Attribution, Pedigree and Legacy;
Interpretating 190 George Street, East Melbourne

John J Matthews

190 George Street, East Melbourne was constructed in 1909 as a two-storey house of nine rooms. It remains an externally intact example of Federation era architecture, executed in an elegantly constrained Melbourne Queen Anne style to accommodate the relatively narrow land size. The red brick and rendered facade comprises a ground level prominent bay window of both coloured and leaded casement windows flanking a tuck pointed, arched entrance porch complete with dripstone and label stops. An enclosed Tuscan columned balcony with shingle patterned ballustrading sits above the entrance. The bricks of the upper story are rendered and a dominant half timbered gable-end surmounts an additional set of rectangular leaded casement windows. The roof is of Marseilles tiles with terracotta ridge capping.

On 2 February 1909 building application number 1259[1] was lodged with the Melbourne City Council for a brick dwelling in George Street, East Melbourne. The owner is listed as Elizabeth Cotton Clark, the builder R L Phillips and the architect, C A Cowper; the said work to be commenced by 3 March 1909. The choice of Cowper as architect when the owner's brother was perhaps Australia's leading government and institutional architect has given rise to a number of questions and no small degree of mystery.

The Clark Family

Elizabeth Cotton Clark 1845-1910 was one of five surviving children to George and Mary Clark. Sailing as unassisted passengers from Liverpool, England, the family arrived in Melbourne in 1851 and set up in Carlton.[2] Within a year the eldest child, John James, was employed in the Colonial Architects Office as a drafting copyist on adult wages; he was fourteen. J J Clark's significance as an architect is well documented.[3] He worked throughout the country with major periods in New South Wales and Queensland but spent his last years in Melbourne. The justifiable attention given to J J Clark's career has tended to overlook the abilities of those of his only child, Edward James Clark 1868-1950. More familiarly identified as E J Clark, Edward began his architectural employment with his father in Queensland 1885 but had additional experience with Alfred Waterhouse in London and

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[1] Public Records Office of Victoria (PROV), City of Melbourne early building records (1850-1915) VPRS 9288, 9289.

[2] Information concerning the Clark family has been supplied by Jason Clark both written and verbal 2025-2026 and also from www.wikitree.com.

[3] Andrew Dodd, J J Clark Architects of the Australian Renaissance, 2012.

Oswald Wilson in Perth. In 1905 he set up in Melbourne with his father as J J and E J Clark Architects, National Mutual Building, 395 Collins Street.

The Clark family were close, especially so after the early death of John's wife Mary (Polly) Watmuff, from kidney failure in 1871. Following her death, Edward's care was shared between the Clark and Watmuff family members. Elizabeth lived for a time with John and the young Edward at a boarding house in St Kilda and followed them to Sydney where she remained from 1881-1889. Regarded as fiercely independent and intelligent, Elizabeth was a skilled artist and said to be fluent in a number of languages. Between 1870 and 1889 she made a comfortable living hand colouring photographs, first in 7 Collins Street, Melbourne and then 71 St John's Road, Forest Lodge, Sydney. As the connection to her brother and nephew were clearly strong, the nomination of Cowper for the architect of her house is understandably curious.

Christopher Alfred Cowper

Cowper was born 17 January 1868, the middle child of three sons to William and Charlotte from Cape Town, South Africa. The family emigrated as unassisted passengers to Melbourne arriving 22 December 1883. Within a few weeks of arriving the 16 year old Christopher was engaged as a junior in the architecture practice of Evander McIvor, best known for his Gothic Revival boom era buildings.

The only in-depth research relating to Cowper and his architecture is a Melbourne University thesis produced by the Architect (then student), Hugh M Deacon in 1969.[4] Although dated, the work provides the only academically based information on the architect and is therefore immensely useful. Deacon's research was essentially reproduced by George Tibbits in his 1982 paper, 'The So-Called Melbourne Domestic Queen Anne'.[5]

According to Deacon, Cowper's first commissioned work was probably the family home or more specifically his eldest brother's house at 25 Oak Grove, Brighton in 1889. Cowper's father had been a successful builder in Cape Town and built the Oak Grove house in which the entire family were eventually to live. Between 1889 and 1892 Christopher designed at least six additional homes in Oak Street and others in nearby Aisling Streets; possibly with his father's assistance. Christopher Cowper left the McIvor Practice in 1892 at the height of the economic depression and set up his own office in the Australia Buildings, 49 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne.

