

Labassa *lives*

Volume 9, Issue 3, 2021

Man behind the camera

As the man behind the camera, photos of Harold Brearley are rare. Over 40 years he took many key photos of Labassa's architectural and lived history – photos of long-lost decorative features, a large fete held in the grounds in 1942 and charming portraits of migrant children.

Harold was 20 when he moved into Labassa Flats in late 1921. His father, James, had a bad fall and was no longer able to work full-time so the offer for James and his wife Emily, to become Labassa's caretakers was appreciated.

The Brearleys, who migrated from Lancashire, England in 1911 were very much at home at Labassa where many of the tenants up until 1946 were British, including two other families from Lancashire. Harold made several life-long friends among these residents.

One of Harold's earliest passions was scouting and he became Assistant Scout Master at 1st Malvern Troop in June 1923. He remained actively involved until just after the beginning of World War 2 when he joined the Australian Defence Forces and was an Air Raid Warden.

His second passion, photography, was piqued when he was one of 71 Victorians chosen to represent Australia at the 1924 Empire Jamboree in the UK followed by the International Jamboree in Copenhagen.

Harold's daughter, Pat, recalls: "His mother was very proud when her son Harold was able to go back to England for a year and represent Australian scouting. He travelled extensively in England, visiting all of his aunts, uncles and cousins, whom he had not seen for about 12 years."

Harold lived at Labassa until his marriage in 1930 to Grace Rice but returned most weeks often accompanied by their three children. While his father died in 1942, his mother stayed on at Labassa until shortly before her death in 1964.

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Labassa



Above: Harold Brearley circa 1939. The uniform is of uncertain origin. **Photo:** Pat Dunn.

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Man behind the camera (cont.)

Even then Harold continued to visit his friends at the mansion, including the Kelders family who had migrated from the Netherlands.

The Kelders got to know Harold when he came to check on his mother. Marianne Glen (nee Kelders) recalls: "He was our family photographer. He was the one who recorded our time at Labassa as a family. It was special to have such great photos of us taken by Mr Brearley.

He bought me a photo album with black paper pages for my seventh birthday which I still have 57 years later! I remember he went to a lot of trouble with my Mum to set up some poses.

We were excited when we knew Mr Brearley was visiting. He always brought much joy and connected to each child at their level."

Sister Alida Schembri (nee Kelders) remembers Harold as "such a nice man; he would visit our family for dinner and share his stories and photos of his holidays. He would make the photos into slides and we always looked forward to these nights.

As children we were not really interested in things like furniture but I do remember a beautiful but very heavy sideboard we were given by Mr Brearley after his mother died. He was a very generous man."

Harold's daughter Pat says that her father developed and printed his own photos in the family kitchen using blackout. The family would come out in the morning and find towels all over the kitchen table where his prints were drying.

During his later visits, Harold was disappointed to see that the mansion and its grounds were not being maintained.

According to Pat, when the property came up for auction in 1980 he attended and was "over the moon" to learn that the National Trust was the new owner. "Now it will be cared for again," he said.

Before his death in 1984, Harold shared his knowledge of the building and many of his photos with the National Trust.



Above: Portrait of Geert Kelders, resident 1961–67 with daughter Patricia. *Photo:* Harold Brearley. *Courtesy:* Kelders family.



Above: Portrait of Marianne Kelders, resident 1961–67. *Photo:* Harold Brearley. *Courtesy:* Kelders family.

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Man behind the camera (cont.)



Above: Caretakers Emily and James Brearley with daughter-in-law Grace. Note that a rear view of the fountain statue in the background shows it to be a boy rather than a cupid as previously thought. **Photo:** Harold Brearley.



Above: Front view of fountain statue. The boy is holding a large fish out of which water once spurted. **Photo:** Helen Apfelbaum.



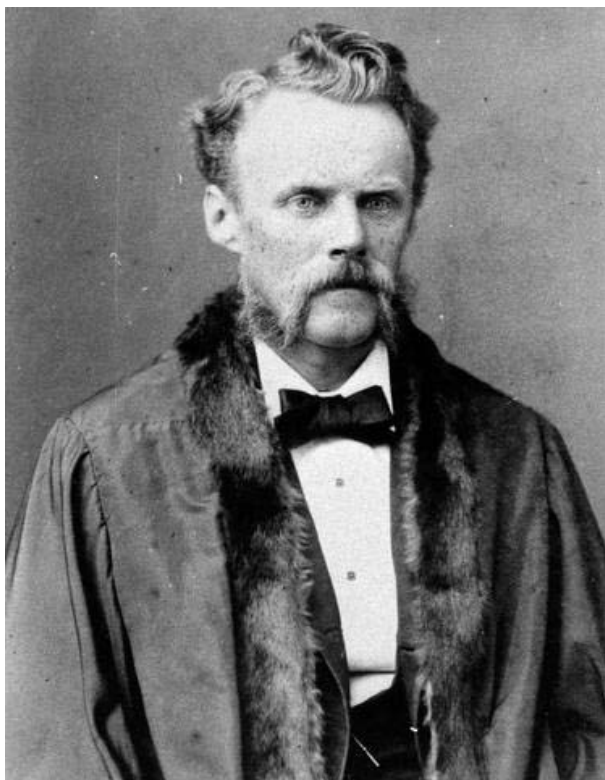
Left: Grounds of Labassa decorated for the 1942 Red Cross Comforts Fund fete. Features of the grounds no longer in existence include the World War 1 sea mines being used as plant holders; a block of garages erected at the rear of the property in the 1920s and a latticed garden alcove on the left. **Photo:** Harold Brearley.



