

Labassa lives

Volume 5, Issue 1, 2017



Distinguished company



Above: Dr Ralph McMeekin.

Above right: Dr Ralph McMeekin, *Sydney Mail*, 5 February 1919.

Labassa retained much of its grandeur and prestige for a decade or more after its subdivision into flats in 1920. We know this in part because of those who chose to live there. Many of the early tenants were high profile professional couples, among them Dr Ralph Parker McMeekin and his wife Marjorie, and, New Zealand diplomat Roberts Matthew Firth and his wife Eleanor.

Medical champions: McMeekins

Dr Ralph McMeekin, a 'Collins Street Specialist', was a popular, well-known and occasionally controversial figure when he and Marjorie came to live at Labassa in 1921. He had been Superintendent at Melbourne Hospital during the First World War but stepped aside when the Returned Medical Officers Association insisted that the position be given to a soldier.

In January 1919, Dr McMeekin took a public stand against the way the authorities were dealing with the Influenza Pandemic (Spanish Flu) which had been brought to Australia by returning soldiers.



On the left is Dr. McMeekin, medical superintendent of the institution, and on the right Dr. Harley, who is in charge of the ward. At the bottom of the picture are, respectively, the pneumococcus and the bacillus of ordinary influenza.

The Quarantine Department initially downplayed the crisis to avoid panic. The Victorian Government delayed declaring 'an infected State'. But Dr McMeekin insisted the epidemic was "Serious, increasingly serious" and challenged the Board of Health's mortality figures, which he said were under reported. Within a few weeks the Government moved to commandeer any vehicle suitable for use as an ambulance and set up the Royal Exhibition Building as a hospital. Around 12,500 Australians died during the pandemic.

Dr McMeekin had a special interest in neurology and treated the Who's Who of Australia, including our longest-serving Prime Minister, Robert Menzies. We know very little about Marjorie McMeekin other than that she was the daughter of a British clergyman and a fundraiser for the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

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Distinguished company: McMeekins and Firths
Living in the 60s: Lindsay Moore, David Innes, Dianne Coulter, Janette Prichard

Distinguished company (cont.)



Royal Visit to the New Zealand Pavilion at World's Fair - June 10th, 1939.
from left: Bob Firth, two aides, the King, Sir Ronald Lindsay, the Queen, Con Firth, and Grover Whalen. "

Left: Bob Firth, far left during the 1939 visit to New Zealand by King George VI and Elizabeth, Queen Consort.

Right: Bob Firth, acting High Commissioner to Canada, 1943.

Photos: Firth family.



A matter of diplomacy: Firths

Roberts Mathew Firth and his wife Eleanor arrived in 1930 when Roberts (aka Bob) was appointed the New Zealand Government's representative in Melbourne. Apart from the usual diplomatic duties, he was charged with boosting tourism to New Zealand. Bob was named after Lord Roberts under whom New Zealanders had fought in the Boer War. Bob and Eleanor's son Robert or Bob Junior was born at Labassa in July 1931.

Firth's greatest challenge came in February 1931 with the Napier earthquake, New Zealand's deadliest catastrophe. Most of the town's buildings were levelled and 256 residents lost their lives. Firth's office in William Street, Melbourne was inundated with hundreds of "pitiful inquiries" from friends and family seeking news from home. He remained by the telephone day and night, answering many calls from his home at Labassa.

His more agreeable duties included hosting New Zealand aviator Miss Jean Batten in 1934 when she landed after her solo flight from England. Jean Batten's flight of 14 days and 22 hours beat the existing record set by English aviator Amy Johnson by over four days. Bob Firth was appointed acting High Commissioner to Canada in 1942 and in 1944 Consul General (USA) for New Zealand.

Eleanor Firth played the role of diplomat's wife with great poise, hosting dignitaries and helping to organise events for the local New Zealand community, including a Maori themed ball at the Melbourne Town Hall. Bob Junior followed his parents around the world, eventually training as an engineer and working in Australia, New Zealand and the USA.

