City of
STONNINGTON

# Rockley Road Precinct

**Prepared by:** GJM Heritage (March 2025)

**Address:** Rockley Road and Alexandra Avenue, South Yarra

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Name:** | Rockley Road Precinct | **Review Date:** | June 2024 |
| **Place Type:** | Residential Precinct | **Architect/Designer:** | Verner Fick (51 Rockley)<br>Howard Lawson (54 Rockley) |
| **Grading:** | See grading table | **Builder:** | Not known |
| **Extent of the Overlay:** | See Figure 5 | **Construction Date(s):** | 1910s, 1930s, 1940s |



*Figure 1. 129 & 131 Alexandra Avenue*



*Figure 2. 51 Rockley Road*



*Figure 3. 42 Rockley Road*



*Figure 4. 44 Rockley Road*

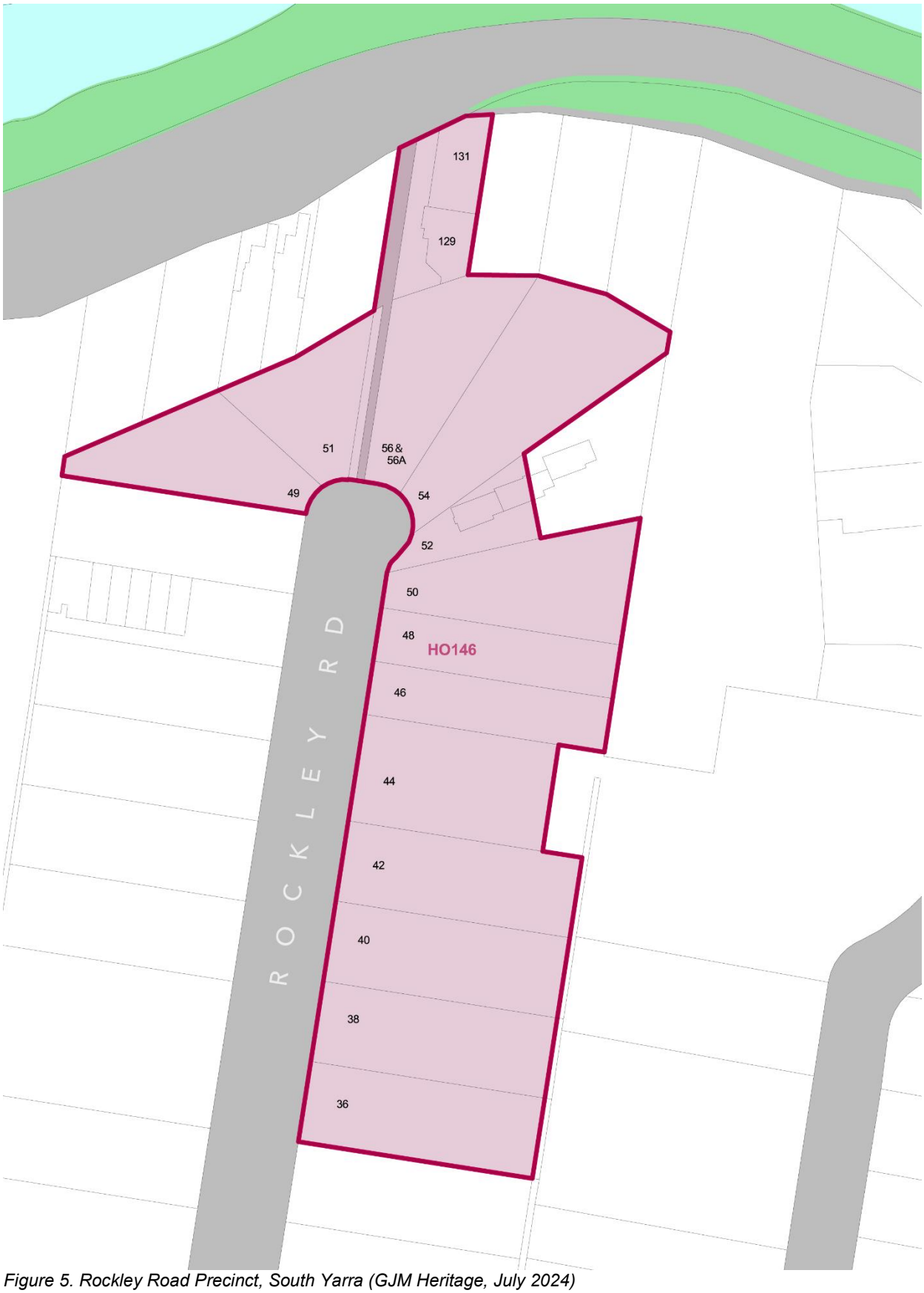



*Figure 5. Rockley Road Precinct, South Yarra (GJM Heritage, July 2024)*

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## Statement of Significance

*What is significant?*

The Rockley Road Precinct a residential precinct containing a collection of early twentieth century and interwar residences.

The precinct includes:

- Rockley Road (nos. 36-56A even only, 49, 51)
- Alexandra Avenue (nos. 129, 131)

Elements which contribute to the significance of the precinct include:

- Landscaped walkway down the escarpment

*Federation Houses*

- Single-storey brick houses
- Tile or slate-clad hipped roofs
- Asymmetrical forms and principal elevations
- Diagonal axis emphasised by dominant hipped-roof verandah bays
- Projecting gable or hip-ended bays
- Roof finials
- Prominent tall chimneys with chimney pots
- Exposed rafter ends
- Contrasting roughcast render
- Half-timber effect
- Large timber brackets, timber fretwork and shingle cladding
- Timber-framed windows including bays and small feature windows.