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[4] University of Melbourne, thesis collection, Hugh M Deacon, 'Chris A Cowper 1868-1954', 1969.

[5] George Tibbits, 'The So-Called Melbourne Domestic Queen Anne', Historic Environment, Vol 2, No 2, 1982.

Three years later in 1895 the office was closed and he moved to the Mallee district with the intention of starting a new career on the land. Citing an interview with Cowper's middle daughter Beryl, Deacon relates that Christopher's time in the Mallee (specifically Kerang) was not without difficulties. 1n 1898, mounting debts and drought drove him to accept a managerial position with the American based Equitable Life Assurance Company and initially returned to Melbourne, settling in St Kilda. Cowper married Mary Agnes Wait in September the same year and this may have had some baring on the career change.

Cowper was successful in his new role and in 1900 moved to Hobart as the company's state manager. In 1905 the Equitable Life Assurance Company closed its offices in Australia and despite being offered a role in America, Cowper chose to remain in Australia. Whether he had been designing the occasional building during these Hobart managerial years is uncertain but by the close 1905, he made a decisive return to architecture.

Christopher Cowper left for overseas in April of 1906, leaving his wife and two daughters, Lila and Beryl in Melbourne. The reasons behind the trip are still not entirely clear. What we do know is that Cowper was appointed by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) as their Delegate for the 7th International Congress of Architects, to be held in London in July of that year. For a Hobart based Architect who had seemingly been away from the industry for a number of years, it appears a surprising choice. I suggest Cowper may have offered his services in this regard and just possibly saw it as way to renew his contacts and perhaps credibility before returning to the field. We know he was still an associate of the RAIA as a series of advertisements[6] placed by the Association appear in Tasmanian newspapers in 1906 listing C A Cowper as one of only five practising Tasmanian architects connected with the RAIA.

Cowper arrived back in Melbourne in October 1906[7], interestingly his ship departed from Cape Town, so clearly a visit home was part of his overseas intentions. He presented his findings from the International Conference at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) general meeting in February 1907 and was unanimously praised for his contribution.

Christopher Cowper's rather staggering architectural output essentially begins with his return to Melbourne. In early 1907 he established a small office at the rear of 359 Collins Street (Styles Building) and essentially became a speculative builder, designing, occupying then selling at least 33 houses on the Grace Park Estate, Hawthorn between 1908-1912. Beginning with his own home at 25 Hilda Crescent (formerly Hilderbrandt), he constructed large family homes, each in what could generally be described as the Melbourne Queen Anne style. The

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[6] *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, Launceston, 19 April 1906, p 1. The *Examiner* newspaper, Launceston, 2 October 1906, p 1, 4 October p 8 and 6 October, p 9.

[7] Saloon passenger on *Miltiades*, arrived Melbourne ex Cape Town.

Grace Park Estate, features the largest grouping of Cowper designed houses and these can be found in Moore Street along with Hilda, Chrystobel and Linda Crescents. All these houses were designed and constructed between 1908-1912 and all feature Marseilles tiled roofs, similar styled interior fretwork and botanically themed or inspired stained and leaded windows.
Arguably, Victoria's most prolific designer of houses between 1907-1913, Cowper's Queen Anne houses spread from Hawthorn to Camberwell, Kew and Toorak. Whilst the overwhelming number of these houses contained three or more bedrooms, less than half would have been actual commissions but rather successful speculative ventures. By 1915 Cowper had employed Gordon Murphy as chief designer and Reg Appleford as draftsman. The subsequent growth of the practice brought additional staff members, Frank Bamford, Ernest Reed, Don Ward, George Ozanne and Bret Finney. This was the beginning of the firm's commercial period and one in which Cowper had increasingly less design involvement.