Launch of Labassa Endowment Fund

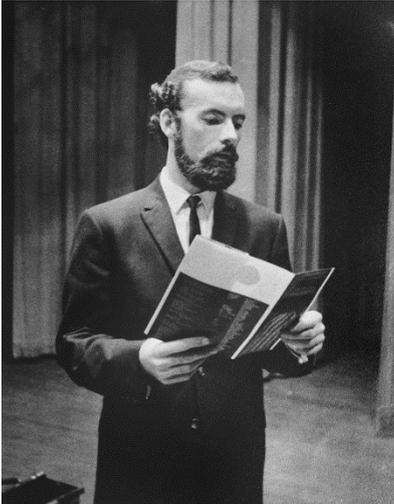
An Endowment Fund for the preservation and maintenance of Labassa was launched on Sunday 5 March. A highlight of the event was a performance by The Flinders Quartet, a donation by Friend of Labassa, Andrew Dixon. Any donation that is made to the Labassa Endowment Fund will be held in perpetuity, helping to build a corpus which will be used solely for the benefit of the property. Making a bequest to the Labassa Endowment Fund through the Foundation, is another way to ensure a lasting legacy for Labassa. If you are interested in receiving a brochure please email: labassalives@gmail.com



Labassa Endowment Fund
Giving the past a future

A grand inheritance

Lindsay Moore, Flat 2, 1963-64



Left:
Lindsay Moore,
c.1963

Right:
The Music Room
(Flat 2) during
Lindsay Moore's
residency.

Photos:
Lindsay Moore.



The Music Room flat (Flat 2) changed hands four times in the early 1960s, each time through an employee, associate or student of Caulfield Technical College (CTC). Lindsay Moore, an English lecturer at CTC, was a regular visitor to Flat 2 where his colleague Brian Kiernan lived. When Brian and his partner Suzanne decided to leave in 1963, Lindsay jumped at the opportunity to 'inherit' their magnificent suite of rooms. The rent was £8 per week, around half the minimum weekly wage at the time. Lindsay became one of only a handful of tenants to occupy an entire flat. He furnished his rooms with bits and pieces from the Salvation Army and added a few flourishes of 19th century décor with lamps, neo-classical sculptures and a rare mantel clock.

Lindsay had only a 'nodding acquaintance' with the other tenants and "liked being able to come in, shut the door and be in a completely different world." One of his outside worlds was live theatre. An accomplished composer and pianist, Lindsay wrote music and played piano for revues at the Muse Theatre in South Yarra, one of Melbourne's small alternative theatres, and for the annual Caulfield student revue.

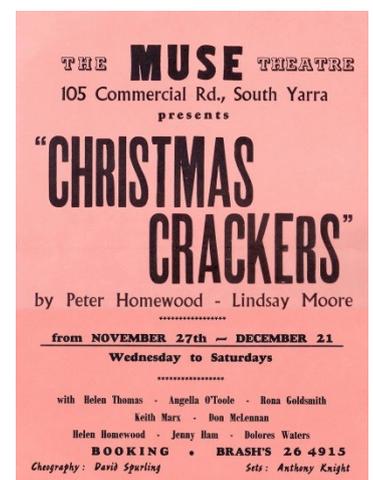
Lindsay's girlfriend, and wife to be, was most unimpressed by his involvement in these revues. When he was the music director for a Caulfield production called *Down Lambert's Way* — a pun on the name of the principal of Caulfield at the time, Austin Lambert — her opening night telegram drolly observed: "*Down Down Lambert's Way Way*". The more adult and risqué shows at The Muse theatre were another matter. This tiny theatre, above a bakery, had once been part of an old stable.

"The Muse could take 42 people – 20 downstairs, 20 upstairs and two in the box," Lindsay explains."

The piano was in the balcony. The Muse was quite trendy at the time. We did late night shows on Friday nights — one performance at 9.00pm and the other at 11.30pm." The theatre may have been 'alternative' but it wasn't amateur as the performers were paid £2 per performance.

