

Labassa *lives*

Volume 8, Issue 1, 2020



Brothers at war

The Newton family

Labassa 1920

Charles Ellis Newton (b.1887)

Minnie Newton (b.1891)

John Ellis Newton (b.1913)

Phyllis Adele Newton (b.1914)

Charles Newton (b.1915)

William Ellis Newton (b.1919)

Almost everything we know about William (Bill) Newton has come to us in the form of a story about his heroism during the Second World War.

Bill was only a toddler when his family came to live at Labassa in 1920. The child became an outstanding sportsman who was fearless to the point of recklessness on the football ground. At Melbourne Grammar he was popular with students and admired by the teaching staff for his leadership as a school prefect. As a young man he was sometimes described as the embodiment of everything movie star Errol Flynn portrayed on screen – handsome, bold and adventurous.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Bill gave up his job in a Melbourne silk warehouse and joined the RAAF as a bomber pilot. He showed exceptional courage in March 1943 when he carried out a series of attacks on Salamaua Isthmus, a Japanese base in Papua New Guinea.

After ditching his aircraft in the sea on 18 March he was declared missing and presumed taken as a prisoner of war. Seven months later Flight Lieutenant Bill Newton was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, the only VC awarded to a member of the RAAF in the Pacific theatre.

The details of his capture and death at 23 were only revealed when a diary was found on a Japanese soldier. The diary included a shocking eye-witness account of Bill's execution by beheading.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

100644

Above: Bill Newton, June 1940. The photo was taken by *The Australian Women's Weekly* and chosen to typify "the gallantry of the young air defenders of freedom".

Photo: Australian War Memorial, 100644.

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Brothers at war (cont.)

For many years Bill's death was believed to have been captured in a photo found by American soldiers in 1944. The subject of this infamous photo was actually Len Siffleet, an Australian special operations sergeant, who had also been captured in Papua New Guinea.

Bill's widowed mother Minnie said that on his last day of leave he told her: "You won't be seeing me again. If you hear — when you hear — there's a bottle of sherry on the mantelpiece. Have a drink for me will you? Don't make a fuss."

Bill's older step-brothers also signed up during the war. Jack and Lindsay had followed their father's profession and trained as dentists. Surgeon-dentist Lieutenant John (Jack) Newton joined the navy and survived the sinking of *HMAS Canberra* on 9 August 1942. Lindsay Newton was a dentist in the Australian Army Medical Corps.

Right: Captain Charles (Lindsay) Newton, a dentist in the Australian Army Medical Corps, Surgeon-Lieutenant John (Jack) Newton, Royal Australian Navy, and Flight Lieutenant William (Bill) Newton, Royal Australian Air Force. The photo was taken after the three brothers met by chance at the Hotel Australia in Melbourne.

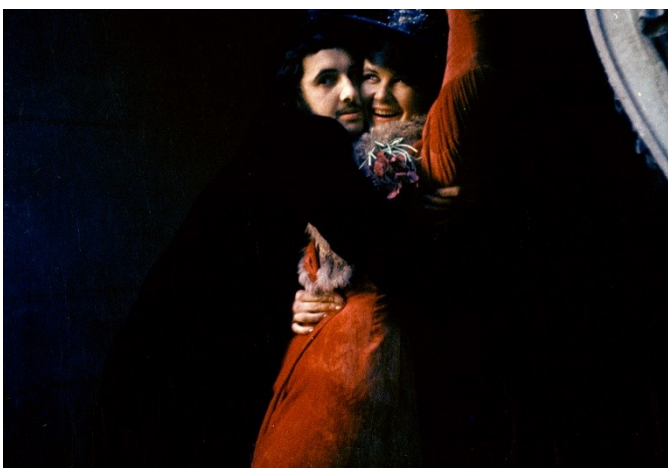
Photo: Australian War Memorial, PO 619001.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Labassa: House of dreams



Above: Resident Sam Schoenbaum (left) and visitor "Schultzie" play dress-ups with Peter Homewood's 'drag bag' of costumes, circa 1965. **Photo:** Ed Lagzdin.

