

# Labassa lives

Volume 4, Issue 2, 2016



## Myths and mysteries: Mr Robertson



Every era in the mansion's history has its own myths and mysteries most of which have evolved out of speculation, false memory and even errors in trusted records.

Millionaire Alexander Robertson, who was responsible for the transformation of Sylliott Hill into the palatial mansion he called Ontario, is no exception. For 110 years it was accepted that Mr Robertson had been born at sea, a romantic tale that likely grew out of syndicated obituaries following his death in July 1896. A detailed obituary in *The Age* said he had been born in Canada but subsequent reports took their lead from *The Argus*: "If he was not a native of Canada he was born on the voyage over from Scotland to that place, and he always regarded himself as Canadian."

Birth and death records in Canada and Victoria confirm that Mr Robertson was born in Canada eight years after his parents Farquhar and Catherine Robertson made the journey from Scotland to North America. The myth of Mr Robertson's birth at sea not only enhanced his reputation as a pioneer but influenced interpretations of Ontario's decorative features. There was speculation for many years that the travel scenes depicted in the Billiard Room cartouches were representations of his travels, including the ship which was believed to have been the one on which he was born.

It may also be surprising to learn that Mr Robertson was not the outright owner of Ontario. His probate papers reveal that Nicholas Maine (Australian Mutual Provident Society) held a mortgage of £10,000 on the property.



**Above:** The Drawing Room at Grosvenor Square. Was it the inspiration for Labassa's own? **Photo:** Neil Robertson.

This large mortgage was not due to Mr Robertson's lack of funds, nor was it out of character for him to spend thousands of pounds on a property he did not own.

In 1890, while works progressed at Ontario, Mr Robertson took out a lease on Lord Aberdeen's house at 27 Grosvenor Square, London. It was to be the setting for a spectacular party on 11 June where his daughters Eva and Nina would be introduced to British aristocracy. No expense was spared with £5000 spent on flowers and entertainment alone. Mr Robertson even had the Drawing Room redecorated by W. Turner Lord & Co. who decorated Highclere Castle ('Downton Abbey') in 1895. The photo above, recently donated by Mr Robertson's great grandson Neil Robertson, was taken by architectural photographers Bedford Lemere & Co. for their client. The Louis Quinze decor shows remarkable similarities of style to Labassa's current Drawing Room. Was W. Turner Lord & Co. following Mr Robertson's plans for Ontario's Drawing Room, or was their room his inspiration?

Mr Robertson's life was a broad canvas and Ontario, now Labassa, only one remarkable feature within its landscape.

**Inside this issue — Bohemian Idyll?**

## Bohemian Idyll?



*Left:* Alan Braithwaite also known as 'Boris' and 'Rasputin'.

*Photo:* Elmar Jakobson.

Labassa of the 1960s and 1970s is sometimes seen as a Bohemian idyll. Residents recall a community of like-minded creatives, passionate about their art, new ideas and experiences. There were intense exchanges of opinions, impromptu feasts and late night carousing. Many residents were impoverished and several artists lived in Labassa's garrett (tower).

But Labassa was never an intimate enclave such as John and Sunday Reed's Heide in Melbourne or Chica Lowe's Merioola in Sydney.

From 1964 Labassa slowly evolved into an artistic hub that was defined by exceptional talent, youth, personal discovery and a little chaos.

For many of the 17, 18 and 19 year olds, Labassa was their first home away from home and a formative experience. Following are the stories and recollections of eight residents from that era.

## Language of a New Age

Geoffrey Eggleston, 1967

Poet, ceramics artist, painter, printmaker, musician and philosopher – Geoffrey Eggleston was all of these. How he found his way to Labassa in 1967 we may never know but as with many young artists of this era he was likely drawn to the mansion's community of creatives and its cheap rent.

At 23, he had already studied Art at Prahran Technical College and worked for a number of boutique pottery companies including Guy Boyd Pottery, Ellis Ceramics and Rayham Ceramics. In 1967 he won a scholarship to the National Gallery of Victoria Art School and gave up full-time work as a ceramicist.

