

Volume 3, Issue 1, 2015

Time of transitions

By the early 1960s, the settled family household of 40 years was on its way to becoming a community of the young and transient.

In January 1964, the only remaining long-term residents were Emily Brearley (Vol. 2, No.1) and Maie Brown. Claude and Ivy Kingston and Ivy's sister Helen Rodgers had moved out after more than 30 years in Flat 2. Some recent 'mature age' arrivals included Bere Feiglin and the newly wed George and Marie Strickland.

Young migrant families with children the Laceys, Rodseths, Olofssons, Kelders and Ceferins — had arrived, but moved on by 1968 to establish their own homes or pursue other prospects.

During this time of transition, the older generation sometimes took on the role of grandparents to the 15 or so resident children for whom the house was their playground and 'village'.

The young women and men who took up residency as the flats gradually became vacant brought a new dynamic. As John Laurie puts it, "We were living life day to day. We weren't big on possessions or posterity." Many were employed in the visual or literary Arts as musicians, radio producers, film makers, television producers, editors and writers or were on the fringe as arts students.

> Social History Day Sunday, 8 November 2015 See last page for details



NATIONAL TRUST

ment an amazing story

Above: Bere Feiglin Flat 7 and Pat Kelders Flat 1 c.1962. *Photo:* Courtesy the Kelders family.



Above: Visitor Margaret Hulse (right) and unknown person avail themselves of Peter Homewood's 'drag bag' of costumes c.1965. Margaret was incorrectly identified as Adele Vol.1, No.2, p.7. *Photo:* Courtesy Ed Lagzdin.

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An uncommon attachment



As the sister of a former owner, Maie Brown had an uncommon attachment to Labassa. Her brother William O'Callaghan purchased the property with his wife Sarah (known as Sal) in 1933 and Maie and her family were regular visitors throughout the 1930s. Following the death of Sal, William moved out and Mrs Brown and her daughter Margaret moved into Flat 4 (original Master Bedroom suite). Maie's son Brian, who was killed in the closing days of the Second World War, had

The newlyweds

George and Marie Strickland moved into Flat 8 (Dining Room), shortly after their marriage in 1959. George (then 56) a widower, was a crane driver; Marie (aged 59) a retired teacher.

The couple are believed to have met through one of George's 11 children. Marie loved to teach, particularly elocution and drama and would coach her step-grand children with little skits and plays to entertain them during their visits.

Resident Noam White recalls: "Mr Strickland was my first experience of a 'petrol head'. Whenever he was to be seen outside, his head would be tucked under the bonnet of the car as he tinkered with it. A hand rolled cigarette



stayed at Labassa when he was on leave from the RAAF. The weddings of daughters Moyra and Margaret were also celebrated at the house. After Margaret moved out in 1948, Maie moved downstairs into the smaller Flat 9, next to caretaker Emily Brearley.

The Browns and O'Callaghans will be the subject of a longer article in a future issue. *Above left:* Maie Brown shortly before her death in 1970 while living at Labassa.

Above right: Maie Brown with her daughters Margaret (left) and Moyra (right) on the occasion of Moyra's wedding, January 1941.

Photos: Courtesy Gleeson family.

Right: George and Marie Strickland, (centre) on their wedding day 1959, shortly before they moved into Flat 8.

Photo: Courtesy Strickland family.

was constantly in his mouth, a scene that would frighten the heebiejeebies out of any self-respecting modern safety officer. He did look like he was a pretty tough character and I had no intention of testing that image out. Nevertheless I have to admit that he was always willing to help me when I summoned up the



courage to ask him to lend me the occasional tool to fix something. He would give me a look with a smile that seemed to say, 'well you really don't know very much about what you are doing and you will probably do something stupid, but go ahead anyway'."

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Mountain climbing at Labassa?



The Kelders family 1961-67

The Kelders family — Gerry (25) and Maria (22) migrated from the Netherlands with their 11 month old daughter Alida in 1956. "Work," says Gerry, "was difficult to get in Holland and there were long queues of job seekers". Their first 'Aussie home' was Bonegilla Migrant Centre near Albury Wodonga. It was "a very big deal" when Gerry, Maria and Alida were naturalised at the Caulfield Town Hall in 1963.

