

Labassa *lives*

Volume 5, Issue 3, 2017

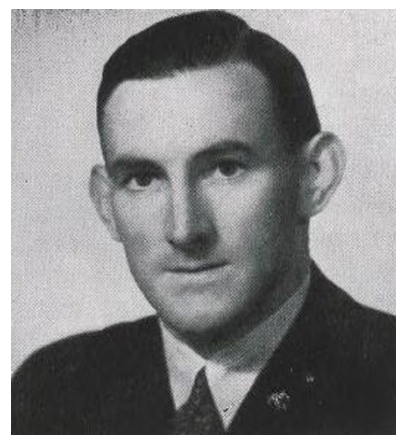


Willas: all mod cons



Left: The Willas flats, built in 1936, abut the wall of Labassa's 1873 cottage.

Below: Willas flats' architect K. Murray Forster c.1937.



Willas, sometimes dismissed as an ugly addendum to a glorious mansion, has a unique architectural story.

The flats were designed by architect K[arl] Murray Forster for Labassa owners Will and Sal O'Callaghan in 1936¹. Art deco in style, they still bear the owners' names in the form of an anagram — "Wil" and "las" (Sal reversed).

K. Murray Forster, whose father was a Presbyterian minister, designed many buildings for the Church, some in partnership with other architects. One of his more unusual commissions was a stone church on the edge of the desert at Woomera where Australia's guided missile experiments were conducted in the 1950s. The stone for the church came from the walls of sheep pens on a neighbouring station. Forster's government buildings include the former Broadmeadows Town Hall (1964).

¹ Tender notice, *The Age*, Saturday 13 June 1936.

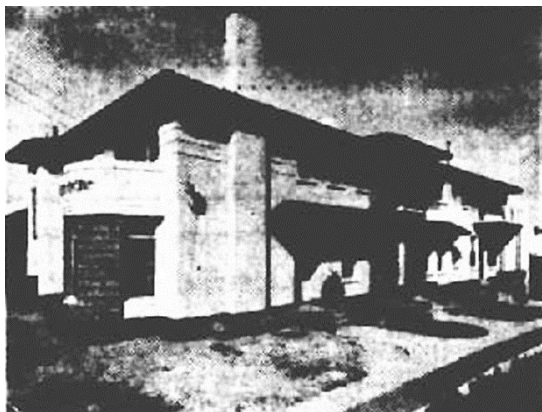
During the 1930s, Forster took on a number of smaller commissions including new-build homes and the conversion of 19th century buildings into flats or commercial premises.

Forster would reconfigure the interior, add modern amenities and design a more contemporary facade. In 1937, he transformed an "old house" at 568 Glenferrie Road, Hawthorn into three flats and a dental surgery suite. The complex, in the International/Moderne style, has a heritage overlay with Boroondara City Council.

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Willas (cont.)

Left: A block of flats in Black Street, Brighton previously a single-storey house before K. Murray Forster redesigned and extended the building in 1937.

Below left: 568 Glenferrie Road, Hawthorn which has a heritage overlay. Designed by architect K. Murray Forster in 1937.

Below right: United Protestant Church at Woomera (S.A.) designed by K. Murray Forster c.1954.



Why Willas was built on the east side of the property when there was more land to the west is unknown. One explanation may lie with the O'Callaghans who were resident owners and viewed Labassa as their private 'village'. K. Murray Forster's laundry although structurally part of the new building was a communal space for the use of both Willas and Labassa residents on a roster system. Decades later Labassa residents also used the laundry to make kosher wine and as a photography dark room.

The proximity of Willas to the mansion involved several changes to the 19th structure, including the sealing off of two doors on the east side of Labassa's 1873 cottage or original laundry where there had once been rooms for a gardener and coachman.

The first advertisements for the four new flats with "every convenience" appeared in late 1936. Later advertisements also promoted the appeal of a west facing sunroom.

