

# Labassa *lives*

Volume 3, Issue 3, 2015

## Women alone

Labassa was, for the most part, a community of women from c.1936 until late 1945. While this was accentuated by the absence of husbands and sons during the Second World War, the household already had a significant number of widows and divorcees.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, a flat was more affordable than a detached house for women on a small pension or a wage half that of a male adult. A flat within a converted mansion also offered a degree of security and privacy, which was especially attractive to divorcees. While Hollywood made light of divorce in films such as *The Gay Divorcee*, the reality for most couples was humiliation and social opprobrium. Divorce by 'mutual consent' was only possible if the parties colluded by hiring a 'professional witness' who would attest to specific acts of adultery, desertion or cruelty. Flat 3 residents Rosamond Pridham Love, Alice Mary Hodgins and Violet Miller all endured unwelcome press coverage of their divorce proceedings.

Resident Jeanie Thomas avoided this attention by separating from her husband in 1934 but never divorcing. She shared Flat 7 with her daughter Marion (Mal) who had work as a saleswoman thus making it possible to rent a flat of their own.

Widows Marie Nell, Maie Brown and Lily Betheras shared flats with one or more of their children. All three lost sons during the Second World War. Flight Sergeant John Nell's plane was lost in the sea near Ceylon in 1942; Pilot Officer Brian Brown was shot down over Italy in April 1945 and Max Betheras died as a prisoner of war in 1945. Widow Helen Rodgers shared Flat 2 (Music Room flat) with her sister and brother-in-law for more than 30 years. Caretaker Emily Brearley, who supported some of these women through difficult times, became a widow herself in 1943 when her husband James died.

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*Above:* Mrs Love, a member of Labassa's 'community of women' in the 1930s and 1940s. *Photo:* Clive Eastwood.

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## Women alone (continued)

### Jeanie Thomas (Flat 7 c.1937 – 1956)



*Above:* Jeanie Thomas, 1943.



*Above:* Marion (Mal) Thomas, 1944.

*Photos:* Margaret McKeown.

Jeanie Thomas and her daughter Mal moved into Flat 7 around 1937. During the Second World War, Mal met and married American serviceman John Merten. In September 1945, Mal sailed on the *Lurline* for the USA with hundreds of other 'war brides'. Jeanie followed in 1956 but the arrangement didn't last and Jeanie returned to Australia in 1958.

Jeanie's granddaughter Margaret, who visited Labassa with her parents on Sunday afternoons, has highlighted how crucial Labassa's supportive environment could be. One memorable day, in excruciating pain from an inflamed appendix, Jeanie dragged herself to the connecting door to the main building and sat on a chair calling for help. It was Emily Brearley who came to her aid and called the ambulance.

### Rosamond Love (Flat 3 c.1936 – 1940)

Rosamond Love was living at Labassa when her divorce application went before the Supreme Court. Her marriage to Fred Love had been in trouble for 15 years and they separated several times. Rosamond told the court that she hadn't previously pursued divorce or maintenance for her two daughters because she "wanted to avoid publicity".

Rosamond was fortunate in having the support of her extended family. Her 'well-to-do' parents owned Sandhurst, in Alma Road, East St Kilda, an Italianate mansion they converted into flats in the 1920s. An aunt in England paid for daughters Lorraine and Rosamond Elspeth to be educated at private schools.

Sister Dorothy (Mrs Oscar Hammerstein) loaned her £400 to clear some debts.

For the main part, however, Rosamond supported herself and the girls as a saleswoman, working in a real estate agent's office and through renting unfurnished flats and subletting them as furnished. It is possible that Vi Miller (see page 3) was one of these sub-tenants.

A more detailed article on Rosamond Pridham and her daughters, was published in *Labassa Lives*, Volume 2, No.3.



*Above:* Rosamond Love, known as 'Mona', resident Flat 3.

*Photo:* Clive Eastwood.

## Women alone (continued)

### Violet Miller (The Tower c.1936 – c.1954)



Violet (Vi) Miller rented a room in Labassa's tower following her divorce in 1936. She already knew the property through her friend Dot Ede who lived in Flat 8.

Vi had to find full-time employment to support herself and used her experience as a photo colourist, dressmaker and milliner to find work at the Myer Emporium in Melbourne.

