

## Historic Building Appraisal

No. 23 Coombe Road,

The Peak, Hong Kong

The house now known as ‘Carrick’ at No. 23 Coombe Road (which falls on Rural Building Lot 731) was constructed in 1887. It was obviously designed as a private luxury house used for residential purpose. Its first owner was John Joseph Francis (1839-1901), or J.J. Francis, as he preferred to be known. J.J. Francis purchased the plot of land on No. 23 Coombe Road in March 1886. In the following year he had his house, which he called ‘Stonyhurst’, built on the site. The house was named after Stonyhurst College in Lancashire, England, where he had been educated and intended for the Roman Catholic priesthood. The house was renamed as ‘Glen Iris’ in 1919 and it was so called until 1972/73 when it was renamed as ‘Carrick’ – a name that has been adopted since then. *Historical Interest*

Born in Dublin (Ireland), J.J. Francis came to Hong Kong as a military officer in the 1860s. He was admitted as a solicitor in January 1869, then as a barrister in April 1877. Shortly after his own admission to the Hong Kong Bar, he signed an affidavit in support of the application of Ng Choy (伍才) (1842–1922), the first Chinese to be admitted to practise in Hong Kong. Ng Choy, otherwise known as Wu Ting-fang (伍廷芳), was the first unofficial Chinese member of the Legislative Council who later joined the Chinese administration as a diplomat. In April 1879, J.J. Francis was appointed Puisne Judge of the Supreme Court. In February 1886 he was appointed Queen’s Counsel (Q.C.) and became the third barrister on whom the honour had been conferred in Hong Kong.

J.J. Francis was prominent in civic affairs in a number of respects. In 1878 Governor Sir J.P. Hennessy appointed a committee of four (including C.V. Creagh, W.M. Deane, E.J. Eitel, J.J. Francis) to investigate the issue of *mui-tsai* (妹仔, indentured Chinese girls working as unpaid domestic servants). This committee recommended the constitution of a Chinese association for the protection of women and girls. As a leading barrister and Queen’s Counsel, J.J. Francis is remembered in the history of Hong Kong for drawing up the rules for enacting the formation of the said association (i.e. Po Leung Kuk Incorporation Ordinance). Set up in 1878, the said association adopted the Chinese name Po Leung Kuk (保良局) and is still active in Hong Kong today. J.J. Francis’ name was sinologised in the Po Leung Kuk Archives as 法蘭些士 or 佛蘭些士.

The best part of J.J. Francis’ life came after he purchased the plot of land on Coombe Road and built ‘Stonyhurst’. He served on the Finance Committee of the Alice Memorial Hospital (雅麗氏紀念醫院), founded by a prominent

Chinese, Dr. Ho Kai (何啟) (1859–1914) and opened in 1887. In the same year he was appointed as standing counsel for the Hong Kong College of Medicine (香港西醫書院, “the College”) where Dr Sun Yat-sen (孫逸仙) (1866–1925) took up his medical studies. J.J. Francis was on the platform at the first graduate ceremony of the College, held in the City Hall on 23 July 1892. On his death the Court of the College passed a resolution expressing appreciation for his services. When bubonic plague attacked Hong Kong in May 1894 the Sanitary Board (潔淨局) formed a committee of three, with J.J. Francis as chairman, to cope with the emergency. In 1895, the Governor Sir William Robinson sent him a silver inkstand as a commemoration for his services during the plague.

J.J. Francis added to his popularity with the community in general by lecturing on various subjects in the Chamber of Commerce and the City Hall, the topics of his lectures ranged from Jesuitism (in 1872) to the Crown Colonies (in 1889). He was, at one time, editor and proprietor of the English local newspaper *The China Mail* (德臣西報). His name was also identified with the Odd Volumes Society, the Navy League and the China Association, of which he was the local branch chairman at the time of his death. His funeral on 30 October 1901 took place at the Roman Catholic Cemetery at Happy Valley. The Right Rev. Bishop Piazzoli (和主教) conducted the funeral service, among those present being the then Colonial Secretary James Stewart Lockhart (駱克), Sir Thomas Jackson (昃臣), Hon. C.P Chater (遮打) and Dr. Ho Kai.

No. 23 Coombe Road changed hands a number of times in the past. Its owners were, in succession, J.J. Francis (1886-1901), The China Fire Insurance Co. Ltd. 中華火燭保險行 (1901-1903), Ahmet Rumjahn (1903-1910), J.J.B. (1910-1918), D.V. Falcorner (1918-1921), The Hongkong Electric Co. Ltd. 香港電燈有限公司 (1921-1976), Cavendish Property Development Ltd. (1976-1993) and then Juli May Ltd. The aforesaid Ahmet Rumjahn was a broker and estate agent conveying on business on Hong Kong Island; himself an Indian Muslim, he served as a member of the Sanitary Board in 1905 along with British board members and several Chinese.

The two-storey house at No. 23 Coombe was designed in classical style by an architectural firm called Danby & Leigh. When James Orange joined in 1890, the firm was renamed Danby, Leigh & Orange, which evolved into Leigh & Orange when William Danby left the firm in 1894. **Architectural Merit**

The house is built on a platform supported by a retaining wall topped by a classical style parapet. The first floor (*piano nobile*) level is accessed through a portico reached by a flight of external steps flanked by stepped planters, and there is a porch over the landing at the top of the steps. Though modest in scale,

the house has a traditional *piano nobile* at 1/F level and a service floor at G/F level with external ornamental classical features typical of Palladian villas. Palladianism became popular in England from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century and in other parts of Europe, e.g. Ireland where the house's first owner came from. Later when the style was falling from favour in Europe, it had a surge in popularity throughout the British colonies.

The elevations of the house are divided into bays by rusticated piers or pilasters. The corners of the building have stucco groins. Moulded stucco bands run around the building. The ground floor windows are smaller than the first floor windows with curved heads and deep reveals. The wide first floor windows have plain segmental arches with central keystones. The walls are finished with painted rough cast rendering. A moulded cornice runs all around the house at eaves level.

'Stonyhurst' bears witness to a historical period when the coolies' labour was much needed in the construction of buildings in Hong Kong. In 1889, two years after the completed of 'Stonyhurst', the Governor Sir George William Des Vœux described the building of houses on the Peak in these words: "every brick, stone, timber, and other article used in construction, as well as the furniture on completion, requires to be carried on coolies' shoulders for distances varying from one to two miles to a height of 1,100 to 1,600 feet".

Before the construction of 'Stonyhurst' in 1887, J.J. Francis had lived at a number of Hong Kong addresses which included Mosque Street, Alexandra Terrace, Caine Road, Bonham Road and Seymour Terrace. At present, the only remaining building in which he lived is 'Stonyhurst', a piece of architecture with built heritage value.

**Rarity,  
Built Heritage  
Value &  
Authenticity**

No. 23 Coombe Road is one of the oldest surviving European houses on the Peak. It was built in 1887, when the Peak could boast of hardly more than a few houses. At the time the Peak Tramway was not yet opened for public. The Mid-Levels were then struggling to attract residents, May Road being but a footpath, and Caine Road considered fairly high up.

The social value of No. 23 Coombe Road partly lies in its association with J.J. Francis during the period 1886 to 1901, at a time when he did something for the historic development of Hong Kong that merits recognition. As the only remaining building in which J.J. Francis lived, it has interest for historians.

**Social Value &  
Local Interest**

Other historic items on the Peak include the Gate Lodge of the Former Mountain Lodge, Matilda Hospital, Former Peak School, The Peak Tramway

**Group Value**