The National Trust is publishing a history of Labassa. The book traces Labassa's transformation from a modest villa to one of Marvellous Melbourne's most spectacular mansions, to its nadir as a warren of run-down flats in the late 1970s.

The story of how the National Trust made an eleventh hour decision to rescue the mansion at a public auction in 1980 is told for the first time.

More than 700 people have called Labassa home including millionaires, movie stars, refugees and hippies. The timely role many of these residents played in the mansion's miraculous survival is revealed through their personal stories.

The book will be published by Hardie Grant and includes over 40 photos. The aim is to have copies available by November 2020 to mark the National Trust's purchase of Labassa at public auction on 8 November 1980.

Further details are yet to be confirmed.

The first time of everything



Left: Judith Buckrich,
visitor 1969.
Photo: Judith Buckrich.

The following is an excerpt from Judith Buckrich's book The Political is Personal: A Twentieth Century Memoir, published in 2016.

This was a period of my life in which everything changed rapidly, every day was a new experience, idea and emotion. The Labassa episode was just six months long, but probably the most charged of my life.

In mid-April I met Nick Hargreaves, who looked like a figure from a painting by Caravaggio, with dark hair and dark eyes. Like me he was intense. We found ourselves dancing together at a party I had gone to with my 'sort of boyfriend' Morry Fraid, one Saturday night. ... By eleven o'clock the party had become rather quiet; Morry had fallen asleep, and people had receded away from Nick and me. We were dancing very close, Nick was looking at my face and said I had the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen — the next moment we kissed. Morry woke up, and then all three of us took a ride home with someone heading towards Caulfield where we all lived. I thought about Nick all through Sunday, hoping that all the kissing meant something to him too. It was wonderful when he arrived at the Union building café on the Monday and sat down beside me as though we had been together forever. On Tuesday he came home with me and we made love all day in my single bed while my parents were at work. I was now taking the contraceptive pill.

Around this time [May] I started visiting Nick a lot. He had moved into a room [once a pantry or wardrobe] at Labassa an elegant nineteenth-century mansion in Caulfield North that had seen better days, and was now divided into apartments.¹

The [formal] rooms were huge, with 20 foot ceilings and remnants of marble fireplaces; beautiful old wall-paper was still visible on some walls. Within the labyrinth of rooms there were many artists and musicians, but there were also junkies floating about who had no occupation at all.

My visits to Nick afforded me my first encounter with such people. The couple from whom Nick rented his room were painters, and respectably married to each other. They cooked and cleaned and looked after their gloriously decaying apartment. ...

Although I was pleased we had somewhere to be together that was not under our parents' noses, I felt uneasy at Labassa. For someone of my narrow experience it was an overwhelming place. Everyone there seemed so much more grown up than me. I did not know the limits of permitted behaviour, especially for women ... I was so awfully sensitive to every nuance of others' behaviour, while not always good at understanding what such nuance might mean. ... Also, and perhaps more tellingly, I felt fearful that my happiness and curiosity could be taken away from me.

The problems of women and men in intimate relationships were not so easy to explore. Most people were (and are), still caught up by the myths of romantic love. This circumstance was confused by the hippie idea that 'love' could solve every problem, and that individuals should not wish to possess one another — a noble idea in theory, but one very open to abuse by men who wanted 'to have their cake and to eat it too'. Into this heady mix were thrown recreational drugs and alcoholic drink. Understandably there were always people who would not cope in such situations. At Labassa I met Pinky who wore copious make-up and very short skirts, and did not wash especially often. ... Men were attracted to her, but she became hopelessly addicted to them, and the end of a relationship was always unpleasant.

¹ Nick's room was the former Silver Room off the Butler's pantry or kitchen of Flat 10 (Drawing Room flat).

The first time of everything (cont.)

Above: Tony (left) with Judith's boyfriend Nick Hargreaves.
Photo: Judith Buckrich.



