

Heritage Citation – Individual Place

Heritage Place: Residence
Address: 55 Lansell Road, Toorak

HO Reference: HO70
Citation status: Final
Date Updated: 24 October 2023
Year of Construction: 1940-41

Designer: Harry Norris
Builder: Unknown



Photograph of 55 Lansell Road (source: Extent Heritage, 2021).



Location map and extent of HO70.

Heritage Group: Residential buildings
Heritage Type: House

Key Theme: Building Suburbs
Key Sub-theme: Creating Australia's most 'designed' suburbs – houses as a symbol of wealth, status and fashion

Significance Level: Local

Recommendation: Retain as an individually significant place on the HO

Controls:	<input type="checkbox"/> External paint colours	<input type="checkbox"/> Internal alterations	<input type="checkbox"/> Tree controls
	<input type="checkbox"/> Victorian Heritage Register	<input type="checkbox"/> Incorporated Plans	<input type="checkbox"/> Outbuildings and fences exemptions
	<input type="checkbox"/> Prohibited uses may be permitted	<input type="checkbox"/> Aboriginal Heritage Place	

Statement of Significance

What is significant?

The property at 55 Lansell Road, Toorak is significant. Specifically, the form, scale and detailing of the Interwar Functionalist style residence and garage is of local significance, as well as the original stone boundary fence. The remaining landscaping is not significant.

How is it significant?

The residence, garage and fence are of local historical, representative and aesthetic significance to the City of Stonington.

Why is it significant?

The residence and garage are of historical significance as the home of Sir George James Coles, founder of what would become the Coles Group retail empire. The residence was G. J. Coles' home from 1946 until his passing in 1977. (Criterion A)

Designed by architect Harry Norris, the residence, garage and fence are representative of the key design principles behind Interwar Functionalist design, including curved streamline features such as the projecting window bay (like the prow of a ship), rendered brick, projecting concrete window sills and lintels, steel framed windows, glass bricks, and a raised parapet concealing the flat roof. (Criterion D)

HERCON Criteria Assessment

<i>A</i>	<i>Importance to the course, or pattern of our cultural or natural history</i>	The residence and garage are of historical significance as the home of Sir George James Coles, founder of what would become the Coles Group retail empire. The residence was G. J. Coles' home from 1946 until his passing in 1977.
<i>B</i>	<i>Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of our cultural or natural history</i>	This place does not meet this criterion.
<i>C</i>	<i>Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of our cultural or natural history</i>	This place does not meet this criterion.
<i>D</i>	<i>Important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or environments</i>	Designed by architect Harry Norris, the residence and garage are representative of the key design principles behind Interwar Functionalist design, including curved streamline features such as the projecting window bay (like the prow of a ship), rendered brick, projecting concrete window sills and lintels, steel framed windows, glass bricks, and a raised parapet concealing the flat roof.

<i>E</i>	<i>Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics</i>	This place does not meet this criterion.
<i>F</i>	<i>Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period</i>	This place does not meet this criterion.
<i>G</i>	<i>Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of the continuing and developing cultural traditions</i>	This place does not meet this criterion.
<i>H</i>	<i>Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in our history.</i>	This place does not meet this criterion.

Description

• Physical Analysis

The residence at 55 Lansell Road, Toorak is a two-storey, rendered brick Interwar Functionalist style structure. The building forms two distinct wings facing Kingsley Court and Lansell Road respectively. The rectangular form terminates at the north façade along Lansell Road, followed by a single storey semi-circular projecting bay with an accessible verandah on the upper level. The structure has a pitched roof which is concealed by the flat parapet that sits flush to the façade.

The smooth wall render is painted a cream colour. The façade is punctuated by windows of a uniform depth, however they vary in width and placement. The larger windows on the upper level have a large centre fixed pane and a pair of two-pane casement windows on either side. The large windows on the ground level have a similar form but with an additional fixed three-pane on the top of the window. The smaller windows are a simple double-hung sash window. The windows sit under an extruded concrete sill that runs the length of the façade.

The two street facing elevations are relatively unembellished. The south elevation facing Kingsley Court features a double height strip window glazed with square glass blocks. There is a side entrance door located on this elevation. A white aggregate path leads from the footpath to the front door. The timber door has a circular window and security door. The door is framed by two engaged piers clad in granite. The main entrance is located on the Lansell Road elevation and is raised on three stone stairs. The steps are framed by decorative fluted cast iron columns and lacework with glass. It is unclear if these cast iron details are original. The front door is timber and painted white, with two symmetrical sidelights. The front door and steps are sheltered by an extruded slab awning. The foundation of the east and north façade is clad in granite and wraps around the projecting bay. The elevations have paired wall vents placed consistently above the windows of each level.

