History and Historical Context

Thematic Context

The following is drawn from the Stonnington Thematic Environmental History (Context Pty Ltd, 2006).

Developing Apartment Living

Apartment buildings or flats began to be constructed in Melbourne in the first decades of the twentieth century. In many municipalities, restrictive building codes were enacted to control of stop this new form of development, unlike the City of Prahran which allowed, and to a certain extent, encouraged flat building. One of the earliest purpose-built flats in the municipality was Fawkner Mansions, erected in 1912 on the corner of Punt and Commercial Roads. However, widespread flat development did not begin in earnest until the 1920s when many of the big mansion estates in South Yarra and Toorak were subdivided.

Apart from changing the physical character of the suburbs, flats also changed the social mix by providing accommodation for single people, leading to rumblings of concern that they would undermine traditional family life. However, not all flats were designed with single people in mind. ‘Luxury’ flats became fashionable for the wealthy in Toorak and South Yarra as a way of living in a prestigious suburb without the burden of a large house and garden requiring servants for their upkeep. By 1934-35 there were 570 flats in the City of Prahran’s Toorak Ward. The growth continued until the late 1930s and by the outbreak of the Second World War there were almost as many flats in Toorak Ward as houses.

Architect Designed Apartments

In response to resident protests about flats destroying the character of Toorak and South Yarra, developers began building apartment blocks and maisonettes designed to emulate a large house. Another strategy was to employ a leading architect to design the flats, one example being Walter Burley Griffin, whose distinctive Prairie School style 'Langi' flats were built on the
corner of Toorak and Lansell roads in 1926. Other leading domestic architects who were prominent in Toorak and South Yarra during the inter-war period include Robert B. Hamilton, Arthur W. Plaisted, J.H. Esmond Dorney and Marcus Martin. Hamilton, in particular, is regarded as the pre-eminent designer of Old English style apartments in Melbourne.

Place History

Six Crown allotments, bounded by the Yarra River, Gardiners Creek (now Toorak) Road, Punt Road and Chapel Street, were sold at the first Crown land sales in June 1840. Each had a frontage to Gardiners Creek Road and stretched north to the Yarra River. River frontages meant prices were relatively high and most blocks were bought by speculators. Lot 3, consisting of 20 acres, was purchased by G.R. Griffiths who soon sold it to John Robert Murphy, brewer and wine and spirits merchant. Murphy planted a vineyard on the northern slopes above the river and from 1847, the land was leased to Swiss vigneron and became known as Murphy's vineyard and Murphy's Paddock. Subdivision of these early properties in the 1850s created housing allotments between Domain Road and Toorak Road, leaving the earlier homes on large sites close to the river. Kearney's map of 1855 shows the new subdivisions which featured wide streets and large allotments reflecting the area's affluence. The low-lying parts of Prahran to the south took on a very different character and the streets and houses much less salubrious.

Figure 2 (left) Part of Kearney's map of 1855 (Avoca Street is incorrectly named Murphy Street) Source: State Library of Victoria.
Figure 3 (right) 1895 MMBW Detail plan showing 44 Murphy Street occupied by tennis court, lawn and garden with a house to the north (numbered 50 Murphy Street). Source: State Library of Victoria.

1 Betty Malone, 'The north-west comer of Prahran (South Yarra) Punt Hill to Daly Town. Unpublished manuscript, Prahran Archives.
Although Murphy Street was created in the 1850s, it was not declared a public road until 1871. Kearney’s map of 1855 shows a number of houses on the eastern side of the street. Allotments in Murphy Street had generous frontages and several large houses soon appeared on the high ground. However, speculators bought much of the land and from the 1870s frontages were reduced.

By the 1890s, as shown on an 1895 MMBW plan, Murphy Street had been largely developed with detached villa housing. At this time, land at present day 44 Murphy Street was occupied by an asphalt tennis court and lawn associated with a residence to the north (listed as 50 Murphy Street and now part of the property at 279 Domain Road).

The final rate book listing for the house at 50 Murphy Street occurs in November 1929 when it is described as a 20 room brick building with a net annual value of £350. The next rate book (for the period 1930-31) does not record a building on the site and its net annual value had dropped to £100, which would indicate that the house had been demolished by this time. The site had been redeveloped entirely by late November 1934 when the rate books list a mix of 4 and 7 room brick dwellings at 44 to 70 Murphy Street, all under the ownership of Hilldene Pty Ltd.

An MMBW property service plan prepared in 1933 shows a flats at 44 Murphy Street configured around a central courtyard. The plan is stamped ‘work carried out to this plan 14 August 1934’ - presumably the completion date of the flats. Noted interwar architect Robert Hamilton is identified as the ‘agent’ on the MMBW plan (the agent often being the building’s architect). The owner was prominent Melbourne surgeon Hugh Berchmans Devine. Hamilton’s design for the Murphy Street flats was illustrated in the Herald in January 1933, with a caption describing them as a ‘new type of flats for South Yarra … externally of an Old English design [the flats] will be constructed round a central court, giving access to each block. Some of the flats will be of four rooms while others will be designed on the maisonette principle.’

