

TRANSCRIPTION INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW SCOTT: BLACKBURN HISTORY

GB: Today is the twenty-ninth of April, 2026 and this is an interview with Andrew Scott at Whitehorse Historical Society and Museum complex with Giselda Bannister regarding the history of the Elmore houses. Um. Thank you for coming in Andrew and please share with us what you would like to tell us.

AS: Well, nice to be here, Giselda. I've lived in Blackburn on and off since nineteen fifty-three when my parents moved into Laburnum Street. Um. They lived – ah – well until they both died and now my brother owns that house immediately opposite the Elmore sawmill. Um, I lived there until I was in my early twenties then moved away from the area and, um, back in the late nineteen eighties, my wife and, then, one child and I moved back into Laburnum Street. Um, we actually bought from my parents, the spare block that they occupied next door to the Elmore house. So it was absolutely directly opposite where the Elmore Sawmill had been. Ah – near where Elmore Walk now runs between Laburnum Street and South Parade, which is on the bike track [coughs]. Pardon me. Um, so on and off I've lived in Blackburn for close to sixty of my seventy-four years and um, I have very fond and strong memories of a lot of things that ah- existed and happened during the nineteen-fifties and sixties particularly. Obviously since then lots of people know what's happened in the last thirty-odd years but I'm imagining a lot do not remember what was happening in the nineteen-fifties and sixties. So it was generally that sort of history I'd like to share and because of the proximity of where I used to live – and still live- and to the Elmore Sawmill and having grown up in an Elmore-built house, I guess that the most often researched – ah – topic in and around Blackburn for many people. I remember that there used to be Elmore tours around the Bellbird area looking at what were then, probably, ten or twelve Elmore houses still in existence.

GB: Who ran those tours?

AS: I thought it was just a local Blackburn interest group. Um, but they – if they're not happening now, I don't know whether they are or not. But I don't think they are. But probably they were still running up until around two thousand?

GB: Perhaps we'll start with the sawmill –

AS: Mm

GB: -and what you know about the sawmill.

AS: Well, it ran across the width of two, if not three, standard housing blocks and ran all the way down to -ah – the creek at the northern end of the block. [Coughs] South Parade didn't extend that far but it did extend up to the back of the sawmill - it was obviously a handy delivery route for the timber, I suppose. And there was a creek that ran all the way -um, along from South – or from Blackburn Station I suppose – all the way down to nearly where Laburnum Station is now, before crossing over Laburnum Street and heading on south down

to join Gardiners Creek near where Laburnum Primary School is now. Um – one of the interesting things to me was -ah- when I was speaking several years ago with Sophia Erry – She was a long-term resident of Laburnum Street and we got to know each other, only a year or so before her death, um. And we'd catch up every – every week when I'd go and take her bins out 'cause she was quite sick then. But she was a double P-H-d, and was very interested in history -ah- and she was talking to me about some of her memories of the land – the area around there even before she moved into Laburnum Street and going back to the fifties and before. And she was referencing a piece of historical information, which talked about where A. J. Elmore sourced a lot of his timber and she was saying: 'Yes, he got it from the creek'. Now she expressed some surprise that he would go so far away to go to the creek at the bottom of Laurel Grove South of Laurel Grove North -um, being Gardiners Creek. And I said: 'No, no, no – it wasn't that creek the person would have been writing about. They would be referencing the creek at the northern end of the sawmill'. I mean that was the obvious place – I didn't know that for a fact. But it made sense to me that he would have all these gum trees around – outside his back door effectively and have to go a kilometer or more away and up and down the hill to Gardiners Creek. And so it made me realise that even a really erudite person who'd taken a special interest in Blackburn, um – didn't know the difference between what that reference was and what the truth of the matter was. Ah. So that's what got me, I suppose, between the eyes, thinking: 'There's things I know that I don't think many other people do know and what are the chances that that information's going to be lost, um, if I don't share it with someone before I go. Now, I'm in no hurry to die but then, I suppose, not many of us are but I'd just like to take this opportunity to fill in gaps or just tell a story of my own.