There is concrete laid driveway off Kingsley Court leading to an original garage that sits flush to the main façade. The garage has a counterweight door. The flat roof structure has a flat roof, parapet sill and concrete lintel that reads cohesively to the main structure.

The grounds of the irregularly shaped lot are moderately landscaped. There are mature trees mostly located on the north side of the property fronting Towers Road. The north and east areas of the property have an expanse of lawn and there is a paved area located on the north façade that mirrors the footprint of the building. The street boundary is demarcated by a short granite wall which is original to the construction of the dwelling. The wall on the Kingsley Court front is a short wall with no piers and is overgrown with ivy (*hedera*). The wall fronting Lansell Road is a short wall with two end stone piers and a timber paling fence affixed to the wall. There is a break in the fence after the stone wall and it becomes a full height timber paling fence with lattice that continues around the border onto the Towers Road frontage.

The dwelling remains in use as a residential property. The details of the main structure appear to be intact and one section of the fence, being the granite wall, is original. The property therefore has high integrity. There are some large cracks on the façade render. The roof scuppers on the façade appear to be heavily rusted and requires replacement. The projecting flat window sills and entrance slab have water stains which are highly visible against the cream coloured façade. The property is considered in fair condition overall.

- [Alterations and Additions](#)

- New gutters.
- Timber paling fence added.
- Roof antenna added.
- White aggregate footpath added.
- Garden shed added to the backyard.
- Painted black metal garden fence with chicken wire added.
- External lights added to the eaves.

[History](#)

- [Historical Context](#)

For thousands of years preceding European colonialism, the area now known as Stonnington was the traditional home of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung people of the Eastern Kulin Nation. This environment would have provided Traditional Owners with access to pre-contact plains, grassy woodland, and floodplains on the banks of the Yarra River (Birrarung), Gardiners Creek (Kooyong Koot), and Hawksburn Creek (now channelised), in a rolling landscape on the northern shore of Port Phillip Bay. It is important to note that the rich cultural heritage of Traditional Owners in Stonnington did not end with colonialism—it has a rich presence to this day.

Following the establishment of Melbourne in 1835, squatter John Gardiner and many others like him sought out land in what would become present day Toorak and surrounds on account of its densely timbered landscape, undulating terrain and proximity to water. By 1840, crown land sales marked the area's transition to pastoral settlement, and later in 1851, with the purchase of land in Hawthorn by Thomas Herbert Power, the surrounding environments gradually became a place where the early

merchant and squatter elite of Melbourne built their homesteads. In Toorak, this is best represented by the purchase of lot 26 by James Jackson, associate in Jackson, Rae & Co. soap and candle merchants. Jackson was described by politician William Westgarth as 'Melbourne's greatest merchant of this early time' (Forster 1999, 10). It is only fitting that his house, called Toorak House, would be the namesake of what would become arguably the most affluent suburb in Melbourne. Following the discovery of gold in the 1850s and the wealth this produced for ancillary trades, the Toorak area drew in Melbourne's newly wealthy. Today, over a century later, Toorak still has connotations of wealth and prestige as best represented in its history and built environment (Forster 1999, 5–26).

- **Place History**

The two-storey residence, originally listed as 31 Lansell Road, was constructed in 1940-41 to designs prepared by Harry Norris (Curtis 1991, 36). Prolific during the interwar period for his Art Deco commercial designs in the Melbourne Central Business District, such as the Nicholas Building and the current David Jones store, architect Harry Norris had a long-standing relationship with businessman G. J. Coles who would later come to occupy the house.

The house was described as a sixteen room brick house at the time of its erection, and it featured a large terrace on the Tower Street side, as well as an incorporated garage into the east side of the building next to the laundry area (MMBW 1940-41). An earlier citation indicates that the original occupant was sharebroker Hugh Wallace Smith. Notable social events at the residency grounds during its early years include the Alfred Hospital Auxillary spring fair that was opened by the Lady Mayoress (The Herald 1944, 9).