Above: Tony in the photo to the left may be the mysterious Tony drawn by resident Antoinette Starkiewicz c.1969.
 (See *Labassa Lives*, Vol. 7, No. 2, June 2019.)

... She had been involved with Tony, Nick's new friend at Labassa who would put some nails into the coffin of my relationship with Nick. Like Nick, Tony was incredibly good looking and 'cool'. ...

...[By] August my relationship with Nick began to end, and I began to think of leaving Melbourne and travelling to live with my cousin in Chicago. Labassa had revealed a scene that I found enthralling and frightening, and I could cope with it until the day I met [G], one of the occupants of the less salubrious upstairs rooms. Nick and I had spent most of the day in bed, and were feeling lazy and warm, when someone hammered at Nick's door demanding that we stop fucking and emerge. This was [G], whom I had never met; Nick had mentioned him briefly as 'someone interesting'. I did not want to respond, but Nick leapt out of bed and began to dress, so reluctantly I did too. When we exited into the corridor [G] was there waiting. He sort of sneered, then urged us to follow him upstairs where we could 'shoot up' together.

The room in which we found ourselves was breathtaking, with its main feature a bow window with curved glass that reached almost from floor to ceiling; it also contained books and paintings, an old couch, and armchairs. [G] declared that this was not his room although he painted there. He took out his gear—syringes and spoons—and offered them to us. We said no, and he laughed. He proceeded to use them. I had never seen anyone mainline heroin before.

Somehow [G] managed to make us feel silly for not joining him, so when he offered us some pills both Nick and I took them. ... [G] talked and we listened. I started to feel 'wired', a sensation I had previously only read about. At about six o'clock Nick and I had to leave, since we had been invited for dinner at the house of my friend Karen Green and her lecturer boyfriend, Frank. I hoped we would be rid of [G] but he tagged along. We hitch-hiked; this was not unusual, many people gave hitch-hikers a ride in those more trusting days.

I could hardly eat any of the meal at Karen and Frank's, and was feeling very strange indeed. Having ascertained that I was a law student, [G] asked if I would like to attend his trial. I assumed the trial would be connected with drugs, but to my amazement he told us that he was charged with rape. He seemed unable to make up his mind about me: one minute he fixed on me as though I were some vile creature, the next he was trying to be my best friend. He was undoubtedly doing his best to manipulate me. At one startling moment at the dinner table he told Nick that if he really wished to be free he would have to 'get rid of his woman'. I was breathless with speed, and not thinking straight, but I knew that he had dealt me a blow. Finally we climbed into a taxi and went home. ...

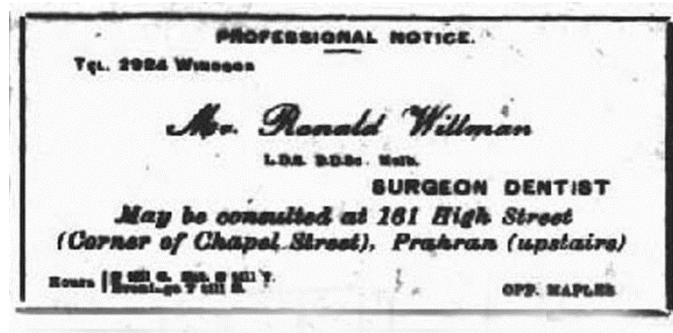
Brief encounters

Those who lived at Labassa for short periods are often difficult to identify as they rarely show up in electoral rolls or directories. While the Wittman and Sholl families are among those who were just passing through, they were both familiar with the mansion.

Mr Wittman's Parlor de luxe

The Wittman family Labassa 1925

Ronald Erlau Wittman (b. 1893)
Doris Wittman (b.1894)
Joy Wittman (b.1918)
Campbell Wittman (b.1923)



Left. Display advertisement from Malvern Standard, 15 March 1919.

Ronald Wittman, L.D.S., B.D.Sc.¹ belonged to a school of modern dentistry that emerged in the early part of the 20th century. When he graduated from the University of Melbourne in 1916 horrific stories of under-qualified practitioners using pliers to extract teeth were still common. Ronald, by contrast, had achieved the highest aggregate of marks for his year in general surgery, pathology and bacteriology. He set up his dental chambers the following year at 161 Chapel Street, Prahran, equipping it with all the latest appliances and every comfort to sooth the anxious patient.

