

## **Cullinan House up for sale, 2 Ash St. Upper Houghton.**

<http://www.miningweekly.com/print-version/cullinan-house-up-for-sale-2015-11-13>



**Cullinan House. 2 Ash St, Upper Houghton** *Many sources state that Cullinan House is the only remaining example of the Art Nouveau style in Johannesburg. It was built in 1910 by Sir Thomas Cullinan (of Diamond fame) for his brother-in-law Mr Joseph Mitchell. The architects were Robert Howden and Arthur James Stewart.*

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Having bequeathed his name to the world's largest gem-quality diamond ever discovered, it was inevitable that Sir **Thomas Cullinan**'s enduring legacy would be most closely associated with South African diamond [mining](#) and, more particularly, the 3 106 ct Cullinan diamond.

In fact, it was precisely for his "[services](#) to the diamond fields" that he was knighted in 1910. What is perhaps less well known is that Sir Thomas was first and foremost a master builder, his craftsmanship and enterprise being evident in many of [Johannesburg](#)'s earliest grand buildings. One such [building](#), a plush residential mansion nestled in the heart of Houghton Estate and unsurprisingly dubbed Cullinan House, is now on [Johannesburg](#)'s property market for a cool R10-million.

Sir Thomas was a second-generation Cape colonial of Irish descent, born on June 12, 1862, in the small British military [outpost of Eland's Post](#), in the [Eastern Cape](#). Little is known of his early life beyond the fact that he was one of seven siblings, that he left school at 15 and that his father, who was employed on the railways between East [London](#) and [Queenstown](#), died when he was only 17, leaving no property “whatever of any description” to his wife and children.

As he came from an entrenched military background – his grandfather, [James Cullinan](#), having been sent to the [Eastern Cape](#) in the 1840s to serve as a sergeant in the British Army – Sir Thomas volunteered in the Frontier War of 1877 at the age of only 15. When the campaign was over, he, like his father before him, secured a job on the railways. But that career prospect must have proved unsatisfactory, for he soon moved to [Queenstown](#), where he was apprenticed to a builder.

While he proved to be a builder of excellent skill, evidenced by the fact that one of his earliest projects, a Dutch Reformed Church in the small town of Dordrecht, still stands today, with its spire being one of the tallest in the Eastern Cape, like many other Cape and Natal colonials of his generation, Sir Thomas was struck with gold fever and joined the rush to the De Kaap valley in 1884. However, as the gold turned out to be quite elusive, he had little luck in making his fortune and soon returned home to the Eastern Cape to claim 19-year-old Annie Harding as his bride.

No sooner had he settled into married life than gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand. Again, he chose to join in the rush to the new El Dorado, but, instead of trying his luck at mining, he opted to set up a business building houses and office blocks for the inhabitants of the rapidly burgeoning village of Johannesburg. It was through his efforts that buildings such as the first Chamber of Mines building, the National Bank building, the Robinson Bank building and the second Rand Club building were constructed. Significantly, it was that skill as master builder that helped him amass enough wealth to retire at the age of only 36.

The story of his transition into diamond prospecting, the discovery of what is now the Premier diamond mine, just east of Pretoria, and his rise as one of South Africa's most powerful diamond magnates is worthy of its own insert and will be elaborated on at a later stage. Suffice to say that the discovery of that massive and richly endowed kimberlite pipe and, more particularly, the wealth that was accrued from that mine, earned Sir Thomas a place at the very top of Johannesburg's Randlord hierarchy.

At the turn of the twentieth century, it was customary for the Randlords to build palatial residences to the north of Johannesburg's picturesque ridges, which separated them from the noisy and dusty mines that followed the golden outcrop from Randfontein to Benoni. The most favoured suburbs included Parktown, Westcliffe and Saxonwold, all of which are still strewn with expensive turn-of-the-century residences. Interestingly, Houghton Estate, which is today one of the city's most exclusive suburbs, only gained in residential popularity in the early 1900s, the area first having thought to be auriferous and subject to intense prospecting activity. It was only in 1904, when the land which now makes up Houghton Estate was bought by Johannesburg Consolidated Investments and earmarked for residential development, that the city's elite began to settle in the area.

Having already discovered the famous Premier mine and established himself among Johannesburg's mining elite, Sir Thomas was one of the first Randlords to buy and develop property in the new suburb. His flagship development in that suburb is undoubtedly Cullinan House. Interestingly, the house, which was completed in 1910, was not built for his own personal use but for his business partner and brother-in-law, Joseph Mitchell.

While it is interesting to note that the house was designed by Robert Howden, who would become the first president of the Institute of South African Architects, what is perhaps the most important feature of the house, at least in this context, is that it was constructed with bricks and tiles manufactured entirely by Cullinan's very own factory, the Consolidated Rand, Brick, Pottery & Lime Company. In fact, the original interior tiles still feature prominently, despite the house having been "updated to suit modern day living".

The four-bedroom house is a declared national monument and is, according to real estate agent Chas Everitt, the only remaining example of an art nouveau private residence in Johannesburg. It is seldom that an original Randlord mansion comes on to the market, and one hopes that whoever buys the property will appreciate and protect the house's undoubtedly unique historical aura and significance.

See too Estate Magazine 25 August 2014:

<http://estatemagazine.com/cullinan-house-art-nouveau-houghton/>

Text: Jocelyn Warrington : Photographs: Dook



Built in 1910, Houghton's heritage gem, the Cullinan House, is the only remaining example of Art Nouveau architecture in Johannesburg.

