

City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

Place name: House
Other names: -

Citation No:
2422

INSERT MAP



Address: 50 Westbury Street, St Kilda East

Heritage Precinct: Not applicable

Category: Residential: House

Heritage Overlay: TBC

Style: Early Interwar: Arts & Crafts

Graded as: Significant

Constructed: 1918-19

Victorian Heritage Register: No

Designer: Unknown

Amendment: TBC

Comment: New citation

Significance

What is significant?

The house at 50 Westbury Street, St Kilda East, constructed by and for George J T Towers in 1918-19, is significant.

Contributory features include the transverse gable roof, projecting gabled porch, bargeboard boards and brackets, rear skillion roof, clinker-brick chimneys, and roughcast rendered walls. As well as timber-framed windows, including double-hung sashes and multipaned windows, bow bays, piers to the porch, recessed entry and doors, and timber shingling/skirting.

Alterations and additions are not significant. The current paint colour scheme is not significant.

How is it significant?

The house at 50 Westbury Street, St Kilda is of local historical and aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip.

Why is it significant?

The house is historically significant as representative of the intensive phase of development that occurred in St Kilda/St Kilda East in the early part of the 20th century in the context of local population expansion. The well-resolved, high-quality nature of the house built by locally-based professional contractor George Towers, reflects a marked shift in the locale's character, as the exclusive landscape of mid-to-late 19th-

century mansions and villas transformed into a more densely populated 'respectable' middle-class suburb. (Criterion A)

The house is of aesthetic significance as a fine, intact and substantial example of an early Interwar period Arts & Crafts attic-storey house. This idiom, indicative of both popular and professional tastes across early 20th-century Melbourne, is indicated by the steep, protective quality of the dwelling's gabled roof and porch as well as the textured, handworked character of its roughcast walls and decorative timber elements. Distinguishing this house from others of its ilk in the municipality is the symmetry of the design – an aspect particularly discernible in its employment of piers – and crafted response to the corner siting, in which the treatment of the side (north/Westbury Grove) elevation ensures a prominence commensurate with the façade. (Criterion E)

Thematic context

Victoria's framework of historical themes

6. Building towns, cities and the garden state: 6.3 Shaping the suburbs, 6.7 Making homes for Victorians

Port Phillip thematic environmental history

5. Buildings and cultural landscapes: 5.2 Shaping the suburbs (5.2.2 Private development), 5.3 Diverse Housing (5.3.3 Suburban bungalows)

History

Contextual history

The development of St Kilda began following the first land sales in 1842 and by 1854 there were over two hundred houses. The plans compiled in 1855 by James Kearney shows that most of these were situated to the west of Brighton Road (later High Street and now St Kilda Road). The St Kilda East area, by comparison, was largely undeveloped and most buildings were located within the block bounded by Brighton Road, Wellington Street, Chapel Street, and Alma Road. Improvements to public transport including the opening of the railway station at Carlisle Street, and the establishment in the late 1880s of cable tram routes along High Street (St Kilda Road) and Chapel Street encouraged development during the land boom, however, this remained sporadic and ground to halt during the economic depression of the 1890s.

There was almost no increase in St Kilda's population in the decade from 1891 to 1901. However, as development recovered in the early twentieth century the number of residents in St Kilda almost doubled between 1901 and 1921 rising from 20,500 to 38,500 as land was highly sought-after by a new generation of homebuilders seeking smaller detached dwellings, duplexes or flats. Whole new streets of neat brick cottages and villas appeared, however, in St Kilda East this largely remained a period of consolidation and infill on vacant land within the established residential areas, rather than expansion into the still largely undeveloped areas east of Hotham Street, although development did begin to creep along the length of Dandenong Road, following the route of the new electric tram introduced in 1911.