While many of Labassa's tenants in the late 1930s were retirees, Willas tenants were often working professionals and included a manager, an accountant, two nurses and a solicitor.



Above: Silent screen actress Louise Lovely was among the first Willas arrivals. Louise, also known as Nellie Cowen, lived with her husband Bert Cowen, Manager, at St Kilda's Victory Theatre.

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Willas (cont.)



Above: Granger family, Willas, 1943-56. Doris, Rossell and Elizabeth. **Front:** David Granger who was included in Mrs Brearley's outings with her own grandchildren. **Photo:** Granger family.

The Willas and Labassa households worked as a community. Apart from sharing a laundry, all residents made use of the telephone outside the cottage (Flat 5) where deliveries were also left for collection.

From 1942, the two households progressively blended. Irene Marriott (Willas) had four relatives living in the mansion. Miriam White (Willas) arranged for her elderly father Bere Feiglin to rent Labassa's Flat 7 so she could 'keep an eye on him'. Before Passover Mrs White would give the Kelders family in Labassa's Flat 1 any surplus food and pay Marianne Kelders 6d to turn their lights on and off.

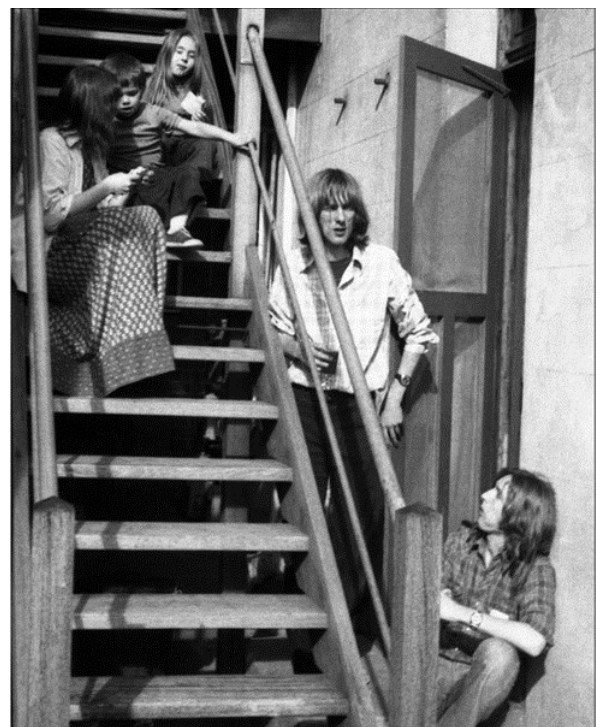
Emily Brearley (Caretaker, 1921-64) included the Willas children in 'outings' with her own grandchildren. The children of both households, Christian and Jewish, were invited to Mrs Brearley's Christmas party where she acted as Santa Claus and presented each child with a gift.

As the older generation made way for the Baby Boomers, it became more common for Willas tenants to 'upgrade' to a more spacious Labassa flat when a vacancy became available.

The Willas flats, which are currently tenanted, still retain many of the original 1936 art deco features and fittings.



