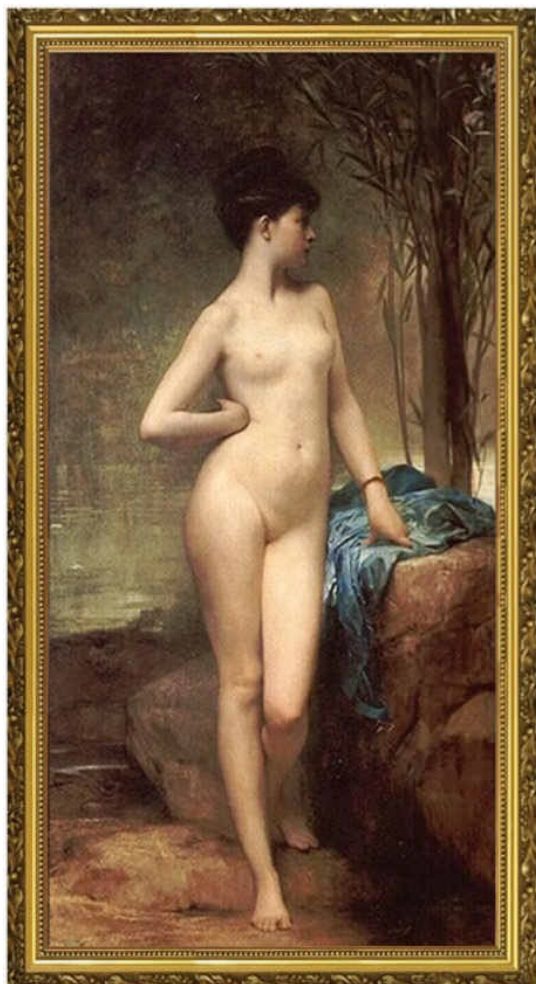


Labassa *lives*

Volume 7, Issue 1, 2019

Known unknowns



Above: *Chloe* provides a vital clue in identifying one of Labassa's former residents.

Image: Young & Jackson.

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Many residents are known only by name. Who was "Mrs Smith" the live-in maid in Tom and Annie Chadwick's Drawing Room flat (Flat 10)? While that question may never be answered other residents are moving out of the shadows.

A visit by Mrs Young

An undated, unsigned note in a Labassa file records the visit of 102 year old "Mrs Young" whose father "Mr Grey" leased the mansion at the turn of the 20th century. Her memory is described as "patchy and somewhat confused" but she offers some tantalising details about the mansion's decor.

"The drawing room ceiling had some life-sized figures painted on it. The carpet, not rugs, was of a rose pink colour with matching curtains. Lighting was by chandelier. Several pictures were hung on the walls and the furniture was white and gold. The dining room had portiers [sic]¹ and curtains across the windows."

Who was Mrs Young and how reliable are her memories? Mrs Young's identity and the date of her visit were finally revealed through her association with *Chloe*, the iconic painting on display at Young & Jackson Hotel in Melbourne.

Gold mining engineer George Gray leased Ontario between 1898 and 1901. His eldest daughter Ethel Houghton Gray married the son of Henry Fisby Young, one of the original licensees of Young & Jackson. Ethel was interviewed about *Chloe* on the eve of her 100th birthday in 1983. She told journalist David Ross an elegiac story about artist Lefebvre and his young Parisian model who died before Ethel was born: "Chloe was such a sad story," she said. "She fell in love with the artist, let him paint her, and then was jilted. He paid her for modelling and she used the money for a farewell party — and then committed suicide. So sad."

¹Portieres or curtains which hang over doors.

continued page 2

Known unknowns (cont.)

A visit by Mrs Young

Mrs Young's recollections in 1985 have some credibility. In 1982, Heritage architects Roslyn and Ian Coleman¹ found that the Drawing Room ceiling decoration appeared to have been over-painted.

"There are brush lines which would indicate the ceiling was panelled and decorated. This decoration and gilding uncovered is far superior in technique and artistry than the existing décor, more in keeping with the skills of the artisan and craftsman of the 19th century."