By the time the family left Labassa, there were four children in Flat 1 (Upstairs servants flat) – Alida, Marianne, Marten and Pat.

"Mountain climbing" is just one of the games played by Alida Kelders and "the troop of kids" she played with. Their challenge was to 'mountain climb' over the ornate cement decorations around the front bay windows, moving from one figure to the next, right around the windows. Alida's sister, Marianne, also recalls their bird cemetery — a special patch in the back garden



Left: Alida, Gerry, Maria and baby Marianne before Labassa. *Above:* Marianne and Alida Kelders on the front veranda. *Photos:* Courtesy Kelders family.

where they buried the birds that fell off the building. The deceased would be carefully placed in a box and all the kids invited to the funeral service.

Apart from this 'troop' of playmates, Marianne says there was a strong sense of "being nurtured by all the older people". Their connection with the Jewish families was particularly strong. Mrs Maria Kelders was very friendly with Mrs White who taught her about Jewish customs. Their Jewish neighbours would give the family food they couldn't use before Passover and pay Marianne 6 pence on the Sabbath to turn their lights on and off and do other chores.

The Kelders children also got on well with their more "exotic" neighbours. Song writer Hans Poulsen was "very nice" and invited them into the Tower for the view. The house was abuzz when his song *Rachael* became a hit. Peter Homewood was also a figure of fascination. He worked in television and grew chillies on his window sill. His guests could be heard chatting and drinking in the courtyard late into the night. The day of greatest excitement was when Nancy Cato, presenter of the children's program *The Magic Circle*, came to visit Peter and the children were introduced.

Like his daughters, Gerry recalls the friendliness of his neighbours —Mrs Brearley who allocated a garage to the family and Bere Feiglin who invited Gerry into his flat to taste his wine. The only bad memory Gerry has is the day his Jewish neighbours were distressed by the painting of Swastikas on the exterior walls of the mansion. They were quickly removed before being noticed by other residents.

"Our family was struggling," says Alida, "but we never felt poor because we lived in a special house." The sisters agree that their time at Labassa left them "with a powerful, life-time legacy of tolerance and an appreciation of people from different backgrounds."



Little United Nations



The Rodseth family 1961-65

Left: On the way to Ripponlea State School, 1963. *L-R:* Sandi Ceferin, Marianne Kelders, Jan Rodseth, Aksel Rodseth, Alida Kelders. Front: Jana Ceferin.

Right: Siren Rodseth with a possum the family found on the backstairs and kept in their bathroom. The possum was taken to Healesville Sanctuary before they returned to Norway.

Photos: Courtesy Jan Rodseth.



Ceferin, Alida and Marianne Kelders). Alida scared the daylights out of me once. She told me with a firm voice that she and I were going to be married when we grew older. I was nine years old. (Looking back, I don't find it scary at all.)

In the summer Aksel, Monica and I used to sleep out on the veranda. Our parents sat around the corner and talked about 'grown-up stuff' until we fell asleep. It was wonderful to hear the crickets in the night before falling asleep and the birds in the morning when I woke up.

Our flat had plenty of room so it became a meeting place for Scandinavian families living in Melbourne. One such family was the Olofssons. Luck had it that the flat next to ours [Flat 6] was vacant and they moved in. Their daughter, Monica, was my age and attended school in my class. With Alida that made three of us from Labassa in the same class at Ripponlea State School.

Sadly, one day in May 1965, my parents told me that we were going back to Norway and Monica and her family were going back to Sweden. There is seldom a week goes by without thinking of Labassa and the life I had there.

Alf and Siren and their boys Jan and Aksel, arrived in Australia in May 1960. Conditions in Norway had been difficult in the aftermath of World War 2. Alf and Siren decided to migrate when their clothing factory was forced to close due to competition from cheap Asian imports. The family moved into Flat 3 (Upstairs, west side) at Labassa on 1 December 1961. The family returned to Scandinavia in May 1965. Alf, Siren and Aksel have sadly passed away. Jan lives 35km outside Oslo, Norway.

By Jan Rodseth

Labassa was more or less known as "little UN", without the bureaucracy, during the time I lived in the mansion. There were people of Irish, British, Yugoslavian, Australian, Dutch, Swedish and Norwegian background living there. There were Jews, Catholics, Anglicans and secular families. Most of the time, things ran smoothly.