*Interwar Houses and Flats*

- Two-storey residential buildings in the English Domestic Revival and Moderne styles of the interwar period
- Asymmetrical forms
- Red and clinker brick construction
- Tile-clad hipped roofs, broad eaves and large rectangular windows, typical of the English Domestic Revival style
- Rounded corner windows, parapeted flat roof and distinctive geometric balustrading, typical of the Moderne style
- English Domestic Revival style house at no. 51 (architect Verner Fick), with asymmetrical form, steep hipped roof with terracotta shingles, massive chimneys, richly detailed clinker and manganese brickwork and steel-framed windows
- Moderne style block of flats at no. 54 (architect Howard Lawson)
- Low brick and random stone fences at the street boundaries (nos. 51, 52 and 54).

Later front fences, vehicle accommodation and rear additions do not contribute to the significance of the precinct. The properties at 46, 48 and 50 Rockley Road, South Yarra are non-contributory places within the precinct.

*How is it significant?*

The Rockley Road Precinct, South Yarra, is of local historical and aesthetic significance.

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*Why is it significant?*

The Rockley Road Precinct has strong associations with the development of the municipality in the early twentieth century and interwar period. Developed on land associated with the c1840s hilltop mansion estate of Little Rockley and sold as part of the Howey and Como Park Estates, the precinct clearly illustrates this period of development which transformed the built environment and social character of the area by replacing large mansion estates with high quality, higher density housing and flat developments. The Rockley Road Precinct clearly illustrates this important phase of development in the City of Stonnington (Criterion A).

The Rockley Road Precinct contains two distinct groups of high quality, finely detailed residences: Federation-style houses dating from the early twentieth century and interwar period houses in the English Domestic Revival or Moderne styles. Despite the variation of architectural styles within these groups, the consistent siting within mature garden settings, low-scale, and materiality presents as a high-quality and aesthetically cohesive streetscape. The negotiation of the steep topography down to Alexandra Avenue and the creation of the landscaped walkway adds to the aesthetic quality of the precinct (Criterion E).

## Historical Context

This place is associated with the following historic theme(s) taken from the *Stonnington Thematic Environmental History* (2009):

8 Building suburbs

- 8.1.3 The end of an era – mansion estate subdivisions in the twentieth century

- 8.4.1 Houses as a symbol of wealth, status and fashion

## Place History

*The following history is drawn from the Prahran Conservation Review, prepared by Context Pty Ltd in 1993 and the Rockley Precinct South Yarra Heritage Overlay Citation HO146, prepared by Nigel Lewis, 2005, with additional information as cited.*

The land on which the Rockley Road Precinct is located forms part of Lot 9 in the Parish of Prahran in the County of Bourke (Figure 6). This lot was purchased in the early Crown Land sales and in c1840, a substantial residence, known as Little Rockley, was constructed to a design by architects James and Charles Webb. Little Rockley was one of four early residences built on elevated sites overlooking the Yarra River; the others included Tivoli, Bona Vista and Como, which are evident on Kearney's 1855 map of Melbourne (Figure 7). The scenic qualities of the escarpment became the subject of several paintings by Frederick Mc Cubbin, who lived in the adjacent original Bona Vista house at the turn of the century. Little Rockley is shown on an 1895 MMBW drainage plan set within extensive grounds (Figure 8).

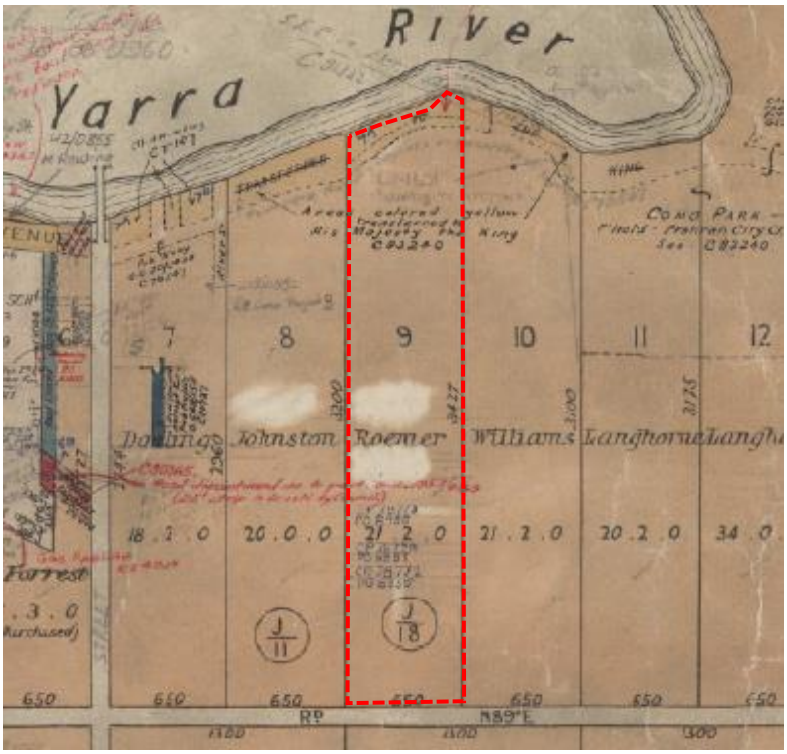



*Figure 6. Detail of parish plan, showing Lot 9 (indicated) with later notations; plan dates to c1880 (Source: Public Record Office Victoria)*