It is, however, possible that Mrs Young confused Labassa with another mansion. Although she lived at Ontario for around four years, the Grays went on to live in two other grand mansions. The now demolished *Corvey* in Brighton and *Craigmore* in Elwood both had large drawing rooms. There are no known records of their décor.

Mrs Young died at the age of 106.

¹'Labassa', 2 Manor Grove, Caulfield : Historic Structure Report, prepared by Roslyn and Ian Coleman; prepared for the National Trust of Australia (Victoria), p. 113.

An unassuming gardener

Norman Aitken (1927 – 36)

Tenant Norman Aitken was employed by owner Will O'Callaghan to redesign and maintain Labassa's gardens. Described on the electoral rolls as a "traveller" or salesman during his residency, Norman appears to have been a square peg in Labassa's round hole of genteel families.

As it turns out, Norman's childhood home was far more splendid than any of his fellow residents had known. Norman was the youngest son of Thomas Aitken, founder of the Victoria Brewery in Victoria Parade, East Melbourne. Victoria Brewery was one of six Melbourne breweries that formed Carlton United Breweries in 1907.



Above: Victoria Brewery, East Melbourne: Victoria's longest surviving and architecturally most significant brewery complex. **Image:** Heritage Council Victoria.

When Thomas Aitken died in 1884 he left an estate valued at around AU\$21 million in today's money. *Elm Grove*, the family home, on the corner of Victoria Parade and Clarendon Street was an "ornamental" two-storey balcony residence "exquisitely decorated throughout". Its 1904 sale notice describes it as "massive" and "palatial".

Norman was the youngest of 11 children and his share of the estate after a protracted legal dispute is unknown. It was enough for him to initially make a living as a grazier and sheep farmer. In 1913 he owned a sheep farm called *Woodlands* near Drouin, Victoria where he lived with wife Isabella and son Kenneth and bred prize-winning Border Leicester sheep.

In late 1918 Norman's life took a sharp turn. *Woodlands* and its champion sheep were inexplicably sold off and he moved to suburban Melbourne.

Norman eventually found employment as a traveller and lived apart from his family. His fortunes improved in 1933 when he inherited £907 from his mother's estate. Although this would have been enough to buy a house during the Depression, he remained at Labassa until around 1937.

Norman ended his working life as a shopkeeper on the Esplanade at Altona Beach.

There are no known photos of Norman Aitken.

Known unknowns (cont.)

The Heralds (1931 – 37)

David Houston Herald was a well-known Melbourne identity with a legal career spanning 55 years. At the time of his death at Labassa in 1933, aged 76, he had been the Prahran City Council's Solicitor for 44 years and was still making regular court appearances.

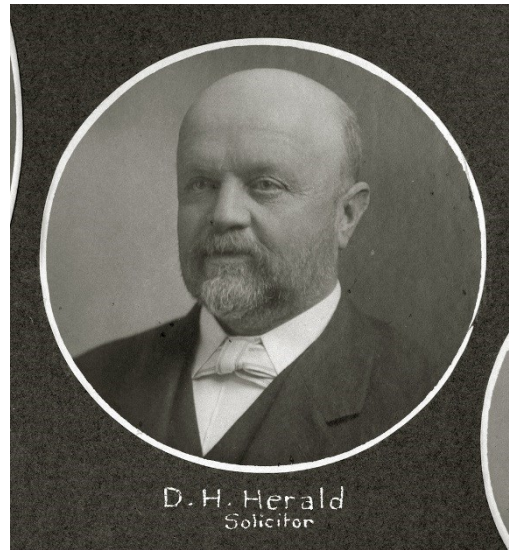
David worked on several high profile cases including his own defence in 1913 when a client sued him for £3000 (AU\$270 000 today) on the grounds of professional negligence. David won the case and was awarded costs by the High Court.

In the early 20th century many issues now administered by state government departments were left for councils to deal with, such as air pollution and the dumping of night soil. Before the Transport Regulation Board was introduced in 1927, councils also had to deal with the growing number of motorists on local roads. David was regularly in court prosecuting drivers for "furious driving" along Chapel Street.

