

Labassa *lives*

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Mrs Emily Brearley: 'the heart of Labassa'

Perhaps no other individual was more responsible for the survival of Labassa's grandeur than Mrs Emily Jane Brearley. Not only did she live at Labassa longer than anyone else (43 years) but as caretaker and custodian she kept many of the building's decorative surfaces in immaculate condition. She also engendered a sense of community ownership that was sustained through several generations of tenant families and cultural shifts.

Like many of Labassa's tenants, the Brearleys were migrants. In 1911, Emily (aged 33), husband, James (aged 36) and son Harold (aged 10) left the family fish and chip shop in Blackpool for Australia. After a short stay in Adelaide, they moved to

Melbourne where they gained experience as caretakers and housekeepers with various employers before establishing their Fruit Palace and Confectionary shop in Dandenong Road, Caulfield.

It may have been here that they met local resident, Stanley S. Sergeant who had purchased Labassa from Flora Watson and from 1921 advertised accommodation at 'Labassa Flats'. The Brearleys arrived at Labassa as caretakers that year, taking up residence in Flat 5 (the Laundry).

It was initially a tight squeeze with son Harold living with his parents on and off before his marriage in 1930.

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Above: Mrs Emily Brearley, 1958, aged 80 years. Photo: Pat Dunn

Left: The James T. Brearley fish and chip shop in Blackpool, c1907. Specialties included chipped potatoes cooked in pure lard, tripe and heel.

Foreground: Emily with son Harold.

Background: James in the doorway behind the gentleman with a fob watch.

Photo: Pat Dunn

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Filmmaking and photography at Labassa



Mrs Emily Brearley (continued)



Margaret Gleeson (nee Brown) who visited Labassa as a child in the 1930s and lived in Flat 4 (Master Bedroom) from 1940 recalls: *"Mrs Brearley was the heart of the place; she kept everything running smoothly. A tiny woman with hair pulled back into a bun, she was a Lancastrian who never lost her delightful accent. Her eyes were always twinkling, smiling. She and her husband were the caretakers, cleaners and general fixers. No matter what was the matter, they found a solution. They meant so much to us all. They delivered milk to each tenant's door first thing each morning and collected and distributed any mail to the house ..."*

After James died in 1943, Emily remained in Flat 5 and continued as Labassa's custodian until shortly before her death in 1964, aged 86. Mrs Brearley had cared for the mansion through six changes of ownership and an incalculable number of tenants. Margaret Manton who lived at Labassa until she was seven in 1956 says: *"Mrs Brearley was an absolute slave to this place, always on her hands and knees polishing the parquet. Up and down the stairs polishing. The house was immaculate."*

Mrs Brearley was known for her friendliness and attitude that everyone

deserved to be treated equally – no matter their social background, religion or disposition. After World War 2, the First Floor tenants progressively moved on making way for the arrival of European migrants, mostly Jewish Holocaust survivors.

Mrs Helen Apfelbaum who lived in Flat 4 (1952-63) and initially spoke no English, recalls that Mrs Brearley *"was an angel – she looked after us like a family. She used to arrange for ice on a hot day on a Saturday when we didn't go out."* Noam White, who lived in the Willas Flats while grand-father Bere Feiglin lived in Flat 7 (original kitchen) remembers: Mrs Brearley *"always knew how to make people feel good and help people. On the Sabbath – when it got a bit dark or cold on a Saturday she would knock on the door and ask 'can I turn on the lights for you; can I turn on the heating for you?'. She was just that way – she knew how to make people feel good. They are very rare people."*

A photo showing Mrs Brearley dressed as Santa with a gaggle of Labassa and Manor Grove children (right) highlights her

sense of community. Three of the children are Jewish.

It is likely that Mrs Brearley realised that Labassa might fall into decline and tried to save some of its precious decorations. Brian Kiernan, who lived in the Music Room flat in the early 1960s recalls: *"I took the ballroom [sic] chandelier when we left to save it from being scrapped – took it all the way to Sydney and returned it when the move began to preserve Labassa – along with some ornate lamp-shades Mrs Brearley, the old housekeeper, entrusted to us."*



Above: Emily Brearley as Santa Claus in the early 1950s.

Top left: Harold Brearley and fiancé Grace c1929.

Top right: Emily Brearley, James Brearley and daughter-in-law Grace Brearley 1930s.

Photos: Pat Dunn

By private introduction



Few people arrived at 'Labassa Mansions' by chance. Some answered a 'To Let' advertisement but many came via personal introduction. A familiar story among residents who arrived after Mrs Brearley's departure is that they 'inherited' their flat from a friend or fellow student. Some departing residents, who were particularly protective of Labassa's decorative features, by-passed the agent and conducted their own interviews for prospective tenants.

This story is also common among tenants from the 1930s through to the early 1950s, except the introductions were made family to family. An outstanding example of this is the Marriott and Spencer families.