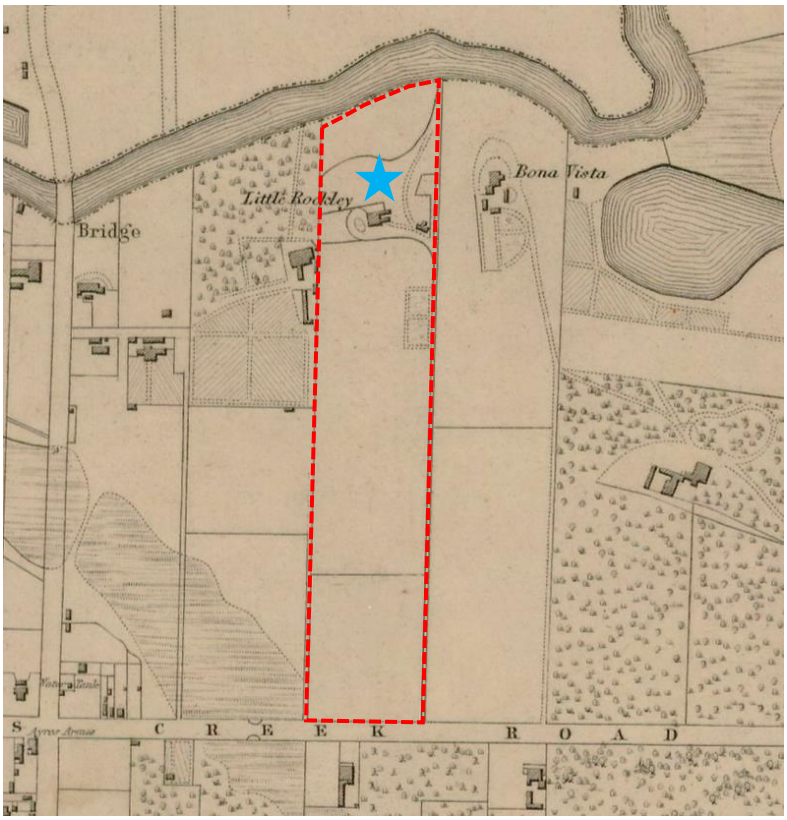



*Figure 7. Detail of plan of Melbourne and its suburbs, compiled by James Kearney, 1855 showing Lot 9 and Little Rockley, indicated by blue star (Source: State Library of Victoria)*

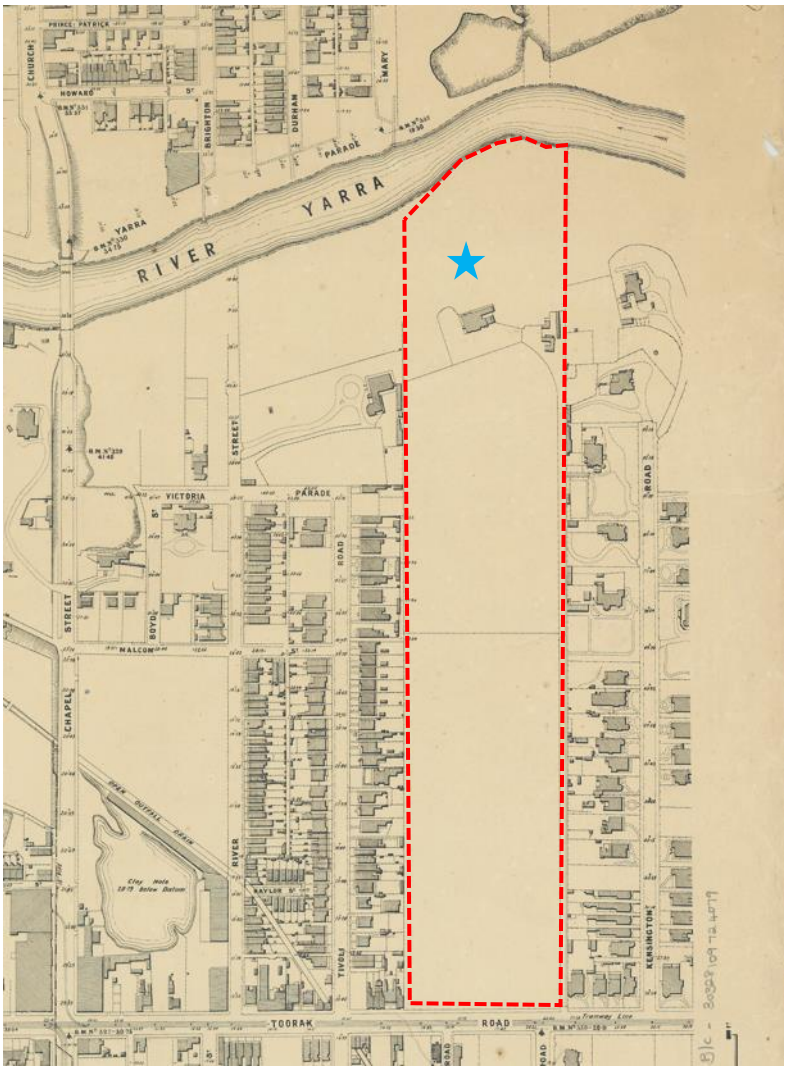



*Figure 8. Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) Plan No 37, City of Prahran, 1895 showing Little Rockley (blue star) and its extensive estate (Source: State Library of Victoria)*