Famous for his "forward" language, wit and tenacity, David enjoyed the respect of successive councils. In 1894, when he was leaving on a European holiday, the Council held a bon voyage party. Councillor Forbes paid him one of the highest compliments of that era: "There was not a man in Melbourne but would say that David Herald was a 'white man'." This archaic, racially charged epithet was commonly used to describe a man who was respectable, decent and trustworthy.

Little is known about wife Ethel and son Herbert who also lived at Labassa. Following her marriage, Ethel confined herself to "home duties". Herbert was employed as a clerk in his father's legal firm.

David and Ethel were among several elderly, genteel couples who lived at the mansion during the Depression. Labassa's cachet as a once elite property suited people of means who didn't want the bother of maintaining a property. The Heralds' first family home was *Weraï*, 92 Finch Street, Malvern, which remains an imposing double-storey Queen Anne cum Gothic Revival mansion.



Left:
David Houston Herald, Prahran City Council Solicitor for 44 years.
Photo:
Stonnington History Centre.

The Herald residence previous to Labassa was *Maysbury Mansions* in Elsternwick. Maysbury is a sobering reminder of how Labassa's fate could have taken a different turn. *Maysbury*, a family mansion on Orrong Road, was converted into flats around 1918. It survives as privately owned luxury apartments with modern facilities.

Visitor to 1 Manor Grove



Are you able to identify the woman and children in this photo? It was likely taken in the 1940s as suggested by the hat, the brick fence and the First World War mine being used as a pot plant. The mine was introduced to the property circa 1933-41.

Vale Neil Robertson

Neil Robertson, great grandson of Ontario's owner, Alexander Robertson, passed away in September 2018. Neil was widely known as the National Executive Officer of the Australian Open Gardens Scheme for 20 years and a popular gardening columnist for Melbourne's *Herald* newspaper.

Neil's green fingers were reflected in his beautiful garden at Westport, New Gisborne. The garden was established by his great aunt Nina Ferrier-Hamilton (nee Robertson), also a keen gardener, who with her husband Vereker planted many of the trees.

Neil was also an ardent family historian. Most of the Robertson family photos and records were lost before Neil was born when his great aunt's cellar was flooded. Neil spent decades gathering documents and images from across Australia and relatives in Canada. The anecdotes Neil gleaned about his great grandfather from those who knew him, transformed the conventional image of Mr Robertson as a rich but somewhat dull businessman into a dynamic and cultured individual.

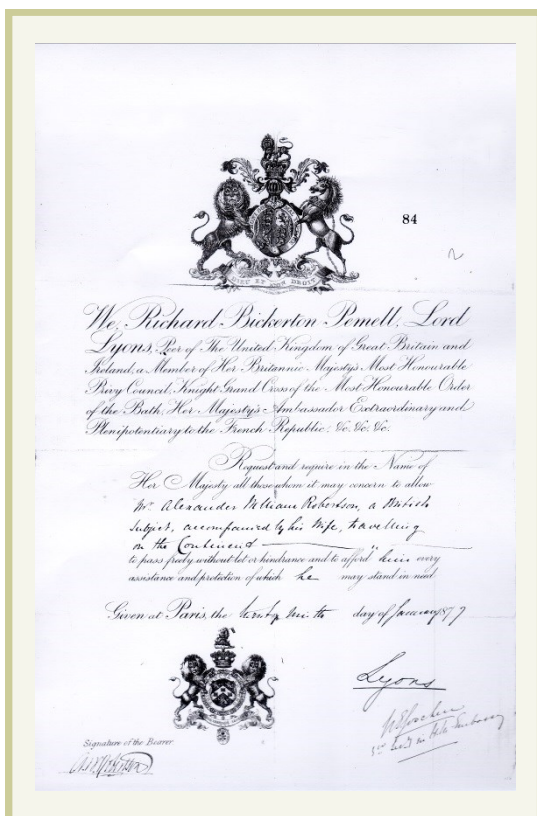


Above: Labassa Centenary Reunion, 10 November, 1989. Neil Robertson (far right) with descendants of Ontario's architect, J.A.B. Koch. **Left to right:** Linda Gleadell, Bert Koch, Mollie Campbell (nee Koch).

