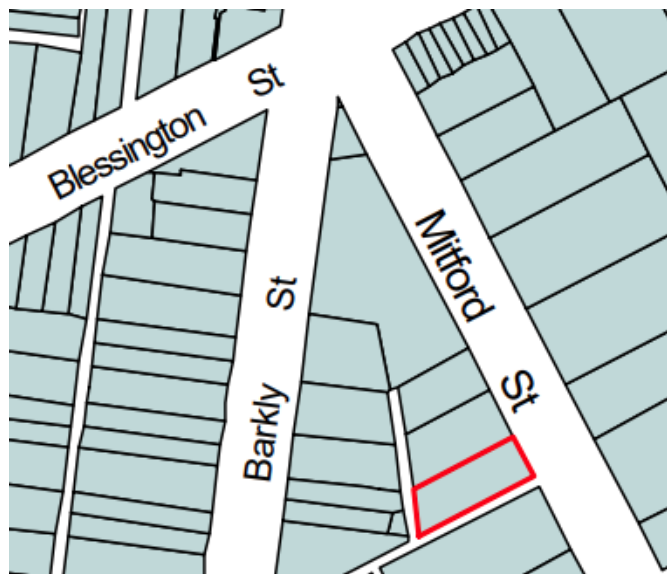


# City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

**Place name:** Birnam  
**Other names:** Flats

**Citation No:**  
41



**Address:** 15 Mitford Street,  
St Kilda

**Heritage Precinct:** St Kilda Botanical  
Gardens & Environs

**Category:** Residential: Flats

**Heritage Overlay:** HO7

**Style:** Federation/Edwardian:  
Arts & Crafts

**Graded as:** Significant

**Constructed:** 1918

**Victorian Heritage Register:** No

**Designer:** W.A. Tombs

**Amendment:** TBA

**Comment:** Revised citation

---

## Significance

### *What is significant?*

Birnam, the Arts & Crafts style flats designed by W.A. Tombs in 1917 and constructed in 1918 at 15 Mitford Street, St Kilda, is significant. The brick front fence also contributes to the significance of the place.

Alterations and additions are not significant.

### *How is it significant?*

Birnam at 15 Mitford Street, St Kilda is of local historic, representative, and aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip.

### *Why is it significant?*

Birnam is historically significant as an early block of flats in St Kilda, preceding by several years the huge growth in flat development in this suburb that occurred in the interwar period. The location of the flats on Mitford Street, which from 1906 was the route of the electric tramway from St Kilda to Brighton, demonstrates how the development of flats was strongly influenced by the development of public transport in Melbourne. (Criterion A)

Birnam is of representative significance as an early block of flats, which demonstrates the development of flat design in Melbourne. Of note is the planning of the access to the first floor flats through semi-enclosed and open stairwells that are carefully integrated into the design, and the provision of external balconies with direct access to all flats. (Criterion D)

Birnam is aesthetically significant as a picturesque example of an Arts & Crafts style apartment block exploiting motifs including the repeated use of arch in openings or inverted to form balustrades, and further re-iterated in the curved shingled balcony. Other distinctive details are the shingled gable end and the projecting bay window on the south side with a shingled 'skirt', the use of rough cast in conjunction with face brickwork, the tapered rendered chimneys, and the nameplate with the apartment name 'Birnam' in raised cement below incised squares to the rendered balustrade. The significance of the flats is enhanced by the high degree of intactness, which includes the original brick front fence. (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 (5.3.5 Higher-density housing)

---

## History

### Contextual history

The early twentieth century saw a marked decline in the viability of large mansions across Melbourne's suburbs in general, but it was particularly felt in the more affluent inner southern suburbs such as St Kilda and Brighton, where land was highly sought-after by a new generation of homebuilders seeking smaller detached dwellings, duplexes or flats. The trend toward higher-density living in St Kilda began with the conversion of mansions and terrace houses into boarding houses in the early 1900s, and continued with the first purpose-built flats that appeared at the beginning of World War I. A 1919 newspaper article noted:

*It was held to be no longer necessary to labour with a house and all the domestic drudgery that entailed when by borrowing Continental ideas, people who could afford it could live in flats... Land has become so valuable the villa of the Victorian days, in a crowded thoroughfare, no longer shows anything like an adequate return of interest on the land's present capital value. It is more profitable to pull the house erected thereon down, and to erect flats. When the flat became popular in England the experiment was made in St Kilda, and it did not take long to discover there was a genuine demand for flats (Prahman Telegraph, 18 October 1919, p.4)*