AS: I suppose my strongest memories of the sawmill are waking up in the morning and hearing the circular saw going, as it always did. Of playing in the sawdust clippings and things on the ground around the saws with my local friends. Ah – Laburnum Street, in the very early days, was not bitumenised. That only happened, probably, in the late fifties. Laburnum Station didn't exist then. That was built probably – oh, it must have been in the fifties or sixties, because I used to catch the train on Laburnum, as a school boy, from nineteen sixty-four on. Um. And – the creek that ran along the northern end of the Elmore sawmill, um, was piped underground from Blackburn Station across Laburnum Street near Salisbury Avenue, where the Laburnum shops now are. And it was piped all the way down to the back of Garie Street, G-a-r-i-e, just near Laburnum Primary School, where our three children all went. I'd actually gone to the Blackburn South State which was in Canterbury Road. It was one of the schools that the Kennett state government sold off in the nineties when he became Premier. Um. Laburnum Primary School had actually been set up – Oh, I'd say I the – ah- mid-sixties, somewhere around then. My brother went across – up from Blackburn South to Laburnum in the first year of its operation. He might have gone across in about grade three or something like that. But I didn't. I'd finished at Blackburn South at that time. I then went up to Box Hill High for a year and then – surprisingly to me – my parents

said: 'Well, you're off to Scotch College. We've had your name down forever!' And so I spent the next six years at Scotch. And that's what I was referencing before, when I used to catch the train from Laburnum Station. There used to be a tip, a rubbish tip, down at the end of Laburnum Street near where the creek used to cross it. It was unmanned. It was just an open piece of – probably flood-prone land, where builders' waste and stuff would be dumped. I don't remember it as – you know – a smelly place. I don't know that household waste was dumped there. To my knowledge, we used to have um, galvanised rubbish bins that were collected by the garbos every week. And – ah, so I think it was mainly building stuff. Which would make sense, because directly opposite there, um, the tip – was where Stuart Spicer, a well-known builder, also in Blackburn, lived. He had a big house and did a lot of building around that area. So, I wouldn't be surprised if he used the area across the road as his dumping ground.

GB: Can I backtrack just for a moment and ask – you mentioned waking up in the morning to the sound of the circular saws in the morning from the timber mill. What time did they start work and – ah- how many days a week did the mill operate? What were the hours, do you remember?

AS: No, I don't. It's funny though, when I started to tell you about that, my memory was of Saturdays. Um. I have no reason to explain why that was the case. But possibly because it didn't start operating until after I'd left for school. And on Saturdays, I was obviously home from school and heard it early in the mornings. But -um- it to the best of my knowledge, it operated probably six days a week. I don't think it operated on Sundays as a rule.

GB: And how long was it in operation for, do you remember?

AS: I don't know when it started obviously but I think the first of the Elmore houses was probably built in the – you know- twenties and um, maybe – I think our place was built in around nineteen thirty-two or something like that. Um – and – ah- I – my mother was friendly with quite a good watercolour painter, John Flexmore. And she got him to come over to our place and do a painting or two in one of our garden area which is now the block on which we built our home. We're still there. And the other one was looking across to the sawmill. And it was a painting of the sawmill, ah – with AJ's yellow ute parked in the driveway. I clearly, used to remember, it was always there. It was a distinctive looking car, I can't remember what model or make it was but – and that's featured in this painting. And my brother has that painting at his place.

GB: Perhaps tell me now a little bit about –

AS: And I wanted to say –

GB: Yes?

AS: So I reckon that was - I think it was - about nineteen sixty, that painting but I don't think it was all that long after that, that it stopped. I imagine it had well and truly stopped by nineteen sixty-five.

GB: Tell me a bit about the house - or the houses - and what you remember about the houses.