Photo: Friends of Labassa.

Neil was an invaluable source of insights into the Robertsons and the creation of Ontario. His generosity in sharing family treasures with the National Trust was deeply appreciated. VS

From the Robertson archives

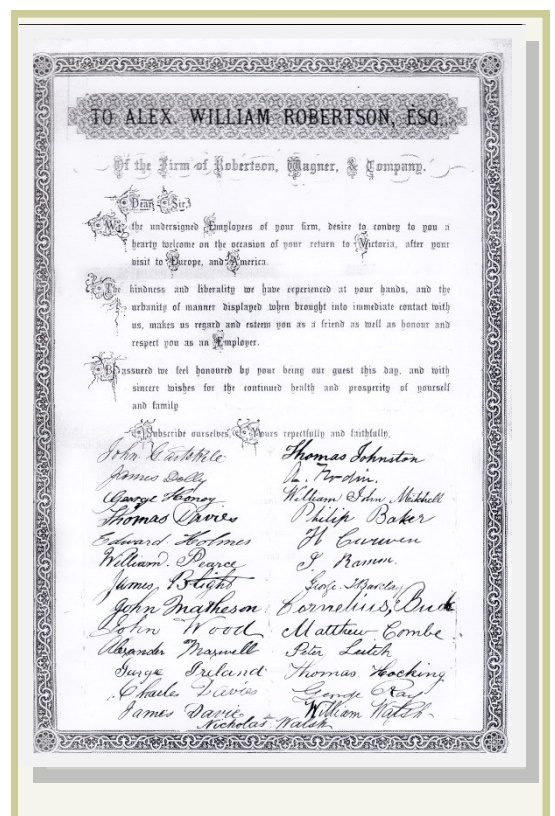


1877

In 1877, A.W. Robertson travelled to Europe and on to Philadelphia, USA where Robertson & Wagner was exhibiting one of its carriages at the International Exhibition.

Left: The passport for Robertson and his wife, Hannah, to travel on the Continent.

Right: On his return to Castlemaine, Robertson's employees presented him with a signed tribute in acknowledgement of his "kindness and liberality".



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From the Robertson archives

1889: Transcription of a letter from Alexander Robertson to brother William in Canada.

London
Oct 27 1889

My Dear William

Your letter of 7th Inst in hand. It is I who should apologize for not having written earlier to you.

In Company with my son Hugh I joined the girls at Paris on the Commencement of their holidays. After having seen all we could of the Paris Exhibition and the Eiffel Tower we went on to Genoa where we spent a very pleasant fortnight – taking occasional tours round the beautiful lake. From there we went to Chamonix where we had a good view of Mont Blanc and the beautiful glaciers – then to Fribourg, Lausanne, Montreux and Berne – and after being satisfied with Switzerland we pulled up for a time at Baden Baden then back to Paris again through Strasborg and Metz. Altogether we had a very pleasant time of it and the girls enjoyed it thoroughly.

After leaving the girls at school again Hugh and I went to Scotland and had a few weeks amongst the grouse and red deer – once more satisfying myself that there is no place on the Continent to equal Bonnie Scotland as a Sanatorium and field for Sport. Hugh left yesterday in company with a very old friend from Australia and altho he took his degree at Cambridge in good style he has decided to give up the Law and turn Squatter or as you will understand the better, sheep farming.

As the cold weather is coming on now I will soon make South. I am going first to visit some friends in Portugal and Spain. After the girls leave school at Christmas I will take them for the Winter to the South of Italy and perhaps to Egypt. I will be indeed glad when I once more get quietly settled down in Melbourne.

With love to you all,

Believe me

Yours Sincerely AW Robertson

Wm Robertson Esq. (P.S. send me the a/c for Hayforth. I am sorry to hear that your son Gordon is no better. I presume you have got him the best medical advice to be obtained. You say you have not much to write about. On the Contrary you have any quantity of news to tell because anything & everything you write about Canada & one's friends – these interest me. Your only fault from that point of view is your reticence.

1896: Page from the inventory taken of Alexander Robertson's real and personal property in New South Wales. *Source:* Supreme Court of New South Wales' Probate Division. No: 11849, Series: 4.

