

# Labassa *lives*

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## Saving 'a doomed relic'

**Right:** Judith Cordingley, resident Flat 8, 1967-78. Judith actively worked to save the mansion from demolition.

**Photographer:** Neil Greenaway, a childhood friend of Judith Cordingley, took a great interest in the house and was on close terms with other tenants. He lived in the tower briefly in the early 1970s when it was condemned.



The 1970s at Labassa have been portrayed as years of dissolution and desecration yet some tenants actively worked to save the house. Among these was Judith Cordingley (1967-78) who was joined by Andrew Lemon following their marriage in 1975.

Although Labassa had been classified by the National Trust and listed on the Historic Buildings Register in 1974, both feared that the house was being deliberately run down to pave the way for its demolition. "Labassa was regarded by many as a 'doomed relic' at the time," Judith explains.

Judith's collection of correspondence, invitations, programs and photos from her 11 year residency not only documents early moves to save the mansion but provides an understanding of how the house worked as a community. Her collection includes communications with real estate agent LJ Hooker and the Housing Commission as well as charming letters exchanged between tenants from the days when most did not have a telephone.

Judith was introduced to Labassa by friend Jan Pearce with whom she initially shared Flat 8 (Dining Room).

When Jan moved out Judith couldn't afford the rent on her own (\$14 per week) so shared with others until she "got a decent job". Judith met her husband Andrew in 1972 when they were archivists at the State Archives (now the Public Record Office). As founding members of the Australian Society of Archivists they sometimes hosted meetings of the Victorian Branch in Flat 8.

Judith and Andrew hit on a strategy to force the agent to carry out urgent repairs and be accountable for the state of the property. Advice was sought from the Historic Buildings Preservation Council, predecessor of the Heritage Commission, and in August 1974 the Housing Commission carried out an inspection. In January 1975 it issued the agent/owner with notices of compliance. Flat 1 (Upstairs Servants Flat) was deemed unfit for habitation. Flats 3, 4 and 5 were found unfit for lease.

*continued page 2*

### Inside this issue

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Saving a 'doomed relic': Judith Cordingley  | 1-3 |
| All in a good cause: Annie and Tom Chadwick | 4   |
| Setting the scene: Professor Brian Kiernan  | 5-6 |
| In my room: Mark Klos                       | 7   |
| Labassa Ballroom 1905                       | 8   |

## *Saving 'a doomed relic' (continued)*



**Left:** Flat 8 kitchen and bathroom annexe in the rear courtyard, which was demolished by the National Trust. Note the congregation of cats on the roof.

**Photo:**  
John Harland.

A closing order was placed on all four flats requiring that repairs be done before reletting. All the other flats, including Judith's, were found to be in a state of structural disrepair. The Historic Buildings Preservation Council, through the agent, scheduled a further inspection in March 1977. Minor repairs were effected in the mansion but Judith believes the main achievement was in helping to build a 'climate of opinion' that, should Labassa come up for sale in a derelict condition, it needed to be saved.

On leaving Labassa in February 1978, Judith wrote to the agent, (with a copy sent to the Historic Buildings Preservation Council) and provided a list of original fittings in her flat that required repair or restoration – wooden venetian blinds, a broken lock, a window shutter, a broken section of the main staircase balustrade and tiles from the fireplace. She carefully placed the tiles in a shoe box and entrusted them to incoming tenant Johnny Kesselschmidt. These tiles were eventually reinstated by the National Trust. Sadly, Judith thinks, the blinds were not.

Judith was well placed to know most of Labassa's residents.

Flat 8 was the cheapest flat because its kitchen and bathroom were in an annexe in the rear courtyard: "You had to go in and out of the flat many times during the day and it meant you had a lot to do with people because you were always encountering them.

The kitchen itself was a bit like a guard box over the back door and people tended to say 'hello' as they passed through."

**Right:** Judith and fellow resident, violinist Alan Bonds, heading off to Keith Keen's wedding 1 February 1969.

**Photo:** Judith Cordingley.



According to Judith, Labassa had "a strong creative spark" in the 1970s. "People with an artistic bent were drawn to the house for its visual delight. It seemed sometimes an outpost of the Carlton arts scene, involving students and associates from Melbourne and Monash Universities and the Caulfield and Prahran institutes of technology and groups which spanned these, such as Melbourne Youth Theatre."

At Monash Judith had been a student, a singer and employed in the Library and Alexander Theatre. "Many of my Monash University contacts were involved in music and in theatre. In June 1968 Keith Keen and Bill Edeson, fellow singers, came separately to look over the 'Ballroom Flat' (Flat 2, Music Room). Both agreed to move in and it appropriately became a musical locus, not for performances so much as persons. Bill liked to study Marine Law to Beethoven at full stretch, an effective sound block. As well Bill had a circle of Sydney and Perth friends who were following orchestral careers."

