

61 St Georges Road, Toorak Heritage Citation Report



Figure 1 61 St Georges Road, Toorak (Source: www.acpaulconstructions.com.au/project3.html)

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

¹ 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. 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 newly prosperous merchants, businessmen and land speculators built mansions and grand residences 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.

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'.² The sale attracted wealthy pastoralists, merchants and professionals who chose this prestigious area to build their mansions. One of the largest of these mansions was built on the west side of Lansell Road in 1882 for Sir Mathew Davies, solicitor, politician and notorious land speculator.

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

Originally named Bracknell, Davies' mansion was a towered Italianate style edifice, standing at the end of present day Kingsley Court. In 1887-1888 the mansion was enlarged and its original cast iron verandahs replaced by grand arcades of masonry construction. A second tower was also constructed. The mansion's sixteen-acre grounds were laid out with vine trellises, a fernery, fish ponds, an aviary, two summer houses, a tennis court with an octagonal pavilion and paths meandering among statues.³

Following Davies' bankruptcy in the 1890s depression, Bracknell and all its furnishings were offered for sale.⁴ The mansion remained empty several years apart from a resident caretaker. It was acquired by wealthy widow Mrs Silas Harding in 1895, by which time the mansion had been renamed 'The Towers'.⁵ Most of the estate, including land to the north of the mansion was subdivided in 1912 to create '14 choice building sites' on Tower Road and the south side of St Georges Road.⁶ The Towers was eventually demolished in 1927 and its remaining grounds subdivided creating 11 residential allotments on Kingsley Court.

Despite its attractive Toorak location, land in the 1912 Towers Estate appears to have been slow to develop. As late as 1930, only two of the seven lots on St Georges Road had houses.⁷ A large double storey house was eventually erected c1933 on lot 3 of the estate (ie present day 61 St Georges Road) to designs by noted architect Robert Bell Hamilton.⁸ It was built for Ivan Gutmann, managing director Bunge Australia Proprietary Ltd, at that time one of Australia's largest wheat exporting firms. Gutmann's wife Elsie is named as the property owner on the first MMBW property service plan.⁹ The Gutmanns named their house 'Dydydans'.¹⁰ Ivan Gutmann died unexpectedly at his St Georges Road home at the age of 57 on 19 September 1935.¹¹ Gutmann was recognised as one of the country's foremost experts in the wheat trade and his death was widely reported in local and interstate newspapers.¹²

Robert Bell Hamilton

The architect of 61 St Georges Road was Robert Bell Hamilton. Born in 1892 and educated at Scotch College, Hamilton served in the 14th Battalion of the AIF during WWI. After the armistice he studied in London to become an associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects. After his graduation, Hamilton remained in London where he designed a housing scheme for the Slough City Council before securing a position as the assistant to the government architect in Bombay, India in 1920. In Melbourne in the same year, Rodney Alsop's continued ill health brought an end to his successful architectural partnership with F L Klingender. Two years later, Klingender formed a new partnership with the recently-returned Hamilton, who became the designing partner.

Initially, Hamilton positioned himself within the Arts and Crafts vernacular vocabulary that had characterised Alsop's work throughout the previous decade, but in the subsequent years, Hamilton gradually eradicated the American influence from his work and by the late 1920s had become the foremost exponent of Tudor Revival styling in Melbourne. Hamilton's design approach drew upon Arts and Crafts principles, in particular the idea that architectural expression should extend beyond the built fabric and into individual components such as leadlight, fittings and furniture. The partnership with F L Klingender lasted until 1925 when Hamilton established his own practice.

³ Stonnington Local History Catalogue. Reg. No. PH6028.

⁴ *Argus*, 6 August 1891, p.2. & 16 June 1892, p.2

⁵ *Australasian*, 8 June 1895, p.26

⁶ Stonnington Local History Catalogue. Reg. No. PH11283.

⁷ Sands and McDougall directories.

⁸ MMBW Application No. 191981. South East Water.

⁹ MMBW Application No. 191981. South East Water.

¹⁰ *The Australasian*, 28 September 1935, p. 11.

¹¹ *The Australasian*, 28 September 1935, p. 11.

¹² www.trove.nla.gov.au

Hamilton was active in Melbourne until WWII and worked alone and in partnership with other architects such as Marcus Norris to produce a large number of residences in a variety of styles throughout the inner eastern suburbs of Melbourne. These include a substantial villa in the restrained Georgian mode at 7 Landale Road, Toorak, completed in the early 1930s, and houses built at 8 and 12 Macquarie Road in 1929 and 1930 respectively.

Although Hamilton designed a number of large and impeccably detailed houses in the Tudor Revival mode, he is best remembered for his Tudor Revival flats, including Burnham at 14 Grange Road, Toorak (1933), Moore Abbey, 50 Marne Street, South Yarra (1934), Denby Dale, 422-426 Glenferrie Road, Kooyong (1938), and for a number of shops throughout Prahran and Malvern in the same mode. Hamilton's group of Tudor style shops in Toorak Village (at 476-478 and 541 Toorak Road) are particularly well known, and are commonly understood to set the character of this small shopping strip.

Robert Hamilton was elected Member of the Legislative Assembly for Toorak in November 1945. He was both a parliamentarian and a Councillor for Mornington Shire when he died on 15 May 1948.