The first link in this family circle was Isabella (Dot) Ede who lived

in Flat 8 (Dining Room) with her husband Sydney from at least 1937. Dot's brother, Percy Spencer was married to Emily Marriott, whose sister Mary Marriott was married to Percy Daly. Around 1938, after Mary died, Percy Daly moved into Labassa. Emily Marriott died in 1941 and Percy Spencer likewise moved into Labassa with his daughter Claire. Meanwhile, Irene Marriott, sister-in-law of the 'two Percys' had taken up residence at No.1, Willas Flats which she shared on and off with her sons Russell and Keith. Russell subsequently rented Labassa's tower rooms 1947-1949 for two shillings and sixpence per week to use as a radio workshop and 'general escape hole'.



Top left: Claire Spencer and Aunt Dot Ede. **Top right:** Dot's brother, Percy Spencer. **Above** Irene Marriott, sister-in-law to the two Percys. *Photos courtesy Marriott Family Image Collection*

The War Years 1939-45



Left: War Effort Fete held in the grounds of Labassa circa late 1939. The view is of the West side of the mansion where a block of flats now stands.

Photo: Pat Dunn



Above: An array of flags, including the Union Jack, festoon Labassa's front garden during this War Effort Fete. *Photo:* Pat Dunn



Above: Pat Dunn, nee Brearley, (grand daughter of Mrs Brearley) presenting a bouquet of flowers to the Mayoress of Caulfield. *Left to Right:* Unknown man; Unknown woman; Mrs Brearley; Mr William O'Callaghan, owner of Labassa who built the Willas Flats; Unknown woman; Unknown woman; Mrs Chadwick (?); Isabella (Dot) Ede; Unknown woman; Pat, Lady Mayoress. Note the wider veranda. *Photo:* Pat Dunn

The War Years 1939-45 (continued)



Above: Bill and Gwen Westwood on the occasion of their marriage, 10 September 1941 at Holy Trinity Church, Balaclava. *Above right:* Bill and Gwen in the grounds of Labassa. *Photo:* Westwood family



During World War 2, Labassa quietly transformed from a private residential community into more of a social hub for the War Effort. Residents formed a committee to raise funds through Labassa's officially registered Red Cross Comfort Fund. Mrs Chadwick (Drawing Room flat) hosted card parties and knitting circles. Letters were written to servicemen. A small dance party was held on the front veranda with ship's lanterns lighting up the front hall and staircase. There were raffles and even a fete with all the theatre of the Victoria Police Highlands Band marching up Orrong Road into the grounds.

Fearful of Japanese air and submarine attacks, the Australian Government introduced blackout restrictions and air raid warning regulations. The residents of Manor Grove appointed Mr Claud Jones (Barry Jones' father) as Air Raid Warden. He ensured that all the windows had their blackout curtains securely closed on the nights of air raid practice.

Resident Margaret Gleeson writes: *"When the eerie sirens sounded we pulled the curtains and dimmed all interior lights. The blanket of darkness over the rooftops of Caulfield all the way to the Dandenongs was a strange sight to behold. As searchlights criss-crossed the night sky, those wardens who had specific duties took up their posts. Mr Jones, carrying a tin helmet, a first aid kit and a torch, quickly knocked on anyone's door should the tiniest chink of light seep through the window. When the All-Clear Alarm rang out practice was over and lights blinked on again all over the suburbs."*

Most of the Labassa families were personally touched by the war. According to granddaughter Pat Dunn, Mrs Brearley *"never forgot her British heritage. On the sideboard in her living room was a china bulldog, and a large framed copy of Winston Churchill's famous speech: 'We will fight them on the beaches... We will never surrender.'*

She spent many hours preparing food parcels for Britain during the war, which consisted of custard and eggs coated in oil or fat to preserve them. In 1945 British 'stage, screen and film star' Gracie Fields toured Australia to entertain the troops and raise funds for the War Effort. My grandmother, who came from the same town in Lancashire as Gracie, invited the star to Labassa for 'a cup of tea'."

A gracious letter of apology followed: *"as much as I would like to accept same, am afraid it's quite impossible. You see my time is very limited so what there is of it is devoted entirely to concerts, camps and hospitals ... Cheerio, Yours sincerely, Gracie Fields."*

Several residents anguished over family members in the forces and even suffered a profound loss. All three of Mrs Irene Marriott's sons (Robert, Russell and Keith) had enlisted. (See Marriott story, page 3.) While Lieutenant Bill Westwood was on campaign in New Guinea his wife Gwen moved into Labassa to be with her friend Nance Hodgins.

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The War years (continued)

Max Betheras, son of Mrs Lily Betheras, Flat 10 (Upstairs Servants Flat), died 28 June 1945 as a Prisoner of War, only 48 days before the war in the Pacific ended with an Armistice on 14 August.

