

Labassa *lives*

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Is this Labassa's greatest rogue?



Above: George Gray, "the great mining expert", c.1896.
Image: *The Sketch*, London, 12 February 1896, p. 137.

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In the eight years following Alexander Robertson's death, tenants intermittently came and went at Ontario, among them the infamous George Gray (1898-1901).

Once described by *Table Talk* as "the great mining expert of Western Australia", Gray was arguably the greatest rogue to ever live at the mansion. Depending on your point of view, he was "the uncrowned king of Kalgoorlie" or a "sand and salt-bush merchant"; a man of superior eloquence or a "puffer".

According to George he made his fortune on the Californian goldfields before going to Mexico as the representative of a large Yankee mining syndicate. Feted in England by an aristocracy eager to invest in Australia's Golden Mile, George dined with dukes and duchesses and was an investment adviser to the Prince of Wales.

George arrived in Western Australia in 1895 as the general manager of London's Colonial Finance Corporation. Within months he was appointed managing director of Hannan's Propriety Company (WA) and other mining ventures.

Originally a butcher from Shields, Northumberland, George's full name was George Gray Hindhaugh. When finally forced to confirm his birth name in court he said he had gone by the name Gray since he started in mining. He hadn't thought it necessary to consult anyone about the change.

The dropping of Hindhaugh would certainly have been of interest to investors in the Colonial Finance Corporation. Few, if any, were aware that Colonial's company secretary, Charles William Hindhaugh, was George's brother.

There were likely more pressing reasons for dispensing with "Hindhaugh".

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Is this Labassa's greatest rogue (cont.)



Left: Cartoon depicting Edward VII receiving investment advice from George Gray.

Original caption: In the ordinary course of social life George Gray was so far down the line that Royalty could not have sighted him with a telescope. Yet he became mining adviser to Edward VII (then Prince of Wales) and induced him to take stock in one of the biggest ramps [frauds] of the early '90s.

Source: George Gray obituary published in *Smith's Weekly*, 3 March 1928.

In 1880 George's first wife Alice, mother of his five children petitioned for dissolution of their marriage in the High Court, London. Not only was he accused of adultery with "divers" women but after deserting Alice and two young daughters he took out a bill of sale on their house and furniture leaving the family destitute.

George wrote to Alice telling her he had gone to San Francisco and had no intention of returning. The High Court directed that her petition be advertised in the Californian newspapers where George was forging his new career.

Within a year of George becoming a "great mining expert", with a reputed salary of £30,000 to £40,000 per year (AU\$ 7.2 – 9.5 million today), his masters started to have "serious misgivings". He was forced to resign from Hannan's and other mining ventures, among them Lake View South Mine which complained they could not get any accounts from him even though he "pretended to have a great staff".

George retreated to the eastern states in 1898 to pursue his other great passion – breeding and racing horses. Not only were Ontario's six hectares ideal for establishing his stable of 49 horses, the mansion's cachet as one of Melbourne's grandest bestowed the appearance of wealth and respectability.

Melbourne's establishment, however, did not embrace this 'blow in' and Gray's reputation for dodgy deals caught up with him the following year.

George was accused in the English High Court of being "the perpetrator of the most audacious and gross fraud". While acting as an agent for Colonial Finance Corporation he paid £32,500 (AU\$7.2 million in 2019) into his own bank account – a secret profit from a transaction he had carried out on behalf of his principals.

When exposed, Gray admitted "things had not been straight" and said he would make restitution but didn't. The court gave a judgement against Gray for £32,350 with costs. What made the fraud even more outrageous was that Gray had used his brother, only identified as "Mr Hindhaugh", as a seemingly independent go between.

The Gray family lived at Ontario from around March 1898 to April 1901 at which time they appeared to be temporarily 'down on their uppers'. Apart from some success with George Frederick, winner of the VRC Maiden Stakes, George Gray's investment in horse flesh was a failure. After costing him "a hatful of money" his stable of racehorses, a thoroughbred sire and brood mares were sold at auction in July 1899.

George's gift of the gab, combined with the public's hunger for get-rich-quick schemes, enabled him to continue spruiking his 'expertise' until his death in New York in early 1928.