Due date	Debts				Amount					
	Brought forward				#230914	13	2	#96767	17	6
<u>Parker Alice May.</u>										
Principal due upon Mortgage over Telleraga	9010	17	4							
Interest accrued to 16 July	249	9	0		9260	6	4			
<u>Tatham Mrs Frances M.G.</u>										
Principal due upon Mortgage over Telleraga	5998	8	11							
Interest accrued to 16 July	163	3	0		6161	11	11			
<u>Darke Mrs.</u>										
Money lent	79	10	7							
Interest accrued to 16 July	2	15	6		82	6	1			
<u>Robertson Nina.</u>										
Money lent	57	19	6							
Interest accrued to 16 July	1	11	1		59	10	7			
<u>Goldsbrough Mort & Coy Ltd.</u>										
Payments rents &c					1927	9	11			
<u>The Bank of New South Wales.</u>										
Overdraft (security over -- Midkin)	41070	11	6							
Interest accrued to 16 July	661	10	6		41782	2	0			
Deceased was liable for one third										
					#290138	0	0	96712	13	4
<u>The Scottish Widows Fund.</u>										
Principal due on Mortgage over Geraldine.	46000	0	0							
Interest from 1st June to 16 July at 5%	283	11	2		46283	11	2			
<u>The Bank of New South Wales.</u>										
Overdraft and Interest --- Geraldine account.					1417	1	1			
<u>Emily R Bagot dead Estate of.</u>										
Principal due upon Mortgage over Geraldine	13665	0	0							
Interest from 1st July to 16 July at 5%	28	2	4		13713	2	4			
<u>Stewart Agnes.</u>										
Principal due on Mortgage - over Geraldine.	1395	0	0							
Interest from 1st July to 16th July at 5%	2	17	2		1397	17	2			
Forward					#262611	11	9	#198460	10	10

Following Alexander Robertson's death in July 1896, detailed inventories of his real and personal property were taken in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. Although Robertson lived in Victoria, most of his property and investments were interstate.

Every ewe, bale of hay, horse rug and bucket on every property was listed with its value.

The above page from the New South Wales inventory reveals the complexity of family share holdings, mortgages and debts owing by, and to, Robertson at the time of his death. The people listed include his daughters Emily and Nina as well as the relatives of his first wife Emily and second wife Hannah.

To let: “really first class house”

When the Robertsons returned to Ontario in late 1890 they had been absent for three years. The day after Emily Robertson’s marriage to Harry Bagot was celebrated at the mansion in January 1887, the remaining family boarded *RMS Austral* for Europe. Three days later, Ontario, a “really first class house with every modern convenience and thoroughly well-furnished and decorated” was advertised for lease. As a bonus, “the pleasure grounds and paddocks” came with Robertson’s gardener, George Cooper, who was supervising the erection of galvanised fencing and establishing a new garden.

Ontario was leased to John Blyth, a wealthy shipping agent for the Loch Line and a leading Melbourne philanthropist. The 20 room mansion was a family home for Blyth, his wife Ellen and their six children. It was where in 1888 daughter Dorothy was born and daughter Catherine held her wedding breakfast.

John Blyth and owner Alexander Robertson were likely acquaintances. Both arrived in the colony in the 1850s and tried their luck on the goldfield before establishing businesses in the Castlemaine district. As their wealth grew they joined the colonial establishment and were regular guests at the governors’ levees and active members of the Australian Club.

Blyth made a fortune as the shipping agent for the Loch Line but also weathered major set backs. Two Loch Line ships were wrecked within seven months – the famous *Loch Ard* which went down near Mutton Bird Island with the loss of 52 lives in 1878 and the *Loch Sunart*, wrecked off the coast of Ireland in 1879.



Above: Depiction of the wreck of the *Loch Ard*.

Inset: John Blyth, shipping agent and philanthropist.

Blyth took a personal interest in the human cost of these wrecks. He was Chairman of the Melbourne Sailors’ Home (demolished in 1969) and the Victorian Shipwreck Relief Society. Blyth was also a lifelong patron of St John’s Ambulance and joined the management committees of the Alfred Hospital and the Women’s Model Lodging House, built to accommodate 200 women of a “certain class”.

