

## A Brief History of Blackburn

Blackburn was named after James Blackburn (1803–1854), civil engineer, surveyor and architect, who had been transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1833 for forgery. Granted a free pardon in 1841, he continued his remarkable career in Van Diemen's Land as a well-respected architect and surveyor until he decided to move with his family to Melbourne in 1849. Regarded as the founder of Melbourne's water supply (with Clement Hodgkinson), James Blackburn died of typhoid fever at the age of fifty-one. It was Hodgkinson who named the creek after his colleague. The settlement, which subsequently grew along the creek, became known as Blackburn Creek. The original Travellers' Rest was built in 1861 on twenty acres of land in Whitehorse Road, purchased by Joseph Counsel the first licensee. After Healesville was founded in 1864, the Cobb and Company coach set up a service from Melbourne, via Blackburn Creek, through Anderson's Creek (now Warrandyte) and onwards to Healesville and Wood's Point. The Blackburn Creek Post office opened in January 1876, indicating the number of settlers in the area had risen.

The major development, however, occurred when in 1882 the rail line was built between Camberwell and Lilydale (with a station at Blackburn Creek). The opening of the railway on 1 December 1882 triggered great interest from many people and companies in Melbourne. At this time the name '*Blackburn*' was adopted. The Freehold Investment and Banking Company, owned by Sir Matthew Davies, purchased 1000 acres of land surrounding Blackburn Railway Station. They are credited with damming the stream which made the Blackburn Lake. Irregular in shape, deep as 50 feet where an old clay pit was included, and surrounded by regenerated natural indigenous vegetation, the Lake has the appearance of an unspoiled Australian bushland.

The Company set about to create a beautiful suburb, a '*Model Township*' that was to be the '*Toorak*' of the eastern suburbs. Within two years the company had set out streets with bluestone kerbs and channels, formed footpaths illuminated with gas lamps, and built some substantial houses. One of the major attractions in Blackburn written about in the *Box Hill Reporter* of August 1889<sup>1</sup> was the lake, a natural water channel 'the beauties of which have been enhanced by the art of man'. The newspaper waxed lyrically about the rugged beauty of the area and the homes '*nestling among some stately trees*'. People came by steam trains in converted cattle trucks to enjoy picnics in the bushland setting. When the Adult Deaf and Dumb Society (now Adult Deaf Society of Victoria) bought and occupied the Lake and surrounding land in 1908, the area remained a popular recreational area. It was zoned '*Open Space*' both before and after its purchase by Nunawading Council in 1964.

The builders realised very early on that the tall trees were an added attraction to the area and so although by 1910 the eastern portion of the Blackburn Township estate had been subdivided, the sale advertisements featuring the blocks were able to state . . . '*fortunately still well studded with fine varieties of eucalyptus.*'

Some of the first houses, built soon after subdivision, remain in the area. One of the most influential designer/builders in Blackburn was Algernon J. Elmore who by 1916 had established his home and workshop in Blackburn. He was a proponent of the '*Arts and Crafts*' and '*Fresh Air*' movements of early twentieth century. He was one of the

<sup>1</sup>

Robin Da Costa, *Blackburn: A Picturesque History* (Lilydale: Pioneer design Studios, 1978) pp. 36-44

pioneers of Victorian Hardwood construction, including weatherboards, flooring and interior joinery in his Blackburn bungalows, embodying those movements' ideals of closeness to nature, naturalistic designs and craftsman construction. Known as a keen conservationist, he custom designed each home around the Blackburn landscape so that it sat naturally within each site. He would also offer planting advice on suitable native species having a great personal interest in Australian native plants. His designs have a unique and distinctive Australian character with their large insect screened verandas and the use of native hardwoods. Although many of these early blocks have since been subdivided the legacy of those times remains in the deep blocks, treed gardens and rights of way. His influence is still felt in Blackburn where people treasure their tall trees and the shrubberies, where birds and possums share the environment.

Elmore wasn't the only proponent of the '*Fresh Air*' movement in Blackburn. In June 1915 the Department of Education commenced operation of the '*Open Air School*' located in the Blackburn Township Estate subdivision. The school provided twelve-month periods of respite for sickly children from the industrialised inner suburbs of Collingwood, Richmond and Fitzroy. The department believed that the fresh air of Blackburn, bush environs, activities such as nature study, native shrub paintings, bird observation and the provision of a healthy diet would restore the health of these sick children. The school remained in operation until 1964 when the increasing number of social welfare programs offered by state and local governments decreased the need for such a program.

Blackburn was the home of painters such as Frederick McCubbin, whose '*Bush Burial*' scene was painted in his backyard in 1890.



Frederick McCubbin - '*Bush Burial*' painted in Blackburn.