House, 50 Westbury Street

The subject land – part of a belt described as 'open heath' in its initial survey – derives from Crown portion 150A of the Parish of Prahran at East St Kilda. The approximately five-acre allotment was purchased in November 1853 by Thomas Fulton, Lauchlan Mackinnon and Frederick James Sargood, trustees of the newly established Victoria Freehold Land Society and purchasers of a number of Crown portions in the St Kilda area (including 151A adjacent to the south). Fulton was a foundry owner, the first deacon of the Congregational Church in Victoria, a leading advocate of the temperance movement, and later a Melbourne city councillor (1854-59). Sargood was a Melbourne soft goods merchant (Sargood, King & Company) and a

member of the Legislative Council for Melbourne (1853-56). MacKinnon was a prominent pastoralist, partner in the Argus newspaper, and former member of the Legislative Council for Warrnambool and Belfast (1852-1853).

This holding was subdivided in a piecemeal fashion over the ensuing decades. The Vardy plan shows that by the early 1870s, the stretch of Westbury Street between Alma Road (north) and Inkerman Street (south) – then the outer suburban fringe of St Kilda – was relatively developed, characterised by an array of freestanding residences, some substantial, in garden settings (VP). The subject land, at this stage, formed part of the formally laid out grounds of a villa (since demolished) on the east side of Westbury (north of the yet laid Westbury Grove). This situation is shown as relatively unchanged in the 1897 MMBW map (Figure 1).

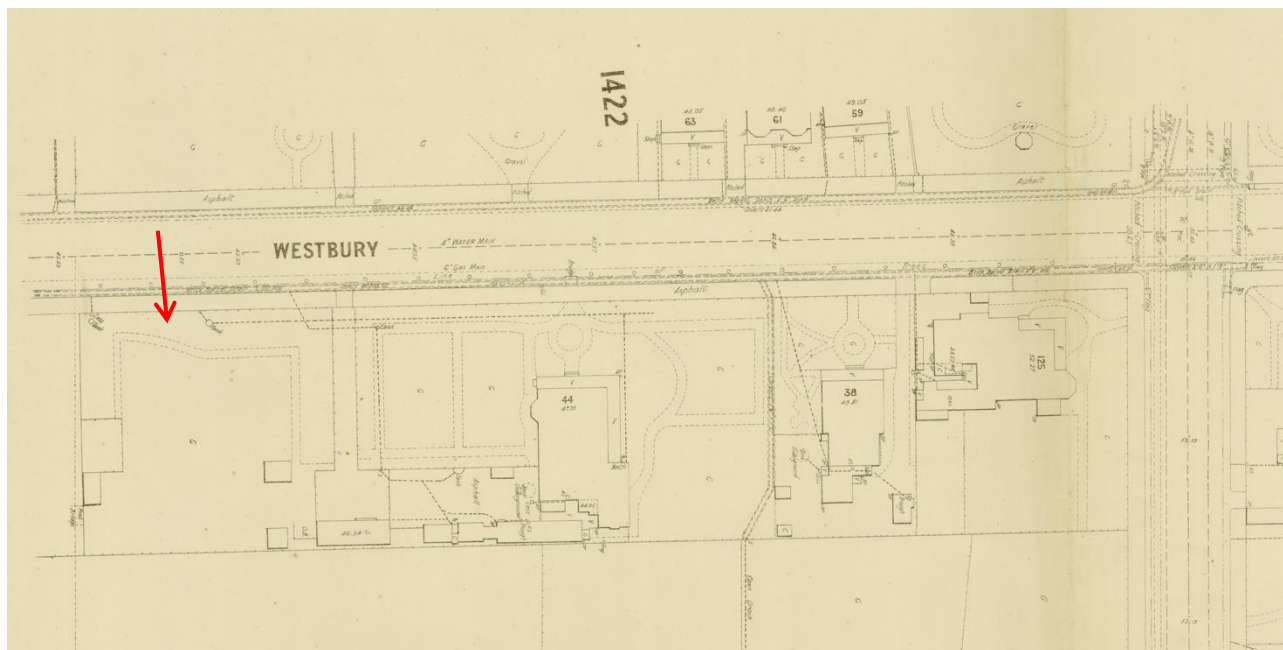


Figure 1 - Extract from MMBW Detail Plan No. 1408 (1897) showing development on the east side of Westbury Street. The arrow indicates the approximate location of 50 Westbury Street.

