

## A Landmark Building

For many years we were intrigued by this building at 127-129 Sydney Road, so distinctly different from others along this part of the road. Obviously a house but for many years French's dental surgery. When was it built? The style is a cross between Neo Tudor and Federation which means that it could be dated either to the early 1900s or the late 1930s.

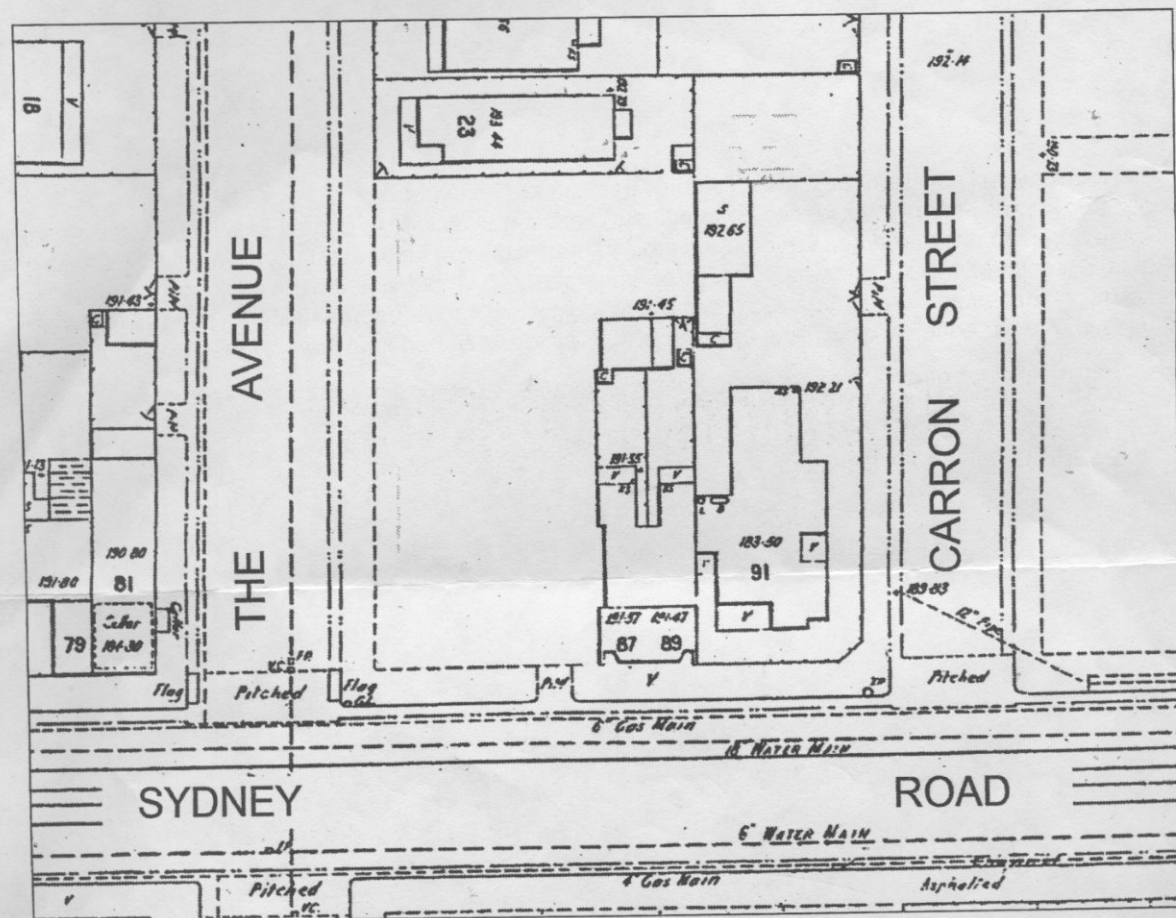
The first house on this site on the southern corner of Carron Street and Sydney Road was built in 1906 and is shown on the MMBW plan dated 1910. Is this the one that we see here today or was it later? The building looks very new but that could be the result of careful maintenance over many years.

Comparison with a 1948 block plan of the existing building when both are reduced to the scale shows an exact match (the recessed porch is not given in the later plan but may be seen on the building today). It might be speculated that the 1906 house

was at some time given an upper storey as neither of the two plans show how many storeys. However an exhaustive survey of the valuations over the whole period does not reveal a sudden increase in the improved capital value in any year. Nor is there any permit for such an extension issued in the years 1931-76. So the 1906 date is confirmed.

This house may profitably be compared to another house serving also as a dental surgery, that at 503 Sydney Road Brunswick, built in 1905 in a similar variation of the Federation Style, but in brick.

Actually 129 (before 1925, no. 91) Sydney Road, Coburg was built for a physician, Francis Reid, who lived and practised there until 1919 when he sold it to a surgeon, Michael Southwick. In quick succession there were two more owners: Jack Lewis, physician and J. Knox Walker, dentist. According to the late Ron French, well-known Coburg dentist, his father Vic French Snr. bought



Part of MMBW Map No. 2352, d. 1910 showing no. 91 now no. 129 on south corner of Carron Street.



127 Sydney Road built 1906, as it appears in 2006

the property in 1922, although the rate books indicate it was 1923.

Since before 1906 there had been two brick shops next door numbered 87 and 89 which in 1924 the owner, Mrs A. C. Skinner, had demolished. Vic French Snr immediately bought this land, doubling his frontage to ninety feet and creating a side lawn and garden for his house. With a hedge in front shielding it from the view of passers-by this garden facing Sydney Road must be the only one along the shopping strip of this busy street.

The house had a bell system to call the maids and other servants necessary to run a large property in those early times.

The French's are the oldest established dental family in Victoria, possibly Australia. Ron and his brother Vic who took over their father's practice in 1946 followed in the footsteps of their grandfather, great-uncle, grandmother, uncle and father. Ron's son Robert continued this family tradition and currently works as an endodontist in Collins Street.

In 1948 another dental surgery was added at the rear of the old building and in the early 1960s a brick extension was made in front which also serves as one of the surgeries.

In 1967 Vic French Jnr applied to Council for permission to build a factory on fifty feet at the rear of the property where originally there were stables.

These had been converted to a dental laboratory where dental technicians making dentures were employed by the French brothers (In the 40s and 50s there were lots of extractions and false teeth – a far cry from today!). The brick building that was erected here now accommodates Balilla Motors, 1A Carron Street. French also built two other factories on adjacent properties that he owned.

Ron French survived his brother Vic but in 1989 retired after 43 years as a dentist. The practice, though not the building, was sold to Dr Jeffrey Kestenberg (See next page for short biographies of the two brothers).

Laurie and Pat Burchell

### Sources:

- Coburg Courier, 25 February 1990
- Coburg City Council Building File No.F/2454/12, 4 March 1948
- Coburg City Council Building Permit 10911, 5 April 1965
- Coburg Rate Records 1905-1986
- Jean Cronin
- Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, Map No. 2352, d. 1910
- Robert French
- Sands & McDougall Directory, 1895-1974