I was the oldest boy in the mansion and that put me in a special position. I was taken on fishing trips with Mr Ceferin to St Kilda. He always wanted to catch a Barracuda. He talked about that a lot, and I sincerely hope he did catch one, one day. Mr Strickland who lived downstairs often pulled me aside to tell me about Ned Kelly.

For Mrs Brearley, I was sometimes, a handful. But she had her ways of redirecting my attention. She started to tell tales about the old days

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and the manor. Then she got my full attention and things simmered down. Mrs Brown and I had a mutual truce agreement. She left me alone and I didn't bother her. Mr Feiglin had fun scaring the girls: he could pop out of nowhere and make ghost sounds.

Most of the Labassa children were immigrants and had left their grandparents behind in Europe. In a sense, Mrs Brearley and Mr Feiglin played a bit of that role.

Labassa was a great place to grow up. There was always someone around I could spend time with. There were four girls and four boys in the mansion and five or six other boys in Manor Grove that I played with. The other boys in Labassa were my brother Aksel and the Lacey boys. We always played 'war'. I played a lot with the girls (Monica Olofsson, Sandi and Jana

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Peter Homewood's Magic Circle

Many residents of the 1960s have a story to tell about Peter Homewood. They attended one of his parties in Flat 2 or encountered his sometimes flamboyant guests wandering the hallways. Years after Peter left there are stories of him arriving late at night and escorting a coterie of friends around the mansion. Peter's former colleague and friend, John Michael Howson shares his memories of Peter's unique style.

A Bohemian gentle man

By John Michael Howson

Back in the 60s, the ballroom [sic] at Labassa ... was rented by Peter Homewood. Peter, who died a few years ago in his early 80s was a true character. He had been a top copy writer at the old 3DB radio station and was considered one of the best copy writers in Melbourne.

He also wrote comedy sketches for the many small revue theatres that abounded in Melbourne in the 1950s: The Arlen, The Arts, The Little, etc. He was a brilliant comedy writer and also contributed to the few comedy shows on TV around that time.

Later, after he had left radio I asked him to help me write episodes for my children's TV shows *The Magic Circle Club* and *Adventure Island*. I had to write five episodes a week as well as perform in the show so having Peter take the weight off was terrific. He also played characters in both shows: Giggles Goblin, a gangster style almost Joker style character and Woofles the Dog!

Anyway, Peter who lived in the family home in Dalgety Street, St Kilda decided to fly the coop and rented the 'ballroom' at Labassa.

The fact that it had a raised band area [Music Room dais] was just ideal for us because every Friday night a group would gather and do material we had written during the week. Peter also had what he called 'a drag bag' of costumes so we were able to dress up as the character we were playing. Sometimes, musicians would turn up and provide music for the cabaret performances.

The word got around and we soon had the 'ballroom' packed (a few sitting on chairs and raggedy sofas) with most sitting on the floor.

I can't recall all the names (Frank Thring, Mary Hardy, Bunny Brook, Lilly Brett) but the crowd consisted of actors, writers, 'people around town', a few socialites ... a pot pourri of characters who made Melbourne a much more interesting town than it is today.

It was always a hoot. Lots of Chateau de Cardboard and 'bring a plate' food but, interestingly, no drugs. I guess we all got a high out of just having outrageous fun and interesting conversations.



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Above: Peter Homewood. *Photo:* Performing Arts Museum, Victoria, Gift of Mr and Mrs Harry Jay, 1983.

On one occasion a wooden telegraph pole was purloined from street works and carried into the 'ballroom'.

One end finished in the fireplace and the other end touched the wall opposite. It was then lit and provided warmth in the cold, unheated 'ballroom' for weeks, maybe months.

As the end would burn down the pole would be moved further into the fireplace. I'm glad Labassa survived.

After several years, Pete decided the party was over and bought a house in, I think, Fulton Street, St Kilda. Later, he and his sister moved to Mornington where he sparkled up the arts scene. In fact, when he died the funeral was packed with locals who all spoke glowingly of what an interesting and colourful character he was.

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A Bohemian gentle man continued

By the way, he was a good looking man who grew his black curly hair longer than normal before The Beatles, he dressed in a wonderful and individual way that could be described as Bohemian/Edwardian and had a laugh that made people laugh and was a truly 'free spirit' in a conventional time. I guess we all were.