Left: Patricia Brearley, Harold's daughter, regularly visited her grand parents with her father.

The brolga is one of at least two that were removed from the parapet in the 1930s due to their condition and used as garden features until the early 1950s.

Photo: Harold Brearley.



Above: John Koch c.1882, seven years before he commenced work on Ontario.

Photo: Richmond Library.

John Augustus Bernard Koch 1845–1928

John Koch, architect for the 1889-90 redevelopment of the mansion, migrated with his parents from Germany as a young boy. He was appointed architect to the City of Melbourne in 1873 and designed the Hay Market, Horse Cow and Pig Market, the Meat Market and Corn Exchange. In 1875 he took up private practice and his buildings include the Record Chambers Office in Collins Street, two public libraries in Richmond and additions to the Melbourne and Women's hospitals. Koch had a particular interest in hospital work, ventilation and modern warming. Labassa is considered the most important of the many private residences he worked on.

Koch had an enduring connection with the German community and his sensibility remained European. He was a parishioner at the Lutheran Church in Tasma Terrace, East Melbourne and a member of the German Club. As a result of local hostility towards Germans during World War 1, he moved his family to Adelaide where he lived in obscurity. He returned to Melbourne after the war and died in 1928 aged 83.

Memories of J.A.B.

By Linda Gleadell
1914 – 2004

In 1982 Linda Gleadell, Koch's granddaughter wrote a short memoir about John Koch and his family life. Linda, who was a member of the Friends of Labassa for many years, established the tearoom at Labassa.

My grandfather, John Augustus Bernard Koch, had nine children from his marriage to Anna Puttman. As he died 54 years ago [1928], my memories of J.A.B. are that of a child, but nevertheless quite clear. The family lifestyle was upper middle class, quite closely knit but uncommunicative. Although we lived in Caulfield quite close to Labassa, my father [Albert Koch] never mentioned that his father was architect of this exceptional house.

Children in those days were seen and not heard. Our Koch aunts and uncles were held in awe by the four of us, particularly Grandma and Grandpa. However, I do remember that when we visited 'Helensville' in Isabella Grove and 27 Hawthorn Grove, Grandpa always went out of his way to entertain us.



Above: John and Anna Koch with some of their children and grandchildren. *Photo:* Linda Gleadell.

Memories of J.A.B. (cont.)

In his book-lined study (I can still smell the tobacco), he set up complicated working models (one was the Old Melbourne Hospital), with elevators, lights and other detailed fittings. ...

He wore a velvet smoking jacket with matching cap and smoked a pipe. He had quite thick white hair, rosy complexion and did not seem tall, so probably about 5'6" [168cm]. He had a large aviary of birds and they were a great hobby. ... When they died he stuffed them, and we were always a bit scared of them.

Although he left Germany at ten years old, he always remained a German and proud of it; and a lovely lot of German customs made our childhood very happy. Birthdays were always celebrated and the Koch family Christmasses were wonderful.

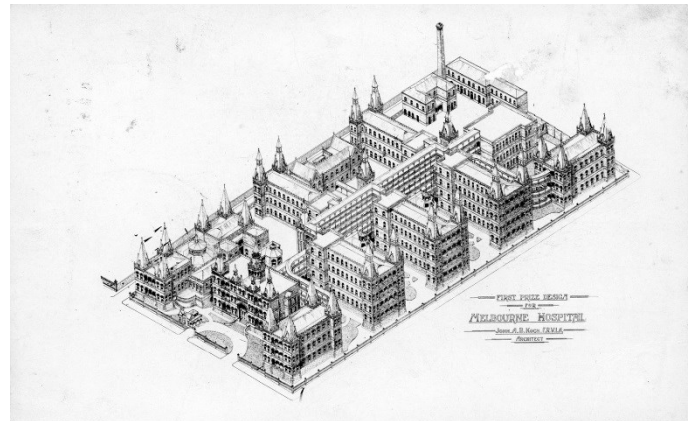
There was always a large, real fir Christmas tree beautifully decorated by Grandpa, and a table for each of the grandchildren set up with presents, little fancy cakes, dried fruits and very dark gingerbread.

At the Christmas dinner table (with that silver epergne in the centre) and about thirty people sitting around the large oval table with white damask and silver, Grandpa served the turkey and Grandma served the vegetables – all under silver covers. The large round Christmas pudding was brandy lit and full of trinkets and silver. Grandpa served the pudding and always saw to it that our slices contained silver. I can see him doing it now.

