

# **ELTHAM DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

**Incorporated**

**No. A0016285F**

**728 MAIN ROAD (PO BOX 137) ELTHAM 3095**

**Website: [www.tinyurl.com/elthamdhs](http://www.tinyurl.com/elthamdhs)**

**Email: [edhs1@bigpond.com](mailto:edhs1@bigpond.com)**

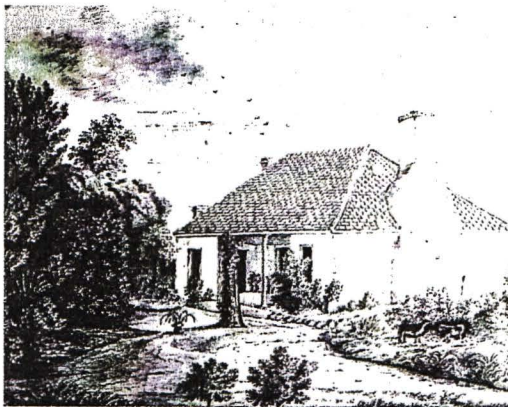
## **NEWSLETTER**

**NO. 191 MARCH 2010**

**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING  
8-00 PM WEDNESDAY 10<sup>th</sup> MARCH**

**GUEST SPEAKER DR ANDREW LEMON  
"THEY'RE RACING AT....ELTHAM!"**

**ELTHAM SENIOR CITIZENS' CENTRE  
LIBRARY PLACE ELTHAM  
(FORMERLY OLD SHIRE OFFICE DRIVEWAY)**



Early sketch of "Culla Hill", Eltham  
(now "Sweeneys")  
home of Thomas Sweeney

**HERITAGE WALKS &  
EXCURSIONS PROGRAM**

**2PM SATURDAY 6<sup>th</sup> MARCH.  
THE THOMAS SWEENEY WALK**

**2PM SUNDAY 28<sup>th</sup> MARCH.  
KANGAROO GROUND  
EXCURSION**

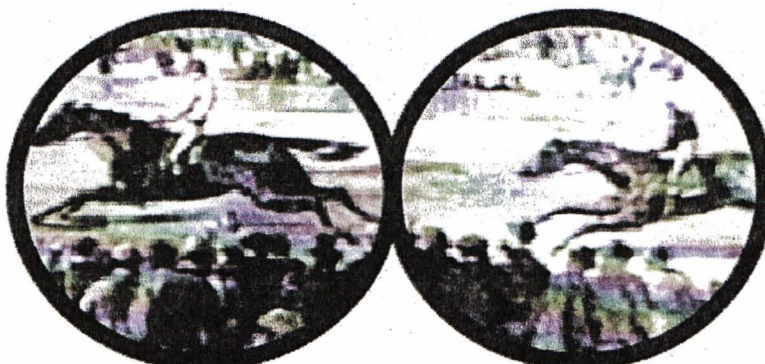
**SEE INSIDE FOR DETAILS**

## **ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

Our March meeting each year is the Annual General Meeting which includes the presentation of annual reports and the election of office bearers for the coming year. The official notification of the Annual General Meeting and the agenda were published in the January Newsletter.

As always, we are encouraging members to contribute to the operation of the Society by becoming an office bearer or committee member. Please give this careful thought and, if in doubt, discuss it with one of our present office bearers. We warmly welcome fresh ideas and enthusiastic participation in the tasks involved in running our organisation.

## **THEY'RE RACING AT ... ELTHAM!**



John Wren, proprietor of the notorious Collingwood Tote in the early 1900s, once seriously proposed to establish a racecourse at Eltham that he claimed would rival famous Flemington. This wasn't entirely out of the blue. Most people don't know that rural Eltham had a long tradition of annual horse races from the 1850s through to the 1890s.

Dr Andrew Lemon, president of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, will be the guest speaker at the Annual General Meeting. He will look at the forgotten history of racing and thoroughbreds in the Eltham district, ranging also across neighbouring areas of historic interest such as Mill Park and Bundoora. There were race meetings too in places such as Ivanhoe, Heidelberg and Doncaster. Andrew will also speak of the place of the horse in Eltham as the district became suburbanized, particularly with reference to the district's prominent role in the pony club movement.

Andrew is an independent professional historian and is author of numerous books on topics as diverse as local history, shipwrecks, schools and biographies, including an epic trilogy, *The History of Australian Thoroughbred Racing*, under the auspices of the Victoria Racing Club at Flemington. Andrew and his family have lived in Eltham since 1982 and he is a long time member of our Society.

Members of the public are most welcome to hear this most important talk.

