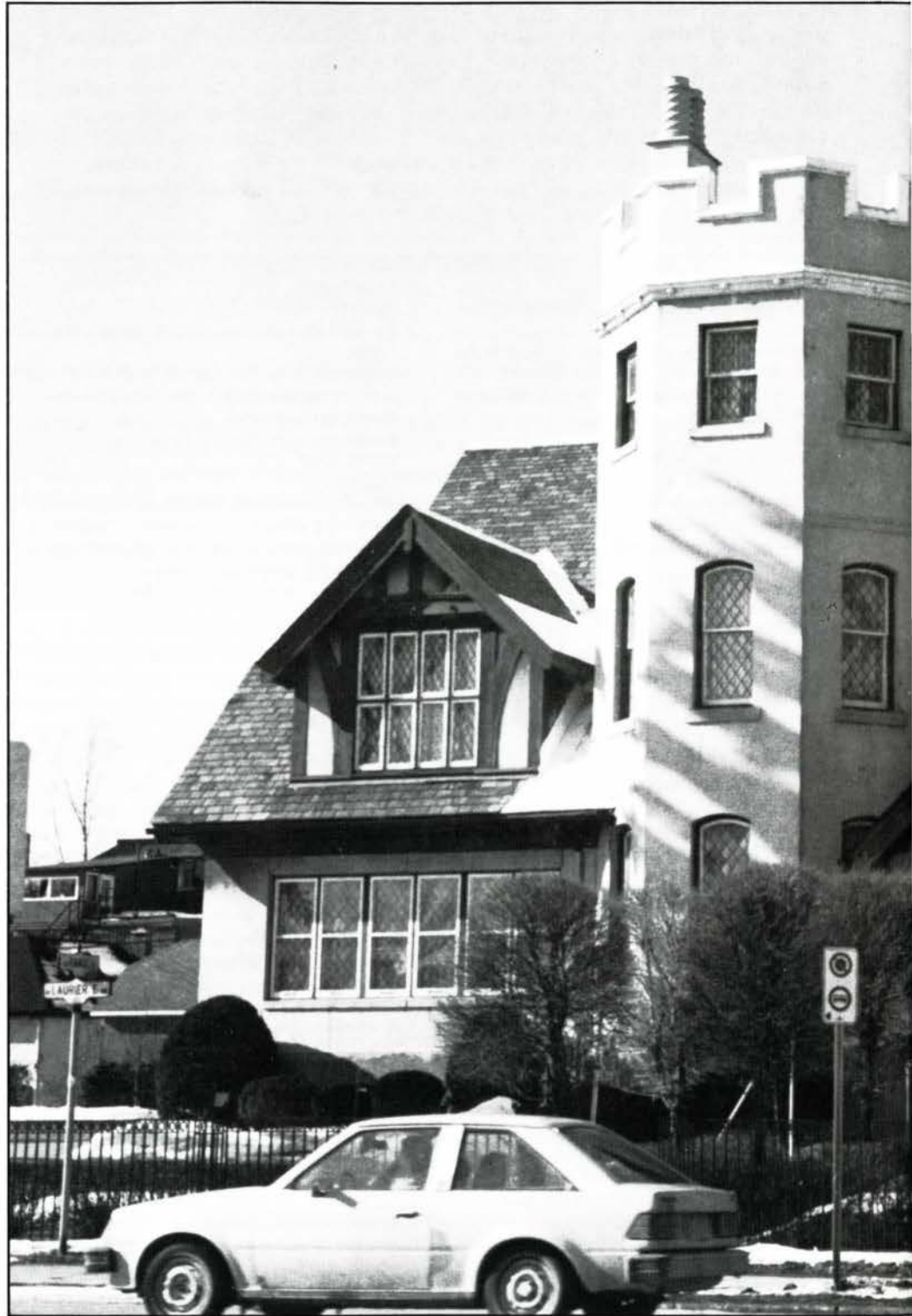


# Munross and Le Circle

*As the character Little Buttercup from Gilbert and Sullivan's HMS Pinafore so aptly remarked, "things are seldom what they seem." So could be said for the imposing mansion at 453 Laurier Avenue East in Ottawa, now the home of Le Cercle Universitaire d'Ottawa. The building, which contains many elements of the Tudor Revival and a Baronial-Gothic Revival crenelated tower, was originally a charming example of Second Empire architecture.*



Over the years, changes to Le Cercle Universitaire d'Ottawa made by different owners reflected their own particular needs and personal tastes. Originally, the land on which Le Cercle stands was part of the 200-acre Crown grant acquired by Louis T. Besserer in

# Universitaire d'Ottawa

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*By Beryl Corber*

*Figure 6. Le Cercle Universitaire, 453 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, as renovated in 1928 by Noffke, Morin & Sylvester, architects. (Photo: author)*

1828.<sup>1</sup> Besserer, Nicholas Sparks, and British Ordinance were the three original owners of the 800-acre townsite that became Bytown, later Ottawa. Besserer's land became known as Sandy Hill. Only with the arrival of the civil service in 1865 did the land begin to appreciate in value.





