

Labassa lives

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Hero of the 1918-19 pandemic

Dr Ralph Parker McMeekin, one of Labassa Flats' earliest residents, was recently featured in an episode of the ABC series *Australian Story* which focussed on the 1918-19 pandemic.¹ Dr McMeekin and wife Marjorie joined the Labassa household shortly after their marriage in November 1921.

After the program went to air, Mr and Mrs McMeekin's daughter, Elizabeth, called the *Australian Story* producer who in turn passed on her details to *Labassa Lives*. Elizabeth has now generously donated copies of contemporary images of her parents. Elizabeth says Labassa was her parents' first home as a married couple and they spoke fondly of the house and its residents.

From 1915 until 1920, Dr McMeekin was Medical Superintendent at the Melbourne Hospital and an outspoken critic of the government's failure to recognise the seriousness of the pandemic. He challenged the Board of Health's mortality figures, which he said were under-reported.

A report by Dr McMeekin in January 1919 has many resonances with current debates about the COVID 19 pandemic: "In several instances, in other parts of world, the epidemic began quietly and continued in comparative quiescence for two or three weeks, after which a lull was experienced," he wrote.

"But a month or six weeks later the epidemic reappeared in a most virulent form. In view of this experience, the way in which the disease in Melbourne has behaved up to the present is by no means a reason for regarding the situation with undue optimism.

¹ *Australian Story: the forgotten flu* was broadcast on 1 June 2020 and is currently available on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YmOnJim5wU>



Above: Dr Ralph McMeekin. Photo: Elizabeth Serpell.

On the other hand, preparations should be made for coping with the epidemic on a huge scale for there is no doubt that by making proper provision in time the death rate will be lessened."

continued page 2

Inside this issue

Hero of the 1918-19 pandemic	1
Vale John Watkinson	2
Private lives of the first family	3
New view of Ontario	5
Familiar photo with new story	5
Friends for life: the Marchant family	6
Remembering the seventies: Linda Wilson	7
Remembering the seventies: Caroline Wilson	7
Remembering the seventies: Adrian Montana	8

Hero of the 1918-19 pandemic (cont.)

Public health restrictions during the 1919 pandemic are remarkably similar to those in 2020. Persons in an infected area were forbidden to assemble for a common purpose within any enclosed building unless there was at least 25 feet (7.6 metres) standing room available for each individual and then in numbers not exceeding twenty at any one time. Places dedicated to "Divine Worship" were, however, exempt as long as everyone wore a mask of an approved kind.

An earlier story on Dr McMeekin was published in *Labassa Lives*, Volume 5, Issue 1, 2017, p.1.

Right : Marjorie McMeekin (nee Heath) on her wedding day in 1921. Marjorie studied singing at the Conservatorium of Melbourne. In later years she devoted much of her time to fundraising for the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

Photo: Elizabeth Serpell.



Vale John Watkinson aka John Paige



Former resident John Watkinson, also known as John Paige, unexpectedly passed away at his Caulfield home on 29 June. John lived in the Old Laundry flat (Flat 5) in the early 1970s. His brothers Howard and Jeff later joined the Labassa household.

John was a media and voice-over professional for more than 30 years working across the eastern states in promotions, radio and television, including Channel 10's *The Comedy Company* series.

He dropped the name Watkinson when he started in radio and was told his name was too long. Paige was his middle name.

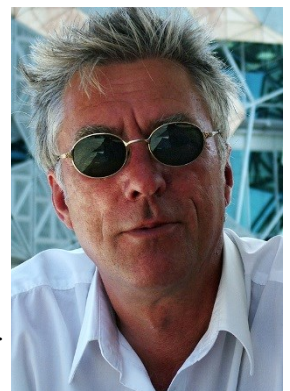
At the time of his death, John was an employee of the Posh Opp Shoppe in Elsternwick.

Left: John Paige, standing.

Photo: John Harland.

Right: A recent photo of John.

Photo: John Paige.



Private lives of the first family



Above: Richard Annesley Billing who built the first house on the land where Labassa now stands.

Image: Johnstone O'Shannessy & Co.



Above: Labassa's Ferguson and Urie stained-glass window, the grand survivor of the Billing house.

