

ENGLISH HOUSE

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| Address | 50-52 Philip Street, Lower Plenty |
| Significance | Local |
| Construction Date | 1947 |
| Period | Postwar |
| Date Inspected | January 2021 |



Statement of Significance

What is Significant?

English House at 50 Philip Street, Lower Plenty is significant. It was constructed in 1947 for returned serviceman, 'Frank' English, to a design by Alistair Knox. The 'foreman' of the building crew was the artist and mud-brick builder Sonja Skipper, then based at *Montsalvat* in Eltham. In the mid-1960s, new owners – the eclaté weavers Edith 'Mollie' Grove and Catherine Hardess/Hardress – engaged Knox to undertake timber additions, extending the dwelling to the west and north as well as providing an additional bay in the east. Around 1996, a new wing was constructed in the west and other alterations occurred, including the rebuilding or recladding of some mid-1960s walls in mud brick.

The significant element is the original (1947) footprint of *English House*, including the skillion profile of its roof, exposed timber beams, broad eaves, adobe chimney and rendered cap, walls and piers of mud brick/adobe, tripartite full-height and triple-leafed French windows (including those relocated), timber lintel (north elevation), original entrance (south elevation), and paved rear patio.

Internally, the mud brick/corbelled fireplace and inglenook, including benches and timber lintel are also significant.

Later additions are not significant, although the utilisation of mud brick for walling in the circa 1996 development complements the aesthetic of *English House*. The front and rear 'bush style' gardens enhance the setting of the place.

How is it Significant?

English House is of historical and aesthetic significance to the City of Banyule.

Why is it Significant?

English House is of historical significance as the first mud brick building designed by Alistair Knox, an acclaimed practitioner of environmental building. The construction of *English House* was undertaken by a small amateur crew, including Knox, led by the talented Sonja Skipper, the only person involved in the project with hands-on experience with adobe. Her 'foreman' role was undoubtedly rare in the highly gendered building trade at the time. The small size and frugal/reductive character of the original *English House* is indicative of key postwar dynamics, especially austerity conditions, building restrictions and the gathering influence of the modern movement. Its mud-brick walls and utilisation of 'bush timber' attest to the problems faced by the aspirational postwar homeowner – a dire shortage of conventional materials. At completion, the small-scale *English House* attracted widespread public attention as a successful experimental model in unorthodox/austerity construction that allowed for a fluid, indoor-outdoor, 'modern' living environment. Such coverage was important in fuelling the wider mud-brick movement over the late 1940s and animating Knox's building career. More broadly, *English House* is illustrative of the emergence of a postwar community in the Lower Plenty area, associated with Eltham at the time, distinguished by its creativity and embrace of 'alternative' environmental living. This aspect is amplified by the long association of the noted eclarté weavers 'Mollie' Grove and Catherine Hardess, who are responsible for much of the tree planting at the property. (Criterion A)

English House is of aesthetic significance as a striking mudbrick design in the municipality, the original core of which remains broadly intact. Alistair's Knox's first attempt at mudbrick building reflects a bold experiment in challenging conditions dictated by lingering wartime rationing and a limited budget. At *English House*, Knox produced an inspired merging of the 'primordial' and robust aesthetic of handwork mud brick and 'bush timbers' with the core tenants of the postwar modern movement, such as careful siting, solar responsivity and a pared-down, 'honest' character. The result was a highly unusual design for the late 1940s, the underlying elements of which came to epitomise his later, influential concept of environmental building (informally, the 'Eltham style'). The bank of elegant timber-framed, triple-leafed French windows, flanked by thick mudbrick piers, are emphatic reflections of Knox's engagement with a then-nascent vein of regionalised Melbourne modernism that continued to evolve over the postwar period. The substantial adobe fireplace and inglenook at the heart of the original footprint is a noteworthy, increasingly rare feature. (Criterion E)

Description

English House is situated parallel to the contour and off centre on a double allotment that falls progressively away from Philip Street. The building is located below the level of the street on a platform excavated from the hillside. The setback between the dwelling and street has been built up considerably since construction to align with the latter and the primary residence is now reached by descending stairs. The front garden is comprised of native vegetation, low rock and timber sleeper walls, and features two gravelled car parking spaces. Another path meanders to the east, providing access to a contemporary freestanding studio residence (no 52).¹

As *English House* is largely concealed or obscured by its siting and orientation or screened by vegetation, this assessment depends in part on aerial photography, contemporary photographs and architectural drawings.²

English House has undergone three known phases of alteration and additions, each of which has expanded its original footprint. These are depicted in the annotated photograph below.

The first iteration of *English House*, constructed in 1947, had a small rectangular footprint of around 84 square metres that contained an open living area/kitchen, a bedroom (which could be curtained off) and a small bathroom (left of the entrance). This size and basic layout reflected postwar economic constraints and strict size restrictions.

The 1947 *English House* was capped by a skillion roof supported by five 7.6m 'yellow box tree trunks' sourced from the Diamond Valley (likely salvaged). These beams are housed centrally in mud-brick piers of the north elevation, sloping towards the south

¹ Richard Peterson and Bohdan Kuzyk, 'Alistair Knox (1912-1986): modernism, environment and the spirit of place', *RMIT Design Archives Journal*, vol 4, no 1, 2014, p5

² (Photographs) Alistair Knox website, <http://alistairknox.org/buildings/214>; (Available drawing) Alistair Knox, 'Additions and alterations to houses at Lots 17 & 18 (Elizabeth Street), Lower Plenty now 52 Philip Street for Miss E M Grove', *Collection of architectural drawings mostly for earth houses in Melbourne and Victoria*, SLV, YLTAD27 24; (Document) Llewellyn Pritchard (architect), *Specification of Materials to be used and worked to be performed: in the construction and completion of alterations and additions to existing residence at 52 Phillip [sic] Street Lower Plenty VIC 3093*, July 1993, provided by the City of Banyule (note the drawings referenced in the specification could not be located)

wall, and provide wide eaves. At least three of the original beams remain and continue to be visible both externally and to the interior. It is possible that the westmost beam may still be in situ. An original exposed short beam east of the entrance may also survive. Initially, the ceiling was of hardwood cross beams with nailed boards; however, this arrangement appears to have been replaced by new timber boards with batten-covered joints.



Close-up aerial photograph of *English House* with approximate extent of construction phases shaded

Red shading, 1947

Yellow shading, mid-1960s additions

Green shading, circa 1996 additions

(Source: Nearmap, March 2021)

The original skillion roof was covered in an insulating foil and three layers of Malthoid (bituminous felt) and creek gravel. This finish presumably deteriorated, probably due to UV exposure. The roof is now clad in metal decking with a standing seam, which continues to later skillion additions and extensions. A metal fascia of similar width to its timber predecessor and incorporating guttering is now evident (originally, *English House* only had downpipes).

In the south elevation of the original section, the projecting mud-brick chimney breast and fascia-breaking broad shaft with cement rendered cap has been retained.

The walls of the 1947 *English House* were constructed of adobe, colloquially mud bricks, with concrete footings.³ These sun-dried bricks, dug and produced on-site, were larger (about 23cm thick) than conventional bricks and rectangular in shape. Initially, the bricks were rendered with a mixture of cow dung and 'loamy soil' with either distemper or whitewashed employed

³ Mud brick methodology – 'Take mud mixed with water the day previously ... and mix with old straw ... to a consistency which will stand on its own. Compress this into an iron mould which can be removed immediately. Initial drying depends on the weather, and varies from one to three days, but they should stand for at least 14 days before being placed in the building ... One man, working an eight-hour day, can make 150 bricks ...' (Esmé Johnston, 'Built from the good earth', *Australian Home Beautiful*, June 1949, p29, 56)

inside. The 1993 *Specifications* note that both new and existing mud-brick walls were to be finished with 'mud brick render' prepared by Alan Grimes.⁴ This new coat, which has presumably remained (or been renewed), allows for the rough appearance of the mud brick to remain appreciable.

The varied forms of earth construction have ancient roots and were practised by settler communities across Australia, becoming a well-known vernacular building technique over the 19th century. During that period, in Victoria, adobe construction was especially common in the Central Goldfields and some of Melbourne's outer-suburban areas.⁵ Knox's use of mud bricks at *English House* – inspired by his experience of *Montsalvat* (see Site-Specific) – came on the back of a minor revival of the tradition from the mid-1930s, concentrated in the Eltham area.⁶

The majority of the mud brick utilised in the construction of the 1947 *English House* endures. At least four of the five piers remain, as does the south elevation wall. The original external east wall became an internal partition in the mid-1960s and has been progressively removed to provide a larger opening to the new kitchen (mid-1960s east bay addition), but sizeable wall nibs remain visible in the interior. The original west external wall was also transformed as part of the mid-1960s new work into an internal wall and may still be present in some form. The partition wall that divides the entrance from the partly enclosed bedroom appears to have been preserved.

