

Labassa *lives*

Volume 3, Issue 2, 2015



1921: Approved tenants only



Above: The Davidson girls with their paternal grandfather. We know more about the residency of this family than any other early tenants due to a court case.

The transition from Labassa Estate to 'Labassa Flats' was almost complete by the end of 1921. While 'Manor Grove' was now recognised most tenants preferred the Estate address of 270 Orrong Road. Building in Manor Grove was yet to take off and it would be 1924 before four vacant fenced villa sites came up for sale. The Estate's magnificent gates would remain in situ until late 1921 and the stables, although stripped of their fittings the year before, lay empty awaiting residential approval from the Council. The conservatory was about to be subsumed into Edmund Ovey's property, which fronted Balaclava Road.

Of the 25 known tenants living at 'Labassa Flats' in 1921 all were 'respectable' people of 'means'. They included twice-widowed Mrs Mary Webster and her daughter Norah Anderson; wool manufacturer George Sugden, his wife Flo and their children; and dentist Charles Newton, his wife Minnie and their children. Lewis Levy an assayer, investor and builder was conducting his business from Labassa. Most of these early tenants would be gone within a few years.

An exception was Sidney Morgan, a warehouse manager, and his wife Eliza who would stay for sixteen years.

1921 would end sadly for this family with the death of their 22 year old son Harold (known as 'Jack') at Labassa. Daughter Merle's wedding celebrations in 1924 raised the family's spirits and provided us with the first photographs of a tenant bridal party.

Each of these tenants had been 'approved' by new owner and resident Stanley Sergeant. Mr Sergeant, a real estate agent and employee of T.R.B. Morton, one of the auctioneers of the Labassa Estate's allotments, knew the property well. Sergeant was also Mr Morton's son-in-law and he and his wife Lilian had just arrived from Valentine Mansions with their six children. They would move on when Labassa's caretakers James and Emily Brearley were in residence. Mr Sergeant finally disposed of the property in 1923 through a complex series of mortgages and transfers to Robert and Emily Hannon.

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1921 Approved tenants only (continued)



Valentine Mansions (now the Malvern Campus of Caulfield Grammar) has a remarkably similar story to that of Labassa. Once again T.R.B. Morton was the lead auctioneer for the 7 acre Estate (from 1911). When the 35-room mansion failed to sell, it was converted into apartments with its own manager-ess. Valentine Mansions initially offered "rooms with a kitchenette, meals if required" whereas 'Labassa Flats' advertised self-contained facilities from April 1921.

Stanley Sergeant was more than a speculator looking for a quick return. As residents of Valentine Mansions the Sergeants hosted a large fundraiser for blind and incapacitated soldiers in their 'beautiful ballroom'.

The Sergeants were avid card players and Stanley, a well-known bridge champion, opened the Sergeant Bridge Studios in 1934 in a new, purpose-built art deco building at 22 Punt Road, St Kilda. He also had a wry sense of humor as suggested by a dance card depicting him and his twin brother Leslie (see above).



Above left: Merle Morgan on her wedding day, 1924.
Photo: Andrew Ramsey.
Above right: Stanley and Lilian Sergeant (not taken at Labassa).
Right: The dancecard of Stanley Sergeant (bottom left) and his twin brother Leslie.
Photos: Tony Green.

DANCES.		MUSIC.	ENGAGEMENTS.
1. March Waltz	<i>The Wanderer</i>		
2. Quadrille	<i>Jolly Folly</i>		
3. Waltz ..	<i>Just as the Sun</i>		
4. Polka ..	<i>Lucky Jim</i>		
5. Lancers	<i>The Lady in Blue</i>		
6. Waltz ..	<i>Doreen</i>		
7. Barn Dance	<i>Honolulu Lady</i>		
8. Waltz ..	<i>Darlington Bertie</i>		
Interval.			
9. Lancers	<i>Going the Pace</i>		
10. Waltz ..	<i>Sweetheart</i>		
11. Schottische	<i>Admission Van</i>		
12. Waltz ..	<i>Pure White Rose</i>		
13. Quadrille	<i>Royal Irish</i>		
14. Waltz ..	<i>Faust</i>		
15. Barn Dance	<i>Harry Dacre</i>		
16. High. Schott.	<i>Scottish Airs</i>		
17. Waltz ..	<i>Neapolitana</i>		
Extra..			
Extra..			