Her needlecraft skills were also put to use in fundraising for Labassa's own Red Cross Comforts Fund.

*Left:* Vi Miller (centre) and her Christmas trees with Pat Brearley left, and resident Thomas Chadwick, right.  
*Photo:* *Argus*, 21 December, 1938.

Vi's signature work was the creation of spectacular Christmas stockings, which she donated to various charities around Melbourne (see photo left).

Vi was joined at Labassa by her daughter Joan Manton and family in 1947, when Flat 10 (Drawing Room flat) became vacant. Although Vi moved out in the early 1950s she made regular visits to Manor Grove and on one occasion transported one of Labassa's large cement brolgas from the grounds to her own garden in Holroyd Avenue, Caulfield. The fate of this broлга, which had decorated Labassa's balustrade parapet until the 1930s, is currently unknown.

### Alice Mary Hodgens (Flat 3, c.1940 – 1943)

Alice Hodgens was a woman of versatile talents – a milliner, cashier, theatre manageress, musician and music teacher. In 1924 she managed the Middle Brighton Picture Theatre while her then husband managed the Northcote Theatre. Alice also played piano accompaniment for the silent movies and was proficient on the steel guitar and drums.

Alice did paid work for most of her life, even during her marriage when she raised four children. The more usual occupation for married women at this time was 'home duties'. In the late 1920s she owned a house in Sandringham followed by one in Elsternwick and said she had "considerable private means". Circumstances changed with her divorce in 1933, however, and Alice relied on the income she earned as a musician and music teacher.



*Above:* Alice Mary Hodgens, Flat 3 resident.

*Photo:* Diana Appleby.

## The Willas Flats

The Willas Flats – newer 'modern' and 'with every convenience' – were completed in 1936.

Unlike Labassa, where several older couples had made the mansion their 'home for life', the Willas Flats attracted more short-term tenants.

These included three married couples, at least six single women and widow Irene Marriott who shared a flat with her sons.

The story of the Marriott family appeared in Volume 2, No. 1 of *Labassa Lives*.

## Resident landlords: Hannons & O'Callaghans



*Left:* Emily Hannon on the family farm at Clyde not far from Dandenong.

*Right:* Robert Hannon whose family nickname was 'Tea' because he asked to be called when the customary cups of tea were made.

*Photos:*  
Helen Bassett.



Two owner couples have the distinction of not only managing Labassa as a long-term investment but living alongside their tenants. Emily and Robert Hannon who purchased Labassa in 1923 and Will and Sal O'Callaghan who followed in 1933 share remarkably similar histories.

Both families belonged to the Irish diaspora that migrated to Australia in large numbers during and following the Great Famine of 1845-1852. By 1871, one in four Victorians had been born in Ireland. Robert Hannon himself, and wife Emily's parents, migrated from Ireland. While Will and Sal O'Callaghan were born in Australia, both had parents or grandparents born in Ireland.

The Hannons and O'Callaghans also came to Labassa late in life after decades of managing successful businesses in rural Victoria. Robert and Emily Hannon were graziers and owned several properties around Victoria. Robert was particularly well-known and popular in Sea Lake where he had been an outspoken advocate for farmers during the drought of 1914-15. Will and Sal O'Callaghan owned country pubs in Devenish, Barnawartha, Glenrowan and Myrtleford.

The Hannons initially took up residence within Labassa. In 1925 they purchased the mansion's stables (9 Manor Grove) which had been sold when the original Estate was subdivided for residential housing.

The Caulfield Council had already rejected an application for their conversion into flats but the Hannons were more successful. Ontario Flats, comprising three self-contained flats, started advertising for tenants in 1926 with Robert and Emily in residence.

Labassa was managed by the Hannons until 1929 when a series of crises eventually led to both properties being put up for sale at a Mortgagees Auction.

Emily Hannon died at Ontario Flats on 24 September, 1928. The following year on 27 September, Robert committed suicide in their flat by cutting his throat. John Hannon told the Inquest that his father "had been suffering from a nervous breakdown owing to financial worries."

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## Resident landlords: Hannons & O'Callaghans (continued)

"He had entered into a contract which would have resulted in a big financial loss and he was receiving medical attention."