He was also a kind man who often took in people who were having a tough time and looked after them until they were on their feet. Sometimes they were grateful, sometimes not but it never deterred him from lending a helping hand. I never heard anyone say anything but wonderful things about him. He was a joy to know. In fact, when he was quite sick towards the end he insisted on his visitors drinking champagne and telling outrageous and funny stories.

Right: Peter Homewood (standing) with visitor Adrian Rawlins c.1965. *Photo:* Photographer unknown.



Exposure of hidden corners



In 1965, artist Sam Schoenbaum was in his first year at Swinburne and a non-drinker. He shared Flat 2 with Peter Homewood, who was 18 years older and at the time working at 3DB radio station. Moving in with Peter was "amazing", especially the boozy parties where he recalls Peter "swinging from the chandeliers".

Sam says 1965 was a traumatic time in his life. "In the short time I was there with Peter I was struggling with the existential part of my identity. "I was as misplaced at Labassa as I was anywhere else, including the art schools I went to.

"Certain key people recognised something of the alienated interior that suburban Melbourne bred in some individuals.

"Peter recognised it through the eccentricity of desire. John Brack's ability for this kind of recognition was an aspect of his professionalism.

Left: Peter Homewood's flat attracted a stream of visitors who would stage impromptu scenarios for the camera using his furnishings and 'drag bag' of costumes. Here Sam Schoenbaum addresses a bust of composer Richard Wagner.

Photo: Courtesy Ed Lagzdin.

"Labassa was a building which encouraged some exposure of hidden corners. It was a great backdrop. By living there, to observe, one became part of what was being observed. *Imagine* ... *Let it be* ... and early Dylan to list some. Now it's being re-invented as history does."

Sam recalls one moment of artistic inspiration at Labassa — "deciding to paint the night at night from the Balcony".

After Labassa, Sam went to various art schools and studied with John Brack at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1968–69. He is now an internationally renowned abstract and conceptual artist. The Jewish Museum of Australia held an exhibition of Sam's work in 2003.

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We were *beatniks* and drank claret!

John Laurie's entree to Labassa was through his mate John Romeril who was looking for someone to share Flat 6. At the time, Romeril was driving a van for Redlich Butchers in Prahran and writing in his spare time. The location suited John, then a trainee film editor at the ABC Ripponlea Studios and a backstage hand at St Martin's Theatre. Another friend of Romeril's, Peter Barrett, also moved in.

"Like many of my contemporaries, I had over-protective parents and wanted freedom. I left home as soon as I could. I did my final year of secondary at night school while living in a flat in another old mansion in Elsternwick. My flat mate there went to America so I needed new digs. There was no dole but plenty of jobs- write three applications and you'd get one. Wages weren't high but rents were cheap. Plenty of old places like Labassa had been converted into cheap flats. It wasn't hard to leave home.

"In the 1960s everyone wanted only modern furniture so we went to an auction place in Chapel Street and furnished the place with very cheap old stuff which nowadays would be 'antique'. When I left, I gave my sideboard to my sister as a wedding present. She still has it and it's now worth a lot of money.

"Flat 6 was freezing cold in winter and being poor bohemians, we'd huddle around a puny kerosene heater to keep warm. We used to ironically refer to it by the name on the side — the "Valor Junior". This was before hippies — we were beatniks, we read Dostoevsky, Faulkner, Artaud and Sartre, argued about the merits of Hemingway, and drank claret (and beer of course)." **Right:** John Laurie on Hampstead Heath taking on the world as a filmmaker.

Photo: Courtesy John Laurie.



John spent his time in the Flat playing folk music on his guitar, writing poetry, reading books and finalising the 16mm film he'd recently made. Sometimes they'd play board games to amuse themselves. There was no TV. John also remembers helping Romeril to install a new rear axle into his brown Ford Prefect. "We put a mattress down, tipped the vehicle on its side and then tipped it back again."

Like many other residents, John remembers the convivial and theatrical Peter Homewood. "His flat was like a 19th century salon." he recalls. "Because Peter had access to props, he dressed his living room like a stage with peacock feathers, statues and animal heads. Amazing! He had a lot of parties, a lot of visitors and we went to the major ones. All the theatrical people would come along - Irene Mitchell, Paul Kathner, Davis Spurling, Frank Thring, Sheila Florance and Mary Hardy. Peter would even have musicians or a string quartet playing."