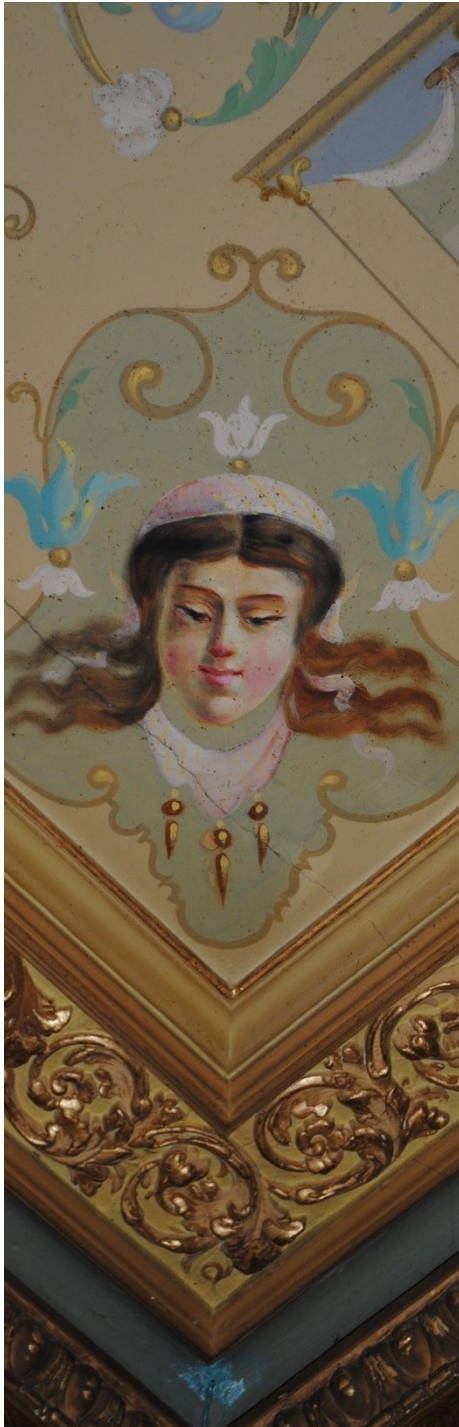
Above: Playmates Jocelyn Cohen (Willas) and Michelle Westwood (Labassa) 1950. **Photo:** Westwood family.



Above: Ann Weir, Emma Watkinson, Ruth Harland, John Watkinson and Trevor Stevens. Willas backstairs adjacent to Labassa's Flat 5, 1976.

Photo: John Harland.

Man of many faces: Herr Hansen



Above: One of eight hand-painted female faces on the ceiling of the downstairs hallway.

All the faces in this story were created by Danish artist, Peter Nielsen Fuglsang Hansen, Ontario's 1890 decorator. As well as decorating many of Melbourne's 'marvellous mansions', Hansen (1862-1916) painted portraits and large scale reproductions of the European Masters. So far only one of his paintings has been located: a portrait of Bendigo Brewer Jacob Cohn which is on display in the Danish Club, Melbourne.

Hansen's other original works included portraits of Lieutenant Governor Sir John Madden and Claus Grønn the "grand old man" of Danish gold diggers. There are also two paintings only identified as *H.M. Queen Victoria* and *After the Boom*.

After establishing a studio in Flinders Street, Melbourne, in 1897, Hansen supplemented his income by painting facsimiles of the Masters such as Peter Paul Rubens' *The Last Judgement* and *The Battle of the Amazons*. In an era when only a few people had the means or opportunity to visit European galleries, reproductions had a value.

Table Talk's review of a Hansen exhibition in the Austral Salon (Friday 1 October 1897) focuses on his particular skill with faces: "It is the studies of heads that Mr Hansen has made from life that show his own originality and mastery over his brush. As a student of the Royal Academy of Munich, his work cannot be otherwise than interesting. These qualities appear at their best in an old peasant head, the contour of which is illumined, with the rest of the face in shadow. Typical studies of age and lusty youth, of matronhood, and manhood are remarkable for the perfection of finish and the strong firm modelling."

The face that Hansen painted more than any other was that of Jesus. When Hansen first arrived in Melbourne in 1888, he and friend John Kannuluik decorated many local churches. Hansen would paint the Stations of the Cross while Kannuluik, a skilled carpenter, made the frames and other altar pieces. Kannuluik went on to create a carved oak altar piece for St Mary's in Geelong, the Grimwade Screen for St Paul's Cathedral and the furniture for Australia House in London (c.1914). Given their close working relationship, Kannuluik may have also crafted some of Ontario's woodwork.

Hansen's obituary (*Norden*, 23 September 1916) provides an insight into what else is missing from his body of work. "Amongst his effects are many excellent pencil studies and sketches from Italy. He himself prized best a picture which he called *A Study in Black*."