The cast, including many of Melbourne's 'arts crowd', later became familiar faces around Labassa. One trio of performers, known as the 'Jewels of the Fruit Bowl' comprised leading fashion models Helen Homewood and Janice Wakely and actor Rona Newton-John, whose young teenage sister, Olivia, regularly played guitar and sang in the adjacent coffee lounge.

The Muse's production of *Christmas Crackers* (1963) was a collaboration between Lindsay and Peter Homewood who would eventually become 'heir apparent' to the Music Room flat. Lindsay met Peter while acting at university and continued the friendship through theatre productions and at Caulfield, where Peter was invited to direct a student revue.



A grand inheritance (cont.)

It was Peter who encouraged Lindsay's talent as a composer. "I was acting in a show and the regular pianist didn't turn up to one rehearsal. I told Peter I could probably fill in. Once it was discovered that I could play, I was never allowed to go back on the stage. At the next rehearsal Peter came up to me and said: 'I've written the words for the opening number. Will you write the music for it for next Sunday?' I explained, 'Peter, you don't understand. Just because you can play the piano doesn't mean you can write music.' Peter replied: 'Oh Darls, don't worry about that. Just go and do it'. So, I came back the next week with the music and some trepidation. 'Good. Now Darls,' he said, 'here are the lyrics for two more songs; bring the music next week'. We went on to write perhaps 50 songs together." According to Lindsay, among the best songs they wrote together was a song called *Love Comes at Christmas Time*, which he played at Peter's funeral on Christmas Eve, 2008.

Right:
Lindsay
Moore's 'dining
room'.

Photo:
Lindsay Moore.



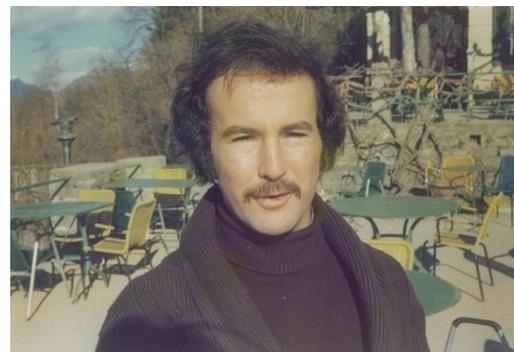
"I didn't realise just how special Labassa was until I travelled overseas and saw similar houses," says Lindsay. "When I lived there I had no knowledge of the history of Labassa. Many years later I discovered an unexpected connection with the house. During my term as President of the Melbourne Athenaeum Club, the Club published a new history of the Club's first 50 years. I discovered that Alexander Robertson had been one of the Club's earliest members, joining in its inaugural year (1868). I realised that I had had the extraordinary pleasure of entertaining my guests in his Music Room and sleeping in his Billiard Room."

I shared with almost everyone!

David Innes, Flat 5, c.1966-68

David Innes, a computer operator who worked shifts, didn't appear to have much in common with the young students, musicians and artists at Labassa. But he did love to party and "there was always something fun going on," he says. David's entre to the house was as a visitor to Flat 5 where his friends John Cotter and Carol Croke lived. John and Carol were part of the creative team that mounted a resident production of *Lady Windamere's Fan* [sic] and David joined the cast as Mr Cecil Graham – "the very flamboyant, gay one," he explains. When John and Carol moved out of Flat 5, David moved in.

Flat 5 (former Laundry) was cheap at \$10 per week but it did have a number of peculiarities. There was a shower over the bath but no hand basin. The bedroom was damp and "when it got a bit *too* damp out the back I moved into the lounge room". According to the lease, the flat had two bedrooms, one within the flat and the second across the courtyard in the first room of the tower. One boon was an 'old cupboard' outside the door where David could store his firewood.



Above: David Innes. **Photo:** David Innes.

This 'old cupboard' had once served as Labassa's communal telephone booth and was located outside Flat 5 because this was where caretaker Mrs Brearley once lived. Coins were needed for outgoing calls but Mrs Brearley was usually on hand to answer incoming calls. Despite these idiosyncrasies David loved his flat: "I still have fond memories. My Edwardian furniture gave it a lovely feeling. Coming home was a pleasure and it was such a cosy place to be."