Figure 1 (above). John Mather, owner of "Munross," 453 Laurier Avenue East. (National Archives of Canada PA 177282)



Figure 2 (above right). Front elevation of "Munross," 453 Laurier Avenue East, in 1903. (National Archives of Canada PA 42469)

In 1860 the property was willed to Besserer's son. It was sold for taxes in 1871 to Sir Henry N. Bate,<sup>2</sup> a leading citizen of Sandy Hill who had purchased additional holdings from this estate. It was not until Scottish lumberman John Mather (figure 1) purchased the property in 1874 from his friend Sir Henry that a house was finally erected on the land.

Mather had come to Canada from Forfarshire, Scotland, in 1857 at the request of Alan Gilmour to direct the woods operations and saw-milling for his company located in the Gatineau, north of Bytown.<sup>3</sup> Mather had been a millwright and machinist in Scotland and was very experienced in forest preparations and conservation.<sup>4</sup>

Gilmour's operations had not been faring well prior to Mather's arrival. Mather's expertise, energy, and thoroughness helped turn the company around, and by 1860 it was flourishing. Gilmour's business acumen ensured continued progress, and by the time Mather retired in 1876 he could contemplate building for himself and his now-grown family a fine home on the lots he had purchased in Sandy Hill two years before.

The 1881 census shows that the household consisted of John Mather, his wife Jean, three of their four children, plus his eldest son Robert's wife Maude and two-year old daughter Annie Eva, his wife's sister, Miss Margaret Lowe, as well as a servant and groom. Clearly, a large and well-designed home was required to comfortably house all these people.

Mather named the house *Munross* after its completion in 1877. His descendants think it was to have been called *Montrose*, after a city near his birthplace in Scotland, but due to his heavy Scottish brogue the house became known as *Munross*.<sup>5</sup>

Two facts might lead one to speculate that Mather supervised the construction of the house himself. First, his father James Mather had been an eminent builder and contractor back home in Scotland. As was common practice then, son John may have worked along side his father while he was involved in the lumber trade—a not-unrelated field—and learned the basics of building firsthand from him. Second, John Mather listed himself both as a lumberman and contractor in the Ottawa City Directories between 1883 and 1907. While separate tenders would have been called for masonry, etc., it is quite possible that Mather oversaw the construction of his new house. There is no evidence, however, that Mather had any design skills.

The original design of the house was in the Second Empire mode, fashionable in Canada from about 1860 to 1880. This style, adopted by the federal Department of Public Works in the 1870s, was favoured in domestic architecture for its suggestion of wealth and stability, optimism and confidence.<sup>6</sup> These attributes described Mather, one-time president of the Free Press Publishing Company of Winnipeg and director of the Keewatin Lumber and Power Company. His obituary notices in the *Ottawa Evening Journal* described him as "a businessman of pronounced ability and integrity," "one of the captains of industry and

1 City of Ottawa, Registry Office Records.

2 *Ibid.*

3 According to John Mather's great-grand-daughter, Dr. Ishbel Currier Leduc, Alan Gilmour knew of him and invited him to join his company. See also Courtney C. J. Bond and John W. Hughson, *Hurling Down the Pine* (Old Chelsea, Que.: The Historical Society of the Gatineau, 1964).

4 The *Ottawa Evening Journal*, 10 June 1907.

5 *Ottawa Citizen*, 8 February 1967.

6 The Second Empire mode was preferred for buildings designed by the federal Department of Public Works, including the Post Office, Elgin Street, Ottawa (1872-76), and the Custom House, Queen Street, Fredericton, N.B. (1878). Its influence spilled over to other public buildings, including the Parliament Buildings, Dufferin Avenue, Quebec City (1877), and City Hall, Centennial Square, Victoria (1878), and to domestic architecture (Shaughnessy House, Dorchester Street West, Montreal (1874-76), Grant House, Elgin Street, Ottawa (1875), for example).