A defining attribute of *English House* is its largely 'open' north elevation, which capitalised on the elevated views available from the property and the solar cycle. In contrast to the solidity of the other walls, Knox's north elevation was formed from four bays created by five thick adobe piers (approximately 91cm x 61cm) infilled with full-height, triple-leafed French windows. The latter were timber-framed, with each leaf divided into three glazed units by slender bars. The lintel was a 'primitive' beam of 'bush timber' (now overpainted). Knox would later describe his repeated use of muscular piers alternating with large glazed openings as a means of capturing a 'natural' rhythm and providing a plane for the strong interplay of light and shadow. In combination with the pronounced eave overhang, it also reflects his 'reverence' for natural caves and the Wrightian/Griffins-influenced concept of 'primitive' shelter.⁷



Close-up of the original north (rear) elevation of *English House*, showing original scale: 'Piers accentuate depth of wall near French windows.' (Source: Johnston, 'Built from the good earth', *AHB*, June 1948, p29)

⁴ Pritchard, *Specification of Materials*, p12, 14

⁵ Julie Willis, 'Earth Construction', in Philip Goad and Willis, eds, *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, Cambridge University, 2012, p220

⁶ Miles Lewis, 'Section Three: Earth and Stone – 3.2 Adobe or Clay Lump', *Australian Building: A Cultural Investigation*, p19, available online

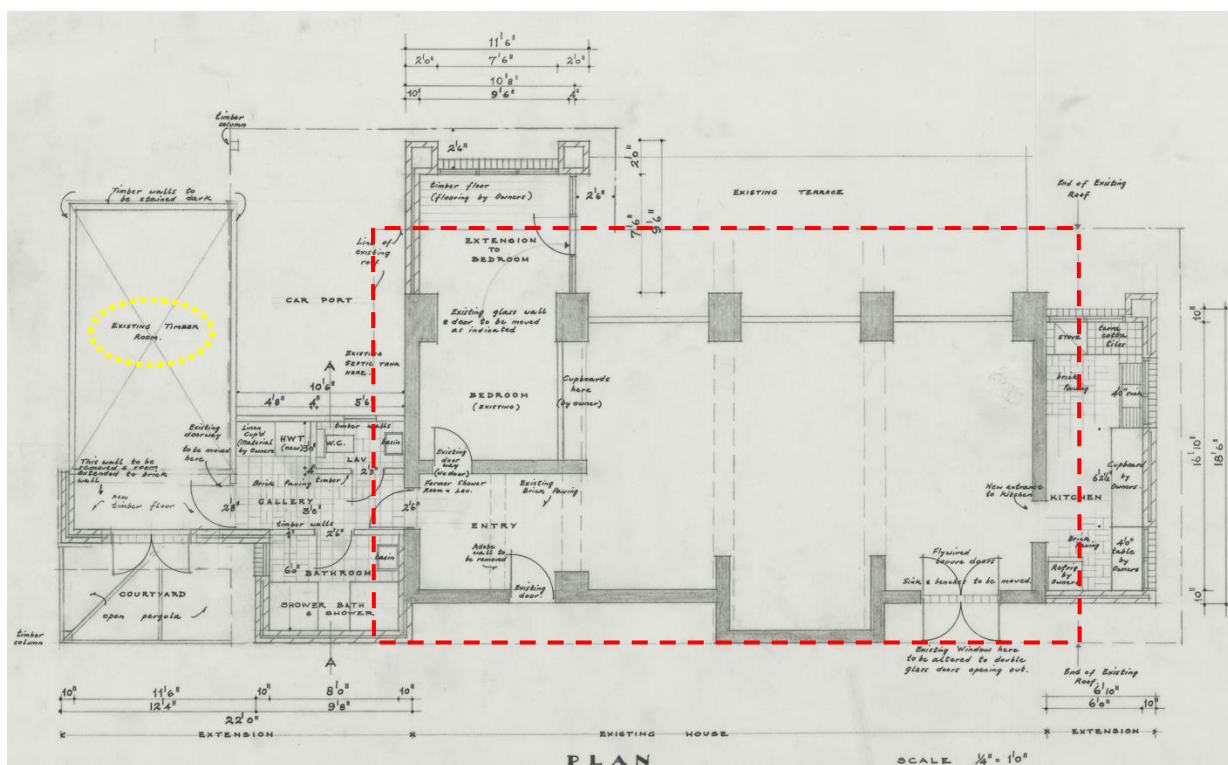
⁷ Philip James Goad, *The Modern House in Melbourne 1945 – 1975*, PhD Thesis, Department of Architecture and Building University of Melbourne, September 1992, chapter 3, p58; Alistair Knox, *Living in the environment*, Mullaly, 1978, chapter 67, available at the Alistair Knox website, <https://alistairknox.org/chapters/67>

The north elevation connects to a raised patio paved with random stone pavers (likely basalt or slate), which is original.

Beyond the substantial chimney breast, the south elevation, 'the façade' of *English House*, was largely blank – only punctured by a deeply recessed door opening in the west and a square double window bank (probably casements) to the east. This entrance still functions as such, but it is unknown whether the solid timber boarded door remains. The eastern windows were extended towards the floor in the mid-1960s (see below). Otherwise, the 1947 extent of the south elevation is largely intact.

In the mid-1960s, new occupants – ‘Mollie’ Grove and Catherine Hardess – engaged Knox to undertake additions and alterations at *English House*. The floor plan for this work is reproduced below. Key changes included the provision of a new eastern bay with proportions similar to the existing (encompassing a kitchen) and the extension of the bedroom via a northern projection – both in timber weatherboard. The drawings show that the original tripartite French windows of the westmost bay were to be relocated into the east face of the northern extension (allowing access to the patio), which appears to have occurred, along with the provision of timber-framed toplights (non-original).

At this time, the house's footprint was also expanded in the west with a new bathroom, WC, laundry, gallery, courtyard pergola and carport . This new work was also clad in walls of timber weatherboard and extended the primary skillion or covered it with a separate skillion (since removed). The east internal wall of the original bathroom was deleted, incorporating this space into the entrance.



Extract from mid-1960s drawing showing alterations and additions to *English House* by Knox – north is top of image

Note some of the new work depicted was later modified or removed

The 'Existing Timber Room' (circled in yellow) west of *English House* was constructed after the mid-1950s and is no longer extant

The extent of the 1947 roof is outlined in dashed red

Dark shaded thick walls indicate mud brick

(Source: Alistair Knox, 'Additions and alterations to houses at Lots 17 & 18 (Elizabeth Street), Lower Plenty now 52 Philip Street for Miss E M Grove', *Collection of architectural drawings mostly for earth houses in Melbourne and Victoria*. SLV. YLTAD27 24)

Around 1996, *English House* underwent a third addition, designed by the Eltham-based architect Llewellyn Pritchard. A new volume was added to the west, extending the building's footprint right up to the property boundary. The mid-1960s carport and front courtyard appear to have been subsumed or rationalised as part of this development. The 1996 *Specifications* detail that this new wing was to have a base course of bagged brick with walls of mud brick ('to match the dimensions of the existing mudbrick walls from an approved mudbrick manufacturer') in stretcher bond. Both new and existing mud bricks were to be

rendered with 'an approved mud render finish prepared by Alan Grimes'. New lintels were also noted as Oregon timber.⁸ As part of this work, Knox's mid-1960s eastern timber bay was rebuilt or reclad in mud brick, an action that may have occurred to other mid-1960s timber walls, including (at least) the northern bedroom extension.

To the interior of *English House*, the 'massive' adobe fireplace remains a dominant feature within the 1947 footprint. This distinctive element comprises a corbelled fireplace and a rare remaining example of an inglenook (a recessed space beside a fireplace), which includes two timber/mud-brick benches and an exposed timber lintel.⁹ Tiling to the hearth and deck appear to be later additions. Timber floorboards in the 1947 footprint may be original.

The back yard of *English House* slopes markedly towards the rear boundary. It accommodates numerous mature native/indigenous trees and rock/sleeper retaining walls. The place's 'natural' bush aesthetic likely stems from the residency, between the mid-1960s and early 1980s, of Grove and Hardess.¹⁰ To the side and rear, the property is surrounded by a non-original high timber paling fence.



