

IDENTIFIER	FLATS	Citation No	HG12
Other name/s	<i>Craigellachie</i>	Melway ref	58 H11
Address	273 Orrong Road ST KILDA EAST	Date/s	1934-37
Designer/s	W H Merritt	Builder/s	Guardian Building Co Pty Ltd



Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, October 2019



Location map and extent of HO

Heritage Group	Residential building (private)	Condition	Excellent
Heritage Category	Flats	Intactness	Excellent

Thematic context	6.7 Making homes for Victorians
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Recommendation	Include on heritage overlay schedule as an individual heritage place		
Controls	<input type="checkbox"/> External Paint	<input type="checkbox"/> Interior Alteration	<input type="checkbox"/> Trees

Statement of Significance

What is significant?

The *Craigellachie* flats, at 273 Orrong Road, East St Kilda, are a large complex of 25 residential flats in a series of two-storey blocks around a central landscaped court. Designed in the Tudor Revival style, they are of clinker brick construction with steep tile-clad roofs, tall chimneys, eaves corbels, gabled porches, bay windows and multi-paned sashes. Developed on part of the former grounds of the eponymous mansion *Craigellachie*, the flats were built in four stages from 1934 to 1937, to a design by architect W H Merritt.

The significant fabric is defined as the entire exterior of the building and the matching boundary fence and gateways on both street frontages.

How is it significant?

The *Craigellachie* flats satisfy the following criteria for inclusion on the heritage overlay schedule to the City of Glen Eira planning scheme:

- Criterion A: Importance to the course, or pattern of our cultural or natural history.
- Criterion E: Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics

Why is it significant?

Craigellachie is significant as the largest and most ambitious block of flats built in the City of Glen Eira area before WW2. Proposed at a time when apartment living was becoming increasingly popular in the former City of Caulfield, the complex provided no fewer than 25 units, three times the size of most local counterparts (typically with only six to eight units). More akin to the grand apartment blocks that emerged in the adjacent City of St Kilda in the later 1930s, *Craigellachie* anticipates the significant post-WW2 boom of higher-density living that would fundamentally reshape the study area. (*Criterion A*)

Craigellachie is significant as a large and sophisticated expression of the Tudor Revival mode that was popular in domestic architecture in the 1930s. While its clinker brick, steep roofline, tall chimneys, gabled porches, arches and multi-paned windows are all broad characteristics of that style, the rendered eaves corbels and window boxes, bay windows, decorative bricks (including corbelling and basket-weave panels) elevate it to a higher level. The distinctive layout of the complex, with blocks arranged around a central landscaped courtyard, is rare at the local level and, coupled with its uncommonly elongated street frontage and matching boundary fence, forms a prominent and eye-catching element along this major residential streetscape. (*Criterion E*)

History

The *Craigellachie* flats at 273 Orrong Road, St Kilda East were erected in several stages between 1934 and 1937, to a design by architect W H Merritt. The flats were erected on part of the grounds of the eponymous *Craigellachie*, a venerable mansion built in the early 1870s for warehouseman William Young, who occupied it briefly before it was acquired and enlarged by pastoralist and politician William Pearson. Following Pearson's death in 1894, the property was occupied by his son, Robert Crawford Pearson, for the next quarter century, and thence by others. In the early 1930s, it was purchased by solicitor Newton Francis (1895-1966), who opted to retain the mansion while developing the property's capacious Orrong Street frontage with a large new block of flats. To design them, Francis engaged architect W H Merritt