*continued page 3*

## *Saving a doomed relic' (continued)*

"That meant temporary seasonal terms with the Elizabethan Trust Orchestra in Melbourne. Richard Divall, Graham Jacups, Alan Bonds, Suzie Powell and Alan Greenlees all became part of the Labassa population periodically and stayed with Bill, in Flat 2 and later Flat 6."

Judith herself hosted a musical crowd from time to time. In 1968 a post-concert supper for about 50 members of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Society and Monash University Choral Society was held in her flat after a performance in the Melbourne Town Hall. The Halfords complained. "There was no band and no dancing. In no terms could it be considered a debauched or even a 'very noisy' party," she wrote in response to a letter from the agent threatening eviction.

The communal life of the house included spontaneous dinners, often in the Music Room, put together with what the residents had on hand. "Nobody had a lot of money," she observes. "The musicians were the only ones who had 'real' money. I remember Jacups arriving impressively with a Jeroboam of champagne over his shoulder."

One early such impromptu gathering resulted in the demolition of the partition that divided the Drawing Room into two rooms. "Everyone hated it," says Judith "and just suddenly there was a convergence of desire to get rid of the partition. It was wonderful to pull it down and have the whole room revealed."

Judith and Andrew played a part in one of many films made at the house.

**Right:** Judith Cordingley and Andrew Lemon shortly before leaving Labassa in February 1978.

**Photo:** Heather Witts.



Resident and aspiring film maker Greg Neville, later a teacher and published critic of photography, involved Andrew in writing a script for a ghost film set at Labassa. Judith played the role of the woman being haunted by 'the heroine' who suffocated under a pile of roses in the tower. The project also met an untimely end.

For Andrew one of the great pleasures of his time at Labassa was getting to know Vera and Fred Halford who "were like something out of central casting. Nobody would have created them." Vera had been a rally car driver in the 1920s and Fred a gold miner in Papua New Guinea. "They were splendidly quaint. Vera with her powdered rouge cheeks and huge hat was such a character. I loved listening to their stories." Although Judith's acquaintance with the Halfords had its beginning in confrontation it had developed into a caring friendship. The Halfords were delighted to be invited to Judith and Andrew's wedding in December 1975. Their letter welcoming the couple back to Labassa after their honeymoon reflects the importance the Halfords placed on the observance of formalities.

Vera wrote: "I trust that you will not think it presumptuous of us to have used your Christian names."

The household had a more sobering and seedy side, however. "Unpleasant things happened," says Judith. "There were definitely young people in the house who were in distress. While many came for a breath of free air, there were people in difficulties." The physical environment was also mixed. "The courtyard was sometimes dank and rank. It was a bit of a 'piss hole' when people were having a party. The gents would head down to the courtyard and the nearest shadowy corner – outside our kitchen window."

The richly decorated Dining Room offered a more pleasant sensual experience. Judith reflects: "In the summer the room came into its own. First thing in the morning the sun would come straight in the two east facing windows – the whole room was totally transformed. You could see colours in the ceiling you couldn't see at all the rest of the time. The windows were a joy. In the summer we could throw the windows right up, step out and sit out on the veranda."



## All in a good cause



**Above:** Annie Chadwick (centre) enjoying a family outing at the beach.  
**Right:** Tom Chadwick dressed as Santa Claus with resident Vi Miller's Charity Christmas Stockings. **Photos:** Chadwick family.



When Tom and Annie Chadwick moved into the Drawing Room flat around 1936, their rooms became a focal point for the mansion's charity work. It is here that Mrs Chadwick, as President, hosted monthly meetings of the Emilie Robins Auxiliary for the Queen Victoria Hospital.

It was also a setting for Labassa's very own branch of the Australian Comforts Fund for servicemen and women. Letters were written to servicemen and card parties, sewing and knitting circles were organised to raise funds for the war effort.

Plans for Labassa's grounds to be used for an Empire Day Appeal Fete in May 1941 were made. According to *The Age*, (24 May, 1941) the Labassa Branch of the A.C.F. stall turned out to be "particularly gay with its many ropes of small flags, while other stalls had draped the cones of the stall roofs with red, white and blue bunting."

Tom and Annie were social and political activists of long standing.

Originally dairy farmers from Gippsland they had a reputation for strong political views. According to family historian Carolyn Larsen, "In 1914, Tom was described as a 'leading light' of the local branch of the People's Party and Annie a 'leading light' of the Women's National League. Annie was part of the committee that agitated to have a nurse in the area and was Honorary Secretary of the Welshpool Bush Nursing Association when its first nurse was appointed in 1914. She later served as President until it was disbanded in 1918. She was re-elected as President of the Woorarra East branch of the Red Cross Society in 1918."