There was an electric drill and steriliser for instruments, a revolving fountain spittoon with double action and "an ingeniously devised tube drawing saliva from the mouth while the patient was reclining in the chair".

Reviewed by the local newspaper as a parlor deluxe² Wittman's waiting room was artistically decorated and equipped with an electric fan to cool the atmosphere on hot days. There was even a cosy rest room, with couch and dressing-table mirror, where patients could relax after their procedure.

The Wittman story was only discovered after it became apparent that there were multiple spellings of the name — Wittman, Wittmann, Whitman, Whittmann and even Willman. Ronald's obscure middle name Erlau was also misspelt as Erlan. These misspellings likely resulted from attempts at anglicising European names.

Ronald and his siblings were the offspring of Jewish migrants. Ronald's father, Georg Wittmann, came from Erlau the Yiddish and German name for the city of Eger in Hungary.

Ronald Wittman, his wife Doris and their children Joy and Campbell moved into Labassa in 1925. The mansion was likely chosen for its location. Ronald's parents lived only metres away in a villa on the south-west corner of Balaclava and Orrong roads opposite Grimwade House.



Above: Doris Wittman.

¹ Licence in Dental Surgery, Bachelor of Dental Surgery.

² *Prahran Telegraph*, 10 February 1917.



"Can you show me the way to the dentist's?"
"Yes: go down that street, second turn on the right, then listen till you hear a shriek."

Mirror (Sydney),
12 July 1918.

Above: This 1918 cartoon highlights the widely held view that a visit to the dentist was a necessary but inevitably painful experience.

Brief encounters (cont.)

Newspaper man

The Sholl family Labassa 1933-34

Harold Edgar Sholl (b. 1905)

Olive Floyd Sholl (b.1907)

Alister John Floyd Sholl (b.1934)

A former student of nearby Grimwade House, Harold (Hec) Sholl was familiar with Labassa. He may have even watched the clearing of the land around the mansion. Hec and his wife Olive joined the Labassa community in late 1933, shortly after they married in the Melbourne Grammar Chapel. Their son Alister was born the following year while they were still in residence. The Sholl marriage, however, was an unhappy and tempestuous one, ending in divorce in 1939.

Hec was a newspaper man for nearly 40 years, mainly reporting for the Melbourne *Argus* and *Age*. When Hec and Olive moved into Labassa he was reporting for the *Star* — a short-lived tabloid that closed in 1936.

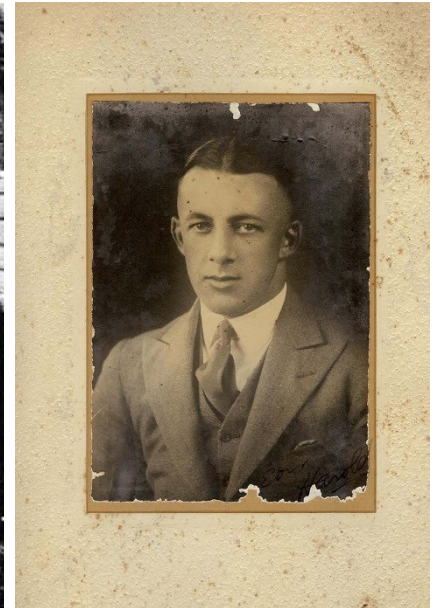
Hec is remembered as a colourful character who followed a very different path to that of his high-achieving family. His father Reginald was a Victorian State and Federal Hansard reporter who later ran his own secretarial and shorthand reporting bureau. Hec's older brother, Sir Reginald Richard Sholl was a barrister, Supreme Court judge and diplomat. Hec's younger brother Eric was an Australian Broadcasting Commission program executive.