The residents we know most about and who have told us most about Labassa in this era are Mr and Mrs Davidson and their two teenage daughters. The Davidson divorce proceedings in the late 1920s caused such a scandal that even the smallest detail was reported in newspapers across Australia. The public packed the gallery every day to hear both parties make allegations of 'impropriety'. Labassa resident Mrs Miller was alleged to have witnessed family disputes and caretaker Mrs Brearley took the witness stand to confirm details of their residency.

It is rare to discover where and when early tenants lived at Labassa but we know from the court case that the Davidsons arrived in December 1921 and took up a ground floor flat. They left in June 1927 before the court

proceedings commenced. We also learn a great deal about the family's background, interests and social life. As for the court hearing itself, while both sides accused the other of unfaithfulness, neither case was ever proved. This however, did not deter those given to moral outrage based on the attitude that infidelity was a 'sin' and divorce 'a shame', nor did it dampen the avid enthusiasm of those caught up in the salacious fever evoked by the press coverage of proceedings. A victim of both, Mrs Davidson changed the family names and the girls left the school they attended, changing their lives for ever. Their descendants only uncovered this family history decades later when news cuttings from the divorce proceedings were found under an old linoleum floor.

Young man's heaven



Above: Ian Peters. **Centre:** Ron Livingston, Ian Peters and Hans Poulsen. **Far Right:** Ian Peters and Lyell Sayer. **Photos:** Lyell Sayer.

It was one of those rare occasions when Labassa resident, Ian Peters was wearing a suit. As he came around the corner into Manor Grove, a woman stopped him in the street and politely enquired: "Do you live around here?" "Yes, I do," he replied without elaborating. "Well," she said, "a few of us are getting a petition together to get rid of those horrible people in that old house." "I'm very sorry to inform you," replied Ian with equal civility, "I am one of those 'horrible people'."

Ian was 23 when he moved into Labassa in early 1966. His childhood friend Hans Poulsen had just taken over the lease of Flat 3 and said there was plenty of room. Twenty-five year-old Lyell Sayer, who had just taken up a job as a Customs Officer, soon joined them. Lyell and Ian shared a bedroom, although for Lyell it was mostly 'a home base'. "I worked long hours when migrant ships arrived at Station Pier," he explains.

The other rooms were sublet to a succession of young men, whose full names after 50 years remain elusive. "A lot of people have passed through this place," says Lyell. "There was a floating population. People came and went. It was a young man's heaven – great for young guys who like to drink.

"Like an 'all-male hippy commune'. We would come and go as we liked. You didn't have anyone telling you what to do. There wasn't a huge level of housekeeping; not a lot of cleaning – typical, really, of young guys sharing a flat." Ian was responsible for collecting and paying the rent of £5 per week. "If someone didn't have the rent," Ian says, "it was 'Oh well, next week'. Nobody worried about anything."

This young man's heaven included Daryl Muxworthy, who worked as a fitter, and Gary Gane, Quenton Buckley and Ron Livingston who were, or had been, studying art at Caulfield Technical College.

Ian and Lyell remember quite a few parties in their communal lounge (front bay window room), some quite wild. A party usually meant drinking a lot of flagon claret and listening to records. According to Ian, Daryl managed to wreck some of his records and even set the player on fire. Sometimes Hans would pull out his guitar and Lyell and Daryl would join in. Lyell was a 'die hard folkie' with a particular interest in Australian folk. He was just starting to write songs and perform in clubs around Melbourne.

Other tenants were invited, including sisters Robin and Deirdre Knaggs from Flat 2 who in turn invited them downstairs for a "bit of a session". Mr Ceferin, "a nice chap" in Flat 10 (immediately below) "would often come up and tell us we're 'making too much noise'. We'd quieten down for ten minutes," says Ian, "and then start up again. He'd come up again." The parties never seemed to sour the relationship with the Ceferins, however. Ian says he got on well with Mr Ceferin after getting him a drill at wholesale price from McPhersons Hardware and Tools where he worked. Mr Ceferin was so appreciative he invited Ian down for dinner and a game of table tennis in the old wine cellar.