AS: The distinctive features of all the Elmore houses were - they were a weatherboard that was black-oiled, treated, so just from looking at the house, you'd know it was an Elmore. Inside there was timber paneling - often quite dark timber paneling. Again with some of the black timber architraves around the walls or the doors. The doors were usually blackened, but the timber was just a - I suppose - whatever brown colour. - it wasn't too dull. Our sitting room and hallway were quite dull when I was growing up because that was um - the default setting of the - of the room that it wasn't that you didn't have lights on inside but you needed them because the rooms were pretty dark. They also featured what we used to call 'sleep-outs' and a sunroom which were rooms that were under the roofline of the house but were only protected from the elements by flywire screens. And in the hotter months we'd sleep in the sleepout, my brother and I. And if it was raining outside, you'd often get a spray from the rain coming in on you. And we had trees immediately outside the - the sleepout and - um - when the Brushtail Possums decided to go for a feed there, they'd scare the be-jesus out of you! [Laughs]. And - oh - the sunroom was on the eastern side of the house and it also just had a flywire screening all the way around it, but it was presumably designed to catch the morning sun. Um, it would be quite a warm room early on in the day but then cool down ideally, late in the day. And, yes, sometimes we'd decide we were sick of sleeping in the sleepout - we'd go and set up a bed in the sunroom and sleep there. The house had - a couple of open fireplaces - brick open fireplaces. We had a hot water cistern in there which - what was it called - a briquette heater. And we had a briquette shed built by Elmore, which is a similar style. So I'd, as a kid, often - occasionally, not often, go in and climb over the briquettes. And it wasn't particularly comfortable. I was inhaling a lot of coal dust, probably - as I learned later in my science lessons, I was probably breathing in coal gas and uh - it was, it was one of the things that made me think - I was in Box Hill station - they had a huge pile of briquettes next to the platform - to hose those down - to dull down the amount of gas and dust that would come off those. 'Cause, I guess it was not just a health hazard but from breathing it in, but it was potentially quite flammable. Um - and we had an outdoor laundry there with a copper. We've actually still got the copper from home. We put ice and drinks in it from time to time. It's a nice feature and - ah - but it was basically the sink in which the hot water would be put and the handwashing that the mother would do, was done then. And of course, it was my mother who would be doing the washing, not the kids or the father. Because that was the time.

GB: And was the kitchen under the roofline as well?

AS: Yep. Yep. We had a pantry – ah – which contained all of our stocks as you would expect. But it was a walk-in pantry off the kitchen and had – what was it called? It was a meat-safe, I suppose. But it was like – where you put the things that you wanted to breathe but keep for the next meal or something. I forget what the description of it was, but that's – yeah, that's where you put stuff that didn't go in the fridge. But needed protection.

GB: Was it paved – was that area paved in a different way?

AS: No just lino.

GB: Okay. What can you tell me about AJ Elmore, if anything?

AS: I can tell you his first names were Algernon John. But he was known to everybody as A.J. There was a relative of his, Minnie Elmore – I knew her as Minnie, but her name, I think, was Marjorie. I don't know whether she was his wife or sister, but they had a big house that fronted – or – ran through from Laburnum Street on the north side down to South Parade. I think it faced onto South Parade, only a couple of doors up from the back of the sawmill – or timberyard. And he also had a son, I think, John Elmore. And they built together, I think, a house in the nineteen fifties or sixties. Probably the fifties, which was quite modern. It wasn't a typical Elmore house, but it was just at the very northern end of what is now Elmore Walk, on the eastern side. So it's the corner of Elmore Walk and South Parade. Is it still there? Probably not, but I'd have to walk past it again and have a look. And then he had a brother, I think and older brother, called Septimus. So we used to know him as 'Old Sep Elmore'. Which is why, I guess, I assumed he was older than A.J. And A. J built a house for Sep, which is still there. Again, it wasn't a typical Elmore design, um, but it's on the southern side of Laburnum Street, one door west of Myrtle Grove. So it's – it was the closest house to where the tip I was talking about before, at the bottom of Laburnum Street was.

GB: Thank you. I'm sorry I'm just trying to think of further questions to ask while you're here, but – is there something else also, you'd like to share, aside from these –

AS: Yeah. I think the – um – the Blackburn shops. There were no shops that I remember down at the Laburnum shops until after Laburnum station was built in the – probably because it was on the tip site. So Laburnum station being built, the creek crossing over Laburnum Street being piped underground made the opportunity for some commerce down at that part of Laburnum Street. Because it's a decent walk up to Blackburn. Probably about a ten-minute walk from there. Box Hill was even further away. [Pause]. And the Blackburn shops out in South Parade included Rafteser's which was the general store, the – in – in South Parade there's a bit of a park and there's a photo or two of the Rafteser's store. I remember you used to walk through that and there was the smell of fertilizer and other supplies and you'd find mice and rats running in and out. I imagine it was that sort of a place that was absolutely of its time in the nineteen fifties and before. I was born in fifty-one and only got there in fifty-three. Um, there was Rob's Cycles, just the other side of the railway lines, which was just heaven for a sports-mad young boy. You'd walk into Rob's and the