Labassa residents likely remember Geoffrey for his interest in poetry of which he said "Poetry will be the language of the new age, viva la revolution!" Geoffrey began to publish and perform his poetry in 1968 and went on to become the founder of the Montsalvat Poetry Festival in Eltham.

Artist and friend Jenni Mitchell, who painted Geoffrey twice before his death in 2008, says he was "the greatest of net workers; a walking hub and repository for artists, musicians, poets, performers and 'want ta bees'. He connected people and brought artists, musicians and writers to the dinner table. He created circles of like-minded people and loved nothing more than to be amidst a group of his creative friends eating, drinking and smoking his small pipe."



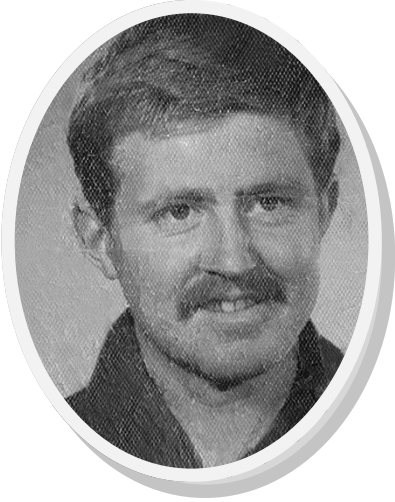
*Above:* Portrait of Geoffrey Eggleston by Jenni Mitchell, Eltham South Fine Art.

Jenni has painted more than a hundred portraits of Australian poets including A.D. Hope, Chris Wallace Crabb, Judith Wright, Shelton Lea, Lauren Williams (former Labassa resident), Adrian Rawlins (regular visitor to Labassa) and many others.



## Living, breathing, restless, mystical

Philip Hutchinson, 1967



"The beautiful Labassa. Some of the best times and the worst were had in that magnificent Gormen-ghastian relic. I think I moved in around '67. I had just returned from Paris, after my first experience as a seaman. My friend Susie Grimshaw, a painter, rang me and said she was moving out and would I like to take over the lease, so, I jumped at the chance. I had started work at Cheshire book-sellers in Little Collins Street. I was always poor and late with the rent.

"Judith Cordingley downstairs – a singer studying at Monash, a lovely, gentle girl – always had a lot of classical musicians and singers visiting. One memorable evening, after the Monash Choral Society had performed Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* they turned up in their tuxedos and evening dresses about 11.00pm and from the staircase, balconies, tower and roof we had a magical performance of *Carmina Burana*.

"Hans Poulsen lived there too! He was a good friend and a talented musician and songwriter. Susie Heinze and Elizabeth Huntley were both beautiful, pre-raphaelite girls with long hair down to their waists.

"There was Vera and Fred Halford. Vera always wore huge Greta Garbo type hats and fox shawls and had raced cars in England and Europe in the 1920s and '30s.

"Others who lived there were painters and sculptors – Geoffrey Eggleston, Ken Forrester, Penny Wilson, Elmar (Jake) and Dick and Greg who were brothers, one of whom became a successful screen-writer in Hollywood. I can't remember all the names. Writers, students, a Swedish poet, Kathy Stewart, Robin and Dierdre Knaggs. We were all friends but I lost touch with them. Visitors included Terence Grundy, Rick Amor, Michael Fitzjames, John Dennithorne and James (Seamus) Shaw. Hundreds of people were coming and going every week.

"There was an older Irish playwright, introduced to us by James (Seamus) Shaw. He used to bring his German wrestler buddy around to 'perv' on the girls. I had the great pleasure of removing him from Labassa at the point of my 200-year-old samurai sword.

"I had the entire Upstairs Balcony wing [Flat 6]. Fantastic. Later on there were some sinister characters haunting the place. They built a hideout up in the roof over the balcony. The residents were very careful with Labassa: it was beautiful and our home. Labassa and its inhabitants were a living, breathing, restless, mystical being, not unlike Mervyn Peake's *Titus'* ancestral home."