English House from Philip Street

As Knox's first mud-brick project, *English House* yields insight into an idiom later described by its designer as 'environmental building' – a multifarious concept that sought the close integration of structure and site and infused earth construction with rising contemporary interests in sustainability and informal/alternative modes of living.¹¹ Adobe was central to Knox's then-budding philosophy. A few years later, in what could have been a description of *English House*, he discussed his use of the material in the pages of the *Australian Home Beautiful*:

With earth building, beauty can be expressed simply: natural and honest treatment of the walls so that they retain some of the primeval quality of earth; a true sense of topography through the proper handling of the site; a strong sense of shelter by deft use of thick walls so that

⁸ Pritchard, *Specification of Materials*, p12, 14

⁹ Inglenooks were prominent features of the Arts & Crafts movement, a manifestation of traditional values associated with hearth and home. The majority of Knox's postwar mud-brick houses had inglenooks.

¹⁰ The increased acceptance of native vegetation and the absence of lawns and formal layouts was marked from the mid-1960s; popularised by influential publications, such as Betty Maloney and Jean Walker, *Designing Australian Bush Gardens* (1966)

¹¹ Knox, *Living in the environment*, chapter 71, <http://alistairknox.org/chapters/71>; and Rachel Goldlust, 'Alistair Knox (1912-1986) and the Birth of Environmental Building in Australia', *Arcadia*, Autumn 2016, no 18, Rachel Carson Centre for Environment and Society, available online, para 1

they can cast deep shadows at the reveals; the use of simple masses... proportions that are unpretentious and fundamental, not frivolous. No material is more responsive to human expression than mud, provided the initial objectives are not lost sight of – retention of its primeval character, and absolute avoidance of nonsense.¹²

In the context of postwar Melbourne design, characterised by its crop of 'hero' architects boldly exploring the structural and aesthetic possibilities of universal, industrially produced materials, Knox's dogged return to the vernacular stood out.¹³ Latent within his concept of environmental building were the principles of organic architecture, as shaped by the work and writings of the American architectural master, Frank Lloyd Wright. In particular, the latter's pared-down Usonian houses (oversailing eaves, robust wall to the street, large opening to the internal garden, focal fireplace/hearth) proved influential for Knox, who seems to have been aware of Wright by the immediate postwar years.¹⁴

Knox also cites as influential the cohesive formwork, 'visual totality' and engagement with light/shadow seen in the work of the first government architect, the emancipist forger Francis Greenway, and Walter Burley Griffin (although not appearing to recognise the important contribution made by Marion Mahony Griffin to her husband's practice).¹⁵ While never communicated in his writings, Knox's debt to the entrenched Arts & Crafts movement – particularly its political idealism and valorisation of craftsmanship – is also clear.

In other respects, *English House* (at least both the 1947 and mid-1960s modification) is decidedly modernist.¹⁶ The core doctrines of the postwar modern movement, ranging from sensitive site and solar orientation to an emphasis on strong indoor/outdoor relationships, floor plans that prioritised spatial flow, and the eschewing of unnecessary detail, are all conveyed by its design. Knox's ensuring ability over the late 20th-century to merge modern living with adobe and a bushland block (natural or contrived) underpins the development of an authentic regional idiom, colloquially the 'Eltham style', with which he was intimately related.

¹² Alistair Knox, 'Down to Earth Housing', Section 3, *Australian Home Beautiful*, January 1953, p14

¹³ Goad, *The Modern House in Melbourne 1945 – 1975*, chapter 3, p58

¹⁴ Alistair Knox, *We are what we stand on: A Personal History of the Eltham Community*, Adobe Press, 1980, p11

¹⁵ Knox, *Living in the environment*, chapter 67, <https://alistairknox.org/chapters/67>; and Knox, *A Middle Class Man*, chapter 22

¹⁶ Peterson and Kuzyk, 'Alistair Knox (1912-1986): modernism, environment and the spirit of place', p21

History

Context

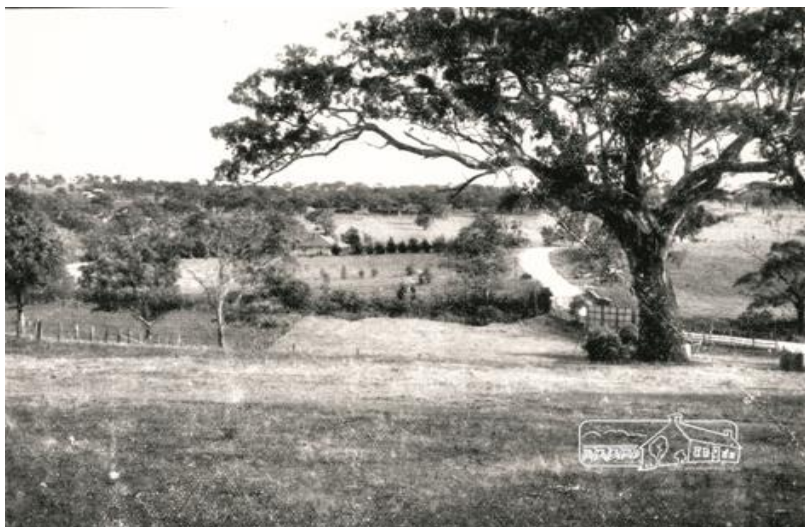
The City of Banyule covers the unceded Country of the Wurundjeri-William people, who inhabited and managed the landscape for millennia and remain culturally connected. The fertile confluence of the Plenty River and the Yarra River/*Birrarung* and adjoining stringy-bark forests hosted squatters from 1837 and was soon after referred to as the 'Lower Plenty'. Much of this area had been alienated by the close of the decade and considered to be of better quality than land elsewhere in the Parish of Nillumbik.¹⁷

Sizable land parcels and absentee owners predominated over the 19th century, with a small community of tenant farmers responsible for clearing the emergent locality. The rough track linking Heidelberg and the Village of Eltham, which passed through the Lower Plenty, was proclaimed a road in 1840 (now Old Eltham Road), and the Plenty River bridged two years later.¹⁸ The present-day Main Road (initially called Eltham Road) was laid in 1869.¹⁹

More intensive subdivision followed in the wake of the First World War, although the locale remained sparsely populated and a 'semi-suburban and rural area' into the 1950s.²⁰ Reminiscing about the postwar years, Alistair Knox described cycling through the area, alongside the émigré architect Frederick Romberg, describing the Lower Plenty at that stage as a 'wide undulating ... savannah landscape' dotted with 'Primeval redgums of enormous size'.²¹ The suburb's geographic connection with and administration by the District (later Shire) of Eltham meant that the Lower Plenty was also shaped by the vibrant, vigorous, environmentally-conscious community that materialised in postwar Eltham.²² From the late 1940s, mud-brick dwellings (built or influenced by Knox) arose (alongside conventional houses) as well as other designs that displayed a clear organic/regional expression:

Twelve miles from Melbourne, the ... [Lower Plenty] is still largely covered with scrub gums and since the housing is nearly all contemporary, the natural appearance of the locality has not been obliterated. More often than not, the modern house has been built to blend, rather than stand apart from its surroundings.²³

From the early 1960s, residential development was prominent, as was a fashion towards substantial, up-market houses situated on largescale allotments. Open spaces and a general natural/rustic setting remain prevalent throughout Lower Plenty, with a peri-rural feel remaining predominant in its southern reaches.



Photograph from a land sale brochure showing the rural landscape west from the old Lower Plenty Bridge, dated 1920s (Source: Eltham District Historical Society, *Victorian Collections*, 00180)

¹⁷ 'Nillumbik' may stem from the Indigenous word *nyilumbik*, meaning 'bad, stupid or red earth'. (Jill Barnard, 'Nillumbik Shire', *eMelbourne*, School of Historical & Philosophical Studies, The University of Melbourne, July 2008, available online; and Context, *Banyule Thematic Environmental History*, October 2018, pp15-20, available online)

¹⁸ The Plenty River was named in 1835 by Joseph T Gellibrand. Its designation as a river was more warranted before the formation of the Yan Yean Reservoir in the mid-19th century, which reduced its flow. Hoddle referred to it as the 'Yarra Rivulet'.

¹⁹ The 1843 bridge was replaced in 1865 by the existing 'Old Lower Plenty Bridge' (HO106).