## **THE THOMAS SWEENEY WALK**

This year we will be continuing our program of heritage walks by providing a variety of walks in different locations around Eltham and nearby areas. The first walk for 2010 will be on Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> March starting at 2pm. The starting point is the corner of Lavendar Park Road and Kent Hughes Road, Eltham South (Melway Ref. 22 A9). Roadside parking is available in Kent Hughes Road. The distance is about 3.5 km and it will take about 2

hours. It includes a track along the Yarra River that is a bit rough in places and a short steep climb in Sweeneys Lane. The track through parkland adjoining the river is quite scenic and there are extensive views of the Yarra Valley from the ridge above

Thomas Sweeney was the first land purchaser from the Crown in the Eltham area in 1840. The family went on to become long term residents, and played a prominent role in Eltham's early history. Most of this walk passes through Sweeney property and we pass the Sweeney homestead which remains on a small part of the original farm. Other locations of interest include Griffith Park and Petty's Orchard across the river in Templestowe.

Bring whatever you need to eat and drink and we will stop along the way for afternoon tea. There is no charge for this walk which is open to the public as well as Society members. The contact number on the day is 0409 021 063. Ring Russell on that number if you need transport and to check for possible postponement if the weather is to be 30 degrees or hotter.

### **KANGAROO GROUND EXCURSION**

For many years now Harry Gilham has been involved with the War Memorial at Kangaroo Ground now titled the Tower of Remembrance. Harry has played a significant role in refurbishment of the Tower and its grounds including construction of the Moor-rul viewing platform designed by Dennis Ward.

Our Society has conducted several visits to the Tower in the past but none since completion of the viewing platform and its interpretive panels.

On Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> March Harry will lead an excursion to see the viewing platform and renovations to the Tower that are currently nearing completion.

We will meet at the Tower in Eltham Yarra Glen Road, Kangaroo Ground (Melway Ref. 271 G10) at 2pm.

Ring Russell on 0409 021 063 if you need transport. Bring your own afternoon tea to enjoy after the inspection.

For those wishing to extend the excursion there will be a visit to the Gawa Wurundjeri Resource Trail at Watson's Creek after we have finished at the Tower. This is a short self guided bushland walking track. Those not wishing to visit this site may make their departure from the Tower.

### **ELTHAM – THE DIY YEARS**

by Diana Bassett-Smith

This is the text of a talk given to the Society by Diana in 2003 and later provided to the Society for our records.

To paraphrase Hillaire Belloc

I will build a house of thick mud to shelter me from the cold

I will hold my house in the high wood

Within a walk of town and pub

And my neighbours shall drink with me

On that social aspect I am going to think back over some seventy years. Depression, jobs scarce, money limited to essentials, land available if one paid the amounts owing on rates. Women worked at basic jobs, had children and stayed home. Even in the 1950s in some areas of employment, if you married, you resigned. I had to. Maybe that's why women

became such adept handymen. {DIY Persons}. Not nearly so today, as I have noticed with our children's friends.

1939 WWII, was perhaps the beginning of social change, the men enlisted, or employed in munitions and women alongside them, education was changing, married, had our families, wives, still, generally stayed home and couples essentially remained a one income family. During the five years of war few if any houses had been built. 1946, men returned to a shortage of houses and materials. There were restrictions on what one could build, for example in size and no verandahs were permitted. There was a lack of skilled tradesmen. Mortgages were generally only available to couples based on the husband's income. War service loans were available to ex servicemen and women. Young people had grown up, they were standing on their own feet in the true outback tradition. They had confidence in their ability. They had matured, outlooks broadened. Grown up in the last twenty years. There were jobs. A low rate of unemployment.

Eltham was known for its individualness, people were impatient, had become more independent, couples were not prepared to wait for supplies or builders, so Eltham became a haven for owner builders.

Land at a reasonable price was available. Grape vine talk of soil types, what a friend of a friend was doing. No sewerage. Piped water maybe. Few made roads, not too many even opened. There was the charm of the area in abundance. Basic shops which most of us can name, a dog box train service, phones, schools and a visiting doctor. The DIY era began with a vengeance.

After buying ones block of land, perhaps following a rough walking track along which one hoped to determine the allotment's correct alignment.

Evenings at home which may have been a flat in town or a bungalow at the in-laws, young people mulling and puzzling over "Modern Houses" books with glossy pages of what one would like to build against what one could afford. We fronted up to the Shire Office with their sketch plan and formalities completed, several pounds lighter, one was armed with the necessary permits.

Couples became owner builders, muddies.

Wheel barrows, shovels, picks and crowbars were not always freely available. Basic hand tools, such as hammers, saws chisels, tapes and levels were in short supply, particularly nails and screws. Oh the advantages of Adobe and Pisé!!