Almost half a century later, one mystery remains – a large family *Bible* that sat on an antique set of drawers under the window in their hallway. Despite the 'unholy' celebrations going on only a few steps away, the tenants always treated it with great respect. No one knows where it came from or where it went to. The only clue is an inscription suggesting that it once belonged to a family from Sebastopol near Ballarat.

Modern women with old world style

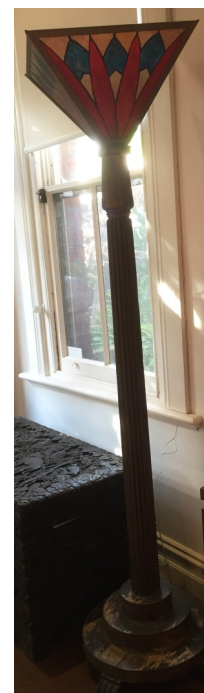


Left: Deirdre Knaggs' painting of Peter Homewood's auction.

Photo: Deirdre Knaggs.

Right: Egyptian lamp purchased by Susan Heinz at the auction.

Photo: Susan Heinz.



It was serendipity that just when Deirdre Knaggs and her house-mates were about to be evicted from their Malvern rental, Peter Homewood should mention he was leaving Labassa. Deirdre, an art student, knew Peter through Caulfield Technical College where he was working on a theatre revue. Housemate, Susan Heinz quickly headed off to LJ Hooker to organise the lease and Deirdre, her sister Robin, Kathy Stewart and Susan made plans for the move.

The group would eventually be joined by Elizabeth Huntley when Kathy Stewart moved out the following year. In time, their number would be briefly complemented by an Afghan dog and a Khaki Campbell duck, the latter being partial to red wine and likely to drink the contents of any glass left unattended.

Peter Homewood wasn't just leaving Labassa. He was selling his furnishings at a public auction in the Music Room. Robin bought his hall stand and chaise, Deirdre four dining chairs, some black-legged tables and a hanging toilet mirror

with drawers; Susan bought one of his four Egyptian lamps for £20 (a lot of money in 1966). All of these items remain family pieces. The young women added to their old world ambience with a new £2 plastic chandelier to replace the missing light shade in the Music Room.

Peter's auction made such an impression that Deirdre painted it a few months later from memory. Several of the items purchased by the new tenants appear in the painting. "It was a highly animated occasion as I recall though the painting shows it to be contemplative. My figures from this time are all characterised by shouldering the weight of the world. The auctioneer was dressed in a Sergeant Pepper's style jacket but this is not portrayed," she says. Peter Homewood also left some items behind, including a box of dress ups and an annotated script for radio serial *The Pencarrow Saga*, which was broadcast on 3DB where Peter had worked. The dress ups are long gone but the script has been generously donated to Labassa by Robin.

In the tradition of the Music Room's theatrical history the women also put on their own production of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, charging 70 cents admission. Bettina Bowater Gordon, Flat 8 resident and art student, designed the program. John Cotter, Flat 5 resident, looked after production and design. The talented cast included Robin (Lady Jedburgh), Elizabeth (the Garrulous Lady Agatha Carlisle) and Deirdre as Lady Plymdale. The audience included other tenants, and friends who would later become tenants.

There was a constant influx of people coming and going within the house and the growing number of resident art students gravitated to Flat 2. A photography student took photos within the house, including one of Deirdre in front of Labassa's stained glass window. A film was made and projected on the Music Room stage. The photos and film are yet to be located.

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Modern women with old world style (continued)

Visitors to Flat 2 would appear day or night. It was nothing to have a knock on the door at 12.30 am. One night, the occupants had a visit from two Vice Squad detectives investigating 'reports' of the comings and goings at the Flat. The red glow from the flat's external light may have stirred their suspicions. During a search of the premises the detectives pulled down Deirdre's art folio from the top of a cupboard and found several paintings of nude women. It took considerable persuasion to convince them that these were no more than the innocuous life-drawings of an art student.