He purchased 438 Little Collins Street in 1922 and set about constructing a new building, *Chancery House* which eventually extended right through to 485 Bourke Street. The Practice relocated to *Chancery House* in 1927 and Murphy and Appleford made partners in the new firm, Cowper, Murphy and Appleford; Gordon Murphy's son John is known to us today for his own distinguished architecture career in the partnership of John and Phylis Murphy (nee Slater). The firm of Cowper, Murphy and Appleford were highly successful during the 1920s and 1930s but particularly so with commercial commissions. Hugh M Deacon makes the point that during this period, Cowper's "…whole attention was directed towards the finance company he had formed - Chancery House Co Ltd, the sole shareholders being his family".[8] Following Reg Appleford's departure in 1949 the firm changed its name to Cowper, Murphy and Associates.

Although still the senior partner, Cowper took less of a role in the Practice after 1930 spending a considerable time travelling overseas and when in Victoria a good percentage of time staying at his beloved Macedon country house, *Ard Rudah.* Christopher Alfred Cowper died in 1954 aged 85 and his firm continued under Gordon Murphy's guidance until the latter's death in 1966.

[8] Hugh M Deacon, 'Chris A Cowper', p 19.

Confusion concerning Attribution

Elizabeth Cotton Clark died on 27 February 1910 and the probate papers lodged following her death raise questions concerning the architect of her East Melbourne home. Lodged at the Public Records Office of Victoria (PROV), document VPRS 28/P0003 115/732 dated 5 August 1910 makes the following statement under disbursement of assets:

> Amount owing to Messrs J J and E J Clark Architects of 395 Collins Street for professional services in the preparation of drawings and specifications for the erection of house in George Street East Melbourne and obtaining tenders and advertising. £33. 3. 0.

additionally on the same page:

> Amount owing to Mr J R Thompson for money paid by him to Mr C A Cowper being balance of his claim for work done as Architect for deceased on house situated in George Street East Melbourne. £26. 8. 0.

The probate documents make it clear that both the Clark and Cowper practices had definite but varying roles in the construction of 190 George Street. A thorough search of tender notices for both Cowper and Clark practices for the years 1908-1909 failed to locate any relating to East Melbourne. However, what was unearthed were tender notices placed by J J and E J Clark in *The Age* newspaper for the 12 and 15 September 1906[9]; they read as follows:

> Tenders invited for the erection of a two storied residence (brick) at East Melbourne until noon Friday 21 inst. J J and E J Clark National Mutual Building, 395 Collins Street.

Although seemingly confusing, the 1906 date makes sense when we realise Elizabeth Clark's purchase of the 190 George Street land was finalised on the very week of the tender notice, i.e. 14 September 1906 Vol 3152 Folio 630323. It is clear that Elizabeth was ready to build once the purchase of land was finalised and a concept house design, possibly by her nephew Edward, ready to be acted on. If we accept this proposition then the construction delay from September 1906 until February 1909 needs to be accounted for.

In looking for reasons I believe we need look no further than ill health. Elizabeth Clark's probate documentation notes the additional disbursements for monies owed for doctors and nursing. Amongst these not inconsiderable sums were fees owed to Mrs White for nursing at the *Mena House* Private Hospital in East Melbourne and to Doctors John Cooke MRCS and G Agnew. A smaller allowance is also made for Elizabeth's sister Maria in Williamstown, for monies paid to doctors, nursing and medicines.

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[9] *The Age* newspaper, 12 September 1906, p 11 and 15 September 1906, p 4.