The couple met around 1893 at the Melbourne Hospital (now the Royal Melbourne) where Annie was a nursing Sister and Tom one of her patients. Tom, a widower, owned a successful drapery and clothing business in Hamilton, Victoria. Selling this business enabled him to buy 4000 acres of uncleared land on the Agnes River in Gippsland.

By the time they came to Labassa this estate had been sold and Tom was a 'gentleman of independent means'. The Chadwicks enjoyed a comfortable retirement and even had their own live-in maid known only as 'Mrs Smith'. Tom, who had migrated from Liverpool in 1877 likely found Labassa very congenial as many of his fellow residents were British — James and Emily Brearley (Blackpool), Percy Kingston (Acton), Ivy Kingston (Ealing), Helen Rodgers (London) and Sydney Ede (Chorlton).

In 1944, Tom and Annie advertised an 'at home' on two consecutive Sundays "to celebrate with thankfulness the 50th anniversary of their marriage, January 2, 1894." Three years later, when Tom was 90 and Annie 82, they decided to move into serviced accommodation. Before relocating to Nangunia Private Hotel, they commissioned auctioneer Leonard Joel to conduct an onsite auction of their "splendid furnishings." Some of these items are visible in the photo of Tom (above).

## Setting the Scene



*Left:* Brian Kiernan, resident Flat 2 (Music Room) c.1963-64. This photo shows the Smoking Lounge's original wallpaper and dado.

*Photo:* Professor Brian Kiernan and Jan Sterling.

by Professor Brian Kiernan

When I was 22 I ran away from home, sharing a flat in Elwood with my friend from university Dalbert Hallenstein.

Naughtily for those days, his girlfriend Jan and my girlfriend Suzanne would often sleep over. Dalbert and I were teaching at what was then Caulfield Senior Technical College and one afternoon he arrived home from work to announce he'd found this "marvellous" place in Caulfield we could move to. It was, of course, Labassa.

The flat was on ground level almost bordering Manor Grove. It comprised what we termed the 'Ball Room' [actually the Music Room] with the 'chandelier' [gasolier] which had been cut down and was sitting forlornly in one corner, another large room with a bay window that we called the Music Room [Billiard Room]

and a middle room that we called the Billiard Room [Smoking Lounge].

The latter connected both to the kitchen behind and to the bathroom which was under Labassa's grand staircase. The flat had both a front and a back door so we each had privacy in our own rooms: Dalbert in the 'Ball Room' and myself in the 'Music Room'.

Most of the other tenants in Labassa, in the more recent block of flats on the property, and the occupants of houses nearby seemed stereotypically suburban to us smug young things. On reflection, we must have given them a hard time with our loud music, noisy comings and goings and our live-in, well weekend, girlfriends (who eventually became our wives —so much for bohemia).

Once we moved in furnishing had to be faced up to. I had a single bed and a card table.

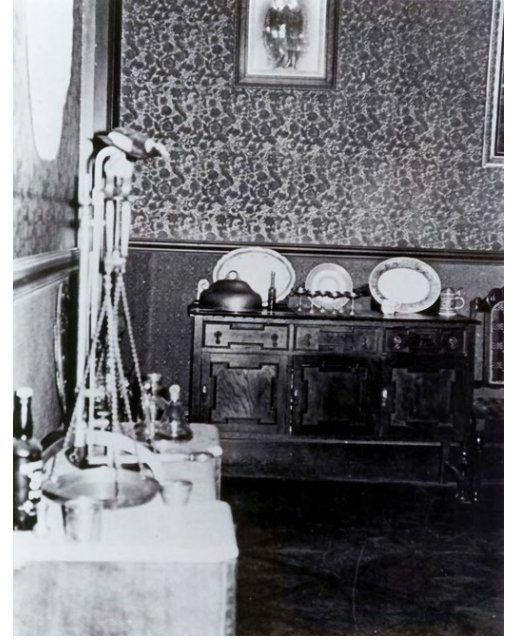
In the *Saturday Age* a department store's second-hand furniture section advertised a come-on special: an eight piece Jacobean Oak dining set for £8, delivered. Does anyone remember Jacobean Oak? It was ubiquitous in suburban homes until Modern and vaguely Scandinavian took over with post-Second World War affluence. Native oak, stained black with sturdy barley sugar legs.

We had the table, four chairs, two 'carvers' (arm-chairs) and a side-board. It filled the central Billiard Room [Smoking Lounge] signorially, and practically.