About 1.6 hectares of land on the east side of Westbury Street was purchased in October 1918 by a small group headed by the widow Susan L Smith (CT Vol. 4159 Fol. 756). Their subdivision, mostly of former gardens, included the establishment of the western half of Westbury Grove and southern half Ravens Grove.

The lots offered sold rapidly, including the subject site in February 1919, procured by 39-year-old builder George James Archibald Towers (CT Vol. 4195 Fol. 853). Evidently, Towers had prior knowledge of the sales having previously tendered a building permit to the City of St Kilda in May 1918 for the corner allotment. The submitted drawing (Figure 2) depicts a then traditional footprint (central hall, rear situated kitchen, free of servant quarters) and section drawing for a sizable bungalow, its cost estimated at £1,000 (BP).

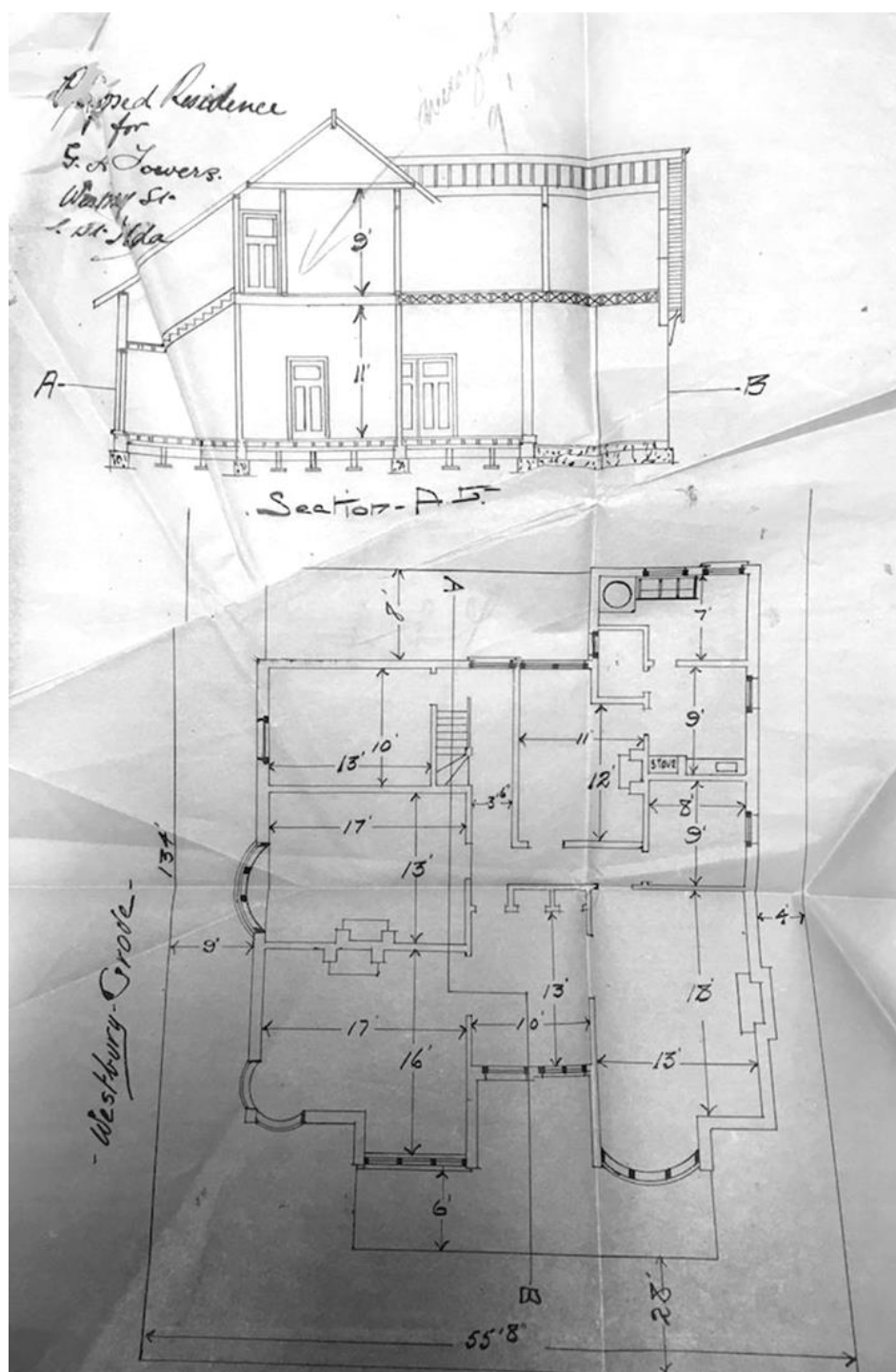


Figure 2 – Plan for proposed residence (Source: St Kilda Council Building Permit, No. 3596 dated 4 May 1918).

Born in St Kilda to English and Scottish parents, Towers (1880-1931) relocated to Christchurch, New Zealand in his early twenties, where he completed an apprenticeship as a joiner and married into a family of local builders. Around 1914, Towers returned to Melbourne, commencing a career as a professional builder. He was also noted as a founding director in several 1920s building supply firms, including Westernport Firebrick, Percydale Slate Quarries, and Builders Roofing & Trading (*Herald* 'New Companies' 22 Dec 1921 p3; *Daily Commercial News* 'Companies Registered' 3 May 1922 p5).

Tower's activities as a contractor are relatively unknown. The *Australian Architectural Index* records a spate of his housing projects around 1920 in the City of St Kilda, and family lore has it that Tower's is the