I believe that when the decision to build was finally reached (possibly the close of 1908), J J and E J Clark's practice was simply too busy to formerly oversee construction. Commencing in 1907 they were engaged in constructing the Auckland Town Hall, the Melbourne Women's Hospital and Carlton Women's Refuge from 1908 and the most demanding of all, the Melbourne Hospital, the latter seeing J J Clark travel internationally to assess the latest improvements in hospital design.[10] J J Clark was away from August 1908 and returned to Melbourne in February 1909 the same month as 190 George Street's building application. Edward James had been left in charge at the Melbourne office but he too travelled to Auckland between May and June the same year.
Exactly when or why C A Cowper was approached in regard to 190 George Street may never be known however I believe it unlikely that John and Edward Clark were personally acquainted with him prior to February 1907. Cowper was overseas at the time of the tender notice (1906) and before this was based in Hobart in his managerial role for the Equitable Life Assurance Co. I believe his introduction to the Clarks only occurred after his return to Melbourne and post his role as Delegate at the RIBA conference.

The Roche Sisters

In all likelihood 190 George Street was completed by the close of 1909. Doubt remains as to whether Elizabeth Clark actually moved to the property before her death in February of 1910. As documentation cites her as from George Street and formerly 1113 Hoddle Street, we assume she may have at least briefly lived in or saw the completed house.

On 5 July 1910 the nine room house was auctioned by Gemmell Tucket and Company and sold for £1,395.[11] The successful bidders were the four Roche sisters, Mary Ann, Ellen Cecilia, Katherine and Annie. Originally from Ireland, the Roche Family (Thomas and Johanna) settled in the county of Crossley, Villiers (Warnambool). Thomas and Johanna were successful farmers and proprietors of the Tower Hill Hotel and General Store. Following Thomas' death in 1883 Johanna and her four daughters moved to Melbourne and purchased 163 Victoria Parade, Fitzroy. After their mother's death in 1908, the four single sisters purchased the new and modern, 190 George Street. The Roche family were devout catholics and the mother Johanna left a considerable sum of her wealth to charities before the bulk of the estate passed to her daughters. The unmarried girls remained at the house until the last of the sisters, Ellen Cecilia Roche died 22 August 1953 at the age of 83.[12] There is no evidence to suggest the property was altered in any way during the Roche ownership however the sisters did purchase the adjoining vacant block 190a in 1928; this apparently serving as a

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[10] Andrew Dodd, J J Clark Architects of the Australian Renaissance, 2012, p 244.

[11] *The Argus* newspaper, 6 July 1910, p 8.

[12] *The Age* newspaper, 24 August 1953, p 7.

garden. With no family to inherit, Ellen Cecilia Roche left the entirety of her estate to the Catholic Church, specifically the Fathers of the Blessed Sacrament, St Francis' Church, Melbourne.[13]

Within twelve months of Ellen's death 190 George Street became the property of the Tramway Members Sub Branch of the Returned Sailors, Soldiers, Airmen Imperial League of Australia (RSSAILA). I have yet to find any public advertisement for the property's sale in 1953 or 1954 so one would assume the RSSAILA ownership was a result of direct negotiations between the Catholic Church, Ellen Roche's Trustees and the Tramways Sub Branch.

The RSSAILA quickly employed the Architecture firm of John Muir and Arthur Shepherd to undertake renovations and the following tender notice[14] appeared in *The Age* newspaper:

> 190 George Street, East Melbourne on behalf of the RSSAILA Tramways Sub Branch are invited for alterations and renovations to premises at 190 George Street East, Melbourne - Plans and specifications obtainable at the office of the Architects. Muir and Shepherd 349 Little Collins Street, Melbourne.
> Tenders returnable 12 noon August 2.

The 1954 renovations to 190 George Street were to provide a meeting room and library on the ground floor with the upper floor serving as a residence for the Sub Branch Manager and his family. Despite research and enquiries at the PROV, City of Melbourne and the Melbourne headquarters of the RSL, plans and documentation relating to this 1954 renovation have not been located.

Initial structural investigations of the house (2025) suggest that the Muir and Shepherd renovations were responsible for the removal of a large proportion of the ground level's timber flooring and it's replacement with slab concrete. The dividing wall between what was originally known as the ground floor's drawing and lounge rooms was removed during this time to supply the necessary meeting area and space for library shelving. Uncertainty exists as to whether the fireplaces in these rooms were altered at this time or during later alterations in the 1980s and 1990s. The 1954 renovations may have also included work to the upper level but as substantial building work was undertaken to both levels during the 1990s it is nigh impossible to know without documentation.