*continued page 6*



## Setting the Scene (continued)



*Above:* Suzanne and Brian Kiernan in the Smoking Lounge. *Above right:* The Jacobean side-board and other pieces “filled the [room] signorially, and practically”. *Photos:* Professor Brian Kiernan and Jan Sterling.

More was needed though to give the grand spaces a lived-in, but sympathetic, appearance. We combed the old wares shops and picked discriminately through Council household rubbish collections.

Suzanne made Regency-stripe curtains for the bay-window and began the arduous task of getting the muddy stain off the parquet.

Enter friend Gary Kay who brought around the treasures and bargains he had acquired at auctions. Some were too large to store in his sleep-out at home and he parked them with us until he opened his shop in Toorak Road.

I remember an ivory-inlaid peacock throne that we had for months. Some goods were damaged beyond profitable repair or just unmarketable but decorative.

We had a magnificent gilt embroidery-trimmed red tablecloth, unfortunately moth-riddled that looked just fine on the Jacobean oak table, strategically placed under candlelight. (Oh yes, there were a lot of candle-lit dinners).

A splendid carved cedar lounge is nearby as I write. I don't know what Dalbert paid Gary for it, if anything, as it needed serious work but when Dalbert left for London (where he married Jan) I gave him ten shillings for it, and years later had it restored. Bits and pieces I bought for ‘a few bob’ or just generously took off Gary's hands are all around our Balmain house still.

The most numerous decorative objects though were the paintings.

Gary would buy job lots for their frames: chromographs from an earlier period, Stags at Bay, Robbie Burns at Court, simpering little misses with very large sonky dogs or very small ponies. Converting the Music Room [Billiard Room] into a private space previously had involved erecting a somewhat ugly partition between its outside door and the in-line inner door to the Ball Room [Music Room]. The paintings were perfect for disguising it, for turning the corridor into a gallery!

Suzanne and I married and left for Europe in early 1964. Among the ‘treasures’ we accumulated while at Labassa were the ‘chandelier’, in pieces, and some lampshades caretaker Mrs Brearley had entrusted to us. These we stored in Melbourne while we were overseas and then we took to Sydney when we moved there. When we learned that Labassa was to be preserved we arranged for their return.

## In my room



After the National Trust purchased Labassa in 1980, several of the flats remained tenanted for many years.

Mark Klos arrived in 1983 and shared Flat 3 (Upstairs west side) with friend and colleague Russell D. Clarke. A keen photographer, Mark came up with the idea of photographing residents in their favourite room. This is a small selection from his 'Labassa Project'.

**Left:** Self-portrait by photographer Mark Klos taken using an automatic timer. According to Mark: "The self-portrait is a bit like looking at me sitting inside my mind."

**Bottom left:** Resident Jenny Hardy Flat 9 (former Scullery).

**Bottom right:** Resident Rodney Ashton Flat 7 (former Kitchen).





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

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## Forthcoming events

**Open Days**

20 March  
April (closed)  
15 May  
21 May (Saturday)  
National Trust 60th  
Anniversary Opening  
19 June

17 July  
21 August  
18 September  
16 October  
20 November  
December closed

## Labassa Ballroom 1905



**Above:** Guests at a Fancy Dress Ball given by Mr and Mrs J. B. Watson at Labassa, Caulfield, 14 July. Flashlight photo by Talma and Co., Melbourne and Sydney.

Residents of 'Labassa Flats' often referred to the Music Room as the 'Ballroom'. Labassa's actual Ballroom, however, existed as a freestanding building, which was relocated to White Lodge, Abbots Road, Lyndhurst around 1918.

White Lodge, once the residence of Malcolm Watson, son of Labassa owners John Boyd Watson II and Flora Kate Watson has since been demolished.

This picture, found by Friend of Labassa Andrew Dixon, was published in *Punch*, 20 July 1905 and shows a Fancy Dress party in the Ballroom. Mr and Mrs Watson can be seen in the centre.

The only vestige of the Ballroom's existence is a semi-circular mark over the northern exterior doorway to the Servants' wing. This is believed to be the outline of a covered walkway to the Ballroom.

## Trust Anniversary

**Saturday 21 May, 2016**

**10.30am—4.30pm**

National Trust properties across Victoria will be open to the public on Saturday 21 May to celebrate its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Labassa is going back to the 1950s with a display of 50s cars, dancing, a Pop Up Beauty Salon, authentic 50s hats to view and buy as well as games and puzzles for the children.

We are also offering self-guided tours of 'Labassa in the 50s' together with period photo and film displays.

Our Tea Room will be serving 50s themed refreshments throughout the day.

Visitors are welcome to help us celebrate by dressing 'in style'.

Entry: Gold coin donation.

For further information email:  
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