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2 City of Prahran Rate Books (1929-30) Toorak Ward, No. 313, p.16.
3 City of Prahran Rate Books (1930-31) Toorak Ward, No. 315, p.16.
4 City of Prahran Rate Books (1934-35) Toorak Ward, Nos. 408-421, p. 21.
5 MMBW Plan of Drainage No 4502. South East Water.
6 The Herald, 26 January 1933, p.32.
Robert Bell Hamilton

The architect of the flats at 44 Murphy Street 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. Upon completion of his studies, 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. Two years later on his return to Melbourne, Hamilton formed a partnership with F L Klingender. The partnership with Klingender lasted until 1925 when Hamilton established his own practice. He was active in Melbourne until WWII and worked alone and in partnership with other architects such as Marcus Norris.

Initially, Hamilton had positioned himself within the Arts and Crafts vernacular and bungalow vocabulary, but in the subsequent years, he gradually eradicated the American influence from his work and by the late 1920s had become the foremost exponent of Old English styling in Melbourne. The August 1934 edition of *Art in Australia* observed the following of Hamilton’s work:

*To those who seek the particular type of English domestic architecture that suggests comfort and romance, the age of the craftsman as William Morris knew it, the hundred and one charms and delights of old word cottages and the atmosphere of scented gardens, Mr Robert Hamilton’s outlook should appeal. Every detail is a matter of consideration, carefully selected and hand-made whenever possible…*\(^7\)

According to Peter Cuffley, Hamilton possessed a deep affection for romantic styles in architecture but was capable of working in a range of styles.\(^8\) Hamilton is nevertheless best remembered for his impeccably detailed Old English style flats and commercial buildings, including the highly regarded Denby Dale flats at 422-426 Glenferrie Road, Kooyong.

Hamilton served as a Prahran City Councillor and was later elected Member of the Legislative Assembly for Toorak in November 1945. He died on 15 May 1948.

While perhaps not a key architect in Melbourne in terms of leading the profession in any new directions, he was of considerable influence as a leading protagonist working in the revival styles important to the interwar era, producing a large number of impressive representative houses and commercial premises.

\(^7\) Quoted from Peter Cuffley, *Australian Houses of the ’20s and ’30s*, p.116.
\(^8\) Ibid., p.116.
Hamilton's achievements are well summarised by Peter Cuffley:

‘… whether it was a small holiday bungalow, a country cottage, a Toorak mansion or a block of flats, Robert Bell Hamilton approached each work with equal concern for its integrity and with a great deal of artistry’.9

Description

Mayfield is an English Domestic Revival style complex of double-storey flats with a U shape plan form partially enclosing a garden court that provides driveway access and hardstand carparking. The driveway entrance on Murray Street is flanked on either side by original semi-circular clinker brick walls with integrated bench seating. The flats have a picturesque arrangement of hipped and gabled roofs with terracotta tiles and tall brick chimneys with paired shafts and corbelled caps. External walls are constructed of clinker brick with half-timbering to the first floor and attic storey dormers. Windows typically have multi-pane double-hung sash frames. Some of the flats have first floor oriel windows supported on ornate timber brackets.

The flats are generally intact externally apart from attic storey storey additions (with dormer windows and half-timbered detailing to match the original) and first floor additions above the rear garages.10 There are also single-storey garage additions to the front flats and a largely concealed double-storey addition to the rear south-east. The additions and alterations are sympathetically designed and do not detract from the interwar character of the flats.

Comparative Analysis

English Domestic Revival Styles

Sometimes referred to as Tudor, interwar English Domestic Revival was an offshoot of the Arts and Crafts medievalism of the late nineteenth century, and shared that movement's values in terms of dark, natural colourings, a predominance of brickwork, the use of half timbering and a love of wrought iron and leadlight windows. Old English architecture was typified by the use of red or clinker brick, brick nogging and/or half timbering in gables or upper storeys, boldly modelled brick chimneys and terracotta tile roofs.

9 Peter Cuffley, *Australian Houses of the '20s and '30s*, p.116.
10 Stonnington Property Files No. 38362BL, 40378BL, 7590.940.6 SBL & 7590.940.11 SBL
Steeply pitched roofs with gables rather than hips were a typical characteristic of the larger, two storey examples, though small suburban houses often had a combination of hips and gables. Walls were usually sheer rather than textured and ended flush with the gable of the roof. Sometimes manganese bricks or tiles or tapestry bricks were used to highlight openings and to decorate walls. Picturesque asymmetry was attained through double or triple fronts to the facade, arched porch entries, large, prominent chimneys and, in larger examples, oriel windows and towers.

Porches were generally small, and the traditional Australian verandah was not included except in some hybrid examples. Windows were of the sash or casement types, and often featured twelve panes or diamond pattern leadlight. Muted colours were appropriate to this style. Cream, off-white, buff, stone, terracotta and dark brown were most popular. Dark stained timber and red brick were the dominant materials, and cast iron painted black or a dark chocolate brown was also common.