Photo: Jessica Hood.

Sylliott Hill, the original house within Labassa's walls is yet to reveal its true form. There are no known images of this house, which was largely subsumed during its redevelopment for new owner Alexander Robertson in 1889. To visualise Sylliott Hill we have to rely on an 1882 description of its interior and physical evidence of pre-existing fire-places and fragments of wallpaper, plaster and glass in the subfloors. The magnificent Ferguson and Urie stained-glass window above the main hallway (below left) remains the grand survivor of the Billing mansion.

The Billing family itself is also somewhat elusive. Owner, Richard Annesley Billing's only child and namesake, died penniless and without issue. There are no family anecdotes or memorabilia and only one known image of Billing senior, a sketch made from a long-lost photo (left). There are no images of Mr Billing's two wives Mary Elizabeth Yeo and first cousin Williamina Owen Walsh or of her son Richard.

Although there are many unanswered questions about Mr Billing's private life, his reputation as a member of the colonial establishment remains untarnished. He was a leading barrister and a judge of the County Court, who was widely respected for his sobriety and courteous manner. As a member of Melbourne's Church of England Assembly for nearly twenty years he advocated for its independence from English rule. Sir Redmond Barry thought highly enough of Billing to nominate him for the Melbourne Club. When Billing died in 1882 the Rev. James B. Norton elevated him to divine status: "When Judge Richard Annesley Billing breathed his last breath there ended the earthly career of one of the noblest men with whom I ever came into contact in these colonies. The offspring of a noble family¹, yet a true servant of Christ, meek and gentle as a little child yet carrying with him a heavenly dignity which only heaven's true born could thoroughly appreciate."

However, Billing's colleagues were far from unanimous in their praise. Chief Justice Sir John Madden recalled that: "He was a good court man, though his manner was somewhat pompous, and he had no great claims to be regarded as an orator." Madden also pointed to a slight meanness in Billing's nature. In referring to his work for the Victorian Government, Madden said "[Billing] was an exception to most of his contemporaries, in that he kept the money, which he so abundantly and laboriously earned."

Billing was certainly careful with his money. Sylliott Hill employed a small number of servants: there was a cook and a laundress but a coachman was expected to serve at the dining table. He was more liberal towards the University of Melbourne's law students, offering the annual Richard Billing Prize – a gold medal worth £20 – which was awarded to the top student between 1858 and 1873.

¹ Billing's father, Lieutenant William Billing, served under the Duke of Wellington in the Napoleonic Wars.

Private lives of the first family (cont.)

Billing's relationships with his wives and only son are open to speculation. When Billing's first wife Mary died in early 1865 he remarried ten months later to his first cousin, 38-year-old spinster Williamina Owen Walsh, who gave birth to a son in 1868.

In the Victorian era it was not uncommon for men to remarry within a few months of a wife's death. While a widow was expected to wait a year or so, a widower was at liberty to remarry if he needed a housekeeper or mother for his children. Whatever the reasons for Billing's expeditious union — love or practicality — Williamina was given a measure of financial security through a marriage settlement.

When Billing died in 1882 his will directed that he be buried with his first wife, Mary. Again, this practice was not unknown but it would have been considered 'odd', especially when the instruction was left in the hands of the surviving wife.

Billing's monument in the St Kilda Cemetery (above right) suggests that Williamina was confident of her place in the Billing household. The inscription on the façade refers only to Billing, his mourning widow Williamina and his only son. Mary's more modest inscription is consigned to the back of the monument.

Shortly after probate was declared on Billing's estate, Williamina departed Sylliot Hill with 14-year-old Richard and lived in rented properties for the remainder of her life. Billing had left an estate worth £24,000 but within eight years mother and son were in financial straits. Richard Billing junior did not follow his father's cautious and thrifty example and at age 21 he decided to become a stock and share broker. Around 1890, his mother handed him £17,000 in cash and securities and he lost the lot.

Tony who?

Former resident Mick Coleman has identified the young man on the left in this photo, published in the last issue of *Labassa Lives*, as his flatmate Tony Polson. Tony and Mick knew each other at high school and were both working at the ABC Ripponlea Studios at the time they moved into the Old Kitchen flat (Flat 7).

