

## 26 St Georges Road, Toorak Heritage Citation Report



Figure 1 26 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 interpreted today. Although new subdivisions imposed new road patterns within the original

<sup>1</sup> 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.

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 block. 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 the residence at 26 St Georges Road, which was built in 1929 for Alfred L Keep to designs by architects W & R Butler and Martin.<sup>3</sup> The house occupied one of six lots created in 1924 through a subdivision of the Illawara mansion estate.<sup>4</sup> The 1928 Sands and McDougall Directory indicate that the property was vacant. The directory for 1929 records a 'house being built' on the site (it was unnumbered at this time). Alfred Keep is listed as the occupant of the house the following year.

### W & R Butler & Martin

Walter Richmond Butler (1864-1949) is best remembered as an architect of great sophistication with a talent for Arts and Crafts design. His grand houses, a number of which survive in the City of Stonnington, are generally considered his greatest achievement. English born, Butler worked for a time in London where he developed associations with important figures in the Arts and Crafts Movement. He migrated to Australia in 1888, and from 1889 to 1893 was in partnership with Beverley Ussher. From 1907 to 1916 he partnered Ernest R Bradshaw, and after 1919 he was in practice with his nephew Austin Richard Butler (1892-1961) as W & R Butler, and from 1926 to 1931 with Marcus Martin as W & R Butler and Martin. Walter Butler gradually withdrew from practice after his only son was killed in the First World War, leaving much of the design work to younger partners like Martin.

Marcus William Martin (1893-1981) was a key figure in Melbourne architecture in the interwar and early post war period. While active in commercial, industrial and institutional design, he was especially influential in terms of his residential work. After attending Melbourne Grammar School, Martin served articles with A & K Henderson and completed a year of the architectural diploma course at the University of Melbourne before enlisting in the AIF in 1915. He was wounded by shrapnel in Flanders and invalided home to Australia. Soon after this he established a practice with Rodney Alsop, subsequently merged with A K Henderson. This larger partnership was dissolved when Alsop embarked on a tour of Europe and the Mediterranean. After a year in practice under his own name, Martin commenced a new firm with Walter Butler and his nephew, Austin Richard Butler. The union with the experienced and highly regarded Butler helped establish Martin at the forefront of domestic practice in Victoria, and from this time Martin became an influential and celebrated proponent of Georgian and Mediterranean influenced design. Throughout his career Martin specialised in a quietly historicist mode that achieved a fashionable compromise between the period revival styles of the early twentieth century and the trend towards a simpler, more modern architectural expression that gained impetus in the 1930s.

It is not certain which architect in the office of W & R Butler and Martin was responsible for 26 St Georges Road. However, it can be speculated that the house is the work of Marcus Martin. It is evident that a large proportion of the firm's domestic commissions were more or less directly under Martin's sole control.<sup>5</sup> The house can also be attributed to Martin on stylistic grounds, given its close resemblance to a Martin designed house at Evans Court, Toorak (1927).<sup>6</sup> While Martin is most closely associated with a neo-Georgian expression, his 1920s work shows an Arts and Crafts emphasis, also evident in 26 St Georges Road.

<sup>3</sup> MMBW Plan of Drainage No. 171921. South East Water.

<sup>4</sup> Stonnington Local History Catalogue, Reg. No. PH 10382.

<sup>5</sup> Bryce Raworth, *Marcus Martin: A Survey of His Life and Work Volume 1*, Investigation Project (University of Melbourne), 1986. p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Bryce Raworth, *Marcus Martin: A Survey of His Life and Work Volume 2*, Investigation Project (University of Melbourne), 1986. Figure 23.

## Description

The site at 26 St Georges Road, Toorak is occupied by a handsome double-storey Arts and Crafts style residence. It has simple, sparsely ornamented building forms and strong chimney massing. External walls are finished in a white painted render with contrasting clinker brick accents used at the arched entry porch and for one chimney. The gabled terracotta roof has exposed rafters and brackets eaves treatment over the windows on the projecting front bay. Windows typically have multi-pane double hung sash frames.

It is understood that the original rear wing of the house was demolished in the 1970s and replaced by a single storey addition.<sup>7</sup> Further renovations were undertaken in 2002 involving demolition of a porch, reconfiguration of internal spaces and enclosure of a front balcony. A new carport was also built in the front setback.<sup>8</sup>

## Comparative Analysis

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.

The Arts and Crafts movement was defined more by a set of ideals and principles than an adherence to 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.<sup>9</sup> A characteristic of Melbourne Arts and Crafts architecture was the diversity of approach and the high quality of design and craftsmanship.<sup>10</sup> Major figures in the Melbourne Arts and Crafts scene include architects Harold Desbrowe Annear, Walter Butler, Rodney Alsop and Robert Haddon.