A number of new economies in materials facilitated the rise of the English Domestic revival. The increasingly availability of seasoned hardwoods made possible the use of brick nogging and half-timbering, even in the most modest house. Added to this was the introduction of terracotta shingle tiles, manufactured by the Eureka tile company in their Ballarat kilns.

By the late 1920s, the inclusion of imitation half timbering in the black and white tradition declined although buildings continued to achieve medieval associations through picturesque massing of gabled and hipped roofs and through the application of elements such as leadlight windows.

The use of an external expression drawing heavily from medieval precedents became a means of expressing the solidity and longevity of British traditions. Old English or Tudor styled houses were associated with a profound Empire consciousness. Larger houses of the type exploited the associations of the manor to convey wealth and social status. A large Tudor house, no matter how new, somehow conveyed a sense that wealth, even recently achieved, was permanent. So common was the use of this idiom within the nouveau riche enclaves of Toorak and South Yarra that the essentially British term 'Stockbroker Tudor' gained popular usage.

Robert Hamilton's Flats

A substantial number of residential buildings drawing inspiration from the English Domestic Revival were built in the well-heeled suburbs of Stonnington during the interwar period. By the late 1920s, architect Robert Hamilton was recognised as the foremost practitioner in this style, designing large and impeccably detailed houses and luxury flats. Throughout the 1930s Hamilton would design at least 11 flat developments in Toorak and South Yarra. Most of them fit within the category of luxury flats. Of his known flat developments, the following are currently individually listed in the Heritage Overlay to the Stonnington Planning Scheme: Haddon Hall, 405 Toorak Road, Toorak (1931-32) [HO451]; Burnham, 14 Grange Road, Toorak (1932-33) [HO438]; Taunton, 520 Toorak Road, Toorak (1936) [HO452]; and Gowrie Court, 716 Orrong Road, Toorak (c1940) [HO446].

Hamilton's 'Luxury' flats fall into two broad sub-types, one being small blocks of two maisonettes or four flats designed to appear as one large house and the other being one or more blocks arranged in the manner of a Tudor or Medieval village (an example of which is Mayfield flats). When Hamilton's design for Mayfield was published in The Herald in 1933, it was claimed to be new type of flat for South Yarra, constructed round a central court. This arrangement was not entirely innovative in a Melbourne context - architect Joseph Plottel's Garden Court flats in South Yarra were built c1918 with a much shallower U shaped plan around a courtyard. This was followed by Arthur Plaisted's more successful designs for Hartpury Court flats, St Kilda (1923). Some blocks built between 1920 and 1935 attempted to enclose a pleasant garden space of reasonable size for communal use by tenants, but most flats built up to c1935 remained single rectangular blocks placed upon the site with little regard for the relationship of
the flat block to its external space. From the mid 1930s a low density, inward looking multi-block pattern emerged. Constructed 1934, Mayfield is the earliest known example of Hamilton’s use of this flat configuration. As such, it is important as a prototype for the luxury flats with semi-enclosed garden settings that Hamilton would incorporate into his developments in the latter part of the 1930s, notably at Denby Dale at 422-426 Glenferrie Road, Kooyong. While not as intact as other Hamilton flats listed individually on Stonnington’s Heritage Overlay Schedule, Mayfield nonetheless demonstrates Hamilton’s talent for design in the Old English mode.

**Thematic Context**

Mayfield flats at 44 Murphy Street, South Yarra illustrate the following themes, as identified in the *Stonnington Thematic Environmental History* (Context Pty Ltd, 2006):

- 8.6.2 - Developing apartment living
- 8.6.3 - Architect designed apartments

**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?**

Mayfield at 44 Murphy Street, South Yarra is a complex of double-storey English Domestic Revival style flats arranged around a central semi-enclosed courtyard. The flats were constructed in 1934 to a design by prominent interwar Melbourne architect Robert Bell Hamilton.

Elements that contribute to the significance of the place include (but are not limited to):

- The original external form, materials and detailing of the buildings.
- The unpainted state of the face brick and terracotta elements.
- The domestic garden setting (but not the fabric of the garden itself).

Later additions and alterations, including the dormer additions, garages, and the driveway gate, are not significant.

**How is it significant?**

Mayfield is of local architectural significance to the City of Stonnington.

**Why is it significant?**

Mayfield is architecturally significant as a fine and largely intact example of interwar flat development in the English Domestic Revival style (Criterion D). The flats are the work of noted interwar architect Robert Bell Hamilton, one of the most important and influential designers of flats in interwar Melbourne (TEH 8.6.3 - Architect Designed apartments).

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Mayfield is also architecturally significant as an early prototype for Hamilton’s ‘luxury flat’ design configured around a central courtyard (Criterion E, TEH 8.6.2 - Developing apartment living).

**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 9 below (with the exception of the driveway to Domain Road). External paint controls, internal alteration controls and tree controls are not recommended. It is further recommended that the building be graded ‘significant’.

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**Figure 9**

Recommended extent of Heritage Overlay at 44 Murphy Street, South Yarra.