During the Second World War, Hec worked for the *Sunday Daily Telegraph* in Sydney where he was part of a team of journalists who provided a complete word-for-word, comma-for-comma reproduction of the War News and Foreign News sections of *Time* magazine.

Every week the final printer's proofs of *Time* were rushed over to the *Telegraph's* New York office. Meanwhile in Sydney, six journalists sat waiting in a sound-proof room ready to take down the proofs, which were read to them in relays over a radiophone.



Above left: Olive Sholl on her wedding day in 1933.
Photo: *Australasian*, 13 May 1933.



Above right: Hec Sholl. *Photo:* Sholl family.



Above: Hec Sholl (left) at work in August, 1941:
Original caption: O.K., NEW YORK. First Time call is booked for 6 a.m. It comes by landline from New York to San Francisco, by radiophone to Sydney. At 6 a.m. New York says, "Are you ready?" *Sunday Telegraph* acting chief-of-staff Norm Kessell (standing) replies, "O.K., New York. Go ahead." Hec. Sholl (left) and Howard Young start writing. Office car picks up staff at homes at 5.30 a.m.

Newspaper man (cont.)

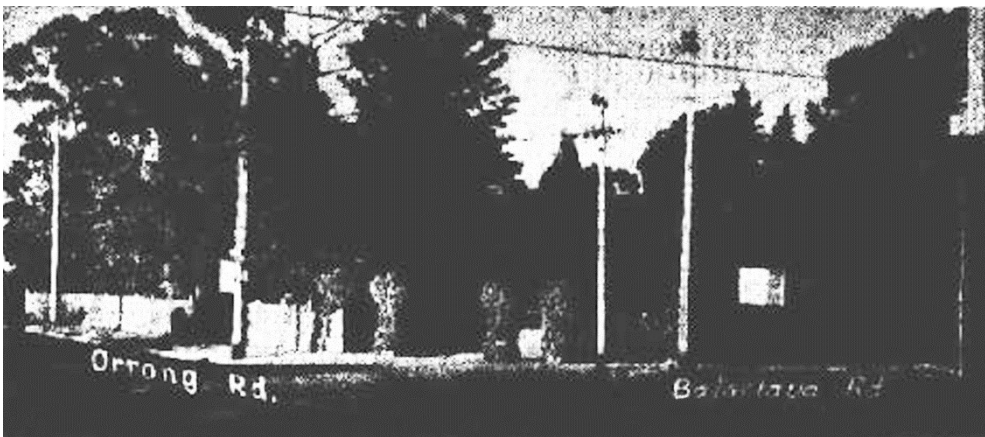
Brian Morley former *Age* journalist, and coincidentally nephew of Labassa residents Fred and Vera Halford, remembers Hec for “his dour and dry manner, his drinking ability” and how he helped to cover for him.

“He was one of the classic old-time journalists with years of great experience, serving out his time on the not-too-arduous Supreme Court beat.

“Hec would arrive at the *Age* office about 9 o’clock each morning (courts started at 10) and approach his good mate Carl Davidson, head of Radio News. Carl would look up from his desk, check his watch, and say quietly to Hec: “It’s probably about time.” Carl and Hec would then gently take off through the back door of the *Age* to the Graham Hotel in Swanston Street, the back door of which adjoined the *Age* across a laneway (this was in the days of 6 o’clock closing so the pubs opened at 9).

“These two old characters would ‘have a couple of beers or so’ together before it was time for Hec to head to the Supreme Court.” The only trouble was that the Supreme Court he headed to first off was a pub of that same name in Little Bourke Street opposite the Law Courts! Hec would invariably make for that Supreme Court to start his day and spend quite some time there during the day. This caused some problems at the end of the day when Hec was due to file his stories from the actual court cases. He apparently had a bit of an arrangement with one of the *Herald* court reporters, Col Brennan (a legendary reporter in his own right), who would help Hec with his copy. Hec would scribble it almost illegibly on the back of some used copy paper, and invariably I would have to type it up quickly for him to go back to the office.”

The lost garden



Left: The block of land on the corner of Orrong and Balaclava roads was sold in November 1948, subject to only one dwelling being erected. **Photo:** *Argus*, 22 November 1948, p.1.