Those who served

The demand for “good” domestic servants exceeded supply in the second half of the 19th century. Working in the fields or a factory was generally preferred to the relentless drudgery and long hours expected in private service.

While the Billing, Robertson and Watson households all employed servants their names, numbers and roles are mostly unknown. The exception is Alexander Robertson, whose probate papers identify scores of servants and workers employed across his properties in Victoria, NSW and Queensland.

We know the name of only one of Richard Billing’s servants: Thomas Cushion whose daughter Mary was left £100 in the Judge’s will. We can reasonably assume, however, that Sylliott Hill was a modest household. In 1868 Williamina Billing advertised for a cook and laundress, jobs usually carried out by two people in a substantial household. In 1876 and 1877, at a time when Mr Billing had a flourishing practice, he placed several advertisements for a groom and coachman. One advertisement stands out for the versatility it requires of an applicant.

WANTED, GROOM, Coachman, single, sobriety indispensable, generally useful, wait table preferred. Mr Billing, Sylliott-hill, Balaclava road. [The Argus, 9 August 1876, p.1].

The insistence on sobriety was not unusual as coachmen had a reputation for drunkenness but the idea that a coachman would also serve dinner guests was exceptional.

Alexander Robertson by contrast employed a Linen Mistress, Elizabeth Pearce, whose sole responsibility was to wash and iron Ontario’s linen. He employed a butler, John Henry Wood and a personal carer Nurse Brissenden who tended to him as his health deteriorated.

Some of Robertson’s employees may have found it difficult to find a comparable position following his death in 1896. Due to an economic depression the era of mansion estates with scores of servants was in decline. Robertson’s prize-winning gardener, George Cooper was offered a job as a propagator at Paton & Sons Nursery and went on to become Head Gardener at the Melbourne Botanic Gardens under Director William R. Guilfoyle.



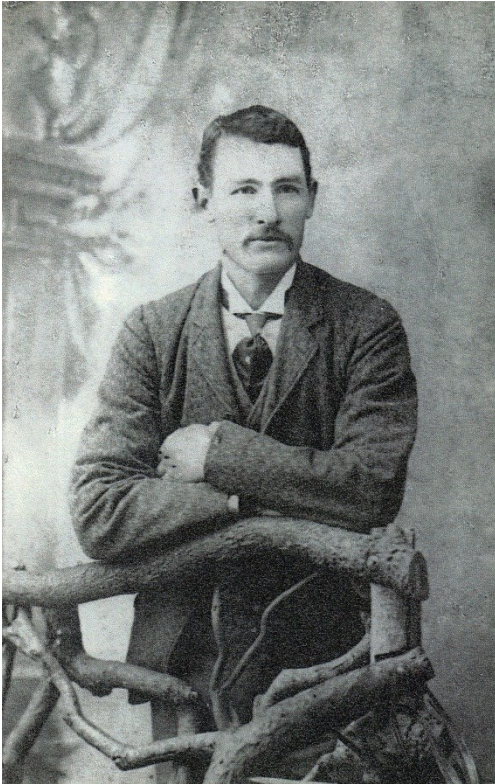
Above: Elizabeth Pearce, Alexander Robertson’s Linen Mistress at Ontario. *Photo:* Bob Maver.

Coachman Richard Fortune moved with the times and became a chauffeur at Trawalla, Toorak. His employer, Mrs Simson, widow of pastoralist John Simson, was a family friend of the Robertsons.

An action taken against John Boyd Watson II in 1900 provides an insight into how the Watsons interacted with their employees. John Francis Hayes, a labourer at the Watsons’ farming estate Pastoria near Kyneton, made a claim against Mr Watson for £100 (AU\$230,000 in 2019) for the loss of his leg and unfair dismissal.

Hayes was injured when sinking a well with four other men and the sides of the hole collapsed. Although Hayes returned to work, Watson eventually gave him notice alleging that he was impertinent, refused to obey lawful commands and other servants had left because of his behaviour. Witnesses for the Watsons included their housemaid Mabel Cook and cook Mary Hennessy who said Hayes referred to her as “an old hatching hen”. Flora Kate Watson testified that Hayes had admitted to her that the accident was his fault because he disobeyed Mr Watson’s instruction that he keep out of the well. Watson won with costs.