If anyone complained about Peter Homewood's parties then John wasn't aware of it. But he does recall one moment of 'theatre' resulting in a resident complaining: the poet Adrian Rawlins (the model for the statue 'Mr Poetry' on the corner of Brunswick and Argyle streets) standing in one of the statuary niches on Labassa's staircase, declaiming the entirety of Alan Ginsberg's poem *Howl* at the top of his voice.

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John recounts that he personally had a 'close call' with agents LJ Hooker when he inadvertently left the bath running. It overflowed and water and bits of plaster fell on Peter Homewood downstairs in the 'Smoking Room'. LJ Hooker was not happy about the damage but fortunately the occupants of Flat 6 were not asked to pay for the repairs.

John's fondest memories revolve around the Balcony: "waking up in the mornings to the sound of the pigeons cooing on the beautiful rococo balcony and then wandering out there for a leisurely breakfast overlooking Caulfield. It was also a fine place for writing poetry or playing guitar."

"We were living life day to day. We weren't big on possessions or posterity. We were all going to make it big in art, literature, film, theatre, one day. I looked forward to getting on the boat to England and taking on the world as a filmmaker. It was all hope and future glory."



Married couples only?

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Left: Jenny Lum, 1966. Right: Peter Gibson, 1966

Photos: Courtesy Peter and Jenny Gibson. These photos were taken in London in 1966, shortly after they left Labassa to travel.



In 1965, couple Peter Gibson and Jenny Lum were looking for a flat close to work at the ABC's Ripponlea studios. They preferred an older style flat, "not just a little box". Labassa was perfect: "We liked the space. It was big, beautiful and graceful," says Jenny.

There was one small challenge Peter recalls: "It was a time when defacto relationships were not acknowledged. LJ Hooker asked us for a marriage certificate. I can't remember how we fudged it — or perhaps we said — 'yes, we'll show proof' but didn't bother. We had a 'presentation bedroom'. I ostensibly lived in the Tower. We always kept a bed up there – unmade. 'Living in different rooms but sharing kitchen and facilities' that's what our parents thought. The room off the bathroom was our real bedroom."

Jenny and Peter were only 19 or 20 and without much furniture so they did what many young people did in the 1960s — got their furniture from the Salvos. "A mattress from the Salvos was okay as long as it didn't sag in the middle or wasn't too smelly or have stains," says Jenny. The rent was only £7 a week, which included gas and electricity. Although they had three fireplaces, firewood was an inconvenience and they relied on a kerosene heater to keep warm in winter.

The most poignant memories for Jenny are of "a life that we were creating."

"We had a lovely ambience in our room — cut glass carafes, candlesticks, and we played Sibelius, which we had just discovered."

They spent 'Somerset Maugham' warm evenings on the balcony, which was also their al fresco 'dining room'. The Tower by contrast was cool and airy during the summer. "We had dinner parties and played records as loudly as we wanted and took our guests upstairs to show off the view."

Peter and Jenny socialised with their neighbours across the hall – the "two Johns" — John Laurie and John Romeril, who accessed the balcony by climbing through his bedroom window. They were already friendly with John Laurie who was an editor at the ABC where Peter was an assistant editor and Jenny a librarian.

Downstairs there was a "feeling of darkness throughout the house, an oppressiveness," except for Flat 2 where art student Sam Schoenboem and writer/actor Peter Homewood lived.

Homewood often invited them to his parties or soirees which were "full of artists and writers and fairly bohemian. He was a colourful, flamboyant personality. Very friendly. A good host, full of life. People often stayed overnight," says Peter.

For Jenny and Peter Labassa was a "special short time in our life". "We just loved living there, because we'd not seen anything like it. It was gorgeous, though in decay. We felt privileged to live here. We would have stayed if we hadn't gone overseas."



Man in the Tower



Left: Hans Poulsen performing *Boom Sha La La Lo* (1970).

Right: Rachael performed by the 18th Century Quartet and

released in 1966.