namesake for Towers Street in Beaumaris, a reflection of his construction activity in the immediate area (C).

Towers appears to have belonged to the middle ranks of Melbourne's early 20th-century speculative builders. Of enough status to be called upon to give evidence at a 1918 inquiry into the cost of building (Age 'The cost of timber' 13 June 1918 p5), but primarily concerned with the traditional mode of small-scale speculative development – the purchase of land, construction of a cost-effective or fashionable abode (dependent on the intended audience) and post-erection sale.

The Sands & McDougall's Directory first lists 'Geo. A. Towers' as the occupant of the subject place in its 1920 edition (SM). Listings typically lagged a year or so behind construction activity, suggesting a building date of 1918-19. Towers remained at the residence until around 1922, when the property was sold (CT Vol. 4195 Fol. 853).

Aerial photographs from 1931 and 1945 (Figures 3 and 4), depict the footprint and roof profile of the house. The latter shows a front garden of lawn with a curved path and rear yard characterised by a small shed and some plantings, elements that have not survived.



Figure 3 – Aerial photograph dated 1931, with the subject place indicated by the red arrow. (Source: Landata, Maldon Prison, Run 15, Frame 2750)



Figure 4 – Aerial photograph dated 1945, with the subject place indicated by the red arrow. (Source: Landata, Melbourne and Metropolitan Area Project, Run 17E, Frame 58014)

References

Australian Dictionary of Biography: entries for Lauchlan Mackinnon (by Jaqueline Templeton, 1974), Thomas Fulton (by Roslyn Brereton, 1972) and Frederick Thomas Sargood (John Rickard, 1976). Available online.