Higher-density housing in the form of boarding houses paved the way to flat development. Flats first appeared in Melbourne around 1906 and slowly spread to the suburbs. They followed a strong pattern of development, appearing close to transport routes, particularly along or within walking distance of tram routes, to allow easy travel to the city. With their proximity to the beach and parklands, good public transport networks and seaside character, the suburbs of St Kilda and Elwood were especially popular locations for flats. Flats became a dominant characteristic of St Kilda and Elwood, and still make up a high percentage of dwellings in those areas. They include some of the earliest surviving flats in Melbourne, some of the best examples of architectural styles and types of flats, and as a group demonstrate the increasing popularity of the lifestyle of flat living from the early twentieth century (TEH).

There was huge growth in flat development in St Kilda and Elwood in the 1920 and 1930s, attracting migrants, single people, and people of diverse sexuality. In 1920 there were 527 purpose-built flats in 92

blocks in St Kilda municipality. By 1925 this had increased to 884 flats in 164 blocks, including large complexes such as the Ardoch flats in Dandenong Road. By 1935, despite a slowing of development due to the Great Depression, there were more than 2,800 flats in over 500 blocks. A further 2,000 flats were added by 1940; however, the onset of World War II slowed development. Nonetheless, by 1947 St Kilda contained 5,500 purpose-built flats, a quarter of all flats in Melbourne (TEH).

## Birnam

The area surrounding the St Kilda Botanical Gardens, particularly the streets with direct views over the gardens, became a popular location for flats and some of the first flats in St Kilda were constructed here toward the end of World War I. These included Clarendon, designed by Joseph Plottel in 1915 at 26-28 Blessington Street, and two blocks by Howard Lawson at 44 (Clairvaux) and 46 Blessington Street, constructed in 1917.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Mitford Street between Barkly and Dickens streets was partially developed and contained several villas (MMBW). However, the economic depression of the 1890s halted development for over a decade and development only recommenced following the opening in 1906 of the electric tramway from St Kilda Station to Elwood and Brighton Beach via Mitford Street and Broadway. Development was slow at first but improvements to the route including progressive duplication from 1913 stimulated development and encouraged the building of new houses and flats, many of which replaced the older houses.

In 1916, Clara and Miriam Polack purchased land on the west side of Mitford Street between Blessington and Dickens Streets, from the executors of J. Manson. The land had a frontage of 41 feet and a Net Annual Value of £14. The following year, A. Murie of Barkly Street, St. Kilda, acquired the land and in 1918 engaged W.A. Tombs to design a two-storey block of four brick flats, which was named Birnam. The builder was Thomas Donald & Co.