smell was of rubber from the tyres on the bikes that he used to make. And I think he was quite a handy cyclist - competitive cyclist in his day. I only ever knew him as 'Robbie' or 'Rob'. I found out his name was George - George Robertson, I think, years later. I got my first bike from there but the other thing he used to sell was football gear. He'd sell footies. He'd sell footy boots. He'd sell jumpers and socks that were in your favourite team's colours. And - ah - it used to be brilliant to kit yourself out on a Saturday afternoon with a couple of friends from round the corner, we'd take our footy, we'd be in our full gear. We'd only be eight or whatever and we'd walk up to Morton Park and watch either Blackburn playing or Blackburn United in the churches comp. play. And as we got a little bit older, we'd volunteer to operate the scoreboard for the Blackburn United games and usually they'd reward us with a quarter of an orange at three-quarter time when we'd go out on the ground to hear coach harangue his team. I subsequently - when I left school - I played a few years with Blackburn United down there which was a nice sort of road journey, I guess, for me to have done that. And, ah, back in those days we would walk to school sometimes, walking up Laurel Grove from Laburnum Street down over the - the bridge at the bottom and then cut through Sheehan's farmland which was on the south side of the creek which ran for quite some distance. Hec Sheehan, who was probably an old man, he'd be long dead now - but I think he was the son of someone else who'd set up the farmland. But it's the end of Sheehan's Road which ran north-south from Canterbury down towards the creek. And so that was the route of choice. Unless we walked the other way down Pakenham Street, there were various choices. You had to cross the creek on the way up to Blackburn South State School. And even before I was walking to school, I'd catch the bus from Blackburn Station - I can remember walking along in the cold mornings of winter - along South Parade when the puddles just actually had ice over the top of them. Then for four pence you would be able to catch the bus. It'd drop straight outside the front of the school and the same on the way back. That was the public transport option which probably, once I'd got to about grade three, I didn't use anymore and was just always walking or riding my bike.

GB: As we're mentioning Blackburn South Primary School and I'm not sure that we have a lot on the school in our archives, can you give me some memories of Blackburn South Primary?

AS: It was big. It would have had a thousand children. And - ah - I was - I started there in what was called 'Bubs' when I was four and a half. Prior to that I'd been at kindergarten at the - what's now - the Uniting Church on the corner of The Avenue and Blackburn Road. They had a kindergarten there. Back in those days it was the Presbyterian Church and - on the corner of Gardenia and The Avenue was where the Methodist Church was built, probably in the late fifties. And then those two churches merged - I was part of the Sunday School group, I suppose - and those two churches, quite informally amalgamated years before the formal union between the Presbyterian, Uniting and Congregational churches. And the driver of that was a minister called Doug McKenzie, who was a real people-person. And he was instrumental in - not just joining the congregations together - he had a - gift of betting musical - religious musical productions - going. So he didn't - he didn't play

much of a part in them – a little bit of a part, but he – real driver of that series of shows that was probably seven or eight different shows that were written – all musical by Marjorie – Marjorie Spicer or – yeah, Marjorie Spicer. She was the wife of Stuart Spicer, who – the builder who lived down at the bottom of Laburnum Street. And she was very musically creative. And in some of those she was helped by Roma Williams, who was the mother of my best friend. And she was also quite talented musically. But all of the Sunday School kids loved getting into – getting up on the stage and singing these songs which were quite modern and tuneful, and catchy for the times. And we'd do a lot of productions in the – in the Uniting Church Hall, the one on the corner of Blackburn and The Avenue. Not all of them there, some were done in the Methodist church hall. And we went touring. And we'd go to other churches and down to Lorne – I remember we did something in the Lorne Theatre – cinema theatre. And we even performed at the Myer Music Bowl and I remember we did a couple of shows there to a crowd that we were told was about two thousand people. Which is a big deal for us. One week later, 'The Seekers' appeared at the Bowl to a crowd of which was reported as two hundred thousand. That helped us keep our feet on the ground. [Laughs]. So that was in the mid to late sixties. But you know it was the place where there was a lot of socializing opportunity for teenage boys and girls. The practice of Sunday School was central to it because of the opportunity it created to socialize together, not – I don't think we were there for the religious – we were there for one another.

GB: Um, you've been talking for about half an hour. Are you getting a bit tired?

AS: A little bit, but I'm fine. Um, but if you're a bit tired – I haven't told you much about Blackburn South –

GB: No, no. Let's go back to that –

AS: Yep.