**Right:** Phil is currently a Navigator/Pilot at sea.



## Pre-Raphaelite twin

Justine Bradley, 1968



**Above:** Justine Bradley above with sister Juliette below.

**Photo:** Michael Caton.

Justine and Juliette Bradley, known to residents as 'the pre-raphaelite twins' were regular visitors to Labassa. Justine became a resident in 1968 when she was just 17, sharing Flat 5 (Laundry) with David Innes.

"My introduction to Labassa was via family friend and flautist Susie Powell who lived in Flat 6 [Upstairs Balcony] and was giving me professional flute lessons. At that time there were many musicians at the house. I recall that the Piano and Vocal Competition was looming and the house rang out with everyone practising for it – a piccolo concerto upstairs, a piano concerto downstairs, a violin and viola somewhere else. There was a sense of energy and perpetual practice in the house.

"The focus, dedication and wonderful talent at Labassa were so exciting to an aspiring teenage musician. I loved being there, feeling quite the sophisticated young woman of the world in their company.

*continued page 4*

## Pre-Raphaelite twin (cont.)

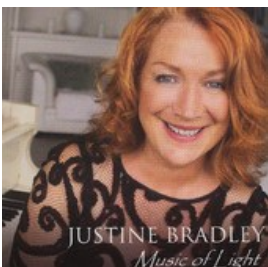
"I recall fabulous nights of feasts and long stories, much laughter and camaraderie. I also had my first affair with a handsome and sophisticated young viola player with whom I am still in contact.

"I remember Keith Keen [Flat 2, Music Room] had expressed a desire to make love while listening to the Bach Double violin concerto and his flatmate Graham Jacups (viola) and Alan Bonds (violinist) obliged, setting their music stand up outside the bedroom. After some time, a giggling sheet emerged with four legs showing and heading to the bathroom, so the boys picked up their music stand and relocated it outside the bathroom and continued where they had left off.

"Other residents included a 'Lady in Black', a mysterious character who kept a very private profile and seemed darkly elusive and interesting. There was also a guy who lived in the 'attic' for a time and who seemed vaguely dangerous.

"It was a community of wonderful, vibrant souls dedicated to art. Age and family may have had something to do with it. Both my parents were classical musicians. I had a strict upbringing and went to a Catholic boarding school, then a Catholic college. Labassa was a fledgling experience and my introduction to Bohemia."

Justine is currently a singer, songwriter, recording artist, musician and educator. <https://soundcloud.com/justinebradley>



## The Flow

Penny Wilson, Elmar Jakobson, 1967



*Above:* Elmar Jakobson, Flat 3, holding a German beer stein, reflected in a large Christmas 'bauble'.  
*Photo:* Elmar Jakobson.

Penny and Elmar's path to Labassa began with a happenstance encounter. Penny met friend Philip Hutchison in Collins Street and he invited her to share Flat 6 (Upstairs Balcony) with Ken Forrester and himself. When Flat 3 (Upstairs West Side) became vacant, she and Elmar moved in together. They had both been studying at Swinburne and had shared a house in Malvern prior to Labassa.

Both were Graphic Artists – Elmar was finishing his final year and Penny was working in the city. The Front Bay Window room became their bedroom, lounge room and a work space for Elmar who was a keen photographer and motorbike enthusiast.

Penny set up a studio/abode in the adjacent West Bay Window bedroom, where she created a large drawing on the north wall. This disappeared under mauve paint a few years later when the Prosser family moved in and decided to redecorate. The rent was only \$18 per week for the whole flat, which included three large rooms plus the Tower.

Penny and Elmar sublet the third room to Art student Laurie Davidson (p.5) but various friends, visitors and other residents also moved in for short periods. "A lot of people were flowing in and out of these rooms and my life — some very clever interesting people — artists, writers, musicians, alternative/hippie. You didn't get much space at times. There were also some who had a very negative influence and input. It could be a bit overwhelming at times, lots of angst and drama, but also lots of laughs and mucking about to compensate. In retrospect it was an amazing time, but I probably wouldn't have thought so then."

Penny has often wondered what happened to a Scot, David Mulholland, a visitor, who later became a resident. "He was older than most of us and loved the young 'gels'. He was a great reader of books and every time he passed the stairwell niches, would make a comment on Nietzsche."