Figure 3 . Side (west) elevation of "Munross," 453 Laurier Avenue East, in 1903. (National Archives of Canada PA 42469)

finance in many parts of Canada," and "a man of boundless charity."<sup>7</sup>

Mather's house could have served as a text-book example of Second Empire architecture, as it embraced many of its distinguishing elements. It was set back from the street, centrally-placed on 3.25 lots and surrounded by extensive lawns. The main body of the residence was 2 1/2 storeys high with a 1 1/2 storey wing at the rear, all clad in yellow brick.<sup>8</sup> Its high mansard roof, carried on bracketed eaves, was pierced by round-headed dormers and surmounted by a iron cresting (figure 2). On the west side projected a 2 1/2 storey half-octagonal tower, again with a mansard roof, round-headed dormer, and roof crest. The windows on the main and second floors had segmental arches with labels.

Extending from the east side of the house was a bow-shaped wood-frame conservatory, and a similarly-styled verandah stood on the west side. The latter is not evident on insurance plans, but is visible on a photograph taken in 1903 (figure 3). A 1 1/2 storey stable with attached one-storey wing lay in the northwest corner of the property. The grounds were beautifully landscaped, and on several occasions won first prize in the Governor-General's garden competition.<sup>9</sup> A simple fence with four decorative gates surrounded the property.

The text-book interpretation of Mather's house might lead one to speculate the design came from an American pattern book, which were widely used at the time. No evidence of this has come to light. I believe, rather, that the original plans for the house were drawn by James Mather, younger brother of John Mather and an architect who practiced in Ottawa from 1873 until his retirement in 1924. His works, which include the First Baptist Church at Elgin and Laurier Streets (1877), the Protestant Orphan's Home on Elgin Street (1876, now demolished), and the Roxborough Apartments at Elgin and Laurier (1910, demolished 1965), all show a purity of style. Some background on James Mather, and a comparison with the house he designed at 335 Laurier Avenue (now known as Laurier House), will substantiate this claim.

James Mather was born at Usan, near Montrose, Forfarshire, on 9 December 1833. He was educated at Bowan Academy, Montrose, and practiced his profession in Scotland until he emigrated to Canada in 1872, a few weeks before his 39th birthday.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps he chose to settle in Ottawa because his older brother, who lived in nearby Chelsea, Quebec, had many influential friends who might prove helpful in establishing his architectural practice. In support of this is his notice of intent to open an office from the Ottawa *Citizen* of 2 December 1872, which names a number of his brother's colleagues as references:

Architect—The undersigned begs leave to intimate he intends practicing his profession—that of architect—in the city of Ottawa and vicinity, and feels assured that his long practical experience in Scotland will enable him to give every satisfaction to all those who may be pleased to employ him.

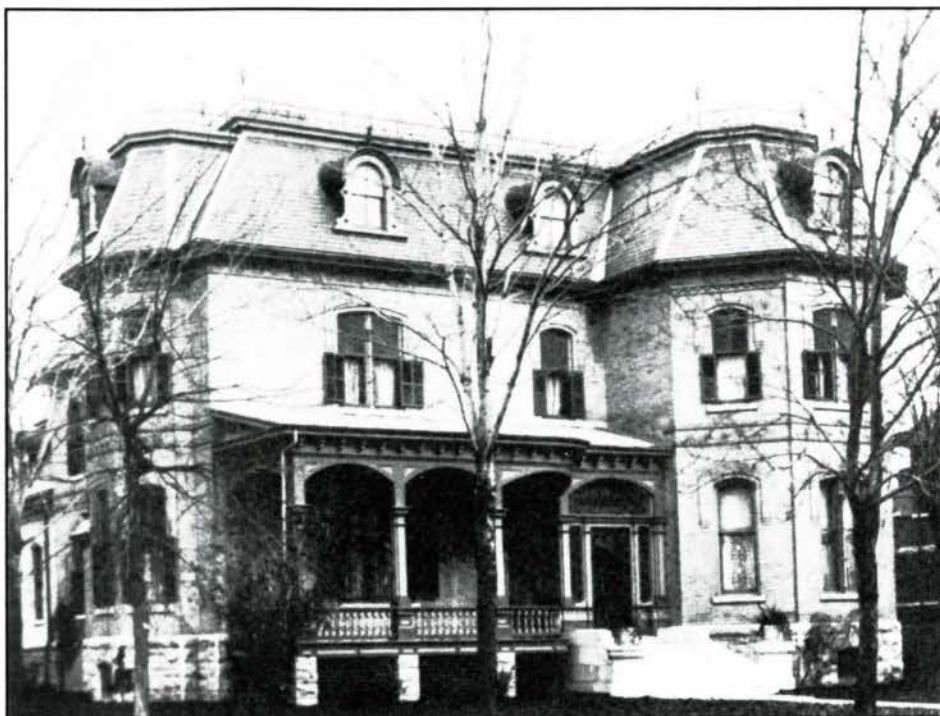
7 The Ottawa *Evening Journal*, 11 June 1907.

