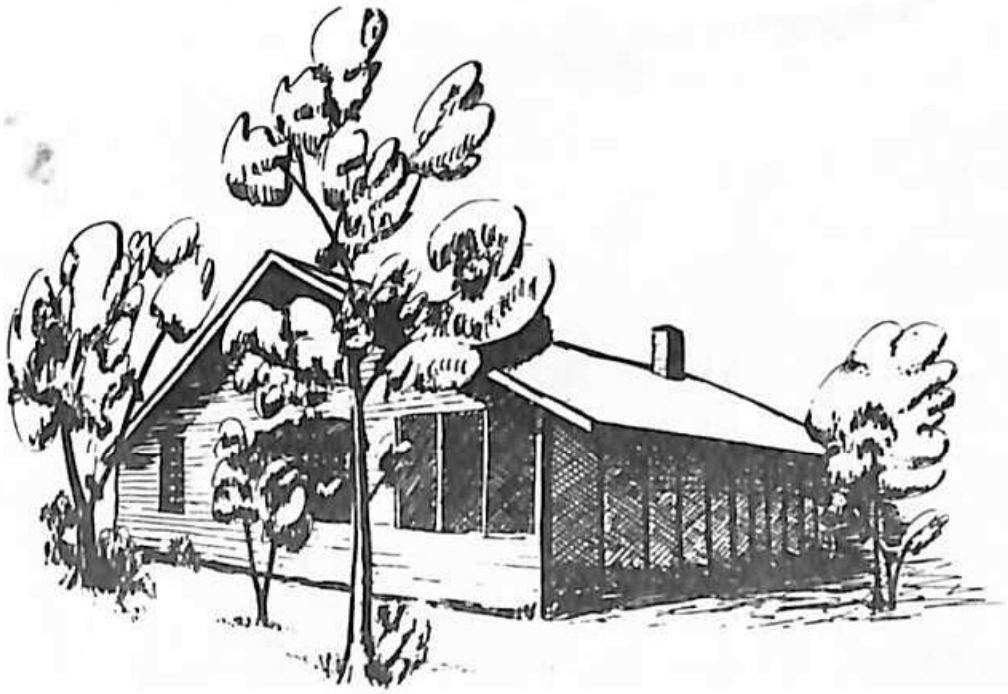


The Elmore Bungalows At Blackburn

by Angela Taylor

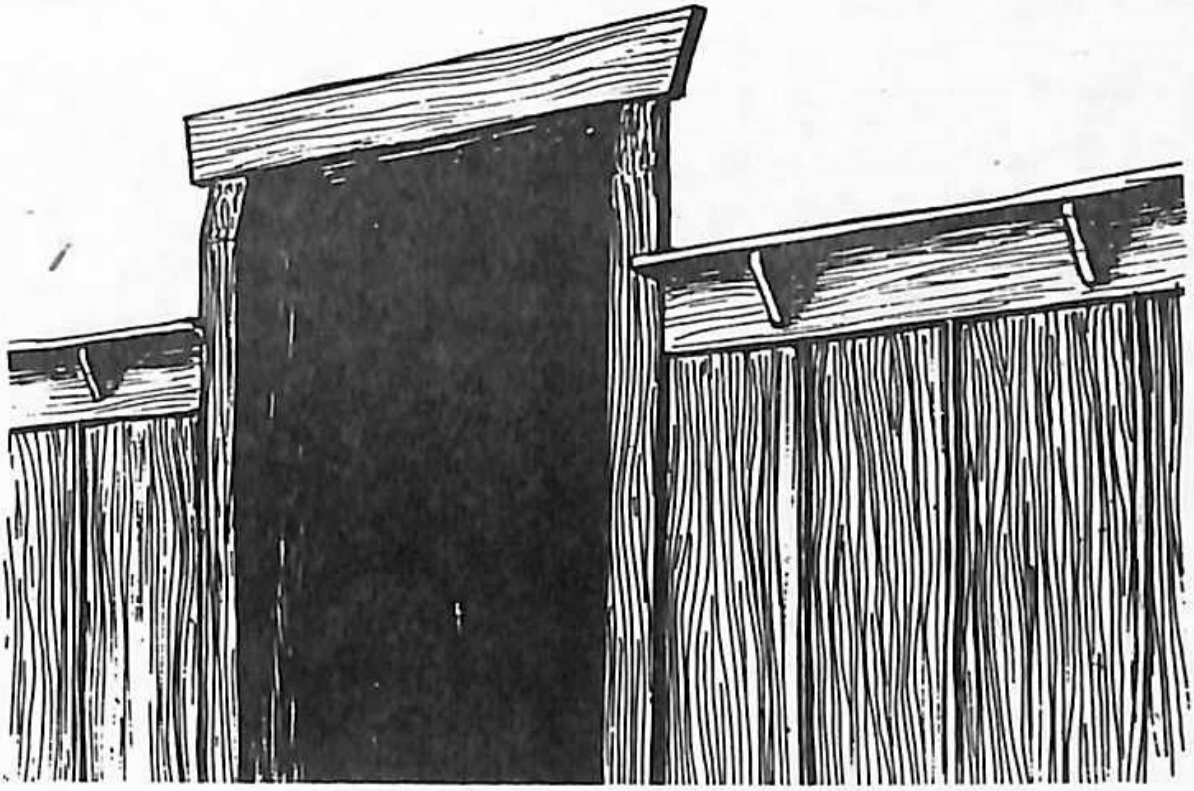
The oiled timber bungalows associated with Blackburn, in the way that mudbrick houses belong to Eltham, were created by A.J. Elmore, a man ahead of his time. The houses, built largely from Australian timbers by the traditional craftsman's techniques, were at home in the landscape of gums and native bush of early Blackburn.