There were likely other factors contributing to Robert's state of mind. Four days prior to his suicide, Robert published a moving 'In Memoriam' tribute to "my dear wife" in *The Argus*.

Robert's tragic death not only traumatised the family but resulted in an extended financial hiatus. He died without leaving a will. Six weeks before his death, he had married a widow, Frances Mary Arthy, who would in due course apply for the administration of her husband's estate. In the meantime, Equity Trustees Executors was granted oversight of the Estate and set about identifying all assets and debts. Apart from Labassa and the stables, Robert had purchased five other Victorian properties. More significantly he had 'loaned' thousands of pounds to his sons Harold and John.

The Estate was under administration for more than four years. In March 1933, Labassa Flats and Ontario Flats went to a Mortgagee's Auction on separate titles and had different owners by August that year.

Robert's death had a lasting impact on the residents of Manor Grove and is still part of neighbourhood folklore. For the Hannon children and their descendants, however, Robert is mostly remembered for his kindness and the nickname 'Tea' given because he asked to be called, when the customary cups of tea were made.



*Above left:* Sal O'Callaghan. *Above Right:* Will O'Callaghan.

*Photos:* Margaret Gleeson.

Will and Sal O'Callaghan sold their country pubs to purchase Labassa for £16,000. Their niece, Margaret Gleeson recalled that [Uncle Will] "loved showing his new acquisition off – I could see he was so proud of Labassa ... The garden (what was left of it) was magnificent. The garden centrepiece was, of course, the cherub fountain, which sat beneath huge magnolia trees."

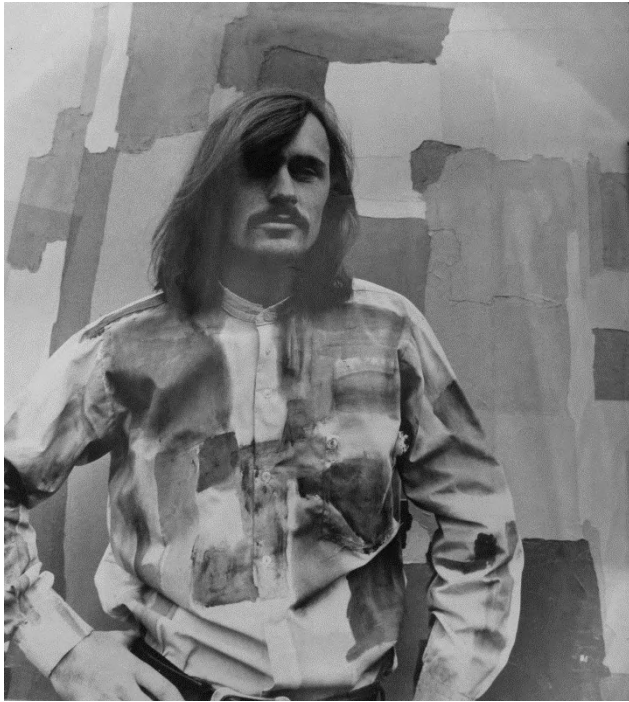
The O'Callaghans employed Mr Aitken as a full-time gardener who enhanced the gardens by cutting pathways through the waist-high ferns and shrubs and adding garden seats and a sun dial. He also removed one of the large brolgas from Labassa's roofline when it became dangerously loose and turned it into a garden feature.

Will and Sal initially lived in part of Flat 3 (First Floor, west side), later moving into Flat 4 (First Floor, east side).

In 1936 they built the red brick flats adjoining the old Laundry and named them the Willas Flats (an amalgam or anagram of their names). For the O'Callaghans, the Labassa and Willas flats were like a private village. Will was a 'racing man' who loved to 'yarn' about his bets with the tenants, especially his big win in 1939 when Rivette won both the Caulfield and Melbourne Cups.

Sal died at Labassa in 1940 of pernicious anaemia. In the latter days of her illness, Will placed a chair for her on the landing just below the stained glass window, so she could have a rest on her way to the upstairs flat. Will's sister Maie Brown and her daughter Margaret moved into Labassa following Sal's death to keep him company. In 1942 Will decided it was time for him to leave Labassa and in 1946 sold the property to the Lapin family.