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National Top Ten hit *Boom Sha La La Lo* (co-written with Seeker Bruce Woodley) was one of Hans Poulsen's biggest hits and yet his first memory of Labassa is of the "wonderful music that came from Peter Homewood's flat, especially Vivaldi's *Four Seasons.*"

Hans would become a regular at Peter Homewood's soirees where The Beatles were played. Hans has warm memories of Peter and his fellow residents — the parties, the plays and the lasting friendships that were formed.

Boom Sha La La Lo was released after Hans left Labassa. It is *Rachael* released in 1966, while Hans lived in Flat 3, that brought him to the attention of all the residents.

When Hans took over the lease from Jenny Lum and Peter Gibson, he invited his good friend Ric Birch, then working as a director at the ABC Ripponlea studios, to share the flat.

Hans' domain was the Tower where he kept his pet crow, listened to music shows at night on his crystal set and slept. Ex-band members also recall auditions and rehearsals in the Tower. Hans was involved in several bands from the early 1960s. The key band contemporaneous with Labassa is the 18th Century Quartet.

The original 18th Century Quartet lineup played material (mostly by Hans) in a style we might now call 'world music'. Unlike other contemporary bands, it used a range of acoustic instruments including mandolin, autoharp and bouzouki.

In early 1966, a new lineup was created, with Hans the only member remaining from the original group. This second band was more pop-oriented.

After the release of *Rachael* in October 1966, Hans left the band for a solo career.

Former band member Keith Glass recalls:

"There were many weird and wonderful nights at Hans' space in the imposing old mansion in Caulfield, at that time a decaying splendour and subdivided into studio apartments. "There were lots of beatnik/arty types in the building and we sometimes went up in the Tower to sing a song or two. It was a great spot to get the Baroque Rock sound together.

"Rachael was well received at radio and made the Melbourne charts almost immediately. 'Great we thought, we'll be on the *GO*!! TV show post haste.' No dice because it was a 'rock' show and we were a 'folk rock' band.

"With that exposure denied it died in other states. We did pick up a *Kommotion* appearance or two but the disc was off the charts by then."

Boom Sha La La Lo On Youtube at:

www.youtube.com/watch? v=lHIm2ivLCpc

Rachael On Youtube at:

www.youtube.com/watch? v=9YWaLBthJmc

	Volume 3, Issue 1, 2015	Forthcoming Open Days 2015		
		Open days (3rd Sunday of the month, $10.30am - 4.30pm$)		
		May 17	September 20	
	Please forward to:	June 21	October 18	
	vienjonatie vortite yanoo.com.aa or	July 19	November 15	
		August 16	December CLOSED	

The Chair

Centre, Chadstone, Vic. 3148

In March, Labassa hosted The Chair, an installation comprising chairs from the National Trust's own collection as well as from Labassa's ex-residents.

High Victoriana, opulent Edwardian and Mid-20th century Modern were among the styles represented.

Items on loan from families and descendants included a 1909 Brearley high chair, used at Labassa in the 1940s, a modernist Apfelbaum lounge chair, Peter Homewood's 19th Century chaise now owned by Robin Dullard, the Traurig family's 20th century stool and dining chairs and one of Bere Feiglin's 20th century dining chairs.



Above L-R: Chairs on loan from former residents Homewood/ Dullard, Apfelbaum, Feiglin, Traurig and Brearley.



Veneto to Victoria, Loire to Labassa



A series of six keynote presentations on the evolution of the arts, design, society, music and culture by social and cultural historian Carolyn McDowall.

10.30am – 2.30pm, Wednesdays June 3, 10, 17 July 22, 29 August 5, 2015

Labassa, 2 Manor Grove, Caulfield

For more information, prices and bookings: www.nationaltrust.org.au/vic/ VenetoToVictoriaLoireToLabassa2015

Errata



Volume 2, No. 3, page 8. The female identified as Jenny Strathie, is in fact Elaine Baker.

Labassa Lives Open Day Sunday 8 November, 10.30am—4.30pm

This special Open Day will

focus on the those who have owned, lived at or contributed to Labassa's human history. The program will include:

- self-guided and specific tours
- viewings of original films and photos.

We are looking for descendants of owners or ex-residents to share their stories on the day.

As this is a fundraiser and open to the public, standard entry prices will apply. Program contributors excepted.

A private viewing of original films in which ex-residents appear will be arranged prior to the event. Details to come.

Program suggestions are very welcome.