8 Dr. Ishbel Leduc confirms the house was built of yellow brick.

9 The Ottawa *Evening Journal*, 10 June 1907.

10 *Who's Who and Why* (Toronto: International Press, 1919-20 and 1924), and obit., Ottawa *Journal*, 6 October 1927.

Figure 4. 335 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, designed by James Mather in 1878. (National Archives of Canada PA 8979)



An office will be opened on the First of January in Bell's Block, opposite the Russel House, and in the meantime, orders or communications may be left with Mr. James Hope, Esq., Stationer, Sparks Street.

References as to personal character, etc., is kindly permitted by Allan Gilmour, Esq., Alonzo Wright, Esq., M.P., Henry N. Bate, Esq., James Hope Esq.

James Mather<sup>11</sup>

Four days later, on 6 December 1872, the *Citizen* carried another announcement of his intention to practice in the city:

Architecture—We would like to direct the attention of our readers to the card of Mr. James Mather, an architect from Scotland, who is about to practice his profession in this city. He is a brother of Mr. Mather of the firm of Messrs. Gilmour and Company, and has references of a high character as to his reliability and good standing in his business.<sup>12</sup>

Within two years of his brother James establishing his practice in Ottawa, John Mather purchased the Sandy Hill site for his future house. Two years after that, John retired from Gilmour's company and started preparations for the erection of his new home.

Many of James Mather's later commissions would appear to be due to his relationship with John. James was the architect for the Bank of Ottawa, for which John was a director. He designed the Rideau Club (1876), of which John was a member; he was also a close friend of Sir John A. Macdonald, who with Sir George-Étienne Cartier founded the club.

In light of all this, it would not be unreasonable to assume James also drew the plans for his brother's residence. Fraternal devotion aside, James Mather was also extremely skilled in his craft, as attested by an article in the *Ottawa Daily Free Press* entitled "James Mather—Ottawa's Pioneer Architect":

He stands at the head of his profession, being a man of unquestionable skill and ability in his line, an expert draughtsman and one who devotes close personal supervision on every detail of his work.<sup>13</sup>

This may have been the reason jeweler John Leslie, the original owner of 335 Laurier Avenue East, asked Mather in 1878 to design his home (figure 4). He, too, was a man of very high professional standards.<sup>14</sup> While neither the Canadian Parks Service, the federal department responsible for the management of 335 Laurier Avenue East (Laurier House), nor the National Capital Commission, which researched the building in preparation for its interpretation programme, had confirmed an architect for the house, James Mather's *Journal* obituary of 6 October 1927 credits him with the design.

John Leslie is mentioned in a notebook John Mather kept for the years 1859-1860. References are made to Mather receiving crutches from Leslie (17 January 1859), who was himself crippled,<sup>15</sup> and getting watches from Leslie (21 January 1859). There are also several mentions of Mather settling his accounts with Leslie, thus the two knew each other some

11 *Ottawa Citizen*, 2 December 1872.

12 *Ottawa Citizen*, 6 December 1872.

13 *Ottawa Daily Free Press*, 15 July 1893.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Lillian Scott Desbarats, *Recollections* (Hull, Que.: Leclerc Printers, 1957), p. 44.