## Derek Hambly: artist at work



*Artist Derek Hambly (left) offers an evocative insight into Labassa's attraction for young artists in the 1960s.*

*Derek was introduced to Labassa by Ken Forrester, an art student at Caulfield Technical College and became a regular visitor.*

*When the Drawing Room flat (Flat 10) became available c.1969 he grabbed it as a live-in studio. Derek shared Flat 10 with partner Cheryl Hammond. They were later joined by Derek's brother Ross, Carole Harper and David Mulholland.*

*Left: Derek Hambly, c.1969.*

*Photo: Penny Carruthers.*

### By Derek Hambly

Labassa was a magnet for young art students and creative life-style people. We could romanticise our existence, living in such a beautiful historic and spacious mansion. I always thought it a great privilege to have lived there.

I'm a full-time artist now, but back in the Labassa days, I did landscaping, mowed lawns and restored antiques to pay for my oil paints, canvas, timber and rent. I moved to Labassa shortly after I'd been commissioned by Sir Roy Grounds to draw and paint the construction of the National Gallery of Victoria.

We had some eccentric friends and apparently Cheryl [now Victoria] Hammond and I took the cake by being elected king and queen of Labassa.

Frank Thring stopped over sometimes. He was in the movie *The Viking*, with Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtis.

Frank played a bad, old king. He made his presence felt in my studio [the Drawing Room]. He sat high up on his over-sized pulpit and with his cheesy, dry, droll humour did a recital right in the bay window. We had great big, heavy, heraldic drapes each side of him, and at the same time there was this contrast of my 6' x 8' full colour, hard edged, abstract paintings all around the walls. I just loved the clash of the old and the new. So did everyone else. I love big art and built a 6' x 30' triptych (in three parts). It was a pity I had to pull it down when I left Labassa, especially now that I have such a huge studio/gallery in the US, just a couple hours from Chicago.

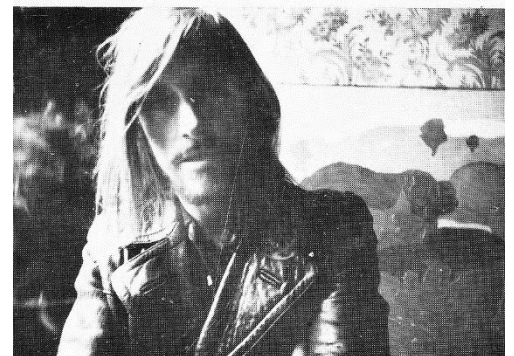
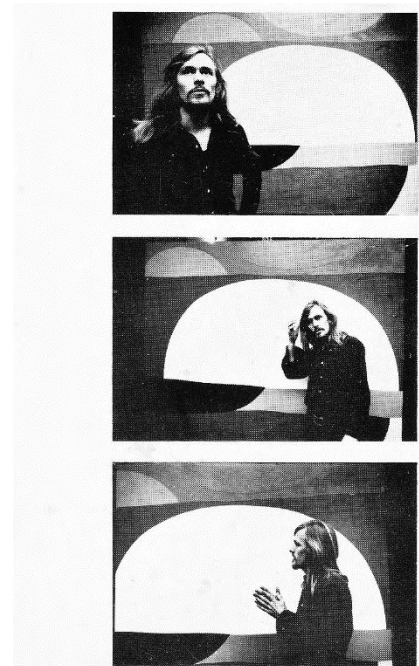
Another person I remember, living in the basement flat of the Servants' Quarters, was 'Boris'. He was an ex-Hell's Angel, kicked out because he refused to fight.

[Boris] had a huge red swastika on a black flag hanging in his gloomy room, with a row of glowing, flickering, red gargoyle candles lined up underneath it. The candles were made by one of the people who lived right above me, Jake [Elmar Jakobson]. He was an artist, and took the satyr mask from above the main entrance of Labassa, made a rubber mould and started producing candles to sell and give as gifts.

Boris stood out in a party full of hippy artists and bikers. Lots of eccentric dressing up went on. Girls in long, colourful dresses, big hats and big hair. Then there was Boris. Standing 6'2" wearing a black top hat with a red ribbon around it, flowing down the back of his long, tailed black coat. His white shirt had a lace front and sleeves.