Construction found all around the world, where resources are limited. The famous The Dejenne's Mosque of Adobe, in Mali and nearby buildings in Timbuktu, West Africa, to Eltham. Most know that Adobe is mud brick, and Pisé is monoconstruction such as found in France.

Now back to Eltham

Friends built a large barn of mud bricks and then lived comfortably in it whilst building their spacious mudbrick home of their dreams. None other than Ron and Yvonne Jelbart. They had a house keeper, Miss O'Brien, (Licia) a read head, solidly built woman, who whizzed round Eltham in the Jelbart LHD Jeep, which, of course, was a carryall not only to collect the children from the train but to pick up the building supplies. Miss O'Brien, was part of the home work force and could be found rendering inside walls with a mixture of cow manure which made a great seal of the mud and reduced dust.

Like many Elthamites, we generally used the back gate or short cut across the fence to visit friends. Ron and Yvonne had magnificent, large iron gates from a cemetery at their main entrance, rarely used in early days, the Arthur Street rear gateway was the regular thoroughfare. I think the gates have since been moved to that area.

Today the barn has been modernised and a delight. While a stately house stands atop the hill, a symbol of inspiration, dedication and hard work.

Another home on the opposite hill built by Bernie and Isobel.

Bernard Smith, (Bernie) was a civil engineer, built on a solid concrete foundation, with interior walls of trowelled concrete, and the outside clad in stone collected from their twenty acres by Isobel and Bernie. A huge fireplace built by Jackie Fabro. Isobel built walls, mixed concrete, heaved stones to clad the outer walls, made the garden, frequently helped by Charlie Bode. Construction was over more than seventeen years. Many will be familiar with the flat roof. Bernie had designed their home for the future, the roof is strong enough for a helicopter.

Their huge dining room and lounge was home to many Pony Club and Rural Group parties, and Scout luncheons – there was always time for a drink with friends. It did not matter if the house was finished or not, we still entertained and were entertained. Today it seems everything has to be just so!

Next door the Rices on one side and the Gardiners on the other, they too, were building their dream homes from the earth and rock of Eltham.

If a job was too high or a beam too heavy or a problem with a plan, help was not far away. There was good camaraderie between owner builders.

Eltham hills rang with the sound of cheerful voices, clang of tools, music from a radio or from ardent musicians practising.

Meanwhile, another young couple were planning their dream home on a block at Peter Street Eltham.

No services were available. Water from a neighbour's half inch copper pipe had to be negotiated. A large hole had to be excavated by pick and crowbar for the septic, arrangements agreed to with neighbours to tap the power. So with sketch plans, a ton of hope and the energy of youth, Bruce and Pat Moore began building their Pisé house. They would excavate, mix and shovel mud into the wooden form work, to be evenly spread by Bruce who would tamp it down then ram it with a "Kanga" rammer. As soon as they had built enough to live in they moved in and so had more time to spend building their dream house, during weekends, school holidays and in longer evenings. They had a rigorous work schedule, and would work for a couple of hours then pause, Bruce to practise his cornet for an hour or so, whilst refreshing themselves with a drink and maybe a word with neighbours who were also building, adding to or finishing their houses. Then Bruce and Pat would once more shovel, fill the form tamp and ram. They worked from early morning to late. In between studying, working as teachers and raising their four children. Opposite were George and Berry Davidson and daughter Kate, at their aptly named house, "Mudstone Acre".



The pise house built by Bruce and Pat Moore in the DIY years.

Behind us in what was known as the General's House, Pisé built by John Harcourt, lived Marjorie and Harry Hammond and son Rupert. Harry had a very successful dunnage business in Port Melbourne and was a wonderful source of oregon and other good timber. Another supplier was, of course, Whelan the Wrecker.

(Note 1. Rupert's Ned Kelly Armour)

Many of us rendered the outside of our houses with the "White House Mixture", a bag of Limil, 4 cups of sugar, 4 cups of caesein, water to a thick consistency and would be either painted on with a coarse brush or rubbed on with a bag, "bagging". It preserved and waterproofed the Pisé or mud bricks. Colouring could be added but needed to be done all at once otherwise a wall could end in various shades.

(Note 2.- John Harcourt's Pisé houses invariably had doors or windows at corners – it facilitated construction.)

Meanwhile, in Kangaroo Ground another young couple were living in two car cases with their children as they started work on their dream house, it was very large. She made over seven thousand mudbricks, learnt carpentry so all the doors and jams are hand made. It is a roomy comfortable house yet, as she told me one day, the happiest time of their marriage was with their children living in the shed of car cases.

Even when labour became less scarce being young and seeing what the neighbours achieved was an incentive to others and again no one in those days took out big mortgages as happens today.