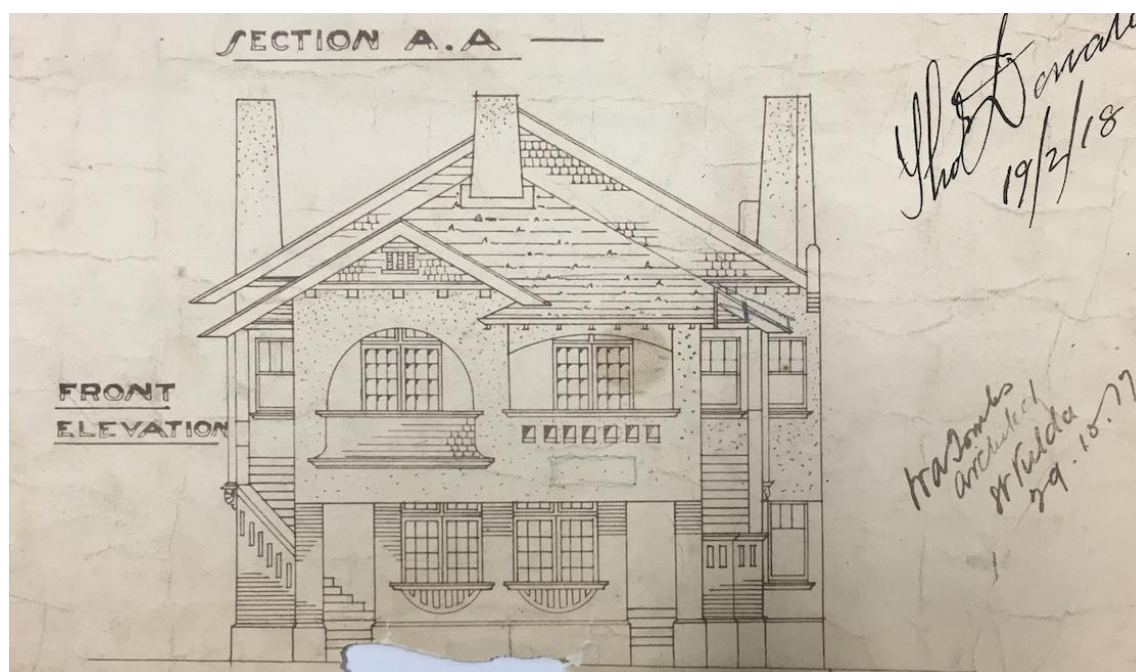


Figure 1: Elevation from the original building plans with architect's signature at right and builder's signature above

Original building plans show each flat had two bedrooms with a separate sitting room (at the front opening through double doors to a balcony) and a living room. The flats on the south side had two bedrooms and those on the north had one, and there was a 'washhouse' at the rear within a basement level. The plans also include a design for the front fence.

The first occupants were Frederick De Valle, (gentleman), Ralph Isaacs, (dentist), Alex Murie, (chemist) and Edward Wilson, (gentleman).

In 1919, Llewellyn Robinson of Ascot Vale purchased the property. Robinson lived on the premises. He continued as owner/occupant in 1935 and the other three flats continued to be let.

Birnam was one of the first block of flats in Mitford Street. The first was the duplex designed by Schreiber & Jorgenson at 71 Mitford Street, while J.J. Meagher designed another duplex just off Mitford at 13 Southey Street in 1918. The building of flats gathered pace during the interwar period and by 1940 more than 30 blocks had been erected in Mitford Street, with a further eight in Southey Street (BP).

Little is known about the architect W.A. Tombs, who was active during the Edwardian and interwar periods and appears to have been based in Geelong, where he was the honorary architect to the Geelong Progress Association. In the early 1910s he was practicing in partnership as Tombs & Durran. This is one of three flat developments in St Kilda designed by Tombs. The others are:

- The Rand flats at 29 Marine Parade (corner of Blessington Street), designed in 1917 (see Citation 2052).
- The conversion of the double storey residence and stables to flats at 14-20 Victoria Street in 1918 (Citation 949).

## References

O'Hanlon, Seamus, 'Home together, Home apart: Boarding house, hostel and flat life in Melbourne c.1900-1940', PhD Thesis, History Department, Monash University

*Port Phillip Thematic Environmental History (TEH)* Version 1, July 2020

St Kilda Council building permits (BP) nos. 3534, 4 March 1918

St. Kilda Rate Books: 1915-21, 1925-26, 1935-36. VPRS 8816/P1, PROV

Sands & McDougall Directories (SM) 1920, 1925, 1930

Sawyer, Terry, (1982) 'Residential flats in Melbourne: the development of a building type to 1950', Honours thesis, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, The University of Melbourne

---

## Description

Birnam is a picturesque two storeyed apartment block in the Arts & Crafts style, comprised of four flats, two on each level. Asymmetrical in plan, the hipped tile roof has a projecting gable with deep bracketed eaves, and there is a flat roof with exposed rafter tails over the adjoining balcony. Access to the upper flats is via open staircases on the north and south sides, which are entered by semi-enclosed openings to either side of the ground floor balconies, and lead to first floor landings above the ground floor porch entries to the ground floor flats, which have arched openings. The timber entry doors have windows, and a sidelight and toplights, and each flat has access to a balcony via paired multi-pane doors with multi-pane toplights. Windows are timber sash with the top sash divided into three panes in singles or pairs, and arched or square heads.

The building uses Arts and Crafts motifs and materials including the arch, inverted to in the detail of ground floor balustrades, and further re-iterated in the curved shingled balcony. Other characteristic details are the shingled gable end, the use of rough cast in conjunction with face brickwork, the tapered rendered chimneys, and the nameplate with the apartment name 'Birnam' in raised cement below incised squares to the rendered balustrade. The projecting bay window with a shingled 'skirt' at the first floor on the south side is another distinctive feature.