²⁰ Alan Marshall, *Pioneers & Painters: One Hundred Years of Eltham and its Shire*, Thomas Nelson, 1971, p84

²¹ Alistair Knox, *We Are What We Stand On: a personal history of the Eltham Community*, Adobe Press, 1980

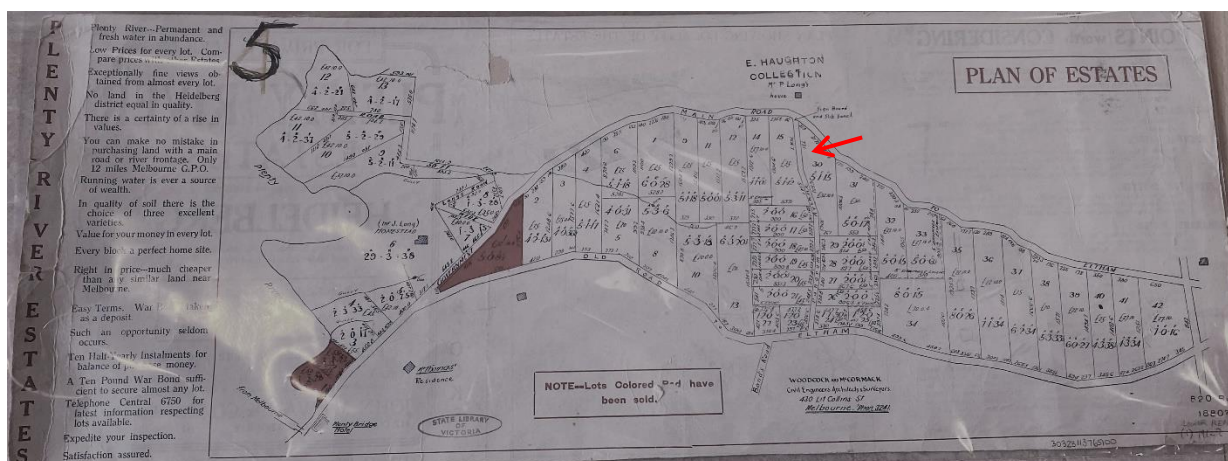
²² The Lower Plenty and Montmorency were transferred to the newly formed City of Banyule in 1994. ('Lower Plenty', *Victorian Places*, 2014, available online; and Andrew Lemon, 'Lower Plenty', *eMelbourne*, The University of Melbourne, July 2008, available online; and Context, BTEH, p37)

²³ Rick Campbell, 'Suburban Living, but with hills and bush', *Age*, 9 November 1968, p23.

Site-specific

The subject land derives from the roughly 384-hectare purchase (Portion 2, Parish of Nillumbik) made in 1840 by the Corkonian, Benjamin Baxter.²⁴ He had arrived in Sydney Town in 1837 as a Captain in the 50th (Queen's Own) Regiment of Foot, charged with escorting a convict transport. Sensing opportunities in the embryonic Port Phillip District, Baxter acquired a Depasturing Licence, ran cattle at Emerald Hill and St Kilda, and held various civil appointments. Around the time Baxter procured his estate in what became the Lower Plenty and Montmorency, he also established a 6,000-hectare pastoral run known as *Carrup Carrup* at Baxter's Flat (Baxter), which became his permanent residence.²⁵ In 1927, a large part of Portion 2 was acquired for use by the Heidelberg Golf Club.²⁶

In 1869, the northern three-quarters of Portion 2, including the subject land, was acquired by the affluent Scot and pastoralist, Doctor Robert Martin (onetime occupant of *Viewbank Homestead* and owner of the *Banyule Estate*).²⁷ Following Martin's death in 1874, the holding passed in toto through several hands. In 1919, the parcel – bound mainly by the Main Road (north), Old Eltham Road (south) and Bolton Street (east) – was brought by George Guthrie McColl, a wealthy Bendigo resident.²⁸ McColl's intentions appear speculative and his purchase, carved up into sizeable blocks, was promoted for sale that year as the Plenty River Estates – 'Lovely Week-End Blocks', 'suitable [for] cultivation (with irrigation), poultry, fruit growing or nursery'.²⁹ As part of this subdivision, Panorama Avenue was established, although it remained an 'unmade road ... in a bad state' into at least the 1930s.³⁰



Plenty River Estates, 1919

The approximate location of the subject land, part of lot 30, is indicated by the red arrow (Source: SLV)

By 1937, the Investors Land and Finance Corporation Pty Ltd had purchased about 5 hectares on the north-eastern side of Panorama Avenue, re-subdividing it into suburban lots, with most addressing the newly established Philip Street (initially, Elizabeth Street).³¹ This action included the pegging out of the two lots (17 and 18) that form the subject property. In 1946, these were purchased by a 'labourer' and his wife from South Kingsville. They sold the land on to Francis ('Frank') English in July 1947.³² He was responsible for engaging a 35-year-old aspirational designer and builder, Alistair Knox, then working a day job as a bank clerk, to erect a small dwelling.³³

Knox recounted the events around the building of *English House* in a number of his publications. He describes Frank English as a 'quiet' returned serviceman, then working as a nurse at the Repatriation General Hospital (Heidelberg), who had first-hand

²⁴ Refer to *Plan of the Parish of Nillumbik*, Office of Lands and Survey, 1866, SLV, available online

²⁵ 'Death of Captain Baxter: An Old Colonist and Pioneer', *Mornington Standard*, 19 May 1892, p3; and Marshall, *Pioneers & Painters*, pp82-4

²⁶ *Heidelberg Golf Club*, 'History', available online

²⁷ Certificate of Title, vol 289, folio 706

²⁸ 'Lieut.-Colonel G. G. McColl', *Argus*, 15 June 1938, p11; and Certificate of Title, vol 233, folio 523

²⁹ 'Advertising', *Herald*, 16 September 1912, p7; and 'Advertising', *Age*, 19 February 1919, p4

³⁰ 'Lower Plenty Progress Association', *Advertiser* [Hurstbridge], 7 March 1930, p4

³¹ Certificate of Title, vol 6145, folio 934

³² Certificate of Title, vol 6917, folio 265

³³ Knox, *We are what we stand on*, p12

experience of adobe buildings from his army service in the Middle East. While appreciating mud brick's 'inherent beauty', English (likely encouraged by Knox) also considered it a low-cost housing option for his newly acquired land in the Lower Plenty, 'which commanded a superb view of the Eltham Valley and the Dandenongs.' Knox agreed to a cost-plus contract, with both parties hoping that English's £600 savings in deferred military pay would cover the construction costs for a 'simple' house.³⁴

The broader socioeconomic backdrop of late 1940s Melbourne was also instrumental in encouraging Knox and his client's interest in a vernacular earth tradition. During the Second World War, many aspects of life had become regulated to an unprecedented degree by the state, a situation that continued across the postwar years. As civil and private construction had practically ceased during the conflict, the nation faced an acute housing shortage during reconstruction. The 'crisis' was magnified by a general shortage in materials, high labour costs, stringent finance and continuing government restrictions. Until the early 1950s, such austerity conditions required major concessions on the part of most aspiring homeowners, with thousands of low-cost, self-built 'mean' timber or brick veneer dwellings the outcome.³⁵

The small scale of *English House* was a direct reflection of postwar size restrictions for domestic buildings. Between 1940 and 1952, Victorian houses were subject to fluctuating size regulations. During the time Knox was drawing up plans for *English House*, the maximum extent allowable for a non-timber framed dwelling (excluding brick veneer) under the *Building Operations and Building Material Control Act* (1946), was just 116 square meters.³⁶

A further complication in the immediate postwar period was severe material shortages. The expense and time required to access conventional construction materials – timber and brick – was prohibitive. Some prospective homeowners and builders turned to alternatives. In Victoria, interest and knowledge in earth construction, once a common 19th-century mode of construction, had renewed in the late Interwar period. The 1934 founding of *Monsalvat*, an artist colony in Eltham, by the patrician artist Justus Jorgensen, with its adobe/pisé 'Great Hall' proved influential in this regard. Knox himself gained his introduction to mud-brick from regular interactions with this utopian commune during the late 1940s.