London-born, William Henry Merritt (1898-1955) studied carpentry at the Working Men's College (later MTC, now RMIT) and joined the building firm of Clements Langford as an apprentice joiner. By the early 1920s, he had begun private practice in partnership as Merritt & Slevin, architects and designers, with offices in Melbourne and Geelong. Married in 1924, Merritt and his wife settled in Elsternwick; by the end of the decade, he was in sole practice and had already fostered a reputation for several well-received blocks of flats in St Kilda. During the peak of his practice in the 1930s, he continued to specialise in apartment blocks but also designed numerous (generally large-scale) single dwellings, several hotels and hotel renovations, and other projects including a factory, guest house and church hall. His office appears to have closed around 1941, presumably due to WW2. Having briefly been attached to the Australian Flying Corps during WW1, he served as a Flying Officer with the RAAF during WW2. Afterwards, Merritt and his wife moved to Toorak. Subsequently maintaining a lower professional profile, he retired in 1954 due to ill health and died the following year, aged only 57 years.

The apartment complex that Merritt designed for Newton Francis on Orrong Road was conceived as an ambitious development of 25 units, contained in a series of double-storey blocks that were carefully sited to define a central forecourt. The scheme was intended to be realised in several stages, and Merritt called tenders for erection of the first two blocks, providing a total of sixteen flats, in early 1934 (*Age* 10/02/1934:10). Construction was carried out by the Guardian Building Company Pty Ltd, a leading Collins Street firm that specialised in residential work and, the following year, would publish an illustrated booklet entitled *Guardian Personality Homes: How to Plan, Finance & Build your Home*.

The first stage of the scheme was completed within twelve months, with an advertisement in early 1935 noting that sixteen new flats at *Craigellachie*, 273 Orrong Road, were now open for public inspection (*Argus* 05/01/1935:14). That week, the development was profiled in the same newspaper's property column by noted architect Best Overend, himself one of Melbourne's leading exponents of flat design. While Overend's own tastes were allied towards Modernism, he was not dismissive of Merritt's conservative style (described as "an Elizabethan manner adapted to Australian conditions"), and otherwise lauded the flats for their progressive fitout, which included automatic hot water services, acid-proof bathtubs and generous built-in cupboards, and a subtle interior design scheme with "textured walls of different soft colours and grain blending into ceilings of a decorative base of soft old ivory" (*Argus* 10/01/1935:13)

The new flats appear to have been snapped up quickly. A month after Overend's review, it noted that only a few of the sixteen flats, with "carpeted stairways, hot water, ornamental gardens and tiled bathrooms", were still available (*Argus* 07/02/1935:16). Four months later, Newton Francis and wife Mona formed their own building company, *Craigellachie Pty Ltd*, which (with capital of £6,000) would underwrite the remaining stages of the project (*Herald* 24/06/1935:23). A third block of four flats was under construction in early 1937, when an article noted the "attractive simplicity of the design in the Old English manner", drawing attention to such advanced features as sound-proof concrete floors, specially-designed light fittings and kitchens with "all the latest equipment and ample cupboard space" (*Herald* 07/04/1937:21). These final stages of the scheme were completed by the end of the year, when an advertisement promoted an "ultra-modern" flat at 273 Orrong Road, "in new set of four flats standing in large grounds" (*Argus* 09/10/1937:24). The following year, *Craigellachie* garnered further press attention when the complex appeared in the Sydney-based national journal, *Building*. Under the heading "Flats can be beautiful", it was lauded as "a forcible argument in favour of proper planning and architectural treatment of the flat building", with praise for its "ample gardens" and its use of clinker brickwork, "a favorite Victorian characteristic, which imparts rustic charm to the wall surface" (*Building* 25/07/1938:14).

Newton and Mona Francis, the owners of the complex, took up residence in one of their flats as early as 1934, and would remain living there for several decades with their son John (born 1926) and, for a few years in the 1940s, with Newton's widowed mother, Ellen Francis. The family was still residing there at the time of Newton's death in 1966.