Although subdivision of the Bona Vista and Tivoli Estates occurred in the 1880s, subdivision of the Little Rockley Estate did not commence until the early 1900s. In 1908, part of the grounds of Little Rockley were subdivided and sold as the ‘Howey Estate’, named after the Howey family who owned the property from the 1840s (Figure 9). The subdivision created a prestigious residential area, including public gardens flanking the entrance from Toorak Road, which was advertised as a special feature. Allotments were described as 'grand residential sites' with 'Magnificent Views from the Northern Lots'. The area along the river below the steep escarpment was reserved for Alexandra Avenue. The Howey Estate was soon developed with individual residences.




*Figure 9. Howey Estate subdivision, 1908 (Source: Stonnington History Centre)*

In 1913, further subdivision of the Little Rockley estate provided an extension to Rockey Road by way of a narrow 'road' on the site of the current walkway, which connected through to Alexandra Avenue. The original Little Rockley residence was demolished at this time (S&M).

The construction of the western extension of Alexandra Avenue in the 1930s resulted in further subdivision of this northern part of the Rockley Road Precinct. The last remaining 2 ½ acres of the former Rockley Estate was sold in 1936, at which time it was described as 'the last large area in the locality available for subdivision within easy access of the city, and will provide an opportunity for further beautifying the land overlooking the Boulevard' (*Herald,* 5 August 1936:9). The land was subdivided and sold at auction as the Como Park Estate the following year, on 20 March 1937 (Figure 10).

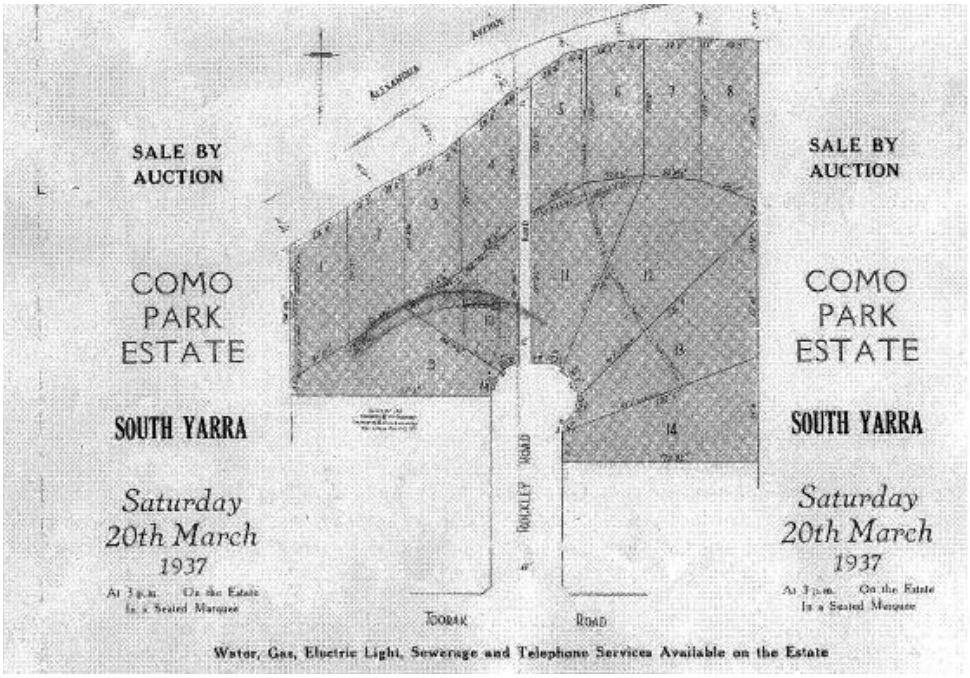



*Figure 10. Subdivision plan of the Como Park Estate, South Yarra, 1937 (Source: Nigel Lewis)*

An oblique aerial photograph included in the 1937 auction brochure shows the vacant land forming the Como Park Estate, as well as the newly constructed Alexandra Avenue and Como Park (Figure 11). The walkway connecting Rockley Road with Alexandra Avenue remained an unformed pathway at this time. The photograph also shows the houses constructed along Rockley Road as part of the earlier Howey Estate subdivision. The first buildings constructed within the Como Park Estate were 52 and 56 Rockley Road, which were erected in 1937-38 as investment properties for the Strang family. In c1938-39, a substantial residence at 51 Rockley Road was constructed for H.H. Henderson to the design of architect, Verner Fick. A block of flats at 54 Rockley Road was constructed in 1942 to designs by architect, Howard Lawson.

The Rockley Road Precinct was largely developed by the mid-1940s, as evidenced by a 1945 aerial photograph (Figure 12), with the only vacant land to Rockley Road being part of the large Bona Vista mansion estate (located to the east on Kensington Street).