Butler, Graeme, *The Californian Bungalow in Australia*, Lothian Book, 1992

Certificates of title (CT)

Clare, John, *The post-Federation house in Melbourne: Bungalow and Vernacular Revival styles 1900-1930*, Research Report, The Faculty of Architecture and Planning, University of Melbourne, October 1984

Correspondence (C), Ironside and Towers family, email, 23 November 2020

Edquist, Harriet, 'Arts and Craft', in Philip Goad and Julie Willis, eds, *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp 44-46

Newspapers, various

Parish Plan - at Elwood, Parish of Prahran, P81-13 (PP)

Port Phillip Thematic Environmental History (TEH), February 2021

Rules and regulations of the Victoria Freehold Land Society, 1854

St Kilda Council Building Permit (BP) No. 3596, dated 4 May 1918

Vardy Plan 1873 (VP), *Alma-Chapel-Inkerman-Raglan-Railway-Westbury*, NW6, St Kilda Historical Society (online)

Description

The large-scale freestanding attic-storey house occupies a medium-sized corner allotment. It is set back a moderate distance from Westbury Street and close to the side property boundaries. The primary roof is a high-pitched transverse gable with a projecting gabled porch (west elevation). Both are clad in unglazed

terracotta tiles. Terracotta ridge cresting is apparent to both. Three tapered clinker-brick chimneys with rendered caps are also evident to the roof. The pair of skylights (east roof plane) are contemporary.

To the rear is an original skillion roof, clad in later addition metal and translucent sheeting, that covers a small rear wing (south), porch and corner wall (north). The latter is not detailed on the 1918 footprint (Figure 2) but based on its shared finishes may have formed part of the original construction or been an early addition.

The residence is constructed of roughcast rendered brick, overpainted. The gable ends feature timber bargeboards and shingles, both painted though the latter may have originally been stained. The extent of the shingling is greater to the side elevations, which also display decorative timber brackets.

Defining the façade (west elevation) is the gabled street-projecting porch with recessed entry. Its large plane is divided into three bays by four engaged piers, creating a distinctive composition. The inside piers end at the upper section of the wall, terminated by a smooth rendered coping. The outer piers join with the soffit. The central bay is characterised by a fan-shaped opening, half of which rises above the framing piers. Initially, the room behind was likely a recessed balcony and open. It is now enclosed with a timber-framed window. Between this opening and the timber fascia of the porch is an extent of timber skirting with an inset geometric pattern to the top course. The porch deck is raised and possibly of red brick. Initially open, the porch has been enclosed by a metal security grille.

To the porch wall (south end) is a quadripartite bow bay. In line with other bay windows at the building, it has timber-framed, double-hung sash windows with restrained geometric leadlighting to both planes.

The front door and ensemble are elaborate, their collective shape mirroring the fan-shaped opening above. The door is timber with three glazed panels of frosted glass and floral/geometric leadlighting. This composition is repeated to the side windows.

The north elevation, facing Westbury Grove, is highly visible from the public realm. At the ground floor, it incorporates a quadripartite bow window, surmounted by a shingled skirt. Above of which is an opening – originally likely another recessed balcony – that has been enclosed by timber-framed windows. At the ground floor, to the north-west of the house, is another large ‘bow’ window, formed by the combination of two curved bays (each addressing different elevations) and separated by the corner of the wall (essentially a thick mullion). Surmounting this element is a rustic ‘canopy’ of exposed rafter ends and crossing beam. To the rear of the northern elevation is multipaned a square window.

The south elevation is partly obscured from the public domain due to the neighbouring flat. The attic-storey paired window appears original, although the two small frosted windows (either side of the chimney breast) at the lower level appear to be later additions. Another two ground floor windows are detailed on the early plans and appear present; however, an assessment of their intactness is not makeable from a street inspection.

To the rear elevation is a dado (projecting brick course). Openings here appear original, although some of the windows may have been replaced. Tiles to the deck are contemporary.