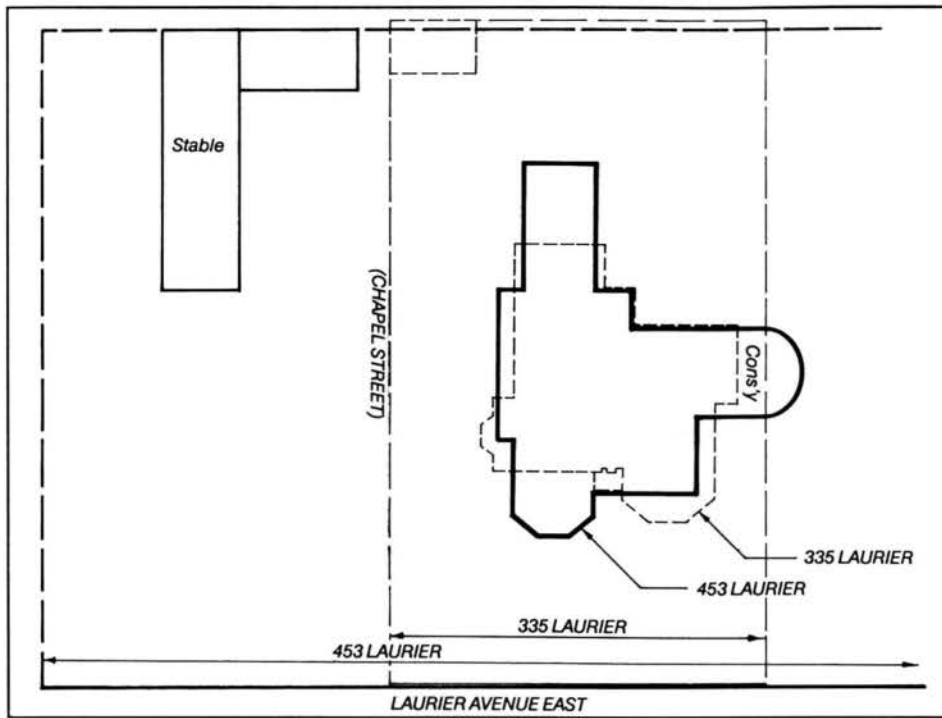


Figure 5. Superimposed site plans of 453 Laurier Avenue East (Munross) and 335 Laurier Avenue East (Laurier House). (From Ottawa Insurance Atlases, 1901, 1912, and 1956 editions, National Archives of Canada)

twenty years before they became neighbours on Theodore Street (as Laurier Avenue East was known before 1904). John Mather's and John Leslie's houses, built two years apart,<sup>16</sup> so closely resemble each other that it would be fair to assume, in light of the above, that they were designed by the same person.

An examination of the fire insurance plans of 1888 (revised to 1901) reveals the similar but mirror-image massing of the two buildings. The basic dimensions are similar, with variances for the wings. And though Leslie's lot was less than half the width of Mather's, the houses were about the same size (figure 5). The elevations of the houses are almost mirror images of each other: both have the same trim, mouldings, and windows, and both were built of yellow brick. They are not carbon copies, though the differences are minor: Laurier House, for example, has a string course between the first and second storeys; Munross did not.

While circumstantial, the evidence is convincing. James Mather, a talented architect, was aptly suited to design a residence for his older brother. And Munross' striking similarity to the Leslie house, known to have been designed by Mather, strongly suggests Mather's authorship of both.

John Mather died in 1907 and Munross was willed to his oldest son, Robert, who lived in Keewatin. Not intending to reside in Ottawa in the future, Robert sold the house to Clarissa Ami, wife of Dr. Marc Henri Ami (1858-1931), an eminent geologist and paleontologist. The Ami family lived there until 1922.

In 1907, shortly after Ami moved in, the rear wing was enlarged and extended to two full floors, and the mansard roof of the tower was replaced with a castellated parapet.<sup>17</sup> Sometime before 1912 the stable was converted to a garage.

In 1922, Ami sold the house to John Ambrose O'Brien and moved to 464 Wilbrod Street (now the Cultural Service of the Embassy of France), which stood directly behind Munross. J. Ambrose O'Brien was a man with extensive business interests in North America, being president or vice-president of at least a dozen companies. He was married to Adele Gorman and had five sons. The family lived there for nearly six years before undertaking to enlarge and change the style of the house. To supervise these renovations O'Brien hired architect Werner Ernest Noffke, who had done a great deal of work in Renfrew, Ontario, for his father Michael John O'Brien, a well-known industrialist and railroad builder.

Noffke, the second architect to be associated with Munross, "swallowed up" Mather's original design with his renovations. Noffke was born in Stolp, Germany, in 1878 and arrived in Canada at the age of five. At only 14, he began a four-year apprenticeship with Adam Harvey, an Ottawa architect. From 1896 to 1901 he worked for Moses Chamberlain Edey (architect of Ottawa's Daly Building); by the time O'Brien engaged him he was working

<sup>16</sup> Ottawa Citizen, 2 May 1879.

<sup>17</sup> Ottawa City Archives, Action Sandy Hill File: 453 Laurier Avenue East. I would like to thank Serge Barbe, Ottawa City Archives, for his kind assistance with this paper.