*Figure 11. Aerial photograph from the brochure for Como Park Estate, South Yarra showing land for sale, 1937 (Source: Nigel Lewis)*

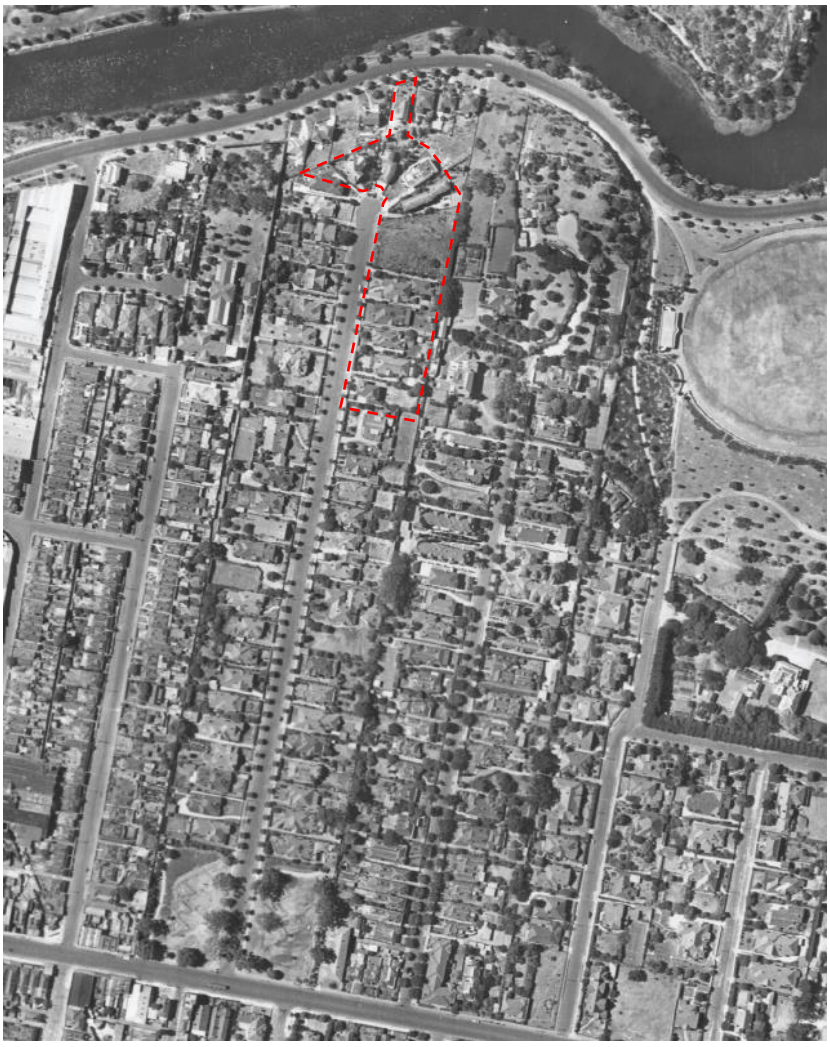



*Figure 12. Aerial photograph showing Rockley Road Precinct, 1945, approximate precinct boundary indicated (Source: Landata Victoria)*

## Description

The Rockley Road Precinct is located to the north of Toorak Road and south of Alexandra Avenue, South Yarra. It comprises four Federation-style houses on the east side of Tivoli Road (even nos. 38-44) dating from the early twentieth century and eight interwar residential buildings which are situated around a cul-de-sac at the northern end of Rockley Road (nos. 49, 51, 52, 54, 56/56A Rockley Road), down a steep escarpment in Alexandra Avenue to the north (nos. 129 and 131) and at 36 Rockley Road. Access to the two Alexandra Avenue properties is via a steep pedestrian path located at the end of the cul-de-sac. Numbers 46, 48 and 50 are of more recent construction and are non-contributory to the precinct. Houses and flats are located either on rectangular sites or on wedge-shaped sites at the north end of the cul-de-sac and are setback from the street boundary behind front gardens.

The single-storey Federation-style houses are highly consistent in scale, form and materiality and display a variety of detailing. Constructed of brick (overpainted at nos. 38 and 40) with tile or slate-clad hipped roofs, the houses are asymmetrical in form and elevation with dominant hipped-roof verandah bays which project diagonally into the garden at the south-west corner of the houses, emphasising the diagonal axis, and terminate at projecting gable or hip-ended bays. Typical detailing includes the use of contrasting roughcast render, half-timber effect, roof finials, prominent tall chimneys with chimney pots, exposed rafter ends, large timber brackets, timber fretwork and shingle cladding and timber-framed windows including bays and small feature windows.

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The interwar residential buildings are two-storey brick buildings which draw on the English Domestic Revival (nos. 36, 49, 51, 52 and 56 Rockley Road, 129 and 131 Alexandra Avenue) and Moderne (no. 54 Rockley Road) styles, and display detailing typical of the late 1930s and early 1940s. English Domestic Revival style buildings are typically asymmetrical in form, of red or clinker brick construction with tile-clad hipped roofs, broad eaves and large rectangular windows. The English Domestic Revival style house at No. 51 (architect Verner Fick) is a particularly fine example with asymmetrical form, steep hipped roof with terracotta shingles, massive chimneys, richly detailed clinker and manganese brickwork and steel-framed windows. The Moderne flats at No. 54 Rockley Road (designer Howard Lawson) display rounded corner windows, parapeted flat roof and distinctive geometric balustrading.