Hugh Wallace Smith's occupancy at the house was short-lived, and by 1946, Sir George James Coles, prominent Victorian businessman and the founder of Coles Group shopping empire, along with his wife Margaret Coles (née Herbert) and four children, occupied the house. The Coles family continued to use the residence as a space for social and community entertainment. An article from 1946 makes note of a musical gathering organised by the local St. John's Church to be held at the residency (The Age 1946, 6).

The retailing sector of G. J. Coles had grown extensively by the time of the Coles occupancy at 55 Lansell Road. George subsequently retired as the director of Coles in 1956, and devoted his time to philanthropic and conservative political causes (Sydenham 1993). He remained at the residence until his death in 1977, whereby his estate was sworn for probate at \$986,486. Little is known about the house following his death. While a property sale history for the house indicates that it was eventually sold in 1983, this date has been difficult to verify. It is highly likely that the property remained in the Coles family until this period. The Coles family's decades long association with the house is certainly noteworthy and has undoubtedly contributed to its high physical integrity.

Comparative Analysis

Harry Norris' Interwar Functionalist design has streamline characteristics, that would be referred to as Streamline Moderne after the World War II. Within City of Stonnington, there are no other examples of his work afforded heritage protections. However, there are other structures within the City of Stonnington with comparable design features, and Norris' domestic work is present in other suburbs.

Comparable examples include:

- **Burnham Beeches (1 Sherbrooke Road, Sherbrooke) (HO5 / H0868).** Constructed in 1930-33 as a rural retreat for the wealthy Aspro 'king' Alfred Nicholas, Burnham Beeches is a good example of Norris' Art Deco streamline work and is noted as one of the most significant Interwar domestic designs in Victoria. Burnham Beeches is a comparable example to the 55 Lansell Road not only for its connection to architect Harry Norris, but for its 'ocean liner' design qualities seen in Norris' work. Both buildings have projecting curved bays fitted with steel framed windows, jutting from the main structure of each built like the prow of an ocean liner. Both houses are constructed of rendered brick masonry with hard line rectilinear form, flat rooves hidden behind parapets, projecting concrete lintels and window sills, and elaborate metal railing. However, it is noted that 55 Lansell Road it is a smaller and less ostentatious example of Norris' design.
- **Strathalbyn (26 The Crescent, Sassafrass) (HO296).** Constructed in 1938, the design qualities exhibited at Burnham Beeches are reflected also at Strathalbyn, making it a good comparable example for the residence at 55 Lansell Road, Toorak. The use of rendered brick masonry and curved streamline features, as well as the projecting bay like the prow of a ship can be likened to both structures, further cementing Norris' design trends and informing the architectural and associative significance of 55 Lansell Road, Toorak.
- **Fenton Bowen House (577 Toorak Road, Toorak) (Precinct, HO143).** As there are currently no recorded domestic examples of Norris' work in Stonnington, other than 55 Lansell Road, the Fenton Bowen House at 577 Toorak Road, Toorak, has been used as a comparable example. The Fenton Bowen House is a double storey Interwar Functionalist building constructed in 1938 for Dr. Fenton-Bowen, to the designs of Rhys Hopkins and Shannon. There is little work associated with the partnership of Rhys Hopkins and Shannon, but Hopkins is associated with the Midland Theatre in Ararat which implements streamline characteristics on a cream brick theatre. The Fenton Bowen House comprises a rectilinear form with curved corners and a projecting curved corner in the same design as Norris' work. Projecting cement lintels and window sills, with steel framed windows and long vertical windows, convey an aesthetic very similar to 55 Lansell Road as well as both Strathalbyn and Burnham Beeches.

55 Lansell Road compares well with the above examples, one of which is on the Victorian Heritage Register. Based on the above examples, when 55 Lansell Road was first constructed it would have been considered cutting edge and modern, particularly in a period whereby Interwar design in Toorak largely equated to the Old English style.

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Limitations

1. Access to all heritage places was limited to a visual inspection from the public domain. The interiors of buildings and inaccessible areas such as rear gardens were not accessed as part of this heritage study.
2. Condition and site modification assessment was limited to a visual inspection undertaken from the public domain.
3. The historical notes provided for this citation are not considered to be an exhaustive history of the site.

Further Images



Southern elevation, looking north (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



Southern elevation, looking north west (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



South eastern corner, looking north west (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



Stone chimney on northern elevation (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



Entrance, eastern façade (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



Vertical glass brick window design (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



Streamline projecting bay on the northern elevation, as viewed from Lansell Road looking west (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).

Authors

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