Right: Tony Polson (left) with fellow Labassa resident, Nick Hargreaves.

Photo: Judith Buckrich.



Above: Inscriptions on Mr Billing's monument highlight the complexities of his two marriages.
Photo: Vicki Shuttleworth.

He claimed that in one seven-month-period his turnover was £1,700,000. Unfortunately, Williamina had also agreed to be guarantor for her son with the Standard Bank in Melbourne. When Richard's cheques started bouncing his debts grew to an estimated £60,000 and the Billings spent the next three years in and out of the Victorian courts.

A move to Sydney c.1893 failed to improve their finances. Richard tried his hand at publishing and portrait painting but in 1895 filed for bankruptcy. Their lives continued in a downward spiral and when Williamina died in 1904 she left an estate valued at only £35. Richard died intestate the following year leaving only £25. Williamina and Richard are buried in unmarked graves in different cemeteries.





New view of Ontario

The National Trust is in the process of acquiring this photograph of Ontario, generously gifted by the estate of Neil Robertson. Neil, the great grandson of Ontario's owner, Alexander

Robertson, passed away in September 2018. The photo is yet to be dated but offers a previously unseen aspect of the garden. The photo is currently in a frame and under glass.



Left: View of Ontario from the south-east garden.

Photo: Neil Robertson.

Familiar photo with new story



For many years, the man standing against the Music Room fireplace in this photo (left) was believed to be writer-director Peter Homewood who lived at Labassa in the early 1960s.

Nigel Buesst, the photographer, has now confirmed that it is Billy Seal, a costume model who posed for art students at Caulfield Technical College, among them Deirdre Jacks (nee Knaggs) who moved into the Music Room flat (Flat 2) when she heard Peter Homewood was about to vacate.

Nigel says the photo was one of eleven he took one night in 1962 when poet Adrian Rawlins (on the chaise) took him to visit Labassa.

The portrait of Billy (right) was later painted by artist Ken Forrester who also lived at Labassa.



Friends for life

The Marchant family

Labassa 1926–27

Edgar Robert Marchant (b.1877)

Millicent Bessie Marchant (b.1880)

Millie and Edgar Marchant joined the Labassa household in 1926 to be with their friends Frank and Matilda McOwan.¹ In 1925, Frank decided he wanted to retire and his company, F. McOwan Motors in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, was taken over by Cheney Motors.

Frank's brother, Amos, seized the opportunity to start a new business, Quality Cars Pty Ltd, next door to Frank's former show rooms. Family friend Edgar Marchant, a municipal officer with the Ballarat City Council, joined the venture as a partner and accountant.

The Wall Street crash of 1929 eventually led to the demise of Quality Cars Pty Ltd and the Marchants relocated to Phillip Island where Edgar became the island's first Shire Secretary.

Phillip Island then, as now, was a popular holiday resort and Edgar was appointed to manage its development, including road upgrades and the installation of an electric light power plant at Cowes. In the late 1930s, Edgar had a new challenge: an epidemic of infantile paralysis (poliomyelitis) which had resulted in the deaths of thousands of Australian children.



Left: Millie Marchant as a young woman.

Photo: Marchant family.

In 1937, Phillip Island, along with the towns of Mildura and Stawell, refused entry to any children from Melbourne who could not produce a certificate from their district health officer confirming they were free of infection and had no contact with anyone who had been infected.

The Marchants and McOwans remained life-long friends and when Frank died in 1950, Edgar acted as his executor.

¹ The McOwans were featured in *Labassa Lives*, Vol. 6. No.1, p. 6.



Above: Edgar Marchant (far right) with officials of the Phillip Island Agricultural and Pastoral Society, at the 1938 Cowes Show.

Photo: *The Australasian*, 26 November, 1938, p. 35.

Remembering the seventies

Cellar parties

By Linda Wilson

Geoff Lawson and I lived in Flat 7 [Old Kitchen flat] between 1973 and 1976. We inherited the flat from Geoff's cousin who moved out to travel overseas and never came back. Labassa was the sort of place that was handed onto people by word of mouth. No one ever got into the house by the agents. As long as the rent was paid the agents were happy. We paid \$18 per month (from a wage of \$25 per week) which went up to \$20 by the time we moved out.