A number of early fences appear to have been retained at the north end of Rockley Road, including low brick fences (nos. 51 and 52) and a random stone wall at no. 54. Later timber picket fences line the front boundaries of the Federation-era houses (Nos. 38, 40, 42 and 44).

Key Features:

- Landscaped walkway down the escarpment

*Federation Houses*

- Single-storey brick houses
- Tile or slate-clad hipped roofs
- Asymmetrical forms and principal elevations
- Diagonal axis emphasised by dominant hipped-roof verandah bays
- Projecting gable or hip-ended bays
- Roof finials
- Prominent tall chimneys with chimney pots
- Exposed rafter ends
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*Interwar Houses and Flats*

- Two-storey residential buildings in the English Domestic Revival and Moderne styles
- Asymmetrical forms
- Red and clinker brick construction
- Tile-clad hipped roofs, broad eaves and large rectangular windows, typical of the English Domestic Revival style
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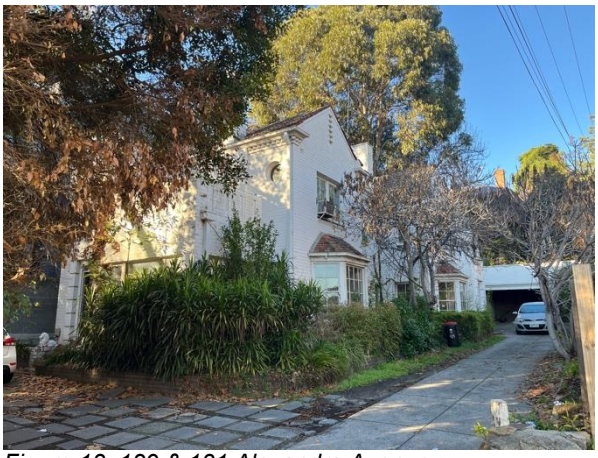


*Figure 13. 129 & 131 Alexandra Avenue*



*Figure 14. 38 Rockley Road, South Yarra*



*Figure 15. 42 Rockley Road*



*Figure 16. 44 Rockley Road*



*Figure 17. 51 Rockley Road*



*Figure 18. 56A Rockley Road*



*Figure 19. 49 Rockley Road*



*Figure 20. 54 Rockley Road*

## Intactness and Integrity

The Rockley Road Precinct remains substantially intact to its early twentieth century and interwar period of construction and retains a high degree of integrity in fabric, form and detail. While some residences have undergone some minor alterations, including rear additions and replacement fences, these changes do not diminish the ability to understand and appreciate the place as a finely detailed and cohesive precinct of residences dating to the first half of the twentieth century.

## Assessment Against Criteria

Criteria referred to in *Planning Practice Note No. 1: Applying the Heritage Overlay* (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, August 2018), modified for the local context.

***CRITERION A:*** *Importance to the course or pattern of the City of Stonnington's cultural or natural history (historical significance).*

The Rockley Road Precinct has strong associations with the development of the municipality in the early twentieth century and interwar period. Developed on land associated with the c1840s hilltop mansion estate of Little Rockley and sold as part of the Howey and Como Park Estates, the precinct clearly illustrates this period of development which transformed the built environment and social character of the area by replacing large mansion estates with high quality, higher density housing and flat developments. The Rockley Road Precinct clearly illustrates this important phase of development in the City of Stonnington.

***CRITERION B:*** *Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of the City of Stonnington's cultural or natural history (rarity).*

N/A

***CRITERION C:*** *Possession to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of the City of Stonnington's cultural or natural history (research potential).*

N/A

***CRITERION D:*** *Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of class of cultural or natural places or environments (representativeness).*

N/A

***CRITERION E:*** *Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics (aesthetic significance).*

The Rockley Road Precinct contains two distinct groups of high quality, finely detailed residences: Federation-style houses dating from the early twentieth century and interwar period houses in the English Domestic Revival or Moderne styles. Despite the variation of architectural styles within these groups, the consistent siting within mature garden settings, low-scale, and materiality presents as a high-quality and aesthetically cohesive streetscape. The negotiation of the steep topography down to Alexandra Avenue and the creation of the landscaped walkway adds to the aesthetic quality of the precinct.

***CRITERION F:*** *Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period.*

N/A

***CRITERION G:*** *Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of their continuing cultural traditions (social significance).*

N/A

***CRITERION H:*** *Special association with the life or works of a period, or group of persons, of importance in the City of Stonnington's history (associative significance).*

N/A

## Gradings and Recommendations

Number 125 Alexandra Avenue is a currently vacant site included within HO146. As this site is on the edge of the precinct and does not contain heritage fabric, it is recommended that it be removed from HO146 (see Figure 21). Land at the rear of 52 Rockley Road has been subdivided and redeveloped. Is it recommended for removal from HO146 (see Figure 21). A small portion of land that forms part of 51-59 Kensington Road (rear of 44 Rockley Road) is currently included in the precinct but does not contain fabric that relates to the significance of the precinct. It is recommended that it be removed from HO146 (see Figure 21) and included as part of HO64, which applies to *Bona Vista* at 51-59 Kensington Road.