Description

The building at 61 St Georges Road is a substantial and handsomely designed double-storey house sited to the rear of a large, attractive garden. The house has a hipped terracotta shingle tiled roof and rendered masonry walls with chimneys and an arcaded loggia in clinker brick providing an interesting variation in texture and colour. Stylistically, the house has a Georgian revival character infused with picturesque aspects of the English Domestic Revival and Mediterranean idioms. The porte cochere on the west elevation and elegant bowed windows are characteristic of the Georgian revival style, as are shuttered multi-pane sash windows. Georgian formality is tempered by the house's irregular massing and clinker brick accents typical of the English Domestic Revival idiom. A Palladian motif archway on the front balcony is broadly suggestive of the Mediterranean style. The property also has an elaborate wrought iron driveway gate with carefully detailed piers and curved wing walls constructed from a thin clinker brick. The piers are surmounted by carriage lamps. The driveway entrance and front fence appear to be contemporary with the house.

The house was recently renovated and extended and provided with a basement level garage.¹³ Extensive landscaping works, including a new pool, are also understood to have been carried out. The changes to the house and grounds do not appear to have diminished the integrity of the original design.

Comparative Analysis

The interwar Georgian revival style is closely related to the Colonial revival and Mediterranean styles. 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.

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. Various other factors prompted a re-investigation of Colonial and Georgian modes. A precedent had been set by British architects such as Edwin Lutyens of abandoning medieval inspiration of the Arts and Crafts style for a return to classicism. Australian architects also looked to the United States where a vigorous Colonial Georgian revival had been underway since the late-nineteenth century.

¹³ www.acpaulconstructions.com.au/project3.html

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 and symmetry or near symmetry in the arrangement of doors, windows and balconies. Houses in this idiom typically featured restrained classical or Adamesque detailing, quoins at corners and around entries, and a porte cochere, often with balconies above. Other common characteristics include gabled porticos and simple wrought ironwork. 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.

The house at 61 St Georges Road is distinguished from other more typical examples of the Georgian revival idiom in Stonnington by its sophisticated and distinctive architectural character, which fuses Georgian formality with the romanticism of the English Domestic Revival and Mediterranean idioms. The scale and quality of the house epitomises the tastes and preoccupations of the wealthy Toorak establishment in the interwar years. The house is also noteworthy as an example of the work of prominent architect Robert Bell Hamilton. Hamilton's name is synonymous with the half-timbered Old English mode but he was adept at a range of architectural styles fashionable in the 1930s – as evidenced by his Georgian revival style house at 7 Landale Road. That house is a purer version of the Georgian revival than 61 Georges Road but otherwise compares favourably in terms its scale, intactness and architectural quality. The Landale Road house is protected as an A2 graded building in the Williams Road precinct HO155 but could readily have attracted an individual heritage control if it were found outside of a heritage streetscape. Given Hamilton's status as one Melbourne's most highly regarded interwar architects, it seems surprising that only one of his surviving houses in Stonnington is protected by an individual heritage control – this being the impressive but altered English Domestic Revival style residence at 4 Struan Street (HO168). While perhaps not a key architect in Melbourne in terms of leading the profession in any new directions, Hamilton was of considerable influence as a leading protagonist working in the revival styles important to the interwar era, producing a large number of impressive commercial and residential buildings, amongst which must be included the house at 61 St Georges Road.

Thematic Context

The house at 61 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 house at 61 St Georges Road, Toorak was built c1933 to designs by noted architect Robert Bell Hamilton. The property was created from a subdivision of the nineteenth century mansion estate 'The Towers'.

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 intactness.
- The unpainted state of the face brick and terracotta elements.
- The domestic garden setting (but not the fabric of the garden itself).
- The front fence and gate.

How is it significant?

The house at 61 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 handsome and largely intact interwar residence blending Georgian revival formality with picturesque elements of the English Domestic Revival and Mediterranean idioms (Criterion E). It demonstrates architect Robert Bell Hamilton's talent for residential design across a range of fashionable interwar styles.

The house is of some historical interest as evidence of a major phase of development that took place in the 1920s and 1930s when subdivisions of Toorak's grand mansion estates were developed as prestigious residential enclaves (TEH 8.1.3 The end of an era – mansion estate subdivisions in the twentieth century, Criterion A). The place also illustrates the role of grand architect designed houses as symbols of wealth, status and taste for Melbourne's middle and 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. It is further recommended that the building remain A2 graded.

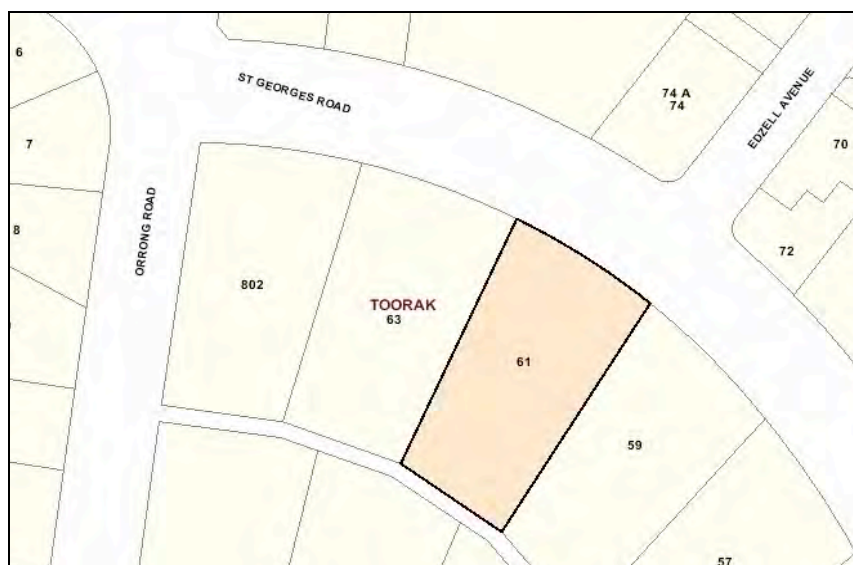


Figure 2 Recommended extent of heritage overlay at 61 St Georges Road, Toorak .