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## Derek Hambly: artist at work (continued)



*Above:* One of Derek's giant canvasses, c.1969. Note the artist's feet.

*Photo:* Penny Carruthers.

*Above.* Artwork for an invitation to Derek's Farewell Retrospective of oils, at Gallery 99, 24 August, 1970 just before he left Labassa for overseas. Note that the bottom photo was taken in Labassa's Boudoir.

*Image:* Judith Cordingley.

But he still danced from one foot to the other when he had something to tell us. Really, he was the cornerstone of our time at Labassa. One could feel David was enjoying the living style that was our very unique time of life at Labassa.

His large eyes with blue veins and grey shadows always popped out of his long gaunt face, fixed on whoever he was talking to. He scared some of the women, and when he would laugh he kept a very straight face. Quite an art in itself. Labassa had its very own Rasputin.

I remember a young couple in love who practised their violins four to six hours a day. They were very inspired. I remember actress Jane Clifton living in Labassa for a time and she was a friend.

Labassa got very social and a lot of growth went on, with student artists and musos.

We had an older guy, a writer, David Mulholland. He loved the Russian writers Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, etc. David had 'starved writer' written all over him. He had an ex-wife and six kids and worked as a proof reader. He got paid in \$1 bills so that it looked like a lot of money. He would show me his money and say "let's go for a drink on me."

David had a strong Scottish accent. His hair was black, long and thinning, which he had to keep throwing back from over his face with his long thin fingers. He was still quite handsome, but bitten by life and stooped over.

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Forthcoming events in 2016

Contributions, corrections, information, comments and articles are welcome.

Please forward to:  
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• <b>Open Days</b>	19 June
• 17 January	17 July
• 21 February	21 August
• 20 March	18 September
• April (to be confirmed)	16 October
• 15 May	20 November
• 21 May (Saturday) National Trust	December closed
• 60th Anniversary Opening	

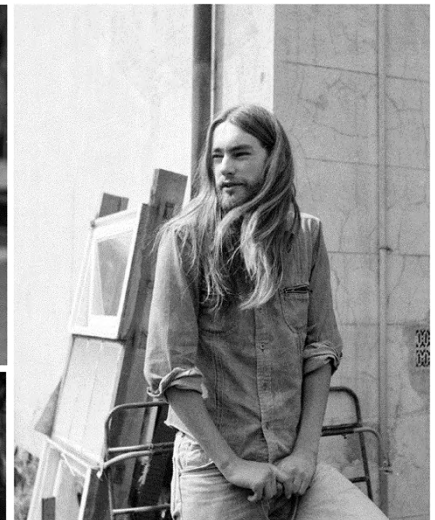
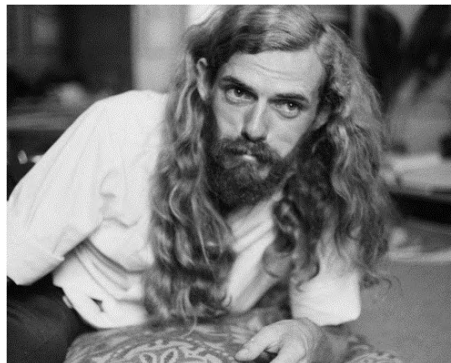
**Social History Open Day**

More than 650 people attended Labassa’s Social History Day on Sunday 8 November to hear about the people who had lived on the property post-1920. The day was also a financial success with \$11,278.60 raised for the restoration of the tower.

Visitors were particularly interested in talking to ex-residents who shared their stories, presented their films and photos and performed. Thanks to all the volunteers who helped on the day with a special thanks to ex-residents Russell D. Clarke, Peter Gibson, John and Ruth Harland, John Laurie and Howard Watkinson who gave the day its real-life edge. Thanks also to ex-resident Randall Bouchier for being part of *The Age* feature on 24 October which drew the crowds.

In the lead up, the National Trust published an article on the tower, which can be viewed online at <http://greenscribble.com.au/clientgs/ntvic/nationaltrust/issue4novdecjan2016/issue4summer16/>

**Right:** A small selection of John Harland’s photos presented for the first time on the Social History Day.



*From top left clockwise:*  
John Harland, Howard Watkinson  
Ann Weir, Stephen Hall and  
Emma Watkinson.