When A.J. Elmore purchased 4 large lots averaging 100' by 335' in King's Paddock, in 1910, it marked the beginning of a remarkable building enterprise in Blackburn. A year or two later, he acquired rights to an adjacent lane and bought another large lot for his timber yard. Here, he set up a joinery, machine, paint and cement shops and extensive drying racks. In 1912, on the crest of his 'splendid Building Rise sloping to a ti-tree valley', he built his family home, 'Kyalite'.

'Kyalite' was an oiled jarrah bungalow with gabled roof of corrugated iron. Shaded by gum trees, a fly-wired verandah, 45' by 10', ran the length of its eastern frontage. It was the first of more than 30 Craftsman bungalows which Elmore was to build during the next two decades for clients who came to live in Blackburn for its salubrious air and bush scenery.

They belong mainly to an area of central Blackburn known to early residents as 'The Paddock'. It was bounded by the railway line, Middleborough and Blackburn roads, and Blackburn Creek to the south. A broad swathe of untouched bushland covered the gentle rises, becoming thicker on the slopes to the Creek. Here and there it had been cleared for poultry farms, orchards and landscape gardens. Cart tracks traversed The Paddock before the roads were made after 1925. In those early days Elmore had to transport his timber by horse-drawn jinker through the bush to more distant sites in The Paddock.

In the 1920's Elmore helped to pioneer the use of Victorian Hardwood for building. His Blackburn bungalows in this period were nearly all constructed in hardwood: the weatherboards, flooring and interior joinery in beautifully grained Mountain Ash. Up to six railway trucks a week of unseasoned mature



hardwood from sawmillers at Black Sands were unloaded at the Blackburn railway siding for Elmore's timber yard. The timber was quarter-sawn and air-dryed for up to 4 months in vertical racks. Elmore was air-drying and building successfully with hardwood well before kiln-drying was firmly established in Victoria.

To minimise the effects of any further shrinkage of his air-dryed hardwood, Elmore developed an original joint for architraves. The stiles of the architraves had a splay at the top over which the head of the architrave fitted. If they shrank a little after construction, no gap could be seen. They are aesthetically pleasing because the grain of the wood is highlighted by the splay. Elmore believed that timber houses were appropriate for Blackburn's heavy clay soil, because the movement of foundations which caused fracturing of plaster linings was minimal. Timber bungalows, their exterior woodwork treated with Bunker Oil for protection, also fitted harmoniously into the treed landscape.

Elmore's Blackburn bungalows are distinguished by the excellence of their craftsmanship. In the joinery Elmore and his joiners used only hand tools, such as trying and smoothing planes and steel scrapers, to form the finished surface of timber. His training as a craftsman began in the 1890's when, as a young lad, he worked for the local carpenter-cum-undertaker in Penshurst in the Western District. Tuition in Pure Geometry at the Working Men's College (now RMIT) at the turn of the century, two years working as an 'improver' in Western Australia, and then as foreman carpenter under Otto Juncken for the Melbourne building firm of Clements Langford provided the solid basis on which his skills developed.

The Depression brought Elmore's building in Blackburn to a standstill, and it did not begin to pick up until 1934. Together with his son Jack, who 'served his time' with his father, Elmore continued to build houses in Blackburn until 1948. During his working life, he built houses in many other suburbs of Melbourne, including Tunstall and Vermont, and in country towns throughout Victoria. As well, he found time to serve as a Councillor for Blackburn Riding in the new Blackburn and Mitcham Shire Council which was formed in 1925. In 1928 he was elected President of the Shire.

Throughout The Paddock, many of Elmore's bungalows have been painted and altered as needs and fashions have changed. Some have been demolished. Fortunately, a few remain with their original form and detailing intact to provide a composite picture of Elmore's unique work. Mr. Irvine Green's excellent photographs capture the essential qualities of Elmore's craftsmanship: the 'simple good taste' in form and detailing of the bungalows, and 'the mellow radiance of wood tones'. The photographs on display are a selection of the work to date.