Consequently, from the late Interwar period, a handful of earth buildings arose in the Eltham area, including a pisé (rammed earth) house by the journalist/writer John M Harcourt.³⁷ Notwithstanding this nascent pre-war revival, it appears the spartan conditions of the late 1940s proved critical in popularising earth construction. As Knox notes, 'Had there been no war, there would have been no shortages, and if there had been no shortages there would have been no mud brick building.'³⁸

The 'alternative' and creative milieu that emerged in the Eltham area – a 'sleepy outer suburb surrounded by remnant bush' – over the postwar period also proved important in allowing for experimentation and engagement with earth structures.³⁹ In the aftermath of the war, the presence of affordable land in the locale (in which the Lower Plenty was included) and its semi-rural surroundings drew those interested in living 'simpler' lifestyles (many apparently influenced by Thoreau's *Walden*). Writers, artists, filmmakers, designer and others flocked to Eltham: 'We were young, enthusiastic idealists, keen to avoid becoming Thoreau's "men who lead lives of quiet desperation".'⁴⁰ Some of the community-members became interested in unconventional construction techniques or turned to them by necessity, as noted by Robin Boyd, many of the mud-brick builders 'had little money for building and they liked rustic simplicity. They looked to the earth for materials.'⁴¹

A carefree Knox lodged a plan for *English House* with the Eltham Shire Office in 1947, not expecting much resistance, as the locality had been 'wonderfully carefree and hillbilly' and had some familiarity with earth buildings. Ominously, however, the permit application coincided with the new appointment of the Shire's first professional engineer. Undeterred, Knox 'decided not to wait on officialdom, but rather to get on with the making of the bricks, the pouring of the footings, and the erecting of the walls.'⁴² Then after weeks of 'sinister' delays, Knox heard news that his application was to be refused that day. A frantic effort to convince the councillors otherwise followed:

³⁴ Alistair Knox, *A Middle Class Man: An Autobiography*, undated, unpublished, chapter 32, available at the Alistair Knox website, <https://alistairknox.org/books/1>; and Knox, *We are what we stand on: a personal history of the Eltham community*, Adobe Press, 1980, chapter 42, available at the Alistair Knox website, <https://alistairknox.org/chapters/42>

³⁵ Goad, *The Modern House in Melbourne 1945 – 1975*, chapter 1, p1

³⁶ *Victorian Year-Book*, 1944-45, p386

³⁷ John M Harcourt, 'Natural earth as a Building Material: Pise-de-terre, Cob and Mud Brick Methods Explained', *Australian Home Beautiful*, January 1946, pp8-10. The same journal ran an article on a mud-brick house near Wandin in Victoria a few years later (Charles Simms, 'Hand-made in mud-brick', *Australian Home Beautiful*, January 1949, pp24-5, 75)

³⁸ Knox, *We are what we stand on*, chapter 45

³⁹ Gordon Ford in Ford with Gwen Ford, *Gordon Ford: the natural Australian garden*, Blooming Books, 1999, p9

⁴⁰ Ford, *Gordon Ford: the natural Australian garden*, p9

⁴¹ Robin Boyd, *Australia's Home: Its Origins, Builders and Occupies*, Melbourne University Press, 1961, p201

⁴² Knox, *A Middle Class Man*, chapter 32

There was a man named [George] Middleton who worked for the Experimental Building Station, a federal body situated in Ryde near Sydney. He had been conducting tests and gaining facts for some years, and had actually written about mud brick ... I realised how important it was to obtain copies of these official pamphlets in order to stimulate the six local councillors to agree to grant a permit ... The Council was to hold its monthly meeting on the very day these pamphlets were to become available in Melbourne ... I reached Tomb's Technical Bookshop around 11 a.m. and had to wait while the needed books were being unpacked. I bought a handful of copies and set off for Eltham once more ... My train arrived back at 2 p.m., and as I walked across the road I beheld some of the worthy city fathers standing at the entrance of the Shire Office.

As I came within earshot of them I heard one say, 'My daughter lives in one of them pise houses and it's quite all right, but I wouldn't have anything to do with them mud-brick ones'. Seizing opportunity by the forelock, I stepped forward and said, 'I overheard what you were saying about mud-brick building. I have applied for a building permit which I understand you will be considering today, and I thought these government documents might assist your deliberations.' I handed one to each councillor on the steps, and those who had already returned to the Chamber also rushed out to get their copies. I heard the next day, to my great relief, that the plan had been passed and that our four-foot-high walls would remain upright ... Eltham's retarded growth had opened a door for earth-building that the combined forces of progress, civic pride, and the new age could never again close.⁴³

During construction of *English House*, Knox continued to work his day job at the State Savings Bank of Victoria (Swanston Street branch) and was only present at the site late in the day and weekends. To oversee the build, he engaged the 29-year-old Sonia Stark Gordon Skipper (1918-2008), a talented painter and sculptor, who he had met at *Monsalvat* (her family were foundational members).⁴⁴ In reminiscing about her appointment, Knox believed Skipper to be the 'first female foreman the trade had ever known in Australia'.⁴⁵ Accuracy of this assertion aside, Skipper was instrumental in the construction of *English House* as she was the only person present at the site who had practical experience and proficiency in adobe building. Skipper, who worked on a few of Knox's later projects, described her involvement at the subject place in her memoir:

Conventional materials were short so it ended up that many people wanted mud brick houses. Later they become the trendy type of house to live in. Knox got a team together and started the mud brick building boom. He did a great deal to promote mud brick building in the area and put a great deal of energy and inventiveness into it. The "environmental building boom" was born. I worked for him for about three years from 1947, though for the last year I mostly did the inside finishing, plastering and colouring the walls, and whitewashing the outside.

The [*English House*] job was a rather strange experience. At the beginning I was the overseer. The fellows were often difficult. I would sometimes come back to the site and find the walls all of out of square or bricks piled up in the opposite place to where I had requested. All this was rather confusing. Alistair, who was still working at his bank job, would come up late in the day to see how things were progressing and shout at me for not having got things done in the way we had planned at the weekend, as though it was my fault. I would tell him that those boys he had working for him were either perverse or plain stupid. Of course I realise now it was the gender problem. They just didn't like taking orders from a female, no matter how reasonable those orders might be. At the time I didn't know to handle the problem, in fact I didn't know what the problem was ...



Sonia Skipper at *Monsalvat*, undated
(Source: *Australian Regional Building*, Alistair Knox website, <http://alistairknox.org/chapters/372>)

⁴³ Knox, *A Middle Class Man*, chapter 32

⁴⁴ Sigmund Jorgensen, 'Painter who left her mark at Montsalvat', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 July 2008, available online; and

⁴⁵ Knox, *A Middle Class Man*, chapter 32

The rest of the £1-a-day workforce were all returned servicemen: Larry Stevens, Tony Jackson and Gordon Ford. They 'regarded the building of the English house as a halfway stage between a holiday and a part-time health cure' and their 'knowledge of building construction was very limited, but the house was simple in design and Sonia was able to keep some sense of order and development'.⁴⁶ Ford (1918-1999), who continued collaborating with Knox, became a celebrated landscape designer and advocate of the 'bush style' garden.

The building of *English House* appears to have taken a few months, likely due to the laborious process of mud-brick production, but more so than expected, and English's savings were eventually 'exhausted' with the dwelling 'only four-fifths finished'. To Knox's incredulity, English refused to come up with additional funds in light of some of the lackadaisical/amateur efforts he had witnessed on occasion from the male workers. Knox ended up bridging the cost gap himself.⁴⁷

It is likely the publicity generated by *English House*'s completion outweighed any immediate financial loss for Knox: 'I received letters from many parts of the world concerning it and earth building generally. The stir it caused attracted a new group of people to move to Eltham'.⁴⁸ Confident in this path as a designer/builder, Knox resigned from the bank, and a series of mud-brick dwellings followed over the late 1940s, many noteworthy.⁴⁹

A year or so after *English House* was finalised, the widely distributed *Australian Home Beautiful* (AHB) ran a feature article on the project, written by Esmé Johnston. Photographs depicting the building in various states of construction accompanied the piece:

At the cost of £770, a house with an overall area of 900 square feet has been built at Eltham (Vic.) — from earth. It was designed for Mr. Frank English by Mr. Alistair Knox, and a women — Miss Sonia Skipper — was works' "foreman," with a working crew of three men. They were Laurie Mayfield (foreman carpenter), Gordon Ford, also building his own earth-house at week-ends, and Tony Jackson taking a spell from his normal sailorly calling.

This unusual home is built on a lightly-timbered hillside with a pleasant view of hill and valley. Its main materials were mud bricks made from the earth excavated on the house site, and bush timbers, which eliminated waste, yet produced a sound building economically and from a material known and esteemed for hundreds of years.

A mile or so away stands a mud-brick house built 98 years ago. It is in remarkably good condition, and it creates an ancient local precedent for mud brick building.