The building is in good condition and has a relatively high degree of external intactness. One of the upper level balconies has been glazed in. The brick front fence with twin gate openings appears to be same as the fence shown in the original building plans, although the gates have been replaced.



---

## Comparative analysis

'The Canterbury', built in two stages in 1914 and 1919, at 236 Canterbury Road, St Kilda is generally acknowledged to be the first purpose-built residential flats in Port Phillip, and one of the earliest in Melbourne. While the 'Majestic Mansions' in Fitzroy Street was completed two years earlier, not all of the residences in that building were fully self-contained. Stylistically, early flats in Port Phillip broadly fit into one of two types: Arts & Crafts, and Freestyle.

The Arts & Crafts style is characterized by features including the use of contrasting textures and materials on facades (such as facebrick, roughcast render, timber shingles and brackets to gables); entrance porches beneath the main roof supported on heavy battered piers or paired timber posts or columns resting on low piers; simple, geometric decoration created by projecting bricks or small voids (e.g., hit and miss brick walls); box windows (with timber frames that project from the wall, resting on timber or brick corbels) and semi-circular windows and openings.

Birnam is a picturesque example of an Arts & Crafts style apartment block exploiting motifs characteristic of the period including the repeated use of arch in one balcony opening, inverted to form balustrades, and further re-iterated in the curved shingled balcony. The shingled gable end with a louvred vent is also characteristic as is the use of rough cast in conjunction with face brickwork, the tapered chimneys and the nameplate with the apartment name 'Birnam' in raised cement below incised squares to the balcony balustrade.

The design and planning of Birnam also demonstrates early approaches to flat design in Melbourne, particularly in the planning of the access to the flats through integrated stairwells and the provision of private balconies to all flats. In relation to access, many early flat developments were created as the conversion of an existing house or houses, and the easiest way to provide access to first floor flats was to build an external stair. This design feature was used on some early flats as it had the advantage of being entirely independent of the internal plan of the flat, but it also had the considerable disadvantage of offering no protection from the weather. Consequently, external staircases became associated with poor quality flats and so the approach taken with some early flats was to make the stairwell an integrated part of the design and as inconspicuous as possible (Sawyer 1982:55). This is demonstrated at Birnam, where the staircases have been carefully considered and, while open, are entered by semi-enclosed stairwells that are integrated into the front elevation. The careful integration of stairwells can also be seen at other early flats that are either fully enclosed such as The Canterbury (1914, Citation 74) and the Wimmera (1917, Citation 914), or open (Clairvaux 1917, Citation 425). At Clarendon (1915, Citation 295) the fully enclosed staircase is used in conjunction with open access galleries.

The approach to the stairwells at Birnam by Tombs may have been informed by his experience with The Rand, a block of flats he designed in early 1917 at the corner of Marine Parade and Blessington Street, St Kilda. These were designed with a marble staircase on the outside, which was described as 'the first case of the kind under the building regulations' by the city surveyor. The staircase was criticised by one Councillor as 'an attempt to diminish the open space by putting outside the building a staircase which should be inside'. After some debate it appears the staircase was eventually permitted (*The Prahran Telegraph*, 17 March 1917, p.5 'House of Tombs').

The provision of private balconies to all flats at Birnam is also a notable feature. According to Sawyer (1992:13-4) the shortage of houses and the desire for smaller, more manageable homes had been a factor in the development of flats, but a common criticism of early flat developments was the poor relationship of the building to its external space, a lack of privacy and the unsuitability of flats for families. In many early flat developments, the site coverage was very high, and the open space left over was not integrated with the building and of little practical use. In 1922 architect James H. Wardrop, a proponent of flat development argued that aggregation of open spaces in flat developments would provide '... a decent breathing space' when compared with the 'mean yard space' available to the conventional small cottage (Sawyer 1982:83).

Despite this, very few early flat developments provided dedicated open space for each unit. While there were exceptions (for example, the Wimmera flats each have a dedicated balcony), most early blocks did

not, and it was not until the post-war period that flats were more commonly provided with their own balconies or private open space.

---

## 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

Retain in the Heritage Overlay with external paint controls.

---

## Primary source

City of Port Phillip, *H07 Elwood St Kilda Balaclava Ripponlea Precinct heritage review Stage 2: Review of existing heritage citations*, 2022

---

## Other images

-