Fencing is non-original and consists of high timber pickets to the front portion and solid timber palings to the side and rear. Landscaping is well-established but appears the result of late 20th-century efforts. Parking is provided to the rear of the site by a recessed fenced-in section.

Comparative analysis

The house expresses an Arts & Crafts aesthetic, a popular idiom in Melbourne since the turn of the century, particularly so at the time of construction (1918-19), the early interwar period. This design mode, rooted in the English Arts & Crafts movement, resonated with domestic architects as it provided an alternative to the classical tradition or Gothic Revival, allowing instead for the exploration of inventive composition techniques and the Ruskinian-influenced valorisation of craft, labour and local precedent. In the preceding Federation period, the symbolic potential of Arts & Crafts architecture had become closely

associated with the vision of a virtuous suburban lifestyle and panacea to perceptions of unprecedented rates of change and as articulating a new British-Australian identity.

Arts & Crafts domestic designs typically adopted uncluttered exteriors and internal spaces and dominant roofs (attic-storeys were common) as well as including detailed artistry and 'natural' materials; roughcast and timber in this case. Such designs were meant to be viewed in the round within garden settings. In their emphasis on structural and material clarity, the Arts & Craft movement is considered by some as laying the groundwork for the gradual emergence of modernism later in the interwar period (Edquist, 2012 p46).

Generally, most Arts & Craft-houses revolved around asymmetrical compositions. Largely symmetrical arrangements, like the subject place, are rarer and cultivate a more formal presentation, albeit still overall informal and homely.

The municipality's early Interwar period residences which have heritage overlays are primarily bungalows, either transitional (Queen Anne/Californian bungalow) or American-influenced (Californian/Craftsman). A smaller number – like the subject place – are classifiable as large-scale attic-storey houses, some of which convey a varied but pronounced Arts & Crafts expression. Of these, the subject place presents as singular for its gesture to symmetry, recessed porch and entry, and the employment of piers in the façade.

Broadly comparable sites include:

- 29 Westbury Street, St Kilda East, built 1913 (Citation no. 956, HO6 precinct). A sizable late Federation period Arts & Craft-style house designed by a professional architect, Leonard J. Flannagan. Rendered in roughcast like the subject place, however, features a more complex roof clad in slate. Also displays an enclosed attic-storey balcony.
- 329 Barkly Street, Elwood, built 1916 (Citation 194, HO403 Precinct.). A large-scale corner-situated house. Walls of roughcast render with a multi-gable roof clad in terracotta tiles. Prominent projections characterised by tapered piers and side porch with balcony above. Similar ilk as 50 Westbury Street but drawing more from the then emergent Californian-bungalow style (tapered piers).
- 18 Normandy Road, Elwood, built 1919 (Citation 747, HO8 Precinct). Hefty early interwar period roughcast rendered bungalow with broad frontage, incorporating an arched porch and street-facing gabled wing and prominent hipped balcony (now enclosed). Designed by a speculative builder, Matthew Sherlock, albeit less resolved than the subject place.
- 69A Alma Road, St Kilda, built 1920, (Citation 144, HO6 Precinct). Early interwar period red-brick and roughcast rendered bungalow with high-pitched street-facing gabled roof defined by an oriel window. Designed by noteworthy architectural practice, Sydney Smith & Ogg.

Assessment

This place has been assessed in accordance with the processes and guidelines outlined in the Australia ICOMOS *Charter for Places of Cultural Heritage Significance* (The Burra Charter) 2013, using the Hercon criteria.

Recommendations

Add to the Heritage Overlay as an individual place.

Apply external paint controls in the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay (to ensure complementary colour schemes are employed and/or encourage restoration of the rendered finish and timber shingles).

Primary source

RBA Architects & Conservation Consultants, *H07 Elwood St Kilda Balaclava Ripponlea Precinct Heritage Review Stage 2, 2021*

Other studies

Andrew Ward & Associates, *Port Phillip Heritage Review, 1998*

Other images



Area to be included in HO