Below: Photo of the same block taken in 1913 for a subdivision of the Labassa Estate. **Photo:** Brochure for auction of Labassa land on 29 November 1913.

The above photo was taken in 1948 for the auction of 270 Orrong Road on the corner of Balaclava and Orrong roads. Although the quality of the image is poor, the 1912 driveway appears to have been partially retained and the mansion is visible in the background. Behind the entrance is a section of the mansion’s former garden, approximately 30.5 metres by 52 metres in depth, which backs on to Manor Grove.

Ontario’s original gates comprising 3.6 metre double traffic gates; and two pedestrian gates, each 1.2 metres wide, are long gone. The gates were sold to the Australian Natives Association for the Maddingley Park memorial in 1921. They were relocated to Bacchus Marsh in February 1922 where they remain.



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Forthcoming Open Days and events

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

Please forward to:

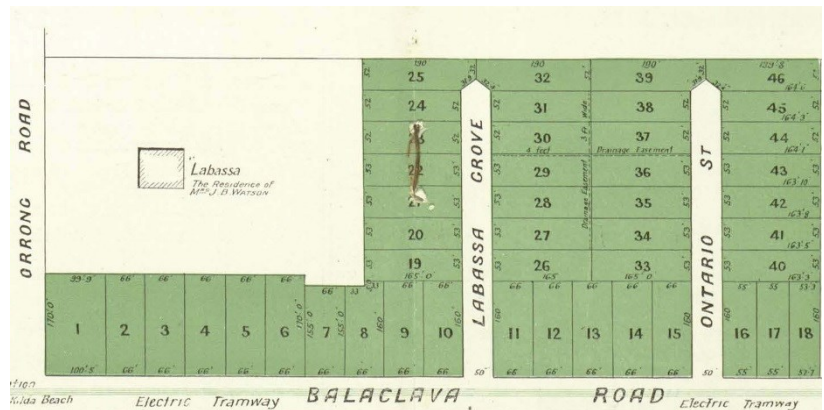
vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au or

PO Box 363, Chadstone Shopping Centre,
Chadstone, Vic. 3148

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, all open days and events are cancelled until further notice.

Right: A section of the 1913 subdivision showing Lots 1, 2 and 3 which were purchased by Arthur Whiting. At this time, the Watson family had a private entrance on Orrong Road, which later became Manor Grove.

Image: Brochure for auction of Labassa land on 29 November 1913.



The survival of this garden is largely due to Arthur Whiting, who bought three lots of land during the 1913 subdivision of the Labassa Estate: Lot 1 (on the corner of BalACLAVA and Orrong roads) and lots 2, and 3 facing BalACLAVA Road. Mr Whiting built his own double-storey home, called Kapala, on one of the lots facing BalACLAVA road and retained the corner allotment as a garden.

Although Arthur Whiting died in 1929, Kapala remained a part of his estate and by 1930 was being used as a guest house. When the property came up for auction in 1935 the grounds were described as "laid out in lawns and flowers with choice well-grown native shade trees."

The 1935 sale did not go through and in July 1935 Kapala re-opened as Kampala Guest House. By 1939 it was taking "elderly gentlemen needing a little attention." Its final incarnation was as St Martin's Convalescent Hospital, which was run by Matron Alma Hendry and a small team of trained nurses.

The 1948 auction notice itemises several outbuildings — two sleep outs, a laundry, staff bedroom, 2 lavatories, "a 'man's room", bath and workshop.

The outlines of one or two of these outbuildings can be seen in the photo on page 7.

Mr Whiting's house and land are now occupied by 66 BalACLAVA Road, and, 268 and 270 Orrong Road.



Above: This photo was taken in the front garden of Labassa in 1941 for the wedding of Moyra Brown. A fenced section of the Whiting garden can be seen on the left in the distance.

Left to right: Margaret Brown (bridesmaid), Stan Hornsby (groom), Moyra Brown (bride).

Photo: Gleeson family.