

50 Hopetoun Road, Toorak Heritage Citation Report



Figure 1 50 Hopetoun 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 (as of 2006). 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 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 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 present day 50 Hopetoun Road originally formed part of Crown Portion 25, consisting of 84 acres of elevated land, bounded by present day Toorak, Glenferrie and Malvern Roads and the line of Denham Place. It was purchased for £151 at the second sale of Crown land in 1849 by John Sullivan, assistant to the Colonial surgeon for the Port Phillip District. Land prices spiralled out of control after the discovery gold, such that English barrister Charles Skinner paid £10,972 for Sullivan's land when it was sold in 1853.

On Lot 25 Skinner planed a village to be named "Ledbury" after the quaint market town on the slopes of the Malvern Hills in England, where is forebears had lived. Skinner's Malvern Hill Estate was mainly divided into small allotments, bisected by Malvern Hill Road (renamed Hopetoun Road in 1901 in honour of Australia's first Governor General). Without public transport or local industry to sustain it, Skinner's vision of an English style village, complete with church and school, did not succeed and much of the land reverted to pasture.

As the scattered cottages of Skinner's village gradually disappeared, many small allotments were consolidated and the vacant land began to attract wealthier purchasers. Malvern Hill Road became the site of several grand residences built for prosperous merchants and professionals.

In 1883, George Meares purchased fifteen acres of land bound by Malvern Hill Road, Glenferrie Road, and Toorak Road. Meares erected a twenty room mansion on the property, named 'Grosvenor', and lived there until his death in 1903. Around 1902 a house was built at the southern end of the Grosvenor estate, near the corner Glenferrie Road and Bruce Street (later Benson Avenue). The house, named 'Myvore', was designed by architect Henry Kemp for George Meares' son Robert.²

² Stonnington Local History Catalogue. Reg. No. MH 14384.

The Myvore property appears to have been subdivided by the 1920s creating additional house sites on the east side of Hopetoun Road.³

A permit was issued for construction of two-storey thirteen room brick house on the east side of Hopetoun Road on 15 August 1934.⁴ The permit lists R K Smibert as the owner and A E Wright as the builder. The permit also shows a line marked across the space provided for the name of the architect (presumably to indicate that Wright was also the architect). Arnaud E Wright was a Toorak based builder and architect who is known to have designed a number of prestigious houses in the area.

The 1935 Sands and McDougall directory records a 'house being built' at 48 Hopetoun Road. The directory for the following year lists Charles Smibert at this address. Smibert was a manager at Trustees Executors in 1927, and later a director of Robert Harper & Co. and the Emu Bay Railway Company.⁵ By 1937, Smibert house is listed in directories at 50 Hopetoun Road.

Charles Smibert died at his Hopetoun Road residence in April 1946 aged 75.⁶ The house was offered for sale in September 1951, and was named 'Kambroona' in contemporary real estate advertisements.⁷ The house remained with the Smibert family until c1953 when it was acquired by Israel Berkowitz, the son of the fine furniture manufacturer Samuel Berkowitz.⁸

A building application was made for a single-storey addition to Berkowitz's house to designs by architect Harold Bloom.⁹ The original Malvern Building plans are undated but the works presumably occurred before 1969, this being the year when Berkowitz left 50 Hopetoun Road.¹⁰

Description

The house at 50 Hopetoun Road is a substantial double-storey Georgian Revival style residence sited prominently on a rising allotment. It has a broadly symmetrical façade with a central pedimented break front and semi-circular entry porch supported on Ionic order columns. The porch is surmounted by a balcony with a wrought iron handrail and an elegant arched Serlian motif French door. The house otherwise adopts a restrained architectural character with little superfluous decorative ornament. The main high pitched roof has a gable over the entry porch, and is punctuated by a series of tall, simply detailed chimneys. Windows are characteristic of the Georgian revival mode, having multi-pane sash frames with louvered timber shutters.

The house appears to be largely intact in terms of its presentation to Hopetoun Road with the only apparent change being re-tiling of the roof. A freestanding modern carport is located on the north side of the house. The modest single-storey post war rear addition is concealed in views from the street.

Comparative Analysis

The interwar Georgian revival style is closely related to the Colonial revival and Mediterranean style. It was particularly fashionable during the interwar period in the wealthy middle ring suburbs of Toorak, South Yarra and Armadale when it became synonymous with upper middle class concepts of good taste.

³ Sands and McDougall directories 1910-1920.

⁴ Stonnington History Centre. City of Malvern Permit No.12022.

⁵ *Argus*, 24 April. 1946, p.5.

⁶ *Argus*, 24 April. 1946, p.5.

⁷ *Argus*, 11 September 1951, p.13.

⁸ Sands and McDougall directories 1952-53.

⁹ Stonnington History Centre. Malvern Building Plan No.

¹⁰ Sands and McDougall directories 1969-1970.

The interest in the Colonial Georgian resulted in part 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 buildings of the early nineteenth century. The inspiration for the re-investigation of colonial and Georgian modes was drawn from a number of factors, first was objective of marrying colonial and Mediterranean idioms into Australian vernacular, the second was the well known precedent established by British architects such as Edwin Lutyens of abandoning medieval inspiration of the Arts and Crafts style for a return to classicism and the international revival of interest in the classical modes. Australian architects also looked to the United States where a vigorous Colonial Georgian revival had been underway since the late-nineteenth century.