Description

Craigellachie, at 273 Orrong Road, East St Kilda, is a large complex of 25 residential flats in the inter-war Tudor Revival style. Occupying a corner site with a wide frontage to Orrong Road, the complex consists of a detached pair of two-storey J-shaped brick buildings facing each other across a central landscaped court. While comparable in general plan form, the two blocks are not of identical mirror-reversed design, but exhibit subtle differences in massing, fenestration and placement of gables and entrances. They are otherwise united by a consistent palette of materials and details: textured clinker brick walls, terracotta tiled hipped roofs clad penetrated by tall chimneys with plain brick capping, gabled bays with contrasting basket-weave brickwork and stepped rendered corbels, and windows with multi-paned

Fenestration is irregular, with windows variously expressed as standard tall rectangular openings, narrower pairs, and larger examples with tripartite bays. The Lyndoch Avenue façade of the south block has a large bay with a row of five windows at each level, separated by continuous brick piers and a vertically panelled rendered spandrel; a similar spandrel recurs to one of the inner facades of the north block. A few windows are accentuated by corbelled lintels and rendered window-boxes, and there is also an eye-catching right-angled bay window on the south elevation of the north block, with corbelled base. A typical entrance, located off-centre on the Lyndoch Avenue frontage, has a projecting gabled porch containing a round-arched opening with rendered quoining.

A front fence, extending along both street boundaries, comprises a rendered dwarf wall with clinker brick capping, rendered piers with stepped caps, and a black-painted mild steel railing. The boundary wall is splayed at the street corner, and incorporates a small pedestrian gateway on the Lyndoch Avenue side and three vehicle gateways along Orrong Road, along with grander central pedestrian gateway with splayed walls, double gates and letterboxes integrated into the piers. This gateway opens onto a hedge-lined concrete pathway, flanked by paved parking areas, that leads toward a formal garden area with a circular bed and radiating pathways (all lined with neatly clipped hedges) that extend across lawn areas to individual flat entrances.

Comparisons

From the late 1920s, as apartment living rose in popularity in the former City of Caulfield, blocks of flats emerged in various sizes, forms and styles that followed prevailing tastes in domestic architecture. Early examples in the bungalow mode, such as *Orrong Court* at 213 Orrong Road, St Kilda East (1926), gave way to counterparts in a Free Classical and Spanish Mission style, typified by *Glenura* at 374 Orrong Road, Caulfield North (c1930) and *Hotham Hall* at 78 Hotham Street, St Kilda East (1933). In the mid-1930s, many blocks of flats were expressed in the simpler form of two-storeyed hip-roofed face brick buildings, nominally enlivened by contrasting render or clinker brick, typified by *Hollandia* at 380 Orrong Road, Caulfield (1935), the adjacent *Kaituna* at No 378 (c1936), and *Kingston Court* at 1088 Glenhuntly Road, Glen Huntly (c1936). Blocks of flats in a more explicitly mediaevalised mode, such as the Tudor Revival or Elizabethan, were less common in the study area. The eclectic *Brixton Court Flats* at 96 Hotham Street, St Kilda East (1935) evoke some of these qualities with its steep gabled roof, corbel-table and pointed arch window. More overtly Tudor Revival, *Park Manor* at 82 Hawthorn Road, Caulfield North (Archibald Ikin, 1935), is a modestly-scaled two-storey block with roughcast render, half-timbered gable ends and corbelled eaves (*Herald* 28/02/1935:20). A slightly later block of flats at 9 Chaddesley Avenue, Caulfield (Walter Mason, 1937), in face brick with steep gable, corbelled eaves and multi-paned shuttered windows, was described in one contemporary source as “Flemish” (*Argus* 23/12/1937:7). None of these, however, displays the degree of stylistic rigour that is evident at *Craigellachie*.