Like many wealthy families, the Blyths were wiped out during the economic depression of the 1890s. Blyth was an unsecured investor in several businesses including a furniture warehouse that owed him £20 000 (around AU\$4.75 million today).

The Blyths vacated Ontario in 1889 in time for architect John Augustus Bernard Koch to start work on the refurbishment of the mansion.

In the shadow of Labassa: a reminiscence*

By Ian Boyle

Ian Boyle has a unique perspective on Labassa. He knew it as child, was part of its counter culture in the 1970s and finally joined the National Trust’s conservation team in 1988.

Labassa frightened me as a child. I was born in 1950, and grew up at the very end of Manor Grove. Labassa was a great, abiding neighbourhood presence – remarkable, yet unremarked. To the small child, the house seemed to loom, the crowning statuary frowned down, mysterious and glowering, nervous feet would step it up a little until safely past.

I recall entering the main building only once in those days (I forget why), and I came away with the impression of inner darkness – and anonymous, reclusive inhabitants in grand rooms that had been crudely partitioned into flats.

But the years brought with them a growing boldness: by age six, I was happy enough to play in the grounds, especially in the “jungle”, a densely overgrown thicket on the west side; a vestige, I presume, of the original garden. The jungle disappeared for a block of units, I think, 1957.

continued page 7

In the shadow of Labassa (cont.)

When I was 11, Labassa's owners of the day built their infamous cream-brick dwelling, a cubic eyesore that obliterated Labassa's façade and took up all that remained of the grounds. In my innocence, I abetted its builders, doing odd jobs for them for a few shillings. That aesthetic catastrophe meant little to me then, but I was affronted by the six-foot high brick wall – unheard of in the neighbourhood – abutting the footpath from one end of the property to the other.

Almost a decade passed before I noticed Labassa again. By then, I was a hippie (a word, I might add, we used only in the ironic sense; we preferred the epithet "freaks"). The house, I discovered, harboured kindred spirits in almost every flat. Between 1970 and 1973, I swear I spent more time under Labassa's roof than under my own, more modest, one. I was never officially resident there; but then, few occupants were.

Labassa and its "counter-culture" population existed in a kind of psychic symbiosis: we regarded the house as in some sense a conscious entity, benign and nurturing, and with us in turn as its spiritual caretakers. For me, those times, in that shabbily rococo ambience, were among the most colourful and creative of my life. It was the heyday of the urban nomad. Eventually, its periodic diasporas left Labassa with no one I knew. By the mid-1970s, I too, had drifted away, in the desultory pursuit of an artistic career.

Apart from the occasional dispiriting visit back to show friends the decaying – and apparently doomed – house, I had little to do with Labassa again until the autumn of 1988, when I moved back to Caulfield. I dropped by Labassa shortly after my return, and was amazed, and delighted beyond words to find a team of conservators at work inside the house.

I was overjoyed to discover that the National Trust had rescued Labassa. When I arrived that day and asked very diffidently if I could possibly have a look inside, for "I used to live here", the restoring architect, Darien Cassidy, almost pounced on me. The first thing he asked was if I had any photographs (I didn't). He eagerly showed me all over the building while plying me with questions ("Do you recall what stood in that corner?" "Did a statue occupy this niche?" and so on).



Above: The house built in Labassa's front garden in 1960 was an "aesthetic catastrophe". *Photo:* David Taft.

My memories, disappointing for him, were vague, and I was of little help. (It didn't help that the partitioning I knew was all gone – the huge rooms that I was now seeing for the first time left me a bit confused at times.)

As we toured the building, the conservators silently carried on, with scalpels and cotton swabs, at their meticulous, inch-by-inch labours. I watched them with envy; all my life I had wished to do such work. As I chatted to Darien, it came out that I was an artist and, to my astonishment, he promptly offered me a job on the conservation team. I couldn't believe my luck.