Life at Labassa could be called Bohemian and was far from mundane but on the domestic front things could be tight. The women contributed £2 a week to a kitty for bread, milk and tea etc. They have memories of fellow Labassa dweller Hans Poulsen inviting them for meals of porridge and rice.

Another friend donated a supply of toilet paper bearing the logo 'Property of Victoria'. Heating was expensive and like other tenants they resorted to some creative solutions. Deirdre recalls stealing a wooden beam from a house being renovated in Orrong Road and feeding it "inch by inch" into the fire.

There was no shortage of entertainment, however. There was always some kind of party going on in the house and in the warmer weather sunbathing on the roof.

Deirdre, Robin, Kathy, Susan and Elizabeth remain friends and are in regular contact.

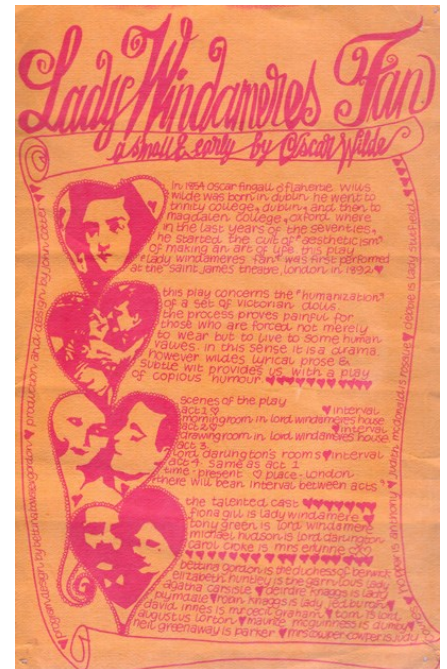


Top left: Deirdre Knaggs celebrating Christmas at Labassa.

Top right: Robin Knaggs.

Above left: Kathy Stewart.

Above right: *Lady Windermere's Fan* program.



Modern women 1966-68

Kathy Stewart 1966
Deirdre Knaggs 1966-67
Robin Knaggs 1966-68,
Susan Heinz 1966-68;
Elizabeth Huntley 1967

Donations to Labassa

Carpet railing from the main staircase (Deirdre).
Peter Homewood script (Robin)
Lady Windermere's Fan program and tickets (Susan and Elizabeth)

Cooper & son: Ontario's gardeners



Above: A bulb show at the Athenaeum Hall, Melbourne, 1892.

Two of Australia's leading gardeners of the early 20th century began their careers at Ontario (now Labassa). George Cooper 'Head Gardener to Mr A. W. Robertson' won many first prizes at horticultural shows for his camellias, irises and orchids from 1885 until Mr Robertson's death in 1896.

George went on to become Head Gardener at the Melbourne Botanic Gardens under Director William R. Guilfoyle. His son, George William, who had trained at his father's side at Ontario from age 12, built on this family vocation to become Superintendent of Sydney Parks and an ABC gardening commentator with 2BL for more than 15 years.

George, his wife Mary and nine children did not live on the Ontario Estate but close by in various houses around Orrong Road where the children attended Caulfield Primary School.

While we only have one photo of Ontario that shows the gardens, a report in the *Leader* newspaper of July 1895, provides a detailed description and acknowledges George Cooper's exceptional talent (see pages 7 and 8).

After Mr Robertson's death, George was employed as a 'skilled propagator' by Paton & Sons Nursery. In 1899, he worked with Signor Bragato, 'a viticultural expert', and the Burnley Horticultural Gardens to propagate phylloxera resistant vines for the burgeoning Victorian wine industry.

George's move to the Melbourne Botanic Gardens in 1900 brought him wider public recognition. In 1905, one news editor urged that signage at the entrance of the Gardens be modified to include George's name alongside that of previous Director Baron von Mueller and then director William R. Guilfoyle.

George's relationship with Guilfoyle may have predated his employment at the Gardens. Neil Robertson, descendant of Alexander Robertson, recalls a family story that Guilfoyle designed Ontario's gardens. Following Guilfoyle's retirement as director of the Gardens in 1909 George laid out Nellie Melba's garden at Coombe Cottage under his direction. It is likely that son George William also worked on this garden as some years later he mentioned that this was where he first met Melba and was inspired by her ideas.