Aside from its style, *Craigellachie* is notable for its scale and unusual layout. Built in four stages with 25 units, it is one of the largest apartment blocks (if not the largest) erected in the study area prior to WW2. Even at the peak of the inter-war apartment boom in the later 1930s, blocks of flats in the former City of Caulfield typically comprised only four or six units. Larger examples include the seven-unit *Meadows* flats at 10-12 Melby Avenue, St Kilda East (1940), an eight-unit block at 14 King Street, Elsternwick (1940), and two ten-unit blocks: *Toolangi Court* at 500-506 Glenhuntly Road, Elsternwick (1936) and *Linden* at 575 Inkerman Road (1937). With two large blocks of eight units and two smaller blocks of four or five, *Craigellachie* is over twice the size of its nearest local counterparts, and three times larger than most. Its layout, with flats in L-shaped blocks around a central garden, is unusual at a local level. Its closest comparators in this regard are the aforementioned *Toolangi Court* at 500-506 Glenhuntly Road, and a residential development at 6 Carnavon Road, Caulfield North (c1939) [part of HO14], comprising semi-detached pairs of two-storey houses in a U-shaped cluster around a central lawn. Ultimately, in scale and layout, *Craigellachie* is more akin to the grand apartment blocks in the former City of St Kilda, such as the 25-unit U-shaped block at 303 Carlisle Street, Balaclava (1934), just across the municipal boundary.

As an example of W H Merritt’s work in the City of Glen Eira, *Craigellachie* is comparable to the nearby two-storey block of flats at 1 Lockerbie Court (1937), and grand two-storey residences at 1 Grimwade Court, Caulfield North (1937), 7 Lempriere Avenue, St Kilda East (1937) [part of HO7] and 430-432 Dandenong Road, Caulfield North (1940). Postdating *Craigellachie*, all of these are in a Streamlined Moderne style, demonstrating a shift in Merritt’s aesthetic tastes as the decade drew to a close. Research to date has not identified any other local buildings that Merritt designed in the more conservative mediaevalised mode that was so deftly expressed at *Craigellachie*.

References

Best Overend, "New flats: park view", *Argus*, 10 January 1935, p 13.

"St Kilda flats built in sections", *Herald*, 7 April 1937, p 21.

"Flats can be beautiful", *Building*, 25 July 1938, p 14.

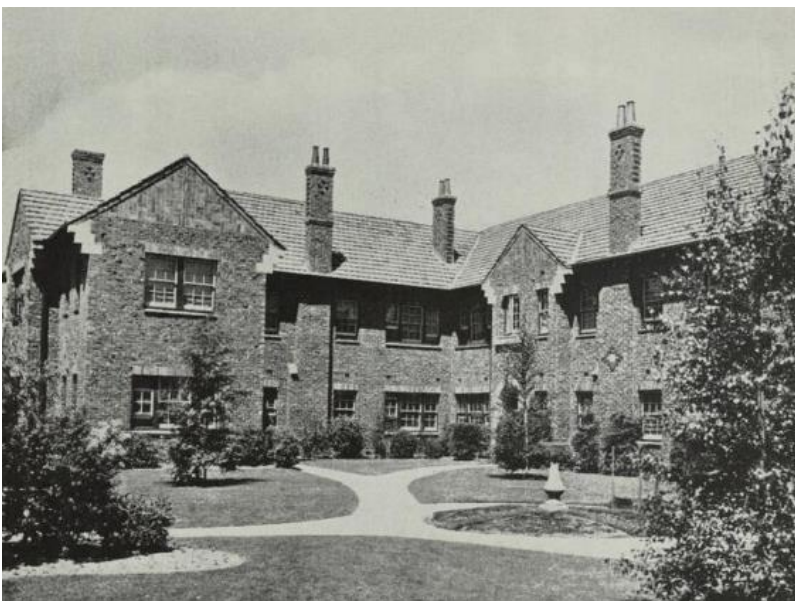
ARBV file for William Henry Merritt. Unit 10, VPRS 8838/P1
(Individual Architects Registration Files), PROV.

Identified by

City of Glen Eira



Perspective drawing of the entire development, as seen from Orrong Road (source: [Argus](#), 5 January 1935)



View of the south block, looking south-west across central garden court (source: [Building](#) 27 July 1938)