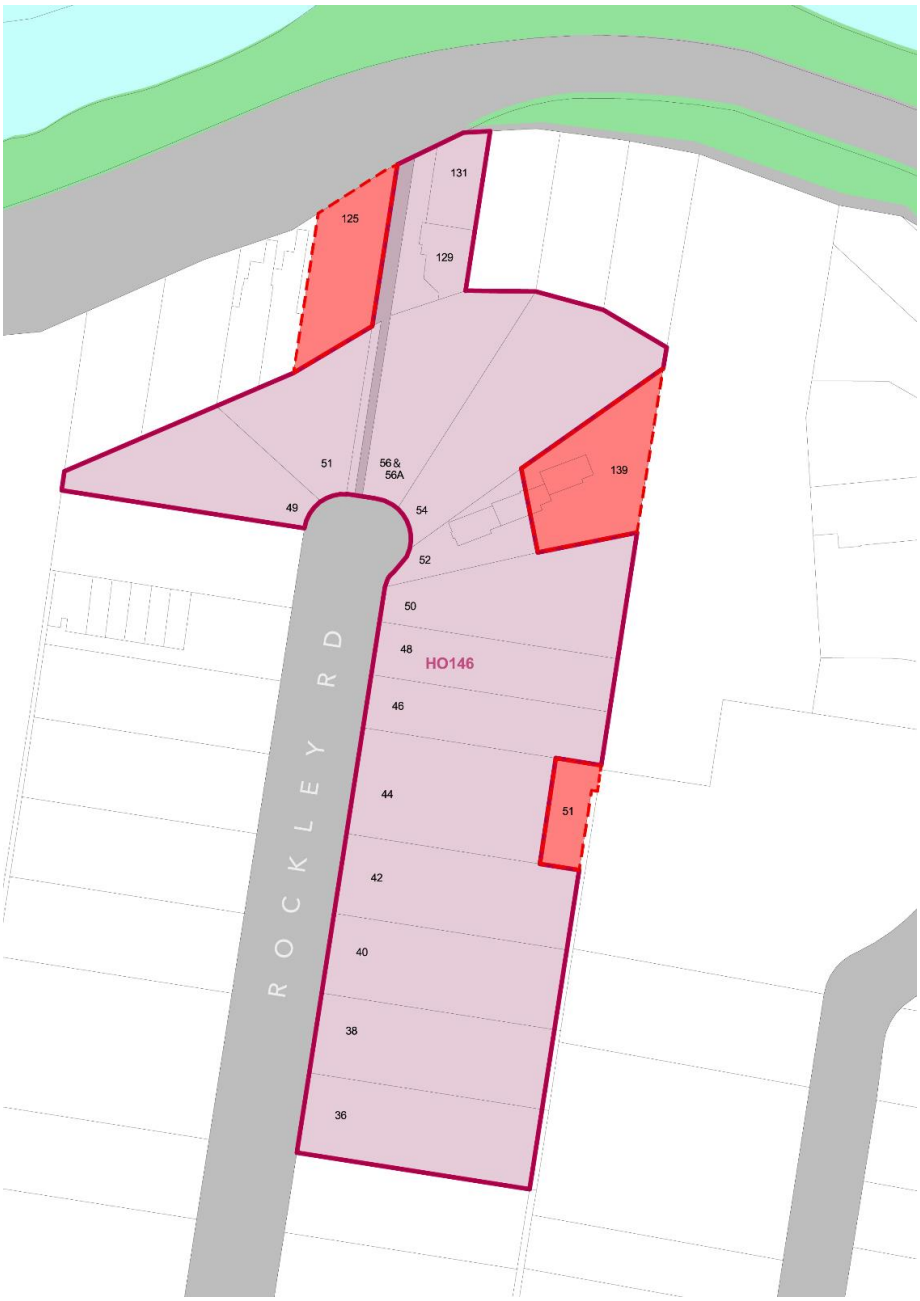



*Figure 21. Recommended changes to extent of HO146*

It is recommended that the balance of the properties remain in the Heritage Overlay as a Heritage Precinct known as *Rockley Road Precinct* (HO146) with the gradings set out in the table below and shown in Figure 22.

Recommendations for the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay (Clause 43.01) to the Stonnington Planning Scheme:

| | |
|---|---|
| **External paint controls**<br>*Is a permit required to paint an already painted surface?* | No |

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| | |
|---|---|
| **Internal alteration controls**<br>*Is a permit required for internal alterations?* | No |
| **Tree controls**<br>*Is a permit required to remove a tree?* | No |
| **Solar energy system controls**<br>*Solar energy system controls apply?* | Yes |
| **Outbuildings and fences exemptions**<br>*Are there outbuildings or fences which are not exempt from notice and review?* | No |
| **Victorian Heritage Register**<br>*Is this place included on the Victorian Heritage Register?* | No |
| **Prohibited uses may be permitted**<br>*Can a permit be granted to use for a use which would otherwise be prohibited?* | No |
| **Aboriginal heritage place**<br>*Is the place an Aboriginal heritage place which is subject to the requirements of the* Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006? | No |
| **Incorporated Plan**<br>*Does an incorporated plan apply to the site?* | No |

Gradings of individual properties within the precinct are recommended as follows and as shown in Figure 21:

| No. | Address | Grading |
|---|---|---|
| 129 | Alexandra Avenue | Contributory |
| 131 | Alexandra Avenue | Contributory |
| 36 | Rockley Road | Contributory |
| 38 | Rockley Road | Contributory |
| 40 | Rockley Road | Contributory |
| 42 | Rockley Road | Contributory |
| 44 | Rockley Road | Contributory |
| 46 | Rockley Road | Non-contributory |
| 48 | Rockley Road | Non-contributory |
| 49 | Rockley Road | Contributory |
| 50 | Rockley Road | Non-contributory |
| 51 | Rockley Road | Significant |
| 52 | Rockley Road | Contributory |
| 54 | Rockley Road | Contributory |
| 56 | Rockley Road | Contributory |
| 56A | Rockley Road | Contributory |