Gardening at the Botanic Gardens was a family enterprise: George William was employed as a gardener and Regnald as a plumber. Daughter Beryl has the distinction of possibly being the Gardens' first forewoman and had her wedding breakfast there in 1916. Son George William went on to develop a public profile as curator of the adjacent Alexandra Gardens and was a popular speaker and judge at various garden shows.

In 1917, when George William took up the position of Parks Superintendent with the Sydney Council it was against competition from 50 other applicants. His father, now 60, moved into his son's position at the Alexandra Gardens enabling him to pursue his love of flowers, particularly his specialty in breeding new strains of Japanese Iris. In 1919, George planted 2000 of these Irises in a single bed. He also planted 20,000 seedlings of phlox, stock, verbena, balsam, and 1000 dahlia seedlings and cuttings. George retired from his position around 1928, aged 70 years.

Meanwhile in Sydney, George William was creating a stir over the redevelopment of Hyde Park. Like his father, George William favoured the European fashion of mass plantings of flowers. He had been critical of Sydney Gardens for many years claiming it was overplanted with native evergreen shrubs and Moreton Bay and Port Jackson figs. *The Australasian* (1919) commented: [Mr Cooper] "is showing the Sydneyites how much more beautiful it is to have flowers and shrubs in Hyde Park and elsewhere than a number of old littering Moreton Bay figs and eucalypts; and we read that his Japanese Irises are nearly as good as those he grew in Melbourne."

George William resigned as head of Sydney Parks in 1930. George Snr died in September 1947 aged 89. George William's death date is unconfirmed. So far, we have been unable to locate any early photos where the Coopers have been identified.

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Cooper & son: Ontario's gardeners (continued)



Above: George Cooper c.1941 with great-grandson Robert Pryce Heslop.
Photo: Courtesy Marg Heslop.

Below: George William Cooper, 1930.
Image: Sydney Morning Herald.

PARK SUPERINTENDENT.

MR. G. W. COOPER RESIGNS.

At a meeting of the City Commission yesterday afternoon, the resignation of Mr. George William Cooper, park superintendent, was accepted. Mr. Cooper is going into private business.



"Triumph of the gardener's skill"

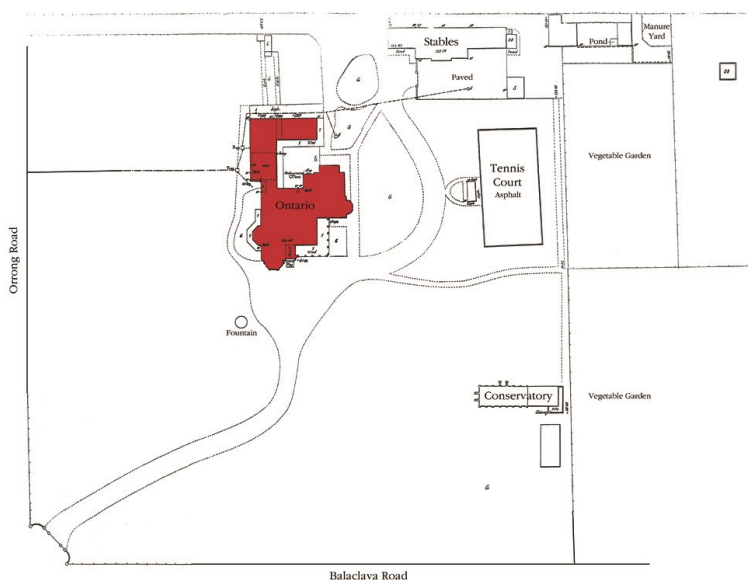
Leader, Saturday 6 July 1895, page 9

Few residences have better surroundings than Ontario, the home of Mr A. W. Robertson, Balaclava road, Caulfield. Both the Balaclava and Orrong roads form a splendid approach lined as they are with some of the finest specimens of *Pinus Insignia* to be found in the colony. The house has a most imposing appearance and certainly is worthy of the surroundings. It stands on the rise of the hill and commands a splendid view from the balcony, from which the estate is also seen to the best advantage.