By the First World War, the revived Georgian style was well established in Britain, often being used for houses, blocks of flats and commercial buildings of modest size. In Australia, William Hardy Wilson is credited with a major role in popularising the Georgian revival idiom through his rediscovering and recording of early nineteenth century architecture in New South Wales and Tasmania, and through his admiration for American Colonial architecture encountered on his overseas travels.

Georgian revival buildings began to appear in Melbourne from about the end of the First World War. Architects drew eclectically from British, French and even Spanish architecture for motifs which to aggrandise the basic Georgian box. Almost invariably the idiom was represented by a two storey rectilinear form of brick or stucco with a simple hip or single ridge gable roofs, symmetry or near symmetry in the arrangement of doors windows and balconies, and restrained classical or Adamesque detailing, quoins at corners and around entries, a porte cochere, often with balconies above. Gabled porticos and simple wrought iron were also common. Occasionally elements of the Mediterranean or modern styles might be introduced in an attempt at variety of expression but the end result was always suitably restrained.

Individually significant interwar Georgian revival style houses in Stonnington include: 7 Glenbervie Road (1924) [HO311] and 8 Glyndebourne Avenue, Toorak (c1926) [HO265], both by Marcus Martin. There is also a very large Georgian revival style house with American Colonial overtones at 17 St Georges Road, Toorak (1936) [HO98]. The house at 50 Hopetoun Road compares favourably with these individually listed places as an impressively scaled, sophisticated and highly intact Georgian revival style building. The sparse but elegant quality of the design, and the manner in which ornament is concentrated about the entry portico, is characteristic of the best examples of the Georgian revival mode.

Thematic Context

The house at 50 Hopetoun 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

Relevant HERCON criteria and themes from the *Stonnington Thematic Environmental History* (TEH) are shown in brackets.

What is Significant?

The substantial double-storey interwar Georgian revival style house at 50 Hopetoun Road, Toorak was built in 1935. The design can be attributed to local architect and builder Arnaud E Wright. The property was created through subdivision of land at the rear of a large villa named Myvore, which was built c1902 on land originally forming part of the Grosvenor 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 high level of external intactness.
- The legibility of the original built form from the public realm.
- The domestic garden setting (but not the fabric of the garden itself)

Modern fabric, including the carport, is not significant.

How is it significant?

The house at 50 Hopetoun Road, Toorak is of local architectural significance to the City of Stonnington.

Why is it significant?

The house is architecturally significant as an impressive and highly intact interwar Georgian revival style residence (Criterion D).

The house is of some historical interest as evidence of a major phase of development that took place in first few decades of the twentieth century when many of Toorak's large 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 large architect designed houses in the fashionable Georgian revival style 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 known as 50 Hopetoun Road, Toorak. External paint controls, internal alteration controls and tree controls are not recommended. It is further recommended that an A2 graded be assigned to the house.

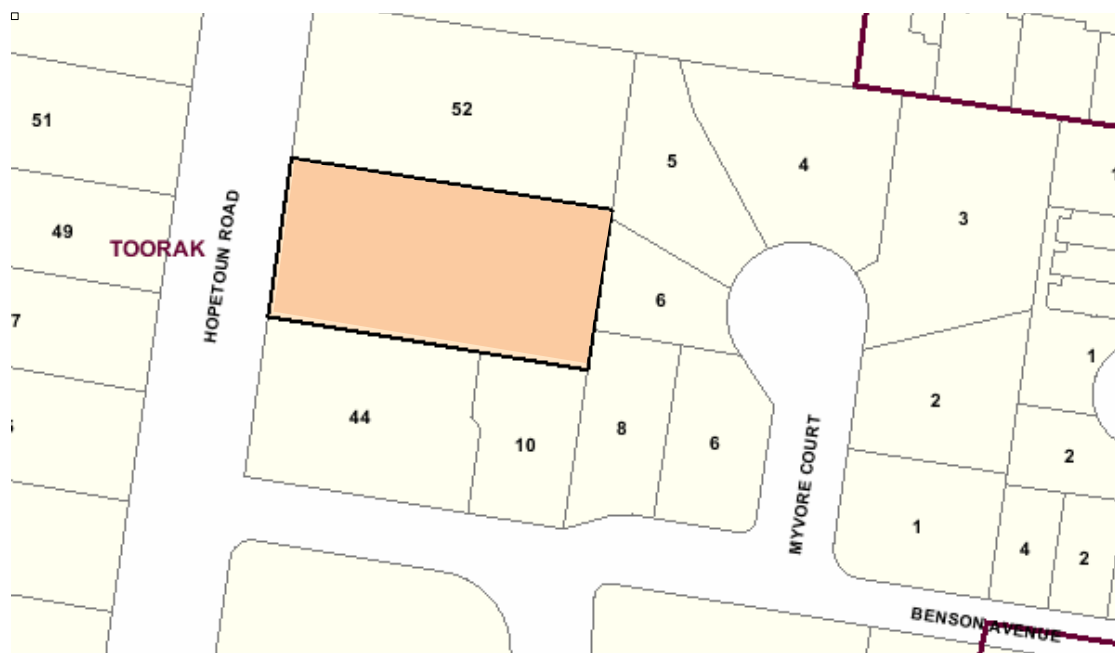


Figure 2 Recommended extent of the heritage overlay at 50 Hopetoun Road, Toorak.