Those who served (cont.)



Left: Watson family employee James Augustine Walsh who worked as a labourer at their Kyneton property Pastoria and later as a caretaker at Labassa.

Photo: Margaret Campion.

James Walsh, who was in charge of the digging party was a long-term employee of the Watsons at Pastoria. He and his wife Bridget moved to Labassa around 1913 as caretakers. While James returned to Pastoria soon after, Bridget stayed on at Labassa with their children Leo, Mollie and Eileen until 1916.

Although the word 'servant' fell into disfavour in the early 20th century many households, including those at Labassa Flats continued to employ live-in maids or 'general help' to do the housework and care for young children and invalids.

In 1926 the former stables were restored to the Labassa Estate when owner Robert Hannon converted the building into "Ontario Flats". "Ontario" had its own live-in maid in 1929, 17 year old Sybil Patmore who lived above the Hannon flat. Sybil's life took a shocking turn in September that year when Mrs Frances Hannon knocked on her door. Her husband had locked himself in the bathroom and was not responding to her calls. Sybil managed to squeeze through their bathroom window and found her employer on the floor with a gash to his throat. The inquest into his death found that Hannon had committed suicide.

The last known residents to employ a live-in maid were Tom and Annie Chadwick (Drawing Room flat, Flat 10). "Mrs Smith" helped the Chadwicks with their numerous charity fundraisers during the 1930s and the Second World War. By 1947, the Chadwicks, now in their eighties, decided to move into the Nangunia Private Hotel where their every need was catered for. (Nangunia survives as the Charlsfield Hotel and remains the oldest house still standing in St Kilda Road.)

"Visitors" identified



Thanks to Michael Gleeson, the visitors in this photo have been identified as Moyra Hornsby who is holding her son Dennis. Son Michael is standing in the foreground. The photo was taken c.1945.

Moyra was the eldest daughter of Maie Brown who lived at Labassa from 1940 to around 1970. Moyra spent her holidays at Labassa in the 1930s when it was owned by her aunt and uncle Sal and Will O'Callaghan. She moved into Labassa in December 1940, shortly before her marriage to Stan Hornsby.

Tony who?



"Tony" was a mysterious presence c.1969. Artist Antoinette Starkiewicz drew him when he visited her studio in the cellar. He entertained her with stories from *The Magus* and "hinted at involvement in arts much darker than mine," she says. "The last time I saw Tony he said he was off to the Rock of Gibraltar via the Bermuda Triangle." Antoinette wonders who he really was and if he ever made it. Does anyone know?

No time for goodbyes

There was no time for goodbyes when Jan and Aksel Rodseth left Labassa in May 1965. After five years in Australia, their parents Alf and Siren Rodseth had suddenly decided to return to Norway. The Rodseth parents, together with Erik and Inga Olofsson who lived in Flat 6 (Upstairs Balcony flat) had met a first mate on a Norwegian ship doing tramp freight in the South Pacific. "The ship was short of four people for a full crew," says Jan. "The parents signed on as deck and mess hands. As the ship had only 48 hours in port the breakup from Labassa and Australia was arranged in a great hurry."

"Neither of us kids got to say goodbye to our friends or our classmates. Everything was packed and plane tickets were bought in a great hurry. Within two days Monica Olofsson, Aksel and I were on a plane for Scandinavia. Monica was sent to her uncle and aunt in Sweden and we were sent to our uncle and aunt in Norway. My brother and I did not see our parents for several months and Monica did not see her mother again for over a year. Monica never saw her father again; he stayed in Australia. This affected all of us kids in a very bad way. We had trouble keeping up in school and fitting in socially. It took years of adjustment and learning before life was normal again."

Despite his traumatic departure, Jan often reflected on his Labassa days over the next 54 years. He returned for the first time in April this year to discover that while Flat 3 (upstairs west side) was much changed, his recollections of family life remained strong. Each room was crowded with memories of his parents and brother who had all passed away.

Jan recalled the trompe l'oeil ceiling in his parents' bedroom (upstairs west side bay window) which was painted over by later tenants and only rediscovered in 2017. Although the wallpaper in this room was gone, Jan recalled it as being similar to that currently in the hallway.