GB: And we'll cover that perhaps –

AS: Ah – I was there from nineteen fifty-seven, when I was in 'Bubs'. I then skipped grade one and in fifty-eight I started in grade two through to sixty-two and then in sixty-three went onto Box Hill High for that first year. There was some terrific memories of that. They used to have a big assembly ground on the bitumen where all the students would line up in their classes, in a big square with the school band playing a marching beat 'cause you'd have to march on and march off the start and end of the assembly. There was a siren that used to go, which I think was probably left over from the war – or something like that. But that would signify the various breaks. And – ah – I got the prize job in grade five, of being the siren monitor. Occasionally I'd be at lunch and I'd get a big surprise when the siren rang to tell us it was time to go in, because that was meant to be my job [laughs] and I'd forgotten all about it. We probably had two, or three, four maybe, different classes in- at each year level. And the size of the class would have been forty or fifty. [Pause]. Always would just have one teacher for the class. So – Mrs Allen would be our 'Bubs' teacher. She would teach

us everything on the - the beginners' syllabus. Then in grade two, Mrs Kennedy would do the same. And then we had the legendary Jack Highett as grade three. Jack Highett was, I think, was the founder of the Gould League of Bird Lovers.

GB: Oh?

AS: So, it became almost automatic that if you were in grade three A, which was Mr Highett's class, we'd all join the Gould League. And we'd all get a badge with a bird on it - or something. But - yeah, he was renowned as a tough man, but incredibly enthusiastic when it came to birds. One of the things that would be talk of the - the year when you'd know who was going to be your teacher for the following year, was - 'what were they like?' And Mr Highett had the reputation of being pretty enthusiastic with the strap. And he - he was the one who made sure that when you were being disciplined with - by him - with the leather strap, you had to hold the palm of your hand out and up, so he - he didn't have to bend down too far. He had a good go at an exposed hand. Never seemed to hurt all that much - clearly the most painful weapon for a teacher to use was the feather duster - where you'd just whip the back of the bare knees with the cane handle. And I remember getting that from Mrs Kennedy in grade two and that really did hurt. But of course when you were getting the strap in grade three - ah - ah - you would do - you wouldn't really cry, a. because you didn't want to cry in front of your classmates and b. because it didn't hurt as much as one thought it was going to. But we would always put on a bit of an act, 'Oh, gee that hurt a lot!', just so Mr Highett didn't bring you up for another serve. Ah - in grade four it was Mr Anderson, in grade five it was Mr Green. And Mr Green - Ozzie Green, I think his name was, who I knew well enough to call Ozzie as I - in the decades afterwards. He was vice-principal but also the teacher we had in grade five. He was terrific. And, um, then we got to grade six and we had Mr Gomersall as our teacher, except that he was in a car accident, I think the day before the school year started in grade six, and he had - He survived and turned up at school later on. But we got a different teacher that year - so out of the blue came Mrs Chapman. And - they were - they - that was the roll call of my teachers but really enjoyable - Oh! I can tell you one of the things we learnt in grade six and you'd have topics written up across the top of the blackboard which ran a long way across the front of the classroom and one of the topics that I clearly remember, was 'Assimilation' - written in chalk across the board. And it was all about the way in which the government of Australia wanted Aborigines to be made to fit into the White Australian - Protestant-type of mould. And, that's what we were taught. And so, as a ten or eleven year old I grew up thinking, 'Well, Assimilation must be a good thing'. Clearly, with the benefit of hindsight, we learned a lot of what we shouldn't have been doing and how deeply hurtful it was to many Aborigines. But - um - it perhaps threw a little bit of a light on why 'baby-boomers' are slower than Gen-X'ers and Gen-Y's to realise the significance of what Aborigines have been through in Australia. Because as impressionable ten year olds we were told this is a good thing. Why would we think otherwise? And we didn't think otherwise. We wouldn't have had to my knowledge, a single Indigenous student at the school. It was - more that the

people who stood out as being a bit different were largely, Italian I would say. We had a few Italian kids in the school and, um – one of the things that would make them appear different was not just their surnames but the clothing that they would wear in the fifties – which seemed to be home-made clothing in a lot of instances. And it wasn't something that we made them feel good about either. We would – we would tease them and there were some – a couple of Maltese boys one year ahead and in my year who we just – we quite liked because they were good at cricket and footy. Ah – and that – being good at sport was like a passport to acceptance – if not admiration.

GB: Thank you very much Andrew. I think maybe we should call it quits there 'cause otherwise you'll get tired talking. It's been very interesting and – um – we'll be pleased to hear more. Thank you.

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