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I shared with almost everyone! (cont.)

Did David ever share his flat like most other tenants? “You’ve got to be kidding. I shared with almost everyone — Diane Coulter, Grant Tokely and Justine Bradley. They came and went. There was an artist, a painter but I can’t even remember his name. If people came to stay we shared my double bed. It was a different era — we were all young and you didn’t have to be in a relationship to share a bed.

“I only had a couple of parties in my flat. I do remember going to one in Derek Hambly’s flat [Drawing Room, Flat 10]. I even bought a sculpture when he was selling up.

“Judith Cordingley [Dining Room, Flat 8] stood out. She was like the matriarch of the place when I was there. She was always the one residents went to when they had problems. She’d put the kettle on and just listen.



Above: Flat 5 (former Laundry), c.2014.

“Labassa was fun; there were so many experiences, mostly wonderful. We were all so young but eventually it was time to move on. I wanted to be near work so I bought a flat in Carlton. By that time, I had quite a separate life and I’d outgrown the people at Labassa.”

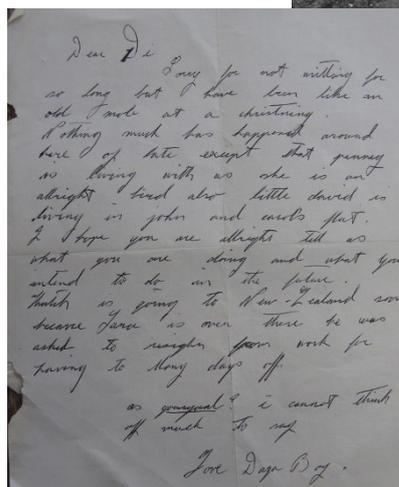
Dear darling little wog woman

Many Labassa stories are told by men and women in their sixties and seventies reflecting on what happened in their teens and early twenties. These articulate and insightful narrators have long forgotten many of the personal dramas and day-to-day trivia of life at the house. Dianne Coulter is in a unique position to summon up some of those young voices through letters she received from residents while she was travelling. “I hitchhiked and worked along the west coast of Australia to Darwin and from there sailed on a small yacht with three other intrepid travellers,” says Dianne. “We ended up becalmed and drifted onto islands south west of Timor. Then I travelled solo over land through to India and west Pakistan in 1968. It was on this voyage that all my correspondence with Labassa friends happened — they were my cheer squad.”

One Labassa correspondent writes: “I have moved into Labassa for a few weeks with Phil and co., sharing a room with 6 people and a cat.” Another says: “There are two girls staying in my place at the moment who have just come back from Darwin and around Australia in general (Vicky and Lynn) don’t know their last names. It’s a possibility you may have run into them — it’s a stinking big country though.”

Right: Dianne Coulter at Labassa.

Photo: Neil Greenaway.



Left: Letter from resident Daryl Muxworthy (deceased) to Dianne Coulter.

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Dear darling little wog woman (cont.)

And again: 'Hi Di, Sorry for taking so long to write but we have been kicked out of Labbassa [sic].' One correspondent affectionately refers to Dianne, who is half Italian, as his 'darling little wog woman'.

Dianne isn't sure who introduced her to Labassa. It could have been John Cotter or Carol Croke or Penny Wilson who all met through Swinburne Technical College. Dianne became a 'transient' Labassa resident, staying three times from the mid 60s to the early 70s while studying art at Caulfield Tech. and later between overseas trips.

"I was never on the agent's books and never paid 'rent' although I'm sure I made a contribution." The living arrangements were 'flexible'. Dianne sometimes found a bed in Elmar and Penny's flat [Flat 3, Upstairs West], or on a couch in John Cotter and Carol Croke's flat [Flat 5, former Laundry] or shared a bed with David Innes when he took over Flat 5. Bed sharing in the platonic rather than carnal sense was common at Labassa from the mid 1960s, especially among cash-strapped students and shift workers.