Figure 7. Proposed alterations to residence J. Ambrose O'Brien, Esq., 453 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, Ont. Noffke, Morin & Sylvester, architects, 1928 [Job #837]. (National Archives of Canada NMC 118351)

in partnership with Morin and Sylvester.

Noffke, known for his interpretation of Tudor Revival, was a versatile architect who could successfully design in many styles:

Regardless of mode, Noffke's houses of the late 1920s are distinctive in style. Horizontal in their proportions, they use gables and chimneys to produce a picturesque, yet well composed asymmetry.<sup>18</sup>

The original massing of the house was not altered when Noffke redesigned the house in the Tudor Revival mode (figure 6). New components added height and breadth to the Second Empire core, and a two-storey wing, approximately one-third of the building's length, was added to the west side. The tower was raised to a full three storeys, with windows on the top storey. The front entrance was extended and enclosed. A verandah was projected beyond the entrance and opened to a square terrace on the east side (today the terrace runs nearly the full length of the building, instead of stopping just short of the living room windows).

The brick labels were removed from the first and second storey windows and stucco was applied over the exterior. The original stone window sills remain. "Half-timbering" was applied to the gables. And finally, in keeping with the Tudor mode, the mansard roof was replaced with a gabled roof inset with dormers.

Noffke paid particular attention to the details, including the medieval tradition of diamond-paned leaded windows. The chimney pots were made of cast stone, sculpted with twisted whorls. At the apex of the gables he placed wooden pendants.

Noffke also drew extensive landscape plans that included a tennis court in the north-east section of the lot. This was flooded in the winter to make a skating rink for the five O'Brien boys. There were numerous flower beds, bushes, and trees set into the large lawn. Today, only the front and east side are landscaped; the remainder has been paved over for parking.

One may ask, Why the change in style? By 1928, the time Noffke undertook the renovations, Second Empire had long been passé. Its meteoric rise in popularity in the 1860s and 1870s was matched by an equally-rapid decline the following decade.<sup>19</sup> Queen Anne style (of which Tudor Revival is a variation) became popular in the mid-1880s and continued to linger well into the 20th century.

The crenelated tower put on the house in 1907 by Ami could easily be incorporated in a Tudor make-over. Altering the roofline in keeping with the Tudor style also permitted more space on the third floor. And the half-timbering and stucco veneer, reasonably easy to apply, completed the transformation. For such a drastic change in appearance, very little disruption of the original structure seems to have occurred (figure 7).

In the early 1940s, with all five sons in the service, O'Brien leased the house to the Department of National Defence, who used it as a residence for the Women's Royal Canadian Navy Service (WRENS). O'Brien, a close personal friend of the Hon. Angus

18 Harold Kalman and Joan Mackie, *The Architecture of W. E. Noffke* (Ottawa: Heritage Ottawa, 1976), p. 7. See also Heritage Renfrew, *Faces and Facades: The Renfrew Architecture of Edey and Noffke* (Renfrew, Ont.: Juniper Books, 1988).

19 Christina Cameron and Janet Wright, *The Second Empire Style in Canadian Architecture* (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1980), p. 22.

MacDonald, wished the DND to have the house.<sup>20</sup> It was called Kingsmill House, after Sir Charles Kingsmill (1855-1935), Royal Canadian Navy Commander during World War I. It was eventually bought by the Crown, in 1942.

The house's 13 bedrooms, seven full bathrooms, and seven fireplaces made it ideal for housing the WRENS. It was equally useful as a student dormitory when the University of Ottawa purchased the property in 1948. It became part of St. Paul's University in 1955.

The building was sold again in 1975 to the current owner, Le Cercle Universitaire, which since its founding on 9 January 1958 had been leasing the premises from St. Paul's. Le Cercle is a bilingual gourmet club that was founded by a group of deans, faculty members, and professional staff from the University of Ottawa. Their aim was to create a place where fine food would be served in an atmosphere of sophistication and elegance.

On 16 September 1977 the building celebrated its 100th anniversary, and the 20th year of the founding of Le Cercle. A sumptuous banquet was served, inspired by a menu served at Versailles in 1890.<sup>21</sup> As was common a century before, cabinet ministers, judges, and prominent business people once more socialized within the confines of its much-altered walls.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Mr. Barry O'Brien, son of J. Ambrose O'Brien.

<sup>21</sup> *Le Droit* [Ottawa], 15 septembre 1977.