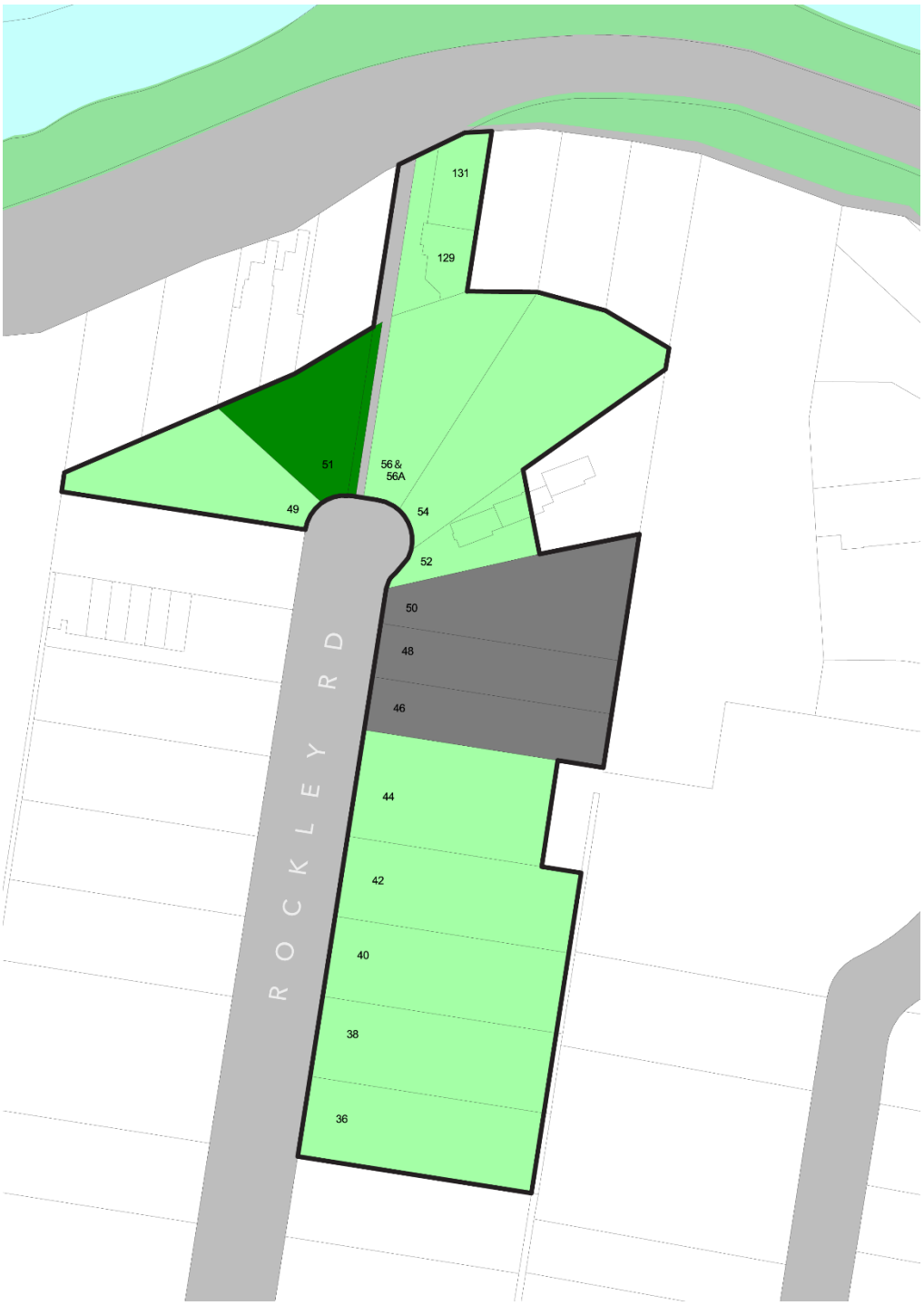



*Figure 22. Grading map.*

## Previous Assessments

*Rockley Precinct South Yarra Heritage Overlay Citation HO146*, Nigel Lewis Pty Ltd, 2005

*City of Prahran Conservation Review*, Context Pty Ltd, 1993

*Prahran Character and Conservation Study*, Nigel Lewis and Associates, 1992

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## References


Context Pty Ltd, *City of Prahran Conservation Review*, 1993.

Context Pty Ltd, *Stonnington Thematic Environmental History*, 2006.

*Herald.*

Landata Victoria, Central Plan Office, Historical Aerial Photography, 1945.

Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) Plan No 37, City of Prahran, 1895.

Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) Plan No 37, City of Prahran, 1933-50

Nigel Lewis and Associates, *Prahran Character and Conservation Study*, 1992.

Nigel Lewis Pty Ltd, *Rockley Precinct South Yarra Heritage Overlay Citation HO146*, 2005.

Public Record Office Victoria (PROV), Parish and Township plans collection.

Sands and McDougall Street Directory, various dates.

State Library of Victoria, map collection.

Stonnington History Centre, subdivision plans.