"The continuity was always Judy Cordingley," says Dianne. "She was always a stately woman and eloquent in her speech. She was admired immensely. I was also very close to Neil Greenaway; we were like a brother and sister.

"There were raging parties. They were mostly impromptu — word got out and there would be a party. There might have been hash, marijuana but definitely booze. I didn't take drugs. I was a ratbag drinker. I just enjoyed drinking and mucking around, laughing and being naughty and getting in the cars and tearing down the streets.

"We were kids experiencing it all with incredible naivety and innocence — freedom, dressing up and playing roles. It was a wonderful, wonderful time. My lasting image of Labassa is of 'Hutch' [Philip Hutchinson, Flat 6, Front Balcony] who had this mad streak in him. It may have been at one of the parties. There he was wearing a kilt with his samurai sword in hand flying mid-air over the Italianate balcony.

"In amongst all this there were people trying to study and others that didn't give a damn. It was all over the shop. I had the luxury of coming and going and therefore some privacy. But there were a lot of people knocking on the door, coming and going."



Above: Dianne Coulter at Labassa.
Photo: Neil Greenaway.

The building itself also left a deep impression: "I loved its sensuousness, the brocade, leadlight windows, tiles, the craftsmanship, the beauty of it. And yet at that time it was relegated to a place that wasn't being respected in our culture other than it being a wonderful place for people like artists and students who could embrace that richness and loved it.

"It was such a contradiction. There was no garden, only a struggling rose somewhere. Stuck in that suburban street was this wonderful majestic building in sad disrepair externally but internally it always looked beautiful.

"To have seen something like that was extraordinary, like a gift. Where else would you have the opportunity at 17, 18 or 19 to go into such a magnificent building? I'm enriched forever by that and the people who were so generous."

Dianne, who has her own studio in Allendale Victoria, is mainly known for her sculptures.

1969: It was a very good year

by Janette Prichard

Stepping into the Music Room it was 1969 once more. That year we called the beautiful configuration of rooms that was Flat 2, the 'Ballroom Flat'. Inaccurate perhaps, as the Labassa residents' grapevine 'knew' that there had been a separate freestanding Ballroom elsewhere in the grounds. 'Legend' said that when the 'original' Ballroom burnt down, the music, dance and laughter had moved into my beautiful lounge room. It had the stage for the musicians. It had the dancing space. It had the smooth parquet floors and the double doors to reduce the sound into the adjacent Billiard Room, my bedroom. It had all the opulence needed for a grand ball.

What more could any young woman want from her first home away from home? A few devils perhaps? The four devils or satyrs centred on the frieze on each wall of the Music Room always signified for me the care that had gone into the design and execution of Labassa. Look right up to the decorative band beneath the cornice and you'll notice that it imitates 3-D. It pretends that the two windows on the Manor Grove side light each face. Above the windows the face appears to be underlit. Above the stage it imitates light flooding in from the windows to its right. Above the fireplace the illusion of light from the left makes the beard, the flowing moustaches and the horns stand out from the surrounding curlicues. This attention to detail is worthy of respect. It may not seem like much when your eyes can so easily be drawn to the imposing carved fireplace or the massive columns each side of the stage. (Put your arms around these and your fingers may just touch!) The anonymous craftsmen who created this beauty are as elusive as candlelight struggling to fill a large space.

There's no double bed now in the Billiard Room where I conceived my son at the ripe old age of 19.



Above: Janette Prichard, 1969.
Photo: Janette Prichard.

In 1969 two-thirds of that bed was inside the large eastern bay window. I would lie there marvelling at the beauty of the ceiling and the twin flowered columns that framed the bay.

Two ceiling paintings have stayed with me for years: a sailing ship tossing on an ocean under golden, cloud-filled skies; a camel and travellers crossing a desert with violet and rose dunes shimmering to the horizon. Each painting is framed in that same imitation 3-D style. For reasons I may never understand, the desert scene entered my dreams of an expansive, nomadic, exotic and creative future.

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Above: Music Room satyr.