In late 1969, Penny and Elmar left Labassa. Before they moved Elmar took a cast of the 'gargoyle' over the front door to make into wax candles. Elmar passed away in 1998. Fortunately, we still have several of the extraordinary photos he took at Labassa.



*Left:* Wax mould taken of the 'gargoyle' on Labassa's front door.



## Impoverished by choice

Laurie Davidson, 1967

Laurie Davidson was an “impoverished student” by choice. At 17, he had had enough of living with Mum and Dad in suburbia and wanted the freedom of his own space. Laurie, an Art student at Brighton Technical School, was pointed in the direction of Labassa by school mate Ralph Farmer and teacher Paul Satchell who were sharing Flat 1 (Upstairs Servants’ Quarters). They introduced him to Penny Wilson and Elmar Jakobson who had a room to sublet in Flat 3 (Upstairs West Side) at \$6 per week.

“It finally felt like I had a studio of my own. The top room of the Tower with its fantastic views was also available for me to work in. I was very poor. There was no student allowance so I had to support myself. I worked with artist Derek Hambly [Drawing Room, Flat 10] on his gardening round for a while. Derek had a FC Holden ute with a couple of mowers in the back. I didn’t have a licence so Derek told me his date of birth in case I got picked up by the police. We weren’t exactly the average gardeners.

“I wasn’t flush with funds and it could be a very cold place in winter. The fireplace was my only source of heat. I sometimes pinched fence palings or bought a few briquettes from the supermarket.

“I remember Labassa as being one big party. What was a party didn’t always start off as a party. A few people would drop in, sometimes musicians, and it would go from there. Just being in the company of other creative people, graphic artists and musicians was very interesting.



*Above:* Drawing of fellow resident Annette Florence (aka ‘Pinky’) by Laurie Davidson.

“Everyone was in and out of each other’s pockets. I didn’t lock my room. I wouldn’t have thought of locking it. Everyone knew each other. It was a community. Derek invited me in for this family dinner one Christmas (or maybe Easter). He’d cooked a big meal. My ginger cat stole the main part of the meal – roast chicken — right off the table.

“The Halfords, an elderly couple in Flat 4 [Master Bedroom, East Side] were the exception. They were in a different world. We rarely saw them, except on Sunday mornings when Fred would get his old car out, take it around the front and Vera would come down in her fox fur dressed to the nines.

“I met my wife Kathy Cutland at Brighton Tech and she lived at Labassa for six months before we decided we’d had enough and moved out to have more space of our own.

“The start of my adulthood was at Labassa. Some of the friendships I made there lasted. There are three or four people I still see. Once you lived at Labassa and had a connection to the building it became a part of you.”

## Outrageous

Mick Coleman, 1968



*Above:* Back: Residents Kathy Cutland and Laurie Davidson. Front: Mick Coleman. *Photo:* Laurie Davidson.

There have been some spectacular parties at Labassa and Mick Coleman was at the most outrageous one of all. “It was 1969 and a really chaotic, strange night. It was so big, hundreds of people. I remember ending up on the roof and looking down and the street was packed with people. The Hells Angels were there. The police came. That was the night one of the newel post lamps went missing. In the morning it was gone. That party was typical of the kind place that Labassa was then – out of control.

Mick was introduced to Labassa by schoolmate Tony Poulson who was looking for someone to share Flat 7 (Kitchen, Servants’ Quarters). Both were working in the ABC’s Film Department at Ripponlea and in the following months brought an ABC crowd with them. They even hosted an engagement party for colleague Susan Nicholls (nee Dobbin) in February 1969.

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## Outrageous (cont.)

Susan recalls: "There was much merriment, booze and very loud music. I think everyone in the building came to share in the celebrations. We've never forgotten." According to Mick, "Parties were things that just seemed to happen. They were fairly disorganised but really interesting nights with stimulating conversation. A lot of people smoked dope but there wasn't any rampant drug taking. At 18 I had found people I fitted in with — people who were sometimes very strange, a little dangerous, but quite fascinating."