People tended to save up till they had enough to buy the fridge outright, the radiogram, washing machine, built the kitchen cupboards, visited Tyes basement for furniture, unless one was fortunate enough to have hand me down furniture from family. We saved for our cars. Owned them.

Residents gradually added on to their postwar restricted sized house as they saved up, materials became less scarce, and we shared 'how to' knowledge. Additional permits with stricter requirements became the order of the day. We were still on a shared 1/2 copper water pipe, which was not coping with growing families. So applied to MMBW for permission to put in a tank. Outrageous. They ultimately agreed so long as in no way could the water from it flow into MMBW supplied water. Easy a separate pipe. We received a permit, bought and erected a stand with neighbours to help put the tank up and presto a reliable source of water. Timber was bought from Harry, roofing materials from where ever and later Les Docksey's.

I well remember building our sun room. We extended the roof and enclosed the Patio. I was 7 months pregnant and keeping fit climbing up and down the ladder as we wanted it completed before our second infant arrived, that was nearly 50 years ago. Yet, it only seemed like yesterday. I was reminded of it recently as I climbed on the roof of our hayshed to nail down the iron after the storms of late.

Now clusters of "Muddies" are throughout the Shire not all owner built. Today people still ponder about their dream home, ensuites, spas, games room, four or five bedrooms, so they become double income parents, maybe with children in care. A large mortgage. Sometimes I think perhaps if they chose something out of town like many of us did and enjoy a simpler home life some would be happier with time to share a drink with friends and neighbours and kick a football with their children.

So, "Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam be it every so humble, there is no place like home".

#### NOTES

*Note 1:*

*Rupert Hammond had a great toy! I could just lift sections of it and it barely fitted over my head. It is original Ned Kelly armour, the children used to play with it. Today Rupert has it stored carefully in a special trunk.*

*He is a successful lawyer in Canberra. His mother is Marjorie Clarke.*

*Note 2:*

*The building regulations at that time contained very little about mud brick, Adobe and Pisé construction standards. In fact, many of us contributed to the research and persuaded banks and others that mud was good if handled properly, gradually it came to be recognised as an acceptable building medium, also to meet requirements for mortgage lenders. CSIRO did quite a lot of work in this regard – Guy Gresford, Secretary of CSIRO, lived next door in a timber John Harcourt house, the first timber house that John built. Guy was very aware of "Muddies" having had a long association with the district. In fact, his in-laws lived in Swan Street in a Harcourt Pisé house.*

*Others too were using their experience and influence on the authorities to recognise Adobe and Pisé.*

## **BOOK LAUNCH**

***Eltham's Serious and Their Neighbours*** (100 pages, B5, February 2010)

This new book by Ken Eckersall follows from his publication of 2000, *Eltham Inhabitants*, with some stories retold and many new stories. *Eltham's Serious and Their Neighbours* tells an Eltham narrative from 1850 to the present. The name 'Eltham's Serious' refers – affectionately – to Eltham/Wesleyan/Methodist/Uniting Church/Eltham Montmorency Uniting Church. *Eltham's Serious and Their Neighbours* presents a kaleidoscope of Nillumbik through stories, and the national and international historical context. Some stories are drawn from Eltham District Historical Society resources including R.D. Taylor 'Reminiscences' of 1931 and the Family History Project.

The Book Launch will be at 2.00 pm on Sunday 18 April 2010 at Eltham Uniting Church, corner of Main Road and John Street. Opportunity will be provided to view church artifacts such as the stained glass windows, the World War I memorial and the bell.

All members of Eltham District Historical Society will be most welcome.

*Ken and Laurel Eckersall*

## **DONATIONS TO THE SOCIETY**

Gayle Blackwood of Morrison Kleeman Real Estate, Eltham has been occasionally donating to our Society real estate brochures and her own photographs of mud brick and other interesting local houses. She has a particular interest in houses by prominent mud brick designer and builder Alistair Knox. Recently she has donated the balance of her collection including a large album of brochures and a significant number of photographs.

The amount of material warrants its filing together as "The Gayle Blackwood Collection" cross referenced to our street address folders.

We are grateful to Gayle for her thoughtfulness in donating this most interesting material to the Society.

\*\*\*\*\*

Bob Manuell is a former councillor of the Shire of Eltham and proprietor of the former Briar Hill Timber and Trading Company.

This business had a large premises in Sherbourne Road, Briar Hill that originally included a sawmill. The site has been redeveloped in recent years and the only evidence of the business that remains is a brick chimney.

Bob has donated a DVD produced from movie film showing the operation of the business in the 1950s when the proprietor was his father-in-law Freddie Squire.

Jim Connor  
President

Russell Yeoman  
Secretary

David Johns  
Treasurer /  
Membership Secretary  
Phone – 9434 3357

Phone - 9439 5916

Phone - 9439 9717