### **Noble Living in Houghton**

Designed in the classic-revivalist style of Robert Howden, the distinguished architect who would become first president of the South African Institute of Architects, and built by Sir Thomas Cullinan, master builder, founder of the Premier Diamond Mine and namesake of the largest diamond ever discovered, Cullinan House in Upper Houghton is certainly not lacking in pedigree. And neither is its noble lineage lost on its current owners, American-born Lawson Ricketts and Nick Geimer, who have zealously guarded Cullinan's legacy for the past three years. 'Nick was overseas when I spotted the ad for the house,' recalls Lawson. 'At the time, I had no idea where Houghton Ridge was but, map in hand, I found the little enclave of schools and oak-lined avenues and then I pulled up to the most magnificent house... It was a diamond in the rough, for sure.'



Interior staircase of Cullinan House

The ‘rough’, Lawson refers to is the state of dishevelled grandeur he confronted when entering the indomitable Art Nouveau fortress with her Greco-Roman symmetrical facade, sandstone architraves and crown of classical pediments. ‘Despite being 100 years old, Howden’s impeccable exterior craftsmanship had stood the test of time,’ he says. ‘But the inside was another story.’

*Only one small crack in the brickwork had to be repointed, new gutters fashioned to match the existing half-rounds, and a paint job done to the roof.’ – Lawson Ricketts*

### **Art Nouveau-Saving Renovations**

Lawson explains how the house had undergone numerous renovations during the course of its life as residence to everyone from Joseph Mitchell, Cullinan’s brother-in-law and business associate, to an order of Dominican friars. ‘The original ceramic floor was in such a poor

state that we had to make the painful decision to pull it up and replace it with Georgian slate and marble,' he recalls, adding that bathrooms were also given a sorely needed facelift. 'We put in modern reproductions of Victorian taps, all imported from London, and added Carrara marble trimmings and underfloor heating.'

The couple also installed a designer kitchen outfitted with top-drawer Miele appliances, and all the windows and doors were reconditioned with solid-brass hardware sourced in the US. Off the conservatory, the terracotta patio and pool deck were removed and replaced with slate and an outdoor living room and braai then instated. An interior designer by training, Lawson and his team at Plaid Cabbage Interiors then tackled the task of dressing the rejuvenated home. 'We followed a simple brief: Respect the heritage of the structure but incorporate furnishings and fabrics with a modern durability and luxury,' he explains.



Off the conservatory, the tired, existing terracotta patio and pool deck were removed and replaced with slate

### **Culling out Cullinan Garden's Best Plantings**

He and Nick also disentangled the home from the ungroomed plantings that engulfed it, removing 17 conifers and other 'invader' species and discovering, in so doing, a subterranean wall that would inspire the layout of the back garden. Retaining walls were straightened and 250 rose bushes, hydrangeas and boxwood planted. Lawson is particularly fond of the charming side garden that flows from the dining room. 'It creates an additional entertaining space for eight months of the year when the weather in Joburg is divine until as late as eight at night,' he says. When asked what he loves most about Cullinan House, Lawson is unhesitating: 'The fact that, in only three years, we have been able to reimagine the grand spaces that were originally designed for one of Johannesburg's most prominent families.' Nick's favourite is the bar that Lawson designed especially for him – and where the couple can be found most evenings, rooted beside the open fire, martinis in hands and dogs at feet.



Interior designer Lawson and his team at Plaid Cabbage Interiors worked painstakingly to preserve the home's heritage qualities

The wallpaper in the dining room was chosen from a William Morris collection and is representative of wall coverings that would have been typical in Edwardian homes of the early 1900s.' – Lawson Rickett

### **In the Houghton Zone**

Situated to the north-east of the Johannesburg city centre, on the southern portion of Houghton Ridge, and separated from Lower Houghton by the East-West section of Houghton Drive, Upper Houghton was developed as a residential area around the turn of the 20th century, primarily by Barney Barnato's Johannesburg Consolidated Investment Company (the name Houghton Estate – by which it's also called – is derived from Houghton Estate Gold Mining Company, which initially purchased the property in 1888). Declared a National Heritage Area, seventy percent of the suburb's surviving structures are located on properties

that were developed between 1900 and 1930. Lawson Ricketts, owner of Cullinan House, highlights his favourite parts of the area.

- **The Munro Drive:** Named after John Munro, a director of the Johannesburg Consolidated Investment Company, and initially built from stacked stone in 1919, this circuitous scenic drive connects Upper and Lower Houghton.
- **The Wilds:** Donated to the Municipality of Johannesburg in 1924 by the Johannesburg Consolidated Investment Company, The Wilds – which covers an area of 18 hectares – was established as an indigenous garden in 1937 and declared a National Monument in 1981.
- **The ‘Education Corridor’:** With St John’s College, King Edward VII School (KES) and Roedean School all within a 10-minute walk from Upper Houghton, the morning school run is a breeze.



Green-glazed tiles were purpose-made at the Cullinan Refractory for the skirtings, cornices and arches of the striking entrance hall.

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<https://www.iol.co.za/business-report/companies/cullinans-home-up-for-grabs-1940195>

Johannesburg - One of the last few remaining examples of an art nouveau private residence, Cullinan House, in Upper Houghton, is up for sale.

This heritage home has an impressive past and is regarded as one of Joburg's most valuable architectural treasures.

It is currently privately owned and has just been listed for sale by the Chas Everitt luxury portfolio division. It is expected to sell for around R10 million