The family living room overlooking Wolf and Hinda Kazer's cream brick house at the front brought vivid memories of his father who played the violin whenever he felt homesick. "He was not that good," observes Jan.



Above: Jan Rodseth with his pet possum on Labassa's roof.
Photo: Jan Rodseth.

"At Christmas time the family roasted chestnuts in the fireplace and invited other Scandinavians to share in the festivities. "These were people my parents knew from the Swedish Church in Toorak.

We celebrated Christmas the Scandinavian way with a grand dinner on Christmas eve at about 5pm. After that there was coffee with traditional cakes. This was torture for us kids. Then as the clock moved towards 7pm 'Father Christmas' entered the flat. It was usually some big, round Scandinavian guy we all knew but we all tried to be surprised. He always had a looong story about how hard it was finding us in Australia and the loooong sleigh ride from Norway to 'down under'. This was also torture for us kids, but we knew him and didn't want to disappoint him. He had worked hard on this story. After that ritual was over the Christmas presents were given out by Father Christmas one by one. On Christmas morning many of us kids would meet on the stairway and show our presents to each other."

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No time for goodbyes (cont.)



Above: Jan Rodseth (foreground) and brother Aksel often slept on the Balcony in summer. *Photo:* Jan Rodseth.

"There were often the Laceys, Monica Olofsson, Sandy and Janna Ceferin my brother and I. After a while Alida and Marianne Kelders showed up. Sometimes Mr Strickland [Dining Room flat, Flat 8] would join us.

Later in the day we always went to the beach and stayed there until late in the evening. On the second day of Christmas we often had visits from the Jewish children at Labassa. They came and looked at our Christmas trees and presents and we shared our Christmas cakes with them. It was the other way around when they were celebrating Passover. I remember that Christmas was special in Labassa. No one was alone if they did not want to be."

The one adult who made a lasting impression on Jan was caretaker Mrs Brearley. "She had a lot of authority and was not to be taken lightly – you listened. Mrs Brearley personalised Labassa. Every day when we came home from school she would be sitting outside her flat [Old Laundry, Flat 5]. If she wasn't there something was wrong."

Labassa was a cold house and the Rodseths made use of all their fireplaces. It was Jan and Aksel's job to check for centipedes in the wood pile they kept in the Tower. During a cold winter spell, the family moved their TV down to the little dining room off the passageway to the Tower and huddled around an electric heater.



Left: Jan Rodseth who returned to Labassa for the first time in 54 years in April 2019.

Photo:
Mette Rodseth.

A hungry and disoriented possum found on the Tower stairs was adopted and fed on bananas and eucalyptus leaves. The possum wasn't house trained so it lived in the bathroom on top of a brown wooden box over the door where it made a nest. "If any towels were missing we knew they were in the box." Sometimes the possum would sleep in a bathrobe pocket. When the family was packing up Mrs Rodseth and a friend drove the possum to Healesville Wildlife Sanctuary.

Jan took something of Labassa away with him in 1965 – a ceramic escutcheon from the bathroom door. "It didn't seem to matter. The house was falling down anyway," he says. Jan kept the escutcheon wrapped in a jewel box, taking it out from time to time to relive his memories of summer nights on the balcony listening to the crickets before falling asleep. He returned the escutcheon in 2002. It was an invaluable return as there was only one other surviving ceramic escutcheon that belonged to the house.

Green fairy cakes and key holes

A Labassa childhood



Above: Ruth Harland (foreground) with Emma Watkinson. *Photo:* John Harland

Lifelong friendships were forged at Labassa. The bond Emma Drysdale (nee Watkinson) and Ruth Harland formed as small children is remarkable for surviving early separation when their parents moved out.

Ruth initially lived in the Willas flats with her parents John and Amanda Harland in 1972. After her parents separated, Ruth spent weekends with her father in Labassa's Flat 3 (upstairs west side). Emma and her parents Ann Weir and Howard Watkinson moved into the Drawing Room flat (Flat 10) in 1976. As neither had siblings and there were no other children in the mansion, Ruth and Emma were constant companions.