Asked why he built with mud bricks rather than pise (rammed earth) Mr. Knox said he preferred mud bricks, because they were a more flexible form. In technical words they were modular rather than monolithic like a wall of rammed earth. They were more malleable and allowed greater variety of form ... "In addition, pise construction requires a sand-clay proportion of about 70 to 30; adobe about 30 per cent. sand and 70 per cent. clay. Eltham soil has a preponderance of clay." Mud bricks are an answer to the building problem, Mr. Knox thinks, and they fit admirably into the Australian landscape.

His foundations are of standard construction — concrete footings, stumps, bearers and joists. The walls are really of mud brick pier and bush timber beam construction, with 9in. filling walls of mud. The piers between the glass doors are 3ft. by 2ft. This develops a sense of depth in the walls.

The rendering, of cow-dung and loamy soil, has a natural bonding quality. Floors are timber and most of the joinery work was done on the job. Twenty-five-foot long yellow box poles from Diamond Creek make effective ceiling beams. The secondary roof beams are of 5in. x 2in. hardwood. On this is a 6in. x 1in. decking. A covering layer of insulating foil reflects the sun's rays, keeping the building cool in summer and warm in winter.

Three layers of malthoid are laid as a mat over the whole roof. These are bonded together with hot bitumen and stuck to the decking at the edges only to allow for movement. A final covering is water-worn creek gravel, floated in bitumen.

The roof has a fall to the corners for drainage, which is caught in down-pipes, with a happy absence of unsightly guttering. The chimney exterior has a concrete coping for protection. "This roof will defy the elements for a lifetime," said Mr. Knox. "You could even play games on it with impunity."

The ground plan is a simple one. There is a living room 40 feet long out of which is cribbed a bedroom which can be curtained off at will. The kitchen is in an alcove beside a huge open fireplace (also built with mud bricks). Bathroom and main entrance are at the other end of the oblong layout.

Mud brick construction is so strong, says Alistair Knox, that doorways can be cut through without the need of a lintel. But, except in one instances, interior walls have been eliminated from this house, other than the bathroom surround. The front door is of rough sawn hardwood planks, suitable and weatherproof.

Practically the whole of one wall is composed of huge French windows with an east-north-west catchment of the sun. These are inlet between the substantial piers giving great depth and solidity of appearance.

⁴⁶ Knox, *A Middle Class Man*, chapter 32

⁴⁷ Knox, *A Middle Class Man*, chapter 32

⁴⁸ Knox, *We are what we stand on*, p28

⁴⁹ Notably, the William Macmahon Ball Studio, 1948; the curved *Periwinkle House*, 1948; the first phase of the *Busst House*, 1948-49; the *Downing/Le Gallienne House* complex (1948-58); *Murphy's Creek Homestead*, 1949; and *Edwards House*, 149 Old Eltham Road, Lower Plenty, 1950-52

In the mud brick department Miss Sonia Skipper, art student and old hand at this form of construction, had a word to say. "Mud bricks are even more impervious to rain water than concrete," she said, "except for one thing. A constant dripping of water on one specific place will effect them. That's why you must keep the head and feet of your building dry with wide-spread eaves, and terraces rather than a built-up garden... Apart from that... you can leave your bricks out in the open during building operations and the weather won't affect them much. Earth containing more than 50 per cent. of clay is most suitable for mud bricks and the soil here is ideal."⁵⁰

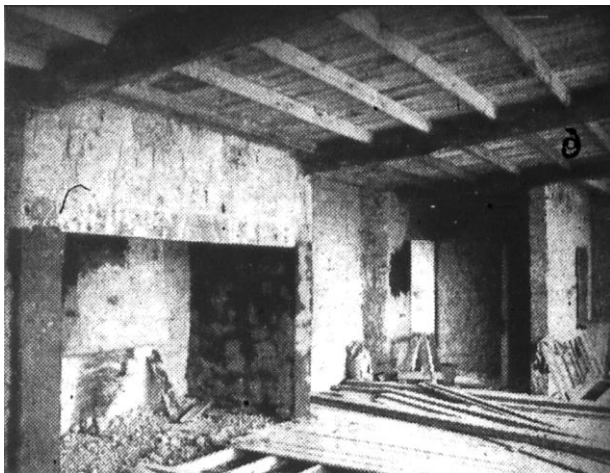


English House near completion, from Philip Street (Source: Johnston, 'Built from the good earth', AHB, June 1948, p29)

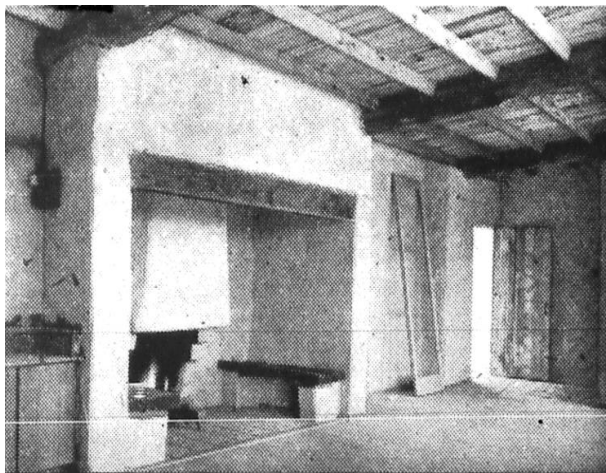


'Gordon Ford stamps mud into a brick mould, while Laurie Mayfield (left), Miss Sonia Skipper, Alistair Knox and Tony Jackson look on.' North (rear) elevation of *English House* in the background
(Source: Johnston, 'Built from the good earth', AHB, June 1948, p28 – courtesy of Miles Lewis, *Australian Building: A Cultural Investigation*)

⁵⁰ Esmé Johnston, 'Built from the good earth', *Australian Home Beautiful*, June 1949, pp28-29 and 56



'Roof and floor construction shows in this progress shot.'
(Source: Johnston, 'Built from the good earth', AHB June 1948, p29)



'Fireplace has cosy ingle seats of hewn bush timber.'
(Source: Johnston, 'Built from the good earth', AHB, June 1948, p29)



Internal view to fireplace/inglenook with original kitchen beyond, facing east (Source: Knox, *We are what we stand on*, p27)



Internal view to French windows, facing north
(Source: Knox, *We are what we stand on*, p27)

In early 1948, Robin Boyd – an acquaintance of Knox – highlighted the emergent mud-brick phenomena in his 'Small Homes' column in *The Age*, likely with *English House* in mind:

Adobe construction is so old, it is in danger of being considered new fangled ... Earth walls are cheap, strong, weatherproof, and highly insulating... It seems that you can't dabble in adobe. Those who use it once are apt to drop all thought of building houses in timber or bricks ... Because it is so easy to make terrible puns about it (mud construction is old as the hills, cheap as dirt, and down to earth) some people prefer not to take it seriously. While no one is likely to want to use it in the strictly geometrical inner suburbs, its great possibilities lie in the country and in outer parts of the bigger cities ...

The more sympathetic councils doubtless will be swayed by the glowing reports recently issued by Australia's foremost authority on building techniques. The thorough, wary Commonwealth Experimental Building Station in Sydney produced last year a report on pise, and now has published its blessing on adobe ...

One architect who is building a few places with a small team of experienced adobe builders reports that fully fitted houses are working out at about £90 a square. This is roughly half the cost of orthodox construction. Adobe can be built to any plan, and can have almost any finish. Therefore it can be given almost any appearance and any architectural treatment. Perhaps this is its greatest danger. With one or two notable exceptions, Victorian adobe builders have been either lamentably unimaginative little villas or have wallowed in confused romanticism ... If the material is treated with common sense and discretion, but naturally so that it is not forced to imitate normal brick structure, then it must look "different". There is no reason why this different look should not be as modern and as beautiful in its own way as anything ever made of brick, wood, stone or steel.⁵¹

However, a few years later, in the same column, Boyd declared 'The mud bubble has burst', lamenting that 'Earth has grown out of the reach of the ordinary man. Pise and adobe have moved into the luxury class':

One man who did much to develop the idea of adobe as a modern building material, and who infected hundreds with his own enthusiasm, was Mr. Alistair Knox, designer and builder. He now says: "I never want to build in it again. It is still practical if you have plenty of space and the right equipment ... And if people are strong enough and healthy enough to do it themselves." Costs finally turned Mr. Knox from adobe.

