

## 22 St Georges Road, Toorak Heritage Citation Report



Figure 1 22 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.

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

<sup>1</sup> 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 intended 'specially for the gentry of Victoria'.<sup>2</sup> The sale attracted wealthy pastoralists, merchants and professionals who chose this prestigious area to build their mansions.

<sup>2</sup> '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. While this commenced in the pre-World War 1 era, most development occurred in the interwar period. Much of this new development took the form of architect designed homes. This included a double-storey residence at 22 St Georges Road, which was built in 1937 to designs by architect Edward Billson.<sup>3</sup> The house's first owner Fred William Dennett was an English concert pianist who married Elise Buck, daughter of clothing manufacturer and retailer Henry Buck. Dennett joined the firm of Henry Buck & Co in 1921 and became its managing director after Henry Buck's death in 1933.<sup>4</sup>

### *Edward Billson*

Edward Fielder Billson (1892-1986) was the first person to enrol in the University of Melbourne Architecture course and the first Australian to serve articles under the noted American architect Walter Burley Griffin. During his time with Griffin, Billson became part of a circle of architects that was instrumental in establishing the Prairie School of architecture in Melbourne. Prairie School influences are clearly visible in Billson's first independent commission 'Wooragee', 28 Clendon Road, Toorak (HO302).

Other important buildings by Billson demonstrating Griffin and Prairie School characteristics include the Margaret Armstrong house, Caulfield (1918-19), Revell, 9 Toorak Avenue (1920) and Woodlands Golf Club House (1925-1929).

From the early 1930s, Billson's work began to depart from his earlier Griffin-inspired designs towards a 'modernised' or simplified Old English Revival style. His entry in the 1934 Centenary homes exhibition, for example, appears to have been based on Cook's Cottage. Billson's more progressive designs in the Old English idiom incorporated modern planning with careful zoning of spaces according to function, avoidance of excessive waste space in halls and corridors and ready access from living spaces to the outdoors.

By the late 1930s, Billson had established a thriving Melbourne practice, and had become one of Melbourne's foremost exponents of Modernist architecture. Notable examples of his work from this later period include the Sanitarium Health Foods Co (1936-9) and Signs Publishing Co (1936-7) buildings in Warburton and the Grange Lynne factory (1937) in South Melbourne. Fielder Billson was awarded the Street Architecture Medal by the RAlA in 1940.

### **Description**

The property at 22 St Georges Road, Toorak is occupied by a double-storey interwar residence combining English Domestic revival elements with a strong French Provincial character. It has clinker brick walls and a steep gabled slate roof with narrow eaves and timber board infill to the gable ends. The asymmetrically composed façade has a circular stair tower surmounted by a conical slate roof. A recessed entry porch is delineated by an elegant, classically inspired entablature and columns.

All of the original front windows were removed c1999 and some openings enlarged.<sup>5</sup> The replacement window frames are nonetheless in keeping with the interwar character of the house. A rear wing was demolished and replaced by double-storey additions. There is also a freestanding pool room in the rear yard. Despite these changes, the integrity of the original design remains high.

<sup>3</sup> MMBW Plan of Drainage No.61187. South East Water.

<sup>4</sup> [www.henrybucks.com.au/company/history](http://www.henrybucks.com.au/company/history)

<sup>5</sup> City of Stonnington Property File 2371BL1.

It is not certain if the brick front fence and wrought iron driveway gates are original or early elements. They are nonetheless broadly sympathetic to the character of the house. The central pedestrian gate was created c1999.

## **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.

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.

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 and Brittany for inspiration. According to Peter Cuffley, the emergence of a French provincial style in Australian can be explained in part by the popularity of the style in America, particularly in fashionable Hollywood and Bel Air.<sup>6</sup>

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

<sup>6</sup> Peter Cuffley, *Australian Houses of the '20s and '30s*, p.131.

associations of the academically detailed Old English 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 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). 221 Kooyong Road is distinguished from these examples by its French provincial character. Normandie at 657 Toorak Road (an A2 graded building in the Power Street heritage precinct) is perhaps the key example in the municipality of the French Provincial inspired English Domestic revival style. 22 St Georges has similar attributes, such the conical turret and dormer windows, but it does not match the rustic picturesque quality of Normandie's stone clad façade. 22 St Georges Road differs from this, being an example of Billson's more progressive 'streamlined' interpretation of the Old English mode. Billson's work in this mode includes the flats at 6 Grange Road (HO347) and 31-33 Marne Street, South Yarra, (graded A within the City of Melbourne). The house at 22 St Georges Road compares favourably with these examples.