Margaret Gleeson recalls a similarly tragic and untimely death: *"My worst memory of Labassa is of going to answer the doorbell one evening. I found the telegram boy at the front door, with the news my brother Brian had been killed in action in Italy. He had been overseas nearly two years. He was just 23 years old. He was a fighter pilot in the RAAF – the day he was shot down was to have been his last tour of operational duties before coming home on leave. It was April 5, 1945 – just one month prior to the declaration of peace in Europe ..."*



Above: Acting Sergeant Russell Marriot, 1944. Russell enlisted at aged 17 and became an electrical fitter who tested planes. *Photo* Courtesy Marriott Family Image Collection



Above: Mrs Brearley in the Red Cross costume she created for Labassa fundraisers. *Photo:* Pat Dunn

Greetings from Labassa



It seems that Labassa may have once had its own greeting card. This card has turned up in the memorabilia of two unrelated Labassa families. Note the pillars at the entrance, which have not appeared in any other photos to date. The image appears to be a black and white photo that has been colorised. It pre-dates February 1958 as the brolgas and urns had been removed by that date. Please contact us if you have any information on the origins or purposes of this card.

Photo: Courtesy Marriott Family Image Collection

A glorious renaissance



Above: The Conservatory, March 2014.



Above: Flora Watson in the Conservatory. *Photo:* John Boyd Watson II Collection. This Collection will be online at the State Library of Victoria website in early April.

Labassa's original Conservatory has a discrete presence in Manor Grove, its survival due in part to early recognition of its elegance as well as its conversion into a private residence during the 1930s. Recently it has undergone a glorious renaissance through the passion and painstaking work of its current owners.

Auction notes for 'Ontario' in the 1890s refer to 'conservatories, hot houses and ferneries' and there is physical evidence of another building on the current property. Newspaper reports about Alexander Robertson's gardener Mr George Cooper also suggest that the plants were of superlative quality. In 1896, following Robertson's death, the sale of a 'Grand Collection' of plants was advertised for viewing at the Athenaeum Hall, Collins Street, Melbourne: "*The plants are in fine condition and fit for exhibition Mr Robertson's gardener (Mr G. Cooper) having taken the leading prizes in Melbourne and suburbs for some years.*"

George Cooper's exhibition specialties – Japanese Chrysanthemums, Ericas, potted plants and

flowers – give us an insight into how the Conservatory may have been used.

The Watson family, who purchased Labassa in 1904, continued to enjoy the lush beauty of the Conservatory as shown in the photo of Flora Watson (above).

Around 1917, when the Estate was being subdivided, the Conservatory was offered for sale to Malvern Council who declined. It was saved by Edmund George Ovey, an architect who had previously purchased 72 Balaclava Road abutting the Conservatory. Ovey also purchased Labassa's gates which he sold to the trustees of the Memorial Park at Bacchus Marsh. The Conservatory was converted into a residence in the 1930s, which involved the addition of a brick section and some internal divisions. The glass roof was covered with metal during the war and some glass walls painted.

There was a false plaster ceiling throughout the Conservatory which truncated the Conservatory in two with all of the pressed metal and upper portion completely hidden.

The upper section had many holes and was being damaged by water ingress. All the glass in the roof had been replaced by asbestos sheeting.

Under the false ceiling there were several partitioned little rooms. All the walls, including the outside frame, were encased in wood panels and/or plaster. There were also two additions to the Conservatory which further concealed (and also were taking a toll on) its true proportions.

The restoration of the Conservatory was conducted in several stages.

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Above: Interior prior to restoration.

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Please send contributions, corrections, information, comments and articles, indicating whether or not they are for publication, to the following:

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Forthcoming events

Open days (3rd Sunday of the month, 10.30am—4.30pm)

April 20 Heritage Week: Basil Watson pioneer aviator
May 18 Regular Open Day
June 15 Regular Open Day
July 20 Regular Open Day

August 17 Regular Open Day
September 21 Regular Open Day
October 19 Regular Open Day
November 16 Regular Open Day
December CLOSED

A glorious renaissance (continued)

The current owners, who purchased the Conservatory in 2002, had the two extensions, internal partitions, false ceiling and asbestos sheeting removed.

In 2012, they entrusted David Wixted, John Vogan and HBS (Heritage Building Services) with the job of restoring the Conservatory to its 19th century grandeur. Pressed-metal man John Vogan recalls: *"It was a wreck when I first saw it."* And yet *"the original workmanship was just incredible, out of this world."* Architect, David Wixted was also thrilled to discover that the frame had not been damaged by all the additions and was *"a building that has actually turned out to be something of real elegance."*

Please contact us if you have any pre-2000 photos of the Conservatory or information about the owners Alfred Goodall, Reginald Drew, Hector Nicholls, Mary Chalk, the Scott sisters (Dora, Gerty and Haidee) and John and Phyllis Jones.

With thanks to the Glen Eira City Council.



Left: The interior ceiling following restoration work, March 2012.



Left: The Conservatory pre-restoration, circa 2002.