The Tramways Sub Branch of the RSL amalgamated in 1972 to become the Tramways and East Melbourne Sub Branch. By 1988, attending members were few and the building and meeting rooms in need of maintenance. A decision to sell 190 George Street was reached in

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[13] PROV, Ellen C Roche: Will; Grant of Probate VPRS 7591/P0003 466/050.

[14] *The Age* newspaper, 23 July 1954, p 14.

1989 and the property auctioned in December the following year for $496,000. In 1991 the Tramways and East Melbourne Sub Branch purchased a cafe in Gore Street, Fitzroy for $190, 000 and this became a more suitable alternative.[15]

190 George Street was sold again in 1991 to the Foster family who undertook major building works during 1992-1993, essentially extending and reshaping the rear of the property, including the erection of a conservatory structure on the building's eastern side. These renovations were also responsible for the addition of some heritage themed but non authentic fretwork and some alteration to the line of the staircase.

Suggestions that the property may have been partially rented during the latter end of the 1980s and again after the December 1990 auction have yet to be confirmed but should not be ruled out. It is perhaps interesting to note that records show the house was briefly rented to Mr M Murphy in 1910 just after Elizabeth Clark's February death and the July Auction to the Roche sisters.

Edward or Christopher, identifying the Design

Despite C A Cowper listed as architect on the building registration form, the fee paid by Elizabeth's executors to John and Edward's firm for architectural services understandably raises doubts.

As suggested earlier, I believe that of her brother and nephew, the young Edward would have been the most likely to have any direct input into Elizabeth house. J J Clark's output was heavily based in the classical form and his work centred around the institutional and governmental. It is more likely that the younger Edward, 38 years old at the time of the 1906 tender, had the responsibility of organising the construction for his Aunt? In assessing the house and J J and E J's rather hectic schedule, I believe the design responsibility was passed on to another; perhaps someone they knew and trusted to use time efficiently. We can postulate various scenarios to explain the reasons behind the delay from September 1906 to February 1909 but regardless, I believe the building itself holds the answers to the question of which architect**?**

In his research, Hugh Deacon has identified two features that invariably appear in Cowper's designs. The first, eave supports that are carried beyond the soffits on prominent Gables and terminated in a unique, pyramid or diamond shaped capping, appear on almost every one of his large Queen Anne style houses.

[15] Information provided by RSL Camberwell, 'Pompey' Elliott Centre.

The second feature identified by Deacon and evidenced in 190 George Street, East Melbourne is Cowper's extensive use of timber Tuscan (Deacon states Grecian) columns. These as Deacon showed in his research can be found on almost all of his Grace Park Estate houses acting in single and grouped formations supporting verandahs and small first floor balconies. Indeed, the small upstairs balcony at 190 George Street featuring two Tuscan columns and shingle patterned balustrade cladding is duplicated at the Grace Estate, albeit flanked by large bracketed gables.

Tibbits suggests another Cowper trait is his treatment of timber window mullions and transoms, which he emphasises by having '…their faces rolled in the profile of a torus moulding'.[16] Regarding this latter point, both the Bay and upper casement George Street windows feature detailed mullions and transoms but these are facetted not rolled.

Where 190 George Street provides conclusive proof of Cowper's hand is in the ornamental timber decoration on the ground floor. This particular stylised internal fretwork has been found with only minor variations on at least two houses on the Grace Estate. Featuring an ersatz kookaburra motif, the timber fretwork surrounding the front bay window of 190 George Street is a virtual match for those found in numbers 18 and 35 Chrystobel Crescent. In addition to the almost identical fretwork are the internal door stylings and coloured and leaded glass patterning. Those at 190 George Street can readily be matched with those of the Grace Estate and it is clear that Cowper, the speculator and developer, ordered in bulk. I imagine more of Cowper's Grace Park Estate design oeuvre could have been located at George Street had it not been for the major 1992 rebuild.