Above: Billiard Room ceiling painting.

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

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Errata

Vol.4, No.3, p.4 Javant Biarujia,
resident Flat 4, did not come from
the Latrobe Valley.

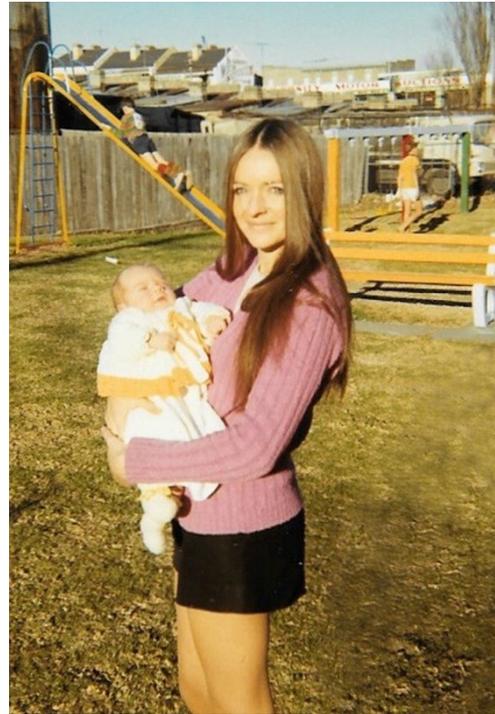
1969: It was a very good year (cont.)

1969 was also the year of my liberation from a suburban upbringing. My immediate Labassa neighbours, friends and visitors were intelligent and creative young professionals with a Renaissance respect for the arts and the sciences. I enjoyed the perfect balance of privacy and communal living in a space both redolent with luxury and buzzing with 'alternative lifestyle'. What more could any 18-year-old female Physics and 'Computer Science' student want from her first live-in encounter with 'the wider world'?

Judy Cordingley was a special presence in the neighbouring ground floor flat [Flat 8]. Our kitchen windows were opposite each other enclosing a sheltered rectangle where we planted a small 'kitchen' garden. Judy still may not know how much her calm, intelligent and independent spirit nurtured the fledgling feminist in me. David Innes lived in style in the old Laundry [Flat 5] that we just called the servants' quarters. David had and still has a delightful exuberance and a gentle manner that welcomed the passing parade of artists and revellers. Deep in the winter we would come together most weeks to cook a communal meal with whatever was available and light one big fire (yep, it was a big cold house!).

Monash University Choral Society partied and rehearsed in our flat, consuming all the cold beer, then raiding the cupboard under the stairs where we stored our warm home brew. I was also fortunate to have talented musicians visiting all year. Members of the Elizabethan Trust Orchestra, when it was still only one travelling orchestra, stayed over when they came down from Sydney to perform opera in Melbourne. My dear talented friend and violinist Graham Jacups may never have lived full time at Labassa but he most certainly contributed to the sound-scape of our days. 'Legend' has it that he serenaded my partner Keith Keen and I as we conceived our son Damon. It's possible...

Living at Labassa most certainly changed my life for the better. The unique environment and the strong individuals around me enabled flashes of insight that have characterised my personal growth ever since.



Above: Janette Prichard, with son Damon who was conceived in the Billiard Room.

Photo: Janette Prichard.

Picture a party. Not too many drugs. Lots of good vibes, good music and good spirit. I was perhaps one of the odd ones out because I was in a heterosexual relationship. But in my experience people of diverse sexuality have always been open and accepting of straight people so I was having a great time. I wasn't particularly surprised at two hefty blokes kissing until a friend assumed I would recognise them. They were AFL players. I didn't know them from 'a bar of soap' because I'd always been a weirdo in Melbourne. I didn't follow the footy! It's hard to explain how delighted I was.

It just broke me through one last barrier: the pressure to conform to mainstream ideas of behaviour and sexuality. If they could do it so could I. I would keep battling to be a woman in Physics. I would keep battling to be a mother *and* a student. This may not sound like much from the perspective of the 21st century but it was quite an achievement in 1969.