
Idlewylde; Mary's Mount



Review of B Graded Buildings
in Kew, Camberwell &
Hawthorn

Location

41-45 Yarrbat Avenue BALWYN, Boroondara City

Municipality

BOROONDARA CITY

Level of significance

Included in Heritage Overlay

Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO423

Heritage Listing

Boroondara City

Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

Idlewylde, at 41-45 Yarrbat Avenue, Balwyn is of municipal historical and architectural significance. Though architecturally relatively undistinguished, as constructed, it was one of the largest and most lavish interwar private residential complexes in the state, with elaborate and extravagant outbuildings and garden, including a lake. In its original form, *Idlewylde* demonstrated one version of the lifestyle of the very wealthy in the early 1930s, with extremely lavish entertaining and recreational facilities.

As is the case for the Nicholas residence, Burnham Beeches, the complex was all the more extraordinary for having been constructed at a time when Australia was still in the grip of economic depression. The ability of the place to demonstrate the interests and aspirations of its original owner, Oliver Gilpin, have been diminished by the truncation of the grounds and the removal of many of the original features, though the lake remains. The indoor swimming pool is of note for its intactness and elaborate decoration and tiling.

Heritage Study/Consultant	Boroondara - Review of B Graded Buildings in Kew, Camberwell and Hawthorn, Lovell Chen Architects & Heritage Consultants, 2006; Boroondara - Camberwell Conservation Study, Graeme Butler, 1991;
Other Names	Mary's Mount, Idlewylde,
Hermes Number	14748
Property Number	

Physical Description 1

Idlewylde, now the *Connaght* nursing home, was a huge house and landscape undertaking, rivaling that of the Douglas Fairbanks Senior house in Los Angeles designed ten years earlier and with a similar aura of the exotic utopia on the hill. The house was, in fact, a group of connected buildings: the family was to live in the central part, a basically rectangular, roughly symmetrical block with a terracotta tiled roof in three hips, with a fourth hip over the north-facing apsidal balcony and a fifth hip over the square porte-cochere to the east side. The roofs were sealed with boxed eaves, each almost a metre deep. The walls and original outside balustrading were stuccoed and keyed to ceremonial steps down into the garden. The north porch entrance has a terrazzo floor inscribed in italics with the initials of the first owner, Oliver Gilpin; above it is a thick-walled balcony, supported on a set of oddly primitive, looking untapered Tuscan columns. There was a balcony immediately overhead, and that was protected by a shallow-pitched, half conical roof, forming an apse. A porte-cochere juts off the main block to the east, carrying an extended bedroom of the main house out on its upper storey: this has leadlit glass in an Adam brothers' pattern on one side as a screen from the morning sun.

The porte-cochere leads into a service courtyard, framed on the south by a dormitory wing that contained what was probably servant's quarters and is now a ward, and on the east by a low conservatory wing, which reads to the service yard as a decorative and interesting elevation, and conceals another surprise: a triangular plan. The dormitory block balances one side of the house against the south entrance; and on the other side, to balance, is an enclosed swimming pool, divided diagonally and chamfered to fit various depths in a festive mixture of baroque arcaded window detail and moulded parapet, a sculpted cartouche, and lime-green tiles inside. This contrasts with the north exterior walls, which appear oddly diagrammatic, divided by course lines and thin corner piers into a grid, with a standard window in the middle of each. Elsewhere the windows, though more closely spaced, were smaller. Very plain in the frames, they suited the house's later role as a nursing home and hospital.

A group of garages stands to the south-east of the site at one side of a large concrete yard, rather as the asphalt and concrete service yard works on *Idlewylde's* east side. This concrete paving is weathered and of long standing, though whether it is original or was added a few years later is hard to tell. The former concrete drive and parking area at the north side in front of the semicircular porch has been asphalted, and paling fences now close in the north garden just beyond the car park. The garden has been subdivided close in at the northeast side as well, and down the entire west side. Here, a lake is placed in a hollow at the centre of this tract of garden, now owned by others. Butler notes that the grounds once also held a concrete and glass conservatory (on the eastern side), fish ponds, fish hatcheries, 34 kraal aviaries, and two acres of covered orchards.[i] While documentation is not complete, it is thought that a four-room lodge may have been located on the property, next to an imposing wrought iron set of entrance gates.[ii] The aviaries were along the east side of the site, where Yarrbat Avenue curled round before climbing the Hill toward the Maranoa Gardens.

In plan the house had its share of oddities and surprises. The entry to the main living room was unexpectedly abrupt, through a shallow entrance vestibule. The living area was paneled in a rich Art Deco, not unlike the interior of contemporary ocean liners. This sense was heightened as the living room had no external windows, being instead, a semi-circulation space, leading variously to a music room and library on either side of the north entry, a billiard room, card room, dining room, powder and bathrooms, through which the principal stair went. The main bedroom, interestingly, was on this floor as well. The porte-cochere entry, as broad as that for a suburban cinema, led simply into the dining room, and the large balcony above it was an extension of the one major upstairs bedroom not to have an ensuite bathroom. The back or service stair was, again surprisingly, on the main general axis from the north porch, and led up to another curious combination of spaces. Clockwise these were, via a centrally placed ballroom over the living room below, four bedrooms, interspersed with the service stair, a vestibule, two more bedrooms, a small lounge opening onto the north balcony, and two more bedrooms on the east side. All but one of the major bedrooms had its own bathroom, virtually unheard of in the 1930s. The servants' rooms, their bathrooms, the kitchen and scullery areas were distributed through a rectangular wing stretching south toward Yarrbat Avenue. The basement held three cellars, a group of workrooms and plant rooms serving both the house and the pool.

When the house was taken over by the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, and adapted for use as a residential care facility, extensive internal alterations were made. A 1997 study of existing conditions at *Idlewyde* showed that all first floor rooms surrounding the ballroom had been turned into wards, as had the servants' wing to the immediate south. The ground floor of the main house had been re-used for administrative rooms, and the former dining room was turned into an extra lounge. The eastern conservatory was turned into a day room. External alterations appear to be relatively minor, and to be generally limited to changes to door and window openings, with the main building forms reasonably intact.

[i] G Butler, Camberwell Conservation Study 1991, vol. 4, pp. 321-2.

[ii] G Butler, Camberwell Conservation Study 1991, vol. 4, pp. 321-2, G Butler, Camberwell Conservation Study 1991, p. 321.

This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.

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