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Man of many faces (cont.)



Hansen's family sketches, a self-portrait and hand-painted rococo screen speak to his versatility. The location of all these works, except for the painting of Jacob Cohn (left) is unknown. Only poor quality black and white photos of the other works are held in the State Library of Victoria's *Australian Art and Artist* file: Peter Nielsen Fuglsang Hansen.

A more detailed article on Peter Hansen can be viewed at www.nationaltrust.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/NT-Vic-Magazine-2016_3_Aug.pdf pp22-23.



Top: Jacob Cohn portrait, c.1901.

Above: Self-portrait of artist Peter Hansen, undated.

Above right: Family portraits dated 1894.

Below right: Undated rococo screen with frame missing.



Myth and mystery: a matter of wills

There are several versions of the story that Emmie, eldest daughter of Alexander William Robertson by his first wife, was disinherited.

In 1887, Mr Robertson apparently gave Emmie an ultimatum: Come to England with me and marry a man of my choice or stay in Melbourne and marry the man of your choice. Marry the man of your choice and you will not receive a shilling from me. Emmie stayed and married Harry Bagot a cycling champion and bicycle salesman. Mr Robertson true to his word disinherited his daughter.

Like many family stories this one turns out to be a mix of truth, supposition and humbug. True, Emmie is not mentioned in Mr Robertson's last Will and Testament even though he notionally left £10,000 to each of her five half siblings.

Mr Robertson's Will, however, is dated 2 February, 1895 one month after Emmie's death. Had she been mentioned in an earlier Will it may have been rewritten.

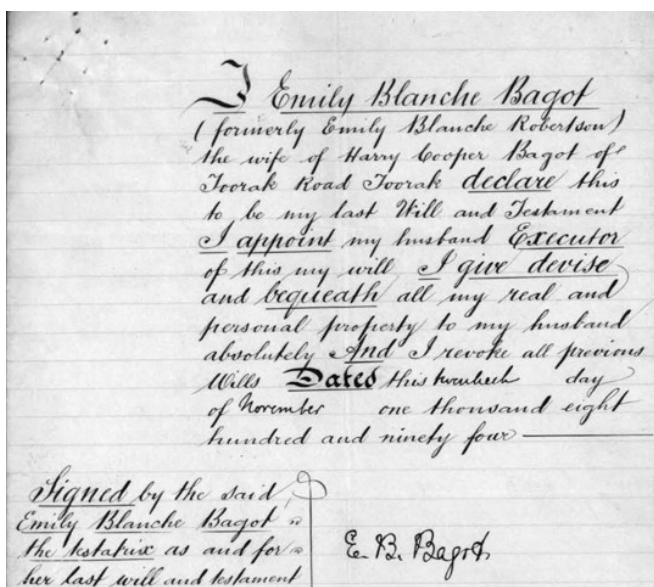
Emmie's death from tuberculosis on 1 January 1895 was followed a day later with the death of her newborn son Alfred and eight days after that the death of her infant son Robert. Emmie left two surviving children, Nina and Joan, for whom Mr Robertson also made no provision.

But did Mr Robertson perhaps believe that Emmie's girls already had enough 'shillings'? As a Trustee for the Estate of Emmie's maternal grandfather, Samuel John Davidson, Mr Robertson was very familiar with the details of her inheritance. She had an equal share in the Davidson estate with her uncles, a share that would be passed onto her children in the event of her death. When Mr Robertson died in 1896 he owned a share in Geraldra Station (NSW) with daughter Emmie and two of her uncles.

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Above: Alexander William Robertson, who initially leased the mansion and then purchased it in 1887.



This is the last Will and Testament of me Samuel John Davidson of Allanvale Great Western near Ararat

A matter of wills (cont.)