Mick and Tony were not flatmates for long and it was all due to the Beatles. "The ABC could get advance copies of record albums and I put in an order for the Beatles' new double *White Album*," says Mick. "I had a big Motorola record player and played the album non-stop for 24 hours. Tony, whose name was on the lease, told me to go." Mick didn't go far — up into the Tower, a very cosy space with room for only a bed and chest of drawers. He later moved into Flat 1 (Upstairs, Servants' Quarters).

Mick can date his departure from Labassa to just before the Woodstock Festival in the USA (August 1969). "I saw an advertisement and said 'This is where I gotta go.'" And he did.

Labassa was a seminal place for Mick. "It's not so much how long you live somewhere. It is what happens there. There were many landmark experiences at Labassa — some too personal to go into. It was the first place I lived after leaving home. I was just discovering everything that wasn't suburbia. Labassa gave me a template for a life that was different to that. The fact that people lived that kind of lifestyle and that they were so passionate about what they did. It coloured my life in so many ways."

## Something for everyone

Carole Harper, 1969



Above: Carole Harper, Labassa, 1969, self-portrait.

Artist Carole Harper passed away in February this year. Carole shared Flat 10 (Drawing Room Flat) with Derek Hambly and Cheryl (Victoria) Hammond in 1969 when she was studying the Bauhaus method at Caulfield Institute.

According to friend Ian Laurie-Rhodes who met Carole later in her life, she had a number of exhibitions of her paintings. Her works were abstract, colourful and often with religious overtones.

The walls in her small flat in Redan Street, St Kilda were covered in art and icons and attracted comment from those who attended her soirees. Ian recalls the night when a visitor looked around the walls of the room and observing the 'Madonna and Child' icons, Carole's paintings, the hanging beaded necklaces and a tea towel featuring the King of Rock 'n Roll, Elvis, observed: "Something for everyone!"

In a short interview in 2014 Carole said that Labassa was a wonderful time in her life. She paid \$12 per week for the Drawing Room where she painted and slept. "There were many parties. Never any drugs but plenty of alcohol. I developed quite a taste for Ouzo and Pernot. A lot of people came in and out and I was never lonely. I had been very lonely before that. It was a wonderful boost to my morale."

Carole also remembered the music at Labassa. On hearing Monteverdi's Vespers wafting across the hallway she knocked on Judith Cordingley's door to find out what they were. It was the beginning of Carole's life time interest in singing in choirs.



Above: Carole Harper's photo of flatmate Derek Hambly, 1969.



## Musician in the Music Room

George Varney, 1969

Classical Guitarist George Varney was thrilled to discover that his new flat had a Music Room [Flat 2]. "In 1969, while taking single unit studies at the Conservatorium I taught guitar part time at Firbank, Shelford and Caulfield Grammar. It was like a fantasy to come to this place in the evenings and then being a musician to practise in a music room. It even had a grand piano in one corner that had been left by someone. I used the stage to practise guitar as well as keep my Hi Fi equipment to play Rock and Roll records. The acoustics in the room were very nice."

George initially slept just inside the front door to Flat 2. When his flat-mates brother John Varney, June Chomley and Peter Tarpey decided that they wanted to use both the front and back doors to the flat, George moved into the Music Room sleeping next to the piano.

Conditions in Flat 2 were not always idyllic. The kitchen smelt of gas all the time. It was a minor irritant compared to Labassa's other attractions. "There were a few romantic adventures here and there. But it was a 'family house' and we respected each other's privacy. There were big parties in the Music Room, in Julie Ryan's flat [Flat 6] and in Derek and Cheryl's flat [Flat 10]."

"We would share a flagon of wine and some would smoke hash. One guy used a hollowed out carrot as a bong and if the police turned up he would simply eat the carrot. There was a generous, free spirit among the residents. People were eager to sit down and have a talk. Sometimes I would knock on someone's door and they would say 'Come in and play something for us'. I remember playing Bach in the Drawing Room for Derek, Cheryl and their guest.

"My strongest memory is arriving on the first day and thinking "Wow I can live here." I liked the architecture, the shapes of the rooms. It was an unreal place. Small details were amazing like the glass door knobs and the cherubs.