⁵¹ Robin Boyd, 'Make it of mud!', *Age*, 17 March 1948, p3. See also Boyd, 'Outer suburbs ban mud construction', *Age*, 5 May 1948, p4

Four years ago the big problem was the shortage of material, rather than labor. Adobe ingredients were on the site, and the finished cost of the house turned out to be less than timber. He built several houses and designed many more for construction by their owners. The last adobe house he built cost £4000, well over the equivalent in timber. And even if owners consider that the extra comfort was worth the extra cost, banks generally did not agree. It was difficulty in obtaining finance which finally killed commercial adobe.⁵²



1956 aerial photograph of *English House*, circled in dashed red, depicting original footprint
(Source: Landata, Project no 2, Run 16A, Frame 53)

English sold the property in late 1949. It passed largely unaltered through two occupancies before its purchase by Edith 'Mollie' Grove in 1965 (then identified as 52 Philip Street).⁵³ A freestanding hipped roof 'timber room' had been constructed west of the mud-brick house (since demolished). Soon after, Grove commissioned Knox to design and undertake timber additions and alterations to *English House*, providing a new kitchen (east) an extension to the bedroom (north), new bathroom and gallery (west), and carport.⁵⁴ Grove remained in occupancy, initially with her personal companion Catherine Hardess (sometimes 'Hardress'), into the early 1980s.⁵⁵

Grove (1909-96) and Hardess (1889-1970) had met during the interwar years at Swinburne Technical College and spent time working and sojourning in Europe over the 1930s. Upon returning to Melbourne in 1940 they held a successful exhibition of their fabric at the Hotel Australia and registered a weaving business: eclarté Pty Ltd. Their stylish hand-made eclarté materials, which interwove national motifs and themes, were widely popular, especially among the Australian couturiers. Their studio became 'the most successful of the mid-century studio-weaving enterprises', 'combining Grove's excellent technical skills and Hardess's design acumen'.⁵⁶ By the late 1950s, then working out of an 'old mill at Heathcote' and concentrating on designing and producing furnishing fabric, the pair were awarded a string of government and large-scale commissions and collaborated with other avant-

⁵² Robin Boyd, 'The "Free" Material That Costs Too Much', *Age*, 13 November 1951, p4 – this appears a moment of peak frustration for Knox, who evidently did continue adobe construction.

⁵³ William Roy Fletcher Harris, 'Gardner', and Bertha May Harris, owned the subject place between October 1949 and December 1965. Robert Hijner, a 'salesman', acquired it on 2 December 1965, transferring it to Grove a few days later. (Certificate of Title, vol 6917, folio 265)

⁵⁴ Alistair Knox, 'Additions and alterations to houses at Lots 17 & 18 (Elizabeth Street), Lower Plenty now 52 Philip Street for Miss E M Grove', *Collection of architectural drawings mostly for earth houses in Melbourne and Victoria*, SLV, YLTAD27 24

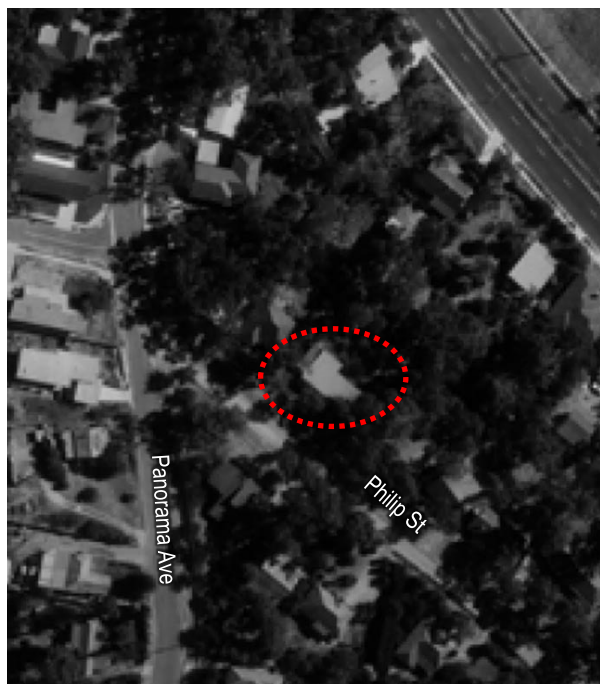
⁵⁵ Certificate of Title, vol 6917, folio 265

⁵⁶ Harriet Edquist, 'eclarté and the transformation of studio weaving in Victoria', *RMIT Design Archives Journal*, vol 4, no 2, 2014, p29

garde period designers, such as Fred Ward, Boyd and (Sir) Roy Grounds.⁵⁷ After economic setbacks resulted in the closure of eclarté in 1962, Grove and Hardess moved into *English House*. They appear to have been responsible for extensive tree plantings in the back yard.⁵⁸



Hardess (left) and Grove (right) with 'Prince', eclarté's mascot, photographed in 1956 at the opening of their large-scale production facility in Dandenong (Source: NAA, Item ID 11868711)



1975 aerial photograph of *English House*, outlined in dashed red. Note the addition of the western wing and thick tree canopy (Source: Landata, Project no 1243, Run 24A, Frame 147)

At least one other phase of alterations and additions is known to have occurred directly to *English House* around 1996.⁵⁹

Alistair Samuel Knox (1912-86)

... it is difficult to establish whether Eltham made Knox or whether he was the making of it – of mud bricks and sturdy timbers ...⁶⁰

A charismatic figure, Alistair Knox was the leading proponent of Victoria's postwar mud-brick 'revival', an ardent movement that became entwined with a specific Eltham-based identity and a broader rise of eco-consciousness. Through his postwar building and landscape work and his writing and activism, Knox was instrumental in popularising the concept of 'environmental building' over the late 20th century.⁶¹

Knox, born and raised in Melbourne within an evangelical context, started a clerkship with the State Savings Bank of Victoria in his late teens and a family soon after. At the outbreak of the Second World War, he joined the Volunteer Defence Corps, ultimately serving in the waters around Papua New Guinea. Discharged in 1945, Knox took advantage of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme to begin but not complete a Diploma of Architecture and Building Construction at Melbourne Tech. Weary of the bank, his postwar ambitions turned to building and design.

⁵⁷ John McPhee, 'Hardess, Catherine (1889-1970)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 1996, available online

⁵⁸ Knox describes 'a Miss Hardess and a Miss Groves, the Eclarte weavers' occupying it and making 'fairly extensive alterations' (Knox, *We are what we stand on*, chapter 45). See also, Edquist, 'eclarté and the transformation of studio weaving in Victoria', p33

⁵⁹ Llewellyn Pritchard (architect), *Specification of Materials to be used and worked to be performed: in the construction and completion of alterations and additions to existing residence at 52 Phillip [sic] Street Lower Plenty VIC 3093*, July 1993, provided by the City of Banyule (note the drawings referenced in the specification could not be located)

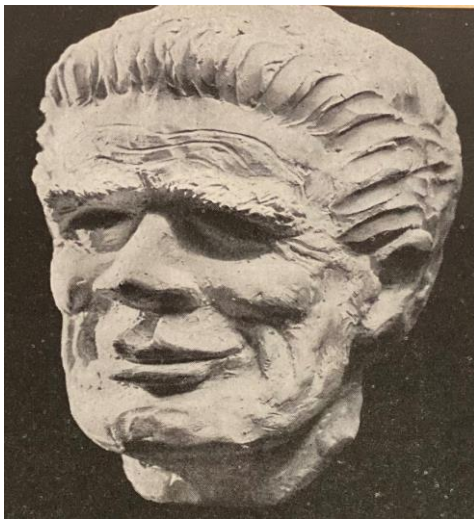
⁶⁰ Anne Latreille, 'Awards for know-how and a flair for original', *Age*, 14 September 1982, p23

⁶¹ Peterson and Kuzyk, 'Alistair Knox (1912-1986): modernism, environment and the spirit of place', p5; Fay Woodhouse, 'Knox, Alistair Samuel (1912-1986)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 2007, available online; and Philip Goad, 'Knox, Alistair', in Goad and Julie Willis, eds, *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture* Cambridge University, 2012, pp387-8

Over the late 1940s, Knox – his first marriage having broken down – began circulating within Melbourne's avant-garde/bohemian circles. He made regular forays out to Eltham to visit *Montsalvat*, experiencing the complex's array of adobe/pisé buildings. The 'primitive' aesthetic and harmonising qualities of earth construction drew Knox, although his first two commissioned houses, both in the Glenard Estate (Eaglemont) in 1946, were of weatherboard. The public interest in the completion of the mud-brick *English House* (1947) encouraged Knox to quit the bank and embark on a string of adobe projects. He relocated permanently to Eltham in 1949, marrying Margot (née) Edwards, a well-known painter, in 1954. Knox became a fixture of postwar Eltham, a place and community he considered unparalleled within Australia.⁶²

Knox's four-decade career in building and landscape design/construction was prolific despite commercial ebbs and flows. It is loosely dividable into four phases. The first, a pared-back, heavily organic, mud-brick phase, was characteristic between the late 1940s to the mid-1950s. The second phase witnessed the adoption of a modular design approach, with low-key modern houses utilising more conventional materials and new products, such as 'Stramit'. The 'credit squeeze' of 1960/61, instigated a return to mud-brick and reclaimed materials, albeit the designs remained generally modular (third phase). From the early 1970s (fourth phase), a sequence of mature and dramatic adobe and landscape projects was initiated, which coincided with the peak of Knox's public profile and the wider resurgence in earth construction in Eltham.⁶³ Underlying the various phases was a deep appreciation of the subtlety of the Australian landscape – the embrace of a site's sense of place and exigencies – and consistent engagement with the principles of the modern movement.