"My best friend at Labassa was Emma," says Ruth. "We were with each other all the time. We woke each other up at 6am in the morning, which was earlier than anyone else dealing with a hangover wanted. We were released into the garden to keep us quiet."

"Some mornings I'd wake up and go downstairs and knock on Emma's door. It had a chain and we'd have a conversation through the crack." Emma was an explorer and the chain was intended to curtail her wanderings.

One night she squeezed through the iron bars on the window in her bedroom, the former Silver Room, and went to visit Trevor Stevens in Flat 7 (Old Kitchen). "After that Mum had John Harland come down and put snibs on the window so it could only open so far," says Emma. John Harland's snibs remain a talking point for those who puzzle over their intended use.

Ruth shared her father's room when she stayed over although John also had a bed in the Tower's rafters where he would "climb like a monkey up and down". Ruth spent hours at the Tower's heights taking in its panoramic views.

Labassa was a communal household in the 1970s and the residents were like an extended family for the friends. According to Ruth, residents took opportunities to spend the time of day with each other. "They had regular sit-around-social-time talking. There was no sense you stay over there and we stay over here. It was a very fluid sort of space."

"Every resident treated me as an adult," recalls Ruth. "I loved the hours I was living here. It was my time of the week. Listening to conversations and expanding my ideas. The house and its people are the basis of my values and outlook on life."



Above: Emma and Ruth in Manor Grove, opposite Labassa, mid 1976.

Photo: John Harland.

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Forthcoming Open Days: 10.30am – 4.00pm

Contributions, corrections, information, comments and articles are welcome.
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June 16 Artist in Drawing Room	September 15
July 21	October (closed)
July 28 Melbourne Open House	November 17
August 18 Orchid Show	December 8 Christmas

**Sunday 16th June****The Artist is in the Drawing Room**

An intimate showing of works on paper by artist and former resident Antoinette Starkiewicz. Antoinette will be drawing *in situ* from live models.

**Sunday 18th August****The Beauty of Orchids**

An exhibition of stunning orchids presented by the Orchid Societies Council of Victoria.

Green fairy cakes and key holes (cont.)

Emma and Ruth agree that as children their understandings of life in the house were sometimes limited. "There was always something intriguing happening even if I didn't understand it," recalls Emma. "Like *Patrick* being filmed at Labassa and talking to Sir Robert Helpmann and not really knowing who he was but finding him interesting." Ruth has a strong memory of opening a door and smelling something "like incense". "There was always a smell throughout the house," she says.

Their memories are sometimes fragmentary and impressionistic: lots of beards, long hair and bare feet, raffia matting on a kitchen floor, whipped up chocolate cake that ended up on the ceiling. Ruth will never forget "Stephen Hall's highway" the ledge around the western facade by which Stephen walked from room to room.

Emma has lovely memories of her mother Ann making green fairy cakes in a blue kitchen and of her prep class coming home for the day to sit in the Drawing Room while her Mum read them a story. Emma recalls water dripping on her on bed and thinking it was rain. It was actually the wet washing a neighbour had left hanging in an upstairs flat.

The whole property was Ruth and Emma's extended playground and like generations of children they took every opportunity to slide down the banisters of the main staircase.

"We weren't told not to," says Ruth, "it was quite liberating. The shape of the banisters was almost designed for landing more gently than otherwise. We also bumped down the stairs on our bums. The curve of the stairs was the right size and shape for a child to play in." For Emma there was the amazing richness of the building itself: she was fascinated by all the fittings, fixtures and key holes.

"The architecture of the house dominated my dreams and some of my nightmares," reflects Ruth. "I managed to combine the maze scene from *The Shining* with Labassa and had a repeated nightmare of being in a maze with a monster and ending up against railings like those on the staircase." Ruth was also petrified of the pitch blackness of the upstairs hallway at night. "In the darkness the stained glass window became black and white and very spooky."

Ruth who studied to be a Sustainable Systems Engineer says: "Labassa gave me a very strong idea of how to go about designing a community – people can have their own space but share. Labassa was a lot more public than the standard flat or share house. There was an ongoing fluidity of catching up with people. I look back at Labassa with affection and would like to reproduce that sort of social milieu."