### **Thematic Context**

The house at 22 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 22 St Georges Road, Toorak is a double-storey English Domestic Revival style house with a circular conical roofed tower recalling French provincial architecture. It was built in 1937 to designs by noted architect Edward Fielder Billson. The property was created through various subdivisions of the Toorak House mansion 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 legibility of the original built form in views from the public realm.
- The generally high integrity of the street elevations.
- The absence of modern garages and carports in views from the public realm.
- The domestic garden setting (but not the fabric of the garden itself)

Modern fabric, including the non-original front windows, does not contribute to the significance of the place.

*How is it significant?*

The house at 22 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 generally intact example of the French provincial variant of the interwar English Domestic Revival style. (Criterion D). It typifies architect Edward Billson's stylised approach to house design in this mode. The house also provides a good illustration of broader trends towards the simplification of form and detail in 1930s domestic architecture in Melbourne.

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). It also 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. It is further recommended that an A 2 grading be assigned to this building (replacing the current B grading).

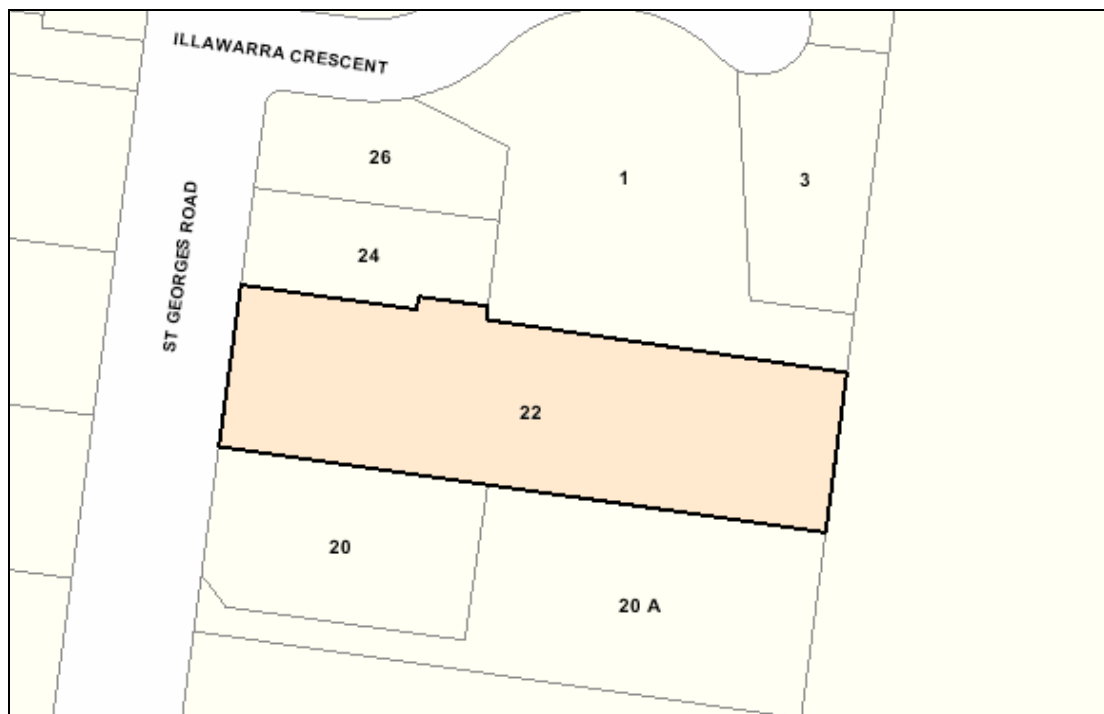


Figure 2 Recommended extent of heritage overlay for 22 St Georges Road, Toorak.