Knox's interests in environmental design and social concerns both mirrored and drove a broader escalation of conservation politics, particularly in Victoria, where he became a household name over the 20th century. Between 1973 and 1975, Knox served on Eltham Shire Council, including as president in his last year. He was also a founding member (1967) and later fellow (1983) of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects. In 1984, Knox received an honorary Doctor of Architecture from the University of Melbourne for his unique contributions to the field of design. The breadth of Knox's influences was notable: 'His work was key to the next generation of builders and designers, including John Pizzey, artist Clifton Pugh, architects Morrice Shaw and Robert Marshall and countless owner builders [particularly in the Eltham area].'⁶⁴ The Alistair Knox Park in Eltham, which he assisted in converting from a rubbish tip in the mid-1970s, is dedicated to him.



Clay caricature of Alistair Knox, 1953, by John Frith
(Source: *AHB*, January 1953, p14)



Clay bricks in production, undated, unspecified site
(Source: Alistair Knox, *Living in the environment*, 1978)

Thematic Context

Context, *Banyule Thematic Environmental History*, October 2018:

- Theme 5: Suburban development

See also Allom Lovell & Associates, *Banyule Heritage Place Study: An Urban History*, vol 1, July 1999:

⁶² Knox, *We are what we stand on*, xiii and p47

⁶³ Peterson and Kuzyk, 'Alistair Knox (1912-1986): modernism, environment and the spirit of place', passim; and 'Design and Building Career', *Biography*, Alistair Knox Foundation, available online, <https://alistairknox.org/>

⁶⁴ Goad, 'Knox, Alistair', p338

• 6.4 Post-War Residential Development

Comparative Analysis

Knox's practice was responsible for approximately 1,260 buildings, principally houses. The majority of his mud-brick projects are now situated in Nillumbik Shire, predominantly in Eltham, Kangaroo Ground, and Diamond Creek. The presence of a small cluster of his first phase projects in the Lower Plenty and Montmorency – now part of Banyule – reflects these areas' associations with the former Shire of Eltham, the 'cradle' of mud brick and environmental design in Melbourne during the second half of the 20th century. Another score or so of Knox's houses, chiefly dating from the 1960s and 1970s, survive elsewhere in Banyule; however, while often distinct within their immediate settings, these places generally present as more typical, even conventional, examples of his second and later phases of work.⁶⁵

English House, namely its 1947 core, is remarkable within Knox's total output by being his first mud-brick design. Its completion proved influential for his career trajectory and proved a catalyst in the postwar mud-brick movement.

The only known example of Knox's work in the municipality affected by a HO is:

- *Brynnig House*, 37 Glenard Drive, Eaglemont (part of the Walter Burley Griffin Glenard Estate, HO1) – a restrained gable-roofed, U-shaped, timber house, Knox's first commercial project, built in 1946.⁶⁶ Since modified.

Two other earlier instances of Knox's work in Banyule have been recommended for a HO by this Study:

- *Lindsay Edward House*, 149 Old Eltham Road, Lower Plenty – a large flat-roofed mud-brick split-level with uncommon U-shaped, 'butterfly' plan, built between 1950 and 1952 for the artist Lindsay Edward. The most architecturally accomplished example of Knox's adobe work in the municipality.
- *Vera Knox House*, 46 Panorama Street, Lower Plenty – a single-storey house of modular design, constructed between 1958 and 1960, from likely salvaged Mount Gambier limestone and window walls as a retirement home for a relative of Knox by marriage. Illustrative of Knox's second phase of work, although set apart by its rare use of limestone.

There are also a limited number of other mud-brick buildings in the municipality:

- *Woodburn House*, 1/11 Hughes Street, Montmorency (HO159) – a modest mud-brick house on a reinforced concrete slab with front 'window wall' (northern outlook, originally louvred) and skillion roof designed/built by an architectural student, William J Woodburn, in 1949. An austerity induced instance of the International Style in adobe recognised as innovative at the time, along with the neighbouring house at no 9 by Sydney Smith (no HO), which attracted attention for its utilisation of hollow concrete block walls.⁶⁷
- *Adobe Houses and Dam (Peck's Dam)*, Napier Crescent and Grand Boulevard, Montmorency (HO101) – a serial listing of single and two-storey mud-brick houses in a naturalised setting, most houses are heavily screened from the streets by native/indigenous vegetation. Skillion or gable roofs, timber-framed windows and salvaged/recycled elements appear to abound. Built over the postwar period on low-cost land in the Panorama Heights Estate, many by their owners (characterised as an eclectic array of creatives), some of whom were evidently influenced or advised by Knox.⁶⁸

In Banyule, a small group of architect-designed houses included in the Schedule of the Heritage Overlay or recommended for a HO by this Study reflect the organic/Wrightian and regionalist strain of modernism in which Knox practised.⁶⁹ These places, however, date from the late 1950s or 1960s, at least several years after *English House*. They also seek to evoke a

⁶⁵ For instance: 43 Alexander Street, Montmorency (mud brick construction, façade of random stone cladding); 30 Gilbert Road, Ivanhoe (courtyard house, mud-brick, carport modified); Sunday School Hall for St Andrews Church at 1-3 Mountain View Road, Montmorency (1955); 8 Rowell Street, Rosanna (1960s brick house with an International Style expression); and *Fowler House*, 60 Adam Crescent, Montmorency (late 1970s mud brick). See Alistair Knox website, section 'Buildings', <http://alistairknox.org/directories/2>

⁶⁶ Knox was also behind the *Moore House* on Glenard Drive (since demolished) – a flat roofed, timber building with a U-shaped footprint which enabled the retention of pre-existing trees, with extensive glazing and a stone paved patio.

⁶⁷ Robin Boyd, 'Small Homes Section: A Lesson From Montmorency', *Age*, 28 December 1949, p4; and *Australian Home Beautiful*, January 1950, pp23-5

⁶⁸ 12-16, 59, 68, 67-71, 72, 73-75 Napier Crescent and 134 Grand Boulevard. Refer to Peterson and Kuzyk, 'Alistair Knox (1912-1986): modernism, environment and the spirit of place', p11

⁶⁹ *V Walker House*, 209 Main Road, Lower Plenty (HO163), 1958; and *Williams House*, 4 Glenard Drive, Eaglemont (HO146), 1963; and *Elliston Estate*, Rosanna (HO92), late 1960s. Recommended by this Study – *Okalyi House*, 66 Old Eltham Road, Lower Plenty, 1968-70; *Yann House*, 21 Keam Street, Ivanhoe East, 1960-63; and *Welsh House*, 4 Eton Court, Heidelberg, 1965-72

regional/organic character with more 'earthy' variants of conventional materials (timber and brick) as opposed to Knox's design, which celebrate their organic nature with heavy-set mud-brick walls and reclaimed 'bush' timber.

Intactness

Generally intact (1947 footprint)

Previous Assessment

- RBA Architects + Conservation Consultants, *Banyule Heritage Study 2020: Stage 1 report*, Banyule City Council, August 2020 – High priority, recommended for Stage 2
- Context, *Banyule Thematic Environmental History*, October 2018 – identified as a 'place of potential heritage significance'
- Heritage Alliance, *Survey of Post-War Built Heritage in Victoria*, Stage 1, vol 2, October 2008, 027-026, p115 [NB – some details are incorrect, including address]

Heritage Overlay Schedule Controls

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| External Paint Controls | Yes (walls of mud brick only and exposed timber) |
| Internal Alteration Controls | Yes (mud-brick fireplace and inglenook) |
| Tree Controls | No |
| Outbuildings and/or fences | No |

Extent of Heritage Overlay

The proposed extent of the heritage overlay is outlined approximately below.



Recommended extent of heritage overlay
(Source: Nearmap, January 2021)