. Although designed with its principal façade facing the rear garden, the imposing street elevation is not lacking in architectural interest. It has a formal and carefully balanced sense of asymmetry with a central entry porch located on axis with a circular gravel driveway. Flanking single-storey side wings have roof top terraces, enclosed by balustrades that are part solid masonry and part wrought iron. Windows typically have double-hung sash frames with louvred shutters. Photographs in the 1931 *Australian Home Beautiful* indicate that the brick front fence and wrought iron driveway gates are original.

The house appears to remain largely intact in terms of its streetscape presentation apart from a garage addition to the south side. Walls have been repainted white and window shutters black, replacing the original colour scheme of dull yellow walls and dark red shutters. Aerial photographs suggest that little remains of the Edna Walling designed garden apart from the circular driveway. The Marcus Martin designed pool and change rooms appear to have been replaced by a tennis court.

Comparative Analysis

Interwar Georgian and Mediterranean Revival

Georgian architecture is understood as the style developed in England during the reigns of the first three Georges. In general terms it is seen to have grown out of a re-examination of the work of Andrea Palladio, the noted architect of the late Italian Renaissance. The foundations of English Georgian architecture were laid by Sir Christopher Wren and others towards the end of the seventeenth century and developed over the following century into an accepted mode for both public and domestic buildings.

During the 1920s, buildings in the Georgian and Regency revival styles constructed in the United States and to a lesser degree the work of English revivalists, such as Edwin Lutyens, promoted a resurgence of interest in these modes amongst local architects. The interest in Georgian architecture also resulted 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 Georgian buildings of the early nineteenth century.

In Melbourne, architects Marcus Martin, Rodney Alsop and Walter Butler all incorporated aspects of the Georgian style along with Californian and Mediterranean influences into their domestic projects. The rise of the Mediterranean idiom gained its impetus from two major sources - the influence of American publications advertising their interest in the Mediterranean and the Californian Spanish Colonial Revival, and the example set by those Melbourne architects and educators who, either through academic publications on the vernacular idioms of the different Mediterranean regions or through travel itself, realised the suitability of such idioms for coping with the light and climates of the major Australian suburban centres. The underlying theme of all contemporary writings on the style is its potential as the basis for the creation of a national style, climatically congenial and appropriately modern. Among Melbourne architects, Alsop and W A M Blackett were early advocates of climatically appropriate design based on a synthesis of the Georgian and Mediterranean modes. Houses in Stonnington that exemplify this approach include Marcus

¹⁰Miles Lewis, Australian Architectural Index, <https://studenteforums.app.unimelb.edu.au/apex/f?p=199:10:>

Martin's house at 8 Glyndebourne Avenue, Toorak (HO265) and Blackett and Foster's 22 Hopetoun Road, Toorak (recommended for an individual heritage overlay control by the Stonnington L47D Panel). The house at 14 St Georges compares favourably with these examples in terms of architectural interest and integrity but is distinguished by its large scale. The house at 14 St Georges Road can also be compared to the nearby interwar mansion at 17 St Georges Road (HO98). Although 17 St Georges Road adopts a purer Georgian revival expression (with American Colonial overtones), it is of a similarly imposing scale and design quality.

Thematic Context

The house at 14 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 building at 14 St George Road, Toorak is a substantial double-storey residence with restrained Mediterranean/Georgian revival character. It was built c1929 to designs by architect A J Ainslie, on an allotment that was created through various subdivisions of the Toorak House estate.

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 front fence.
- The layout of the circular driveway.
- The domestic garden setting - but not the fabric of the garden itself.

How is it significant?

The house at 14 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 notably large, well designed and generally intact interwar residence with a refined Mediterranean/Georgian revival character (Criterion D). It is distinguished from most other examples of this idiom in the municipality by virtue of its impressive scale.

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 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, the building illustrates the role of large architect designed houses, particularly in the Georgian revival and Mediterranean modes, 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 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.

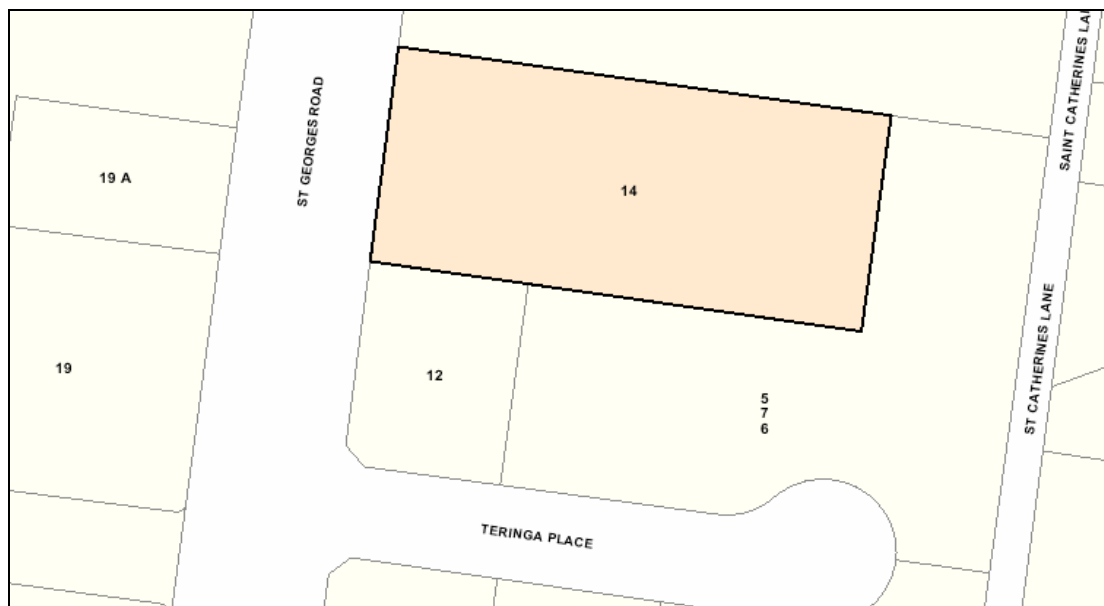


Figure 2 Recommended extent of heritage overlay for 14 St Georges Road, Toorak.