"I was only 21. It was a formative time. You are finding out how to live. You don't know what is going to happen one day to the next. That creative atmosphere can stimulate your imagination. Projects, truths and futures start to emerge. I got to know myself better and my limitations. I was preparing to go overseas and being at Labassa and away from the protective shield of my mother was how I developed personally. I was already flying away when the photo [above] was taken."



**Above:** George Varney standing on the pillar. **Back row L-R:** Hartmut Erdman, Jessica Tarpey. **Second row:** Jeff Black. **Front row:** Judith Cordingley, Helen Ryan. **Photo:** Section of a group photo taken by resident, Peter Tarpey.



**Left:** This photo was taken at Labassa during George Varney's residency. Do you recognise the man on the left or the location? The man on the right is believed to be Max Loudon. **Photo:** Phil Speller.

George has lived and worked in Stockholm since 1976. He completed his performing/teaching diploma in Madrid on Classical Guitar with masters such as Andres Segovia and Regino Sainz de la Maza. Apart from diverse musical projects with the Duo Varney Delin, George, now retired, enjoys spending some time in Melbourne each year with family and friends.

## Volume 4, Issue 2, 2016

## Forthcoming Open Days 2016

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

Please forward to:

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PO Box 363, Chadstone Shopping Centre,  
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Open days (3rd Sunday of the month, 10.30am—4.30pm)

August 21

November 20

September 18

December CLOSED

October 16

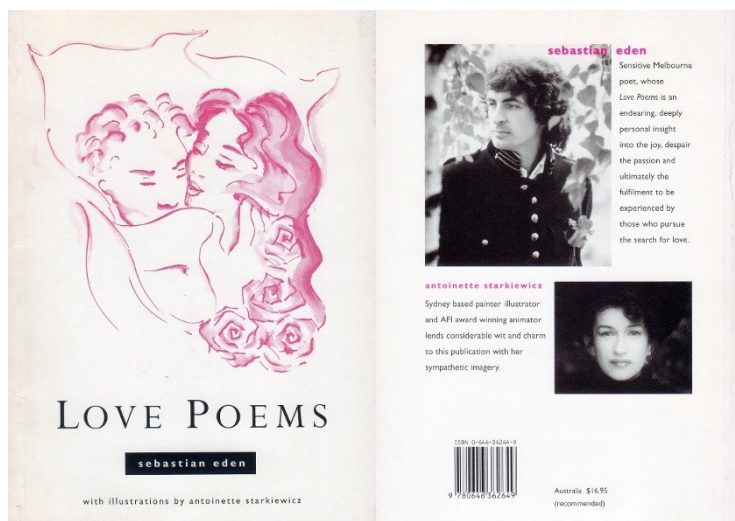
## Love Poet

Peter Sinnott, 1971



**Above:** Sandy and Peter Sinnott.

**Photo:** Section of a group photo taken by resident, Peter Tarpey.



**Above:** *Love Poems* published by Peter Sinnott under the pseudonym Sebastian Eden with illustrations by former resident Antoinette Starkiewicz.

**Right:** Shirts donated to the National Trust by Peter Sinnott.

Former resident Peter Sinnott passed away in April this year. Peter shared Flat 1 (Upstairs Servants' Quarters) with his first wife Sandy and Jane Clifton in 1971.

According to his wife Annette Wregg, "Peter had a love of art and artists. Music and poetry had special significance for him." In 1998 he published *Love Poems* under the pseudonym Sebastian Eden with illustrations by Antoinette Starkiewicz, who coincidentally had lived at Labassa a couple of years before him.

Peter had early onset Alzheimer's when he attended the Return to Labassa in 2013. His long-term memories of Labassa were limited but he donated some of his hippie clothes from the 1970s to the National Trust.

His cotton shirts feature psychedelic motifs of mushrooms or mushroom like jellyfish, which were created using wax resist dyeing techniques. They can be viewed on the National Trust website at <https://www.nationaltrust.org.au/collections/pair-of-shirts-worn-at-labassa-in-the-1970s/>