I believe I started the very next day as a "conservator's technical assistant". My first task was very carefully to scrape a coat of 1950s-vintage house paint off an exterior archway, to reveal the turn-of-the-century stencilling beneath. With a scalpel. The total area to be retrieved in this way was less than a square metre, and it took me a month.

That done, I moved on to the work that was to occupy me, along with most of the team, for the rest of the year: cleaning and consolidating – and later, where necessary, restoring – the embossed wallpaper in the stairwell and entrance hall.

The paper in the upper stairwell had suffered terribly in places, mostly from water. (During a visit some years before, a resident had described to me how on rainy days the water ran down the stairwell walls "like an old-fashioned fish-shop window".)

Volume 7, Issue 1, 2019

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: 10.30am – 4.00pm

Sunday 21st April (Easter Sunday)

Sunday 19th May

Heritage Festival: Labassa Treasures

Rare treasures and artefacts on display for one day only. Highlights include exquisite porcelain, fine furniture and a quirky door buzzer panel from “Labassa Flats”.

A special self-guided tour will focus on the mansion’s decorative treasures. Regular guided tours of the House and Tower throughout the day.

Correction

Labassa Lives, Vol. 6, No. 3, p. 5. Artist Stephen Hall no longer manages an art gallery in Townsville.

He is currently president of Mullum Museum and the Brunswick Valley Historical Society.

Sunday 16th June

The Artist is in the Drawing Room

An intimate showing of works on paper by artist and former resident Antoinette Starkiewicz. The artist will be drawing *in situ* from a live model. There will also be a showing of Antoinette’s award-winning animation *Pussy Pumps Up*.



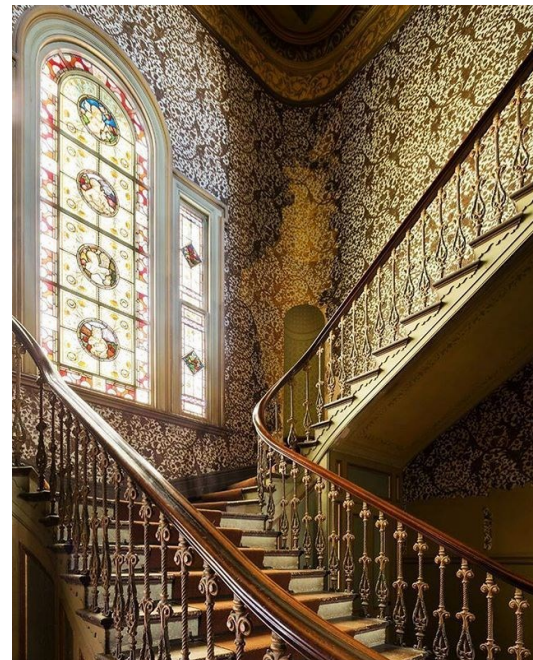
In the shadow of Labassa (cont.)

The cleaning was done with cotton swabs and special cleaning agents, or, where the surface would tolerate no chemicals at all, distilled water only. In places where the paper had entirely disappeared, replacement paper was made from scratch.

My last month on the job was spent among those painting the design on the new paper, using pigments mixed on the spot, and a special conservators’ medium so toxic we wore gas masks and worked in the draughtiest rooms in the building, with fans running and the windows open.

The work was deeply satisfying. (However, despite the extremes of those last weeks, the conditions – and the pay – were very ordinary. Nevertheless, I remember replying to someone’s gripe about the pay rate on my first day on the job by saying I would do such work for nothing! Perhaps, because of my links to the house, my motivation was unusually strong.)

I also gained an unlooked-for bonus in doing my bit to demolish the hated cream-brick edifice blocking Labassa’s view of the world. The National Trust had some time purchased the monstrosity I had unwittingly played a small part in constructing 27 years before, and Whelan the Wrecker took less than a day to knock it down (the front lawn Labassa now has is where it stood, menacingly within three metres of Labassa’s portals.)



Above: Ian Boyle assisted with the cleaning of Labassa’s Rottman Strome wallaper.

Where sections of the wallpaper were missing replacement paper was made by hand.

Photo: National Trust (Victoria).

* First published in the *Labassa Quarterly*, March – May, 1996. This is an abridged version.