Labassa was a great place to live during that time. Everyone got on well together and various groups would have communal meals and there was usually an impromptu party on the go somewhere. I can remember sitting on the roof watching the sunset and lighting over Balaclava with a horde of people.

We used to have lots of parties in the cellar and people often had difficulty in finding where we were if they had not been there before. We also had various bands at the house who used the cellar as a rehearsal space.

I can't remember who lived in the red brick flats but when we moved in one of them was being operated as a brothel.



Above: Linda Wilson is a ghostly presence as she leaves Labassa's Cellar. *Photo:* Geoff Lawson.

That didn't last long. I don't know whether the agents got on to it but the other tenants weren't too fussed and before too long the woman there left.

Labassa was a bit like a commune but everyone had their own space and I have made some life-long friends from people who lived there and their friends who visited.

Secrets of the Old Kitchen flat

Caroline Wilson

In 1974, Caroline Wilson and her daughters Michelle (4½ years) and Joanne (2½ years) briefly shared the Old Kitchen flat (Flat 7) with her sister Linda and her partner Geoff Lawson. It turned out to be a very eventful and memorable experience. "At the time I was working afternoon shift at a factory and the taxi driver who dropped me off around 11.30pm was most concerned that I was walking through the side gate into a dark area and to him what looked like a very spooky house, which was a little on the scary side at night.

Early one morning my girls and I heard a loud knock at the back door of Flat 7 only to find three or four plain-clothes police officers barge straight in. The police proceeded to search every inch of the flat, looking in saucepans, wardrobes etc. At the time I had no idea what they were looking for but they then went onto the other flats in search of whatever. I contacted Linda at her work and she said 'Did they find the marijuana?' to which I replied 'What!!!!'



Left: Caroline Wilson's daughter, Michelle, looks out from the bathroom window of Flat 7.

Photo: Caroline Wilson.

continued page 8

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

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

Secrets of the Old Kitchen flat (cont.)

“What the police didn’t know was that Flat 7 had access to the cellar from the bathroom vanity with stairs under the flooring. I’m sure you can guess the rest.

During the two months we spent at Labassa, we found the other residents most friendly and welcoming; many of them were good friends of my sister and her partner.

The building itself was fascinating and beautiful: although a little worse for wear, you could see the potential.”



Above: Caroline Wilson’s daughter Joanne.

Photo: Caroline Wilson.

Great place for “arty musicians”

Adrian Montana



Left:
Upstairs
Servants’
Quarters flat
(Flat 1) from
courtyard.

Photo:
Jane Clifton.

It was Jane Clifton who alerted Adrian Montana to an upcoming vacancy at Labassa. Labassa had become known among Melbourne’s “arty musicians” as a great place to live. “People didn’t leave quickly,” says Adrian, “and when they did, they’d hand on their room to another appropriate person. People understood the significance of the house — they realised it was one to look after and care for.” Adrian’s new home was a large room in the Servants’ Quarters (Flat 1). “It was up one of those long steep staircases that could only lead to the Servants’ Quarters.”

According to Adrian, Labassa attracted an “interesting group of people”. During his tenancy he played keyboard with The Sharks, and his loud pop music would sometimes enrage the French theatre director living downstairs to such a degree he’d bash on the roof with a broom.

The Labassa Adrian knew was vastly different to the one visitors admire today: “It felt very depressed, very run down — its beauty was nevertheless a source of strong inspiration. It had the most beautiful stained-glass windows I’d ever seen,” enthuses Adrian. “I used to turn the light off and stand at the bottom of the stairs. They were the gem of the house. The richness of the colours was gorgeous — the deep reds and yellows. It was almost a religious experience.”

The partitioning of Labassa was, to Adrian, something to lament. “The worst aspect of living at Labassa was to see this beautiful historic house subdivided in such an ugly, greedy fashion. What was once a grand house had been truncated to the point of the absurd.”

Adrian Montana celebrated his twenty-first birthday at Labassa in 1973.

Based on: Adrian Montana, ‘HISstory’, *Labassa Quarterly* June–August 1999, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 1.