When Emmie married Harry Bagot in January 1887 she wasn't abandoned by her family to a life of poverty. John Robertson, her father's brother, was a witness at the ceremony and when he died in 1899 left a bequest to Nina and Joan Bagot.

Emmie and Harry took up residence at 'Allanvale' a ten-room house in Toorak Road, opposite Como. 'Allanvale', named after the Davidson Estate at Great Western, Victoria, was owned by Harry Bagot. Emmie, herself, owned a property at Mount Macedon, which she left to her husband.

Nevertheless, according to Mr Robertson's great grandson Neil Robertson, the Bagots felt they had been poorly treated by the Robertsons. "Nina told me that they received nothing from their grandfather except a sovereign each. Harry Bagot and the girls were bidden to Christmas 1895 where the girls were seated on cushions. Nina got a sovereign out of her helping of Christmas pudding and Joan cried because she wanted one too. Her grandfather gave Joan a sovereign which, as Nina said, 'was the only thing we ever got out of the Robertsons'."

Drawing from life



Above: Drawing by Paul Havin dated 8 April 1967.
Donated by Bill Gleadell great grandson of architect John Koch.

Illustrations, when reliably dated, can help unravel the 'who, what and when' of Labassa. From 1962 until 1970, student Paul Havin visited Labassa and sketched its interiors. His father waited in the car in Manor Grove while he drew "spellbound by the lavishness of this mysterious old mansion."

In 1967, Paul was freely admitted to the Drawing Room flat which he says was let as two. "There was a partition wall along the sides of the Corinthian pillars that divide the room into sections. The mantelpiece section with its bay window was one flat. The oblong section [was] another.

The occupant of the oblong section had a piano and played very beautifully. The young lady in the mantelpiece section was very sweet, kind and let me come and go."

One day Paul returned to find "the young lady" was gone. If his sketch is true to life then someone may one day recognise the painting or print on the wall and tell us who she was.

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

Please forward to:

vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au or

PO Box 363, Chadstone Shopping

Centre, Chadstone, Vic. 3148

Forthcoming Open Days 2018

Open days: 10.30am—4.00pm

January 21

February 18

March 18

April 15

May 20

June 17

July 15

August 19

September 16

October 21

November 18

Return to Labassa 2018

A Return to Labassa for previous residents and owners is planned. The date is to be confirmed. Suggestions as to format are welcome.

Forthcoming special events 2018

Open Day, Sunday, 18 February 2018



Preview the finalists of the Melbourne International Millinery Competition. Milliners will also be demonstrating the art of making silk flowers.

Further details:

www.nationaltrust.org.au/places/labassa/

Open Day, Sunday, 18 March 2018



The Embroiderers Guild (Vic.) will be displaying some beautiful embroideries and antique needlework tools from their Collection.

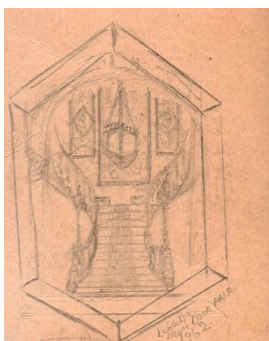
This unique display will showcase many items not previous seen.

Further details:

www.nationaltrust.org.au/places/labassa/

Drawing from life (cont.)

In 1969-70 Paul Havin returned to sketch the main staircase and Drawing Room which was now one room. His sketch of the staircase dated 4 July 1970 may provide clues to several events in the house. This includes the year in which the newel post lamps disappeared, an event for which various dates have been given.



In 1962 Paul sketched the staircase through the prism of the glass in the front door (above). Despite the lack of detail, both newel lamp stands and bases are intact.

His 1970 sketch (main image) shows that the newel post on the left has only the lamp base whereas the other, on the right, is still intact except for its shade.

In 1998, Paul Havin presented his illustrations to Linda Gleadell, granddaughter of Ontario's architect John Koch. They were recently donated to the Labassa archive by her son Bill Gleadell.