The grounds are a triumph of the gardener's skill. Mr George Cooper, the gardener, certainly deserves great praise, but those who know him, and there are few visitors to horticultural shows who do not, are aware that whatever he takes in hand is thoroughly done. The grounds have quite a tropical effect, here in one corner you see a group of tree ferns, there the stately Banana with its broad leaves, whilst in front is a splendid bed of *Ericas* in full bloom, the light sandy soil suiting them admirably.

Azaleas also thrive here and in a few weeks will be a perfect picture. *Eugenia*, both the white and pink varieties, are covered with berries, and make splendid border shrubs. *Sparmania Africana* is covered in bloom, and is very useful for cutting at this time of year. To show how well the grounds have been laid out with a view to protection, the red roses are covered with buds. The specimen plants of *Dracena Draco* are exceptionally good, proving the value of this variety. *Aralia papyrifera* is in full bloom and, the large bunches of white flowers with the large dark green leaves looked particularly striking. The collection of Bamboos is very good and show to great advantage amongst the other shrubs. The conifers are doing splendidly. *Thujopsis Borealis*, *Cupressus* and *Retinospora* are the best we have seen for some time. The green-houses have evidently been built from the best design, all communicating with the potting shed, so that there is no danger of plants receiving a check whilst being repotted.

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Left: Grounds Plan. MMBW Plan 1431. Shire of Caulfield 1901.

Volume 3, Issue 2, 2015

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

Please forward to:
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PO Box 363, Chadstone Shopping

Forthcoming events

Remaining 2015 Open Days:
10.30am—4.30pm
August 16
September 20
October 18
November 15
December CLOSED

Labassa Lives Open Day

Sunday 8 November, 10.30am—4.30pm

As this is a fundraiser for the National Trust's Tower Restoration Program—Reaching New Heights—standard entry prices apply to all visitors including National Trust members. Program contributors excepted.

If you are interested in contributing to the program or acting as a guest volunteer on the day please contact
vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au

"Triumph of the gardener's skill" (continued)

The conservatory is looking nice and clean, and we saw some old friends amongst the plants here, many of them having taken prizes at the various shows. *Pandanus Veitchi*, a splendid plant with its graceful striped foliage, *Macroramia*, *Dennisoni*, *Curculago recurvato*, *Kentias* and *Aralia anthurium* all combine to make a splendid show.

In the orchid house, although rather a bad time of the year, there are some splendid specimens in bloom, *Angraecum sesquipedale* and *A. eburneum* with their waxy white flowers are very fine; *Dendrobium*, *Cypripedium* and *Phalaenopsis amabilis* are also in bloom, the whole looking the pink of perfection and only those who know the amount of care involved can appreciate Mr Cooper's abilities.

The vinery is a lean-to structure. The vines look strong and healthy, but at this time are at rest. The kitchen garden and orchard occupy about 2 acres, and have the same trim appearance as the front.

The fruit trees are clean and healthy, oranges bearing well, thus demonstrating that when given proper attention they can be grown near the sea.

The whole estate comprises 16 acres one half of which is devoted to pleasure grounds and kitchen garden, the remainder grass.

Vale Margaret Gleeson: 1925-2015



Above: Margaret Gleeson's wedding 1948.

L-R: Sister Moyra; Margaret and Denise O'Shea. Photo: Gleeson Family.

Margaret Gleeson (nee Brown) lived at Labassa in the 1930s and 1940s. Margaret's connection with the mansion was unique. She experienced what it was like to live in the mansion as a child when she visited her uncle and aunt (Will and Sal O'Callaghan) who owned Labassa, and then as an adult resident after the property was sold.

Margaret saw the building of the Willas Flats, the removal of one of the large cement broilgas from the roof and the re-landscaping of the garden to include new pathways, garden seats and a sundial.

After the National Trust purchased the property, Margaret joined the Friends of Labassa and shared her memories of the residents and life in the house. The photos she donated to the National Trust remain an invaluable record for conservation architects and social historians. Margaret passed away in June.

Next issue

Labassa Lives Open Day discoveries

Owners 1923–1946

The 1960s: Artists in residence