The size of Elizabeth Clark's land would have presented the greatest challenge in Christopher Cowper's history of house design. We can say this with some sureity as all of Cowper's previous creations had at least the standard quarter acre as a base upon which to design. Within days of lodging George Street's building application, a small item on Cowper's Architecture featured in Melbourne's *The Herald* newspaper.[17] Under the title 'Villas that save work - kitchens conveniently planned', the article refers to Cowper's method of design whereby the kitchen '… is made the centre of a nest of working rooms'. The article quickly goes on to bemoan small building blocks, complaining that the greatest foe to progress in house architecture is the person who divides up land too small for a decently proportioned house. He further blames Municipal Councils for allowing pocket handerchief blocks and states a home in the true sense of the word needs ample garden space around it. Given his rather strident attitude to reduced size 190 George Street must have presented a challenge but perhaps it extended his abilities in the process.

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[16] George Tibbits, 'The So-Called Melbourne Domestic Queen Anne', p 36.

[17] *The Herald* newspaper, 23 February 1909, p 3.

Legacy

The examination of 190 George Street has enabled a study of C A Cowper's homes specifically from 1907-1912. In the course of this research I have identified buildings wrongly attributed and at the same time discovered two more previously unattributed houses. I suggest Cowper was responsible for approximately 50 houses but less than half of these would have been commissioned. It is, however, worth mentioning that 190 George Street was not included or recognised as by Cowper's in Deacon's early study but this is certainly forgivable given the large number of houses we now know he produced.

Due to the brutal 1990s alterations 190 George Street offers a difficult challenge. Thankfully the building exterior street face has suffered the least from the incursions of the 1980s and 1990s and should respond favourably with restoration of correct glazing and minor repairs to its lower undressed brick and rendered upper level. Thankfully what remains of the W H Rocke and Co, Wunderlich Art Metal ceilings appear to be authentic and these need to be maintained and incorporated. Further work will have to be undertaken in confirming the authentic fretwork and removing the *faux quasi* heritage additions from 1992. Receipts kindly supplied by the past owners indicate that additional glazing of some doors and windows has occurred; this will require following up to isolate the original from the *faux*. The suggestion of removing the slab concrete and replacing with period correct flooring is commendable however the logistics of its removal may be difficult.

A bonus to the house are the Marseilles tiles and they appear in remarkable condition. Marseilles tile manufacturers all utilised specific trade mark symbols, often prominently placed on the leading front edge of the tile. 190 George Street carries tiles by Pierre Saccomon and feature his five pointed star trade mark.[18] The co joining of terracotta shingles with the original Marseilles terracotta is a natural balance and provides the contemporary acknowledgment and echo of the lost tile clad coach house. I'm assuming this must have gone in 1992? Attempts to locate photographs of the house from this time have, so far, been unsuccessful. The continued use of terracotta provides a clear historical context that links Christopher A Cowper's, Australian Queen Anne designs with Edward J Clark and his time in London working for architect Alfred Waterhouse. Waterhouse was renowned for his large number of terracotta buildings such as the Natural History Museum and was held in high regard by Edward.

[18] The Saccomon family were also known for their anchor and lighthouse branded tiles.

Conclusion

190 George Street is a puzzle with clearly a number of pieces still to be located. I believe that the building's architect has been identified and to a great extent proven to be Christopher Alfred Cowper. Whilst it would be natural for Edward or John to have some small input or commentary upon the design I believe professionalism would have allowed Christopher full rein. It is more probable that Elizabeth Cotton Clark as Artist and client would have had the greatest input. I think it likely Elizabeth chose the Wunderlich Art Metal ceilings as I'm not aware of their use in any of Cowper's Grace Park homes. We should also consider that Elizabeth's intention may have been to operate a small boarding house. Clark family tradition states that Elizabeth was particularly enamoured with the boarding house lifestyle and this may explain the reason for the size of her newly built house.[19] At the time of writing, research continues for plans and documentation specifically relating to the house but additionally for any historical material relating to the formative years of George Street and the rise of East Melbourne as a genteel suburb.

[19] *The Argus* newspaper, 6 July 1910, p 8. The advertisement refers to 6 bedrooms.