In Australia, the Arts and Crafts style emerged in the eastern states in the late 1890s although a strong Arts and Crafts influence prevailed well beyond this date within the architectural practices that had pioneered the style in Melbourne, such as Walter Butler's. One of the finest surviving Arts and Crafts style houses in the City of Stonnington is Butler's Euylina, built 1925-26 at 48-50 Irving Road (HO158). 26 St Georges Road is more compact, austere and stylised design with a pared back simplicity anticipating the architectural characteristics of the late 1930s.

<sup>7</sup> Submission to the City of Stonnington from the current owners in relation to Amendment C189.

<sup>8</sup> It was not possible to confirm the extent of changes to the original design as Council records relating to the 2002 works were not available to the author of this citation.

<sup>9</sup> Apperly et. al., *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture*, p.140.

<sup>10</sup> Harriet Edquist, 'Arts and Crafts' in *Encyclopaedia of Australian Architecture*, p. 45.

### **Thematic Context**

The house at 26 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 property at 26 St George Road, Toorak is occupied by a double-storey Arts and Crafts style residence erected in 1928 to designs by the important architectural firm of W & R Butler and Martin. The house occupies one of six lots created in 1924 through a subdivision of the Illawara 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 generally high level of external integrity.
- 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)

Modern fabric, including the front fence and carport, does not contribute to the significance of the place.

#### *How is it significant?*

The house at 26 St Georges Road, Toorak is of local architectural significance to the City of Stonnington.

#### *Why is it significant?*

The house is architecturally significant as an accomplished example of an interwar residence in a stylised Arts and Crafts mode, the design of which can be attributed to important architect Marcus Martin. (Criterion D). The house's integrity to its original design appears to be high despite modern alterations and the loss of some early fabric.

The house is of some historical interest as evidence of the 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 substantial architect designed houses 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. The building should retain its current A2 grading.

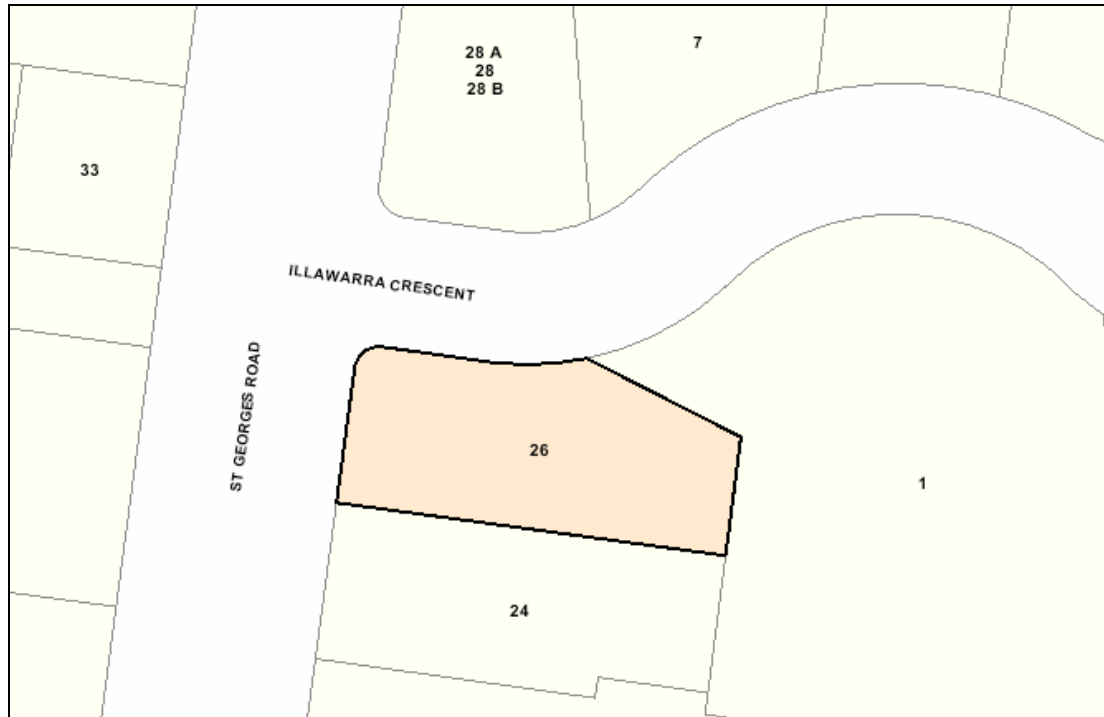


Figure 2 Recommended extent of heritage overlay for 26 St Georges Road, Toorak.