Wherever they lived, Grandpa had a lovely garden. He always had a fountain, fernery and statues; and was particularly fond of fuchsias.

As far as I know he never travelled overseas, and all his architectural ideas could have come from books and his own innate genius. In 1926 he gave me a book which he received from his sister Kate in 1872 called *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* – a highly imaginative German classic which evidently he treasured. He also gave me *Struwwelpeter*, another German classic. I learned recently from a distant cousin that one of J.A.B.'s brothers was Librarian to Edward VII.

German cooking was a great feature of the household and doughnuts, vanilla slices, tea cakes, pastries and gingerbread were reasons why we as children always loved going to Grandpa's.



Above: The design for the Melbourne Hospital for which Messrs Koch and Son won first prize in 1908. Linda Gleadell recalls seeing working models in her grandfather's study.
Image: State Library of Victoria.

He was a member of the German Club and the Lutheran Church in East Melbourne.

Looking back with the benefit of age, I can see how the German culture of his forbears made him the outstanding architect he became; perhaps not so recognised in his own day, as ours, when integrity, imagination and good workmanship are at a premium. I only hope the storks [sic] can be found so they can be put back on the balustrade of Labassa. I think he would like that.

From *Labassa Quarterly*, Vol 5. No. 1, (March – May 1999), page 1, (edited).



Above (left to right): Linda Gleadell (nee Koch), Bert Koch, Mollie Campbell (nee Koch) and Neil Robertson (Alexander Robertson's great grandson) at a Labassa reunion in 1989.
Photo: Friends of Labassa.

High society in a 'small' town



Left: Melbourne's elite gathered for the 1889 wedding of Josie Wagner and Major Hammans. The guests included Emily Bagot (eldest daughter of Alexander Robertson) and Mr Robertson's brother John.

Mr Robertson's partner John Wagner is standing second from the right. **Photo:** Wagner family album.

Melbourne was a small town for its rich and enterprising residents of the late 19th century. The Robertsons (Ontario), Armytages (Como), Sargoods (Rippon Lea), Clarkes (Cliveden and Rupertswood) and Chirnsides (Werribee Park) were among a throng of familiar faces at society balls and weddings.

When Ethel Clarke, married at Rupertswood in 1895, her father Sir William Clarke arranged for 300 guests to travel on a special express train to his private railway station at Sunbury. Among the guests at this lavish wedding were Alexander Robertson, the Misses Eva and Nina Robertson, Mr and Mrs John Wagner (Robertson's business partner), Laura and Connie Armytage, Sir Frederick and Lady Sargood, and Mr and Mrs George Chirnside.

Sir William Clarke was a mutual acquaintance, if not a close friend, of these families. At one point the largest landowner in the State and Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of Victoria, Clarke was a man you wanted to know.

The more modest weddings of John Wagner's daughters Josie (1889) and Bessie (1890) highlight these interconnections. Cecil Armytage was best man for Major Hammans at his marriage to Josie. The wedding breakfast at the Wagner family home, Stormont¹, was attended by the Clarkes, the Chirnsides, Alexander Robertson's eldest daughter Emily (Mrs Bagot) and his brother John Robertson.

¹Stormont was a fourteen-room mansion set on a half hectare at 51 Alma Road, St Kilda. It was converted into flats following John Wagner's death and survives today as a supported living home.

(Alexander Robertson and his daughters Eva and Nina were in Europe while Ontario was undergoing a major refurbishment.) The Robertsons returned from Europe just in time for Bessie Wagner's marriage to Sam McCulloch in late 1890, which was also attended by the Sargoods and Clarkes. Emily Bagot was there, once again, putting paid to the story that she was disowned by her family after her marriage to cycling champion and bicycle salesman Harry Bagot.



Above: The 1890 wedding of Bessie Wagner and Sam McCulloch (centre), which was attended by Alexander Robertson and his daughters Emily, Eva and Nina. The best man (far left) was Reginald Verdon, son of Sir George Verdon, Victoria's first Agent General. The three bridesmaids were Lottie Wagner (sister of the bride), Ella McCulloch and Katie McCulloch (sisters of the bridegroom).

Photo: Wagner family album.

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High society in a 'small' town (cont.)

The more informal or intimate gatherings reveal the depth of some of these associations. The Robertsons and Armytages were close and invited each other to their more select gatherings such as tennis parties and 'at homes'. Eva Robertson, along with Julia Clarke, Laura Armytage and Ethel Simson, was a bridesmaid at Bertram Armytage's marriage to Blanche Dunn Watson in 1895¹.

Interestingly, Sir Frederick and Lady Sargood appear not to be part of the Robertson 'set' and are not on any of the public listings of Robertson guests. This includes visitors to Perricoota Station, near Echuca, where the highest ranking visitors were entertained — Prince Alfred Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Thomas Duke of Genoa, princes August and Philipp of Saxe Coburg Gotha, the Earl of Rosebery and governors of Victoria, George Bowen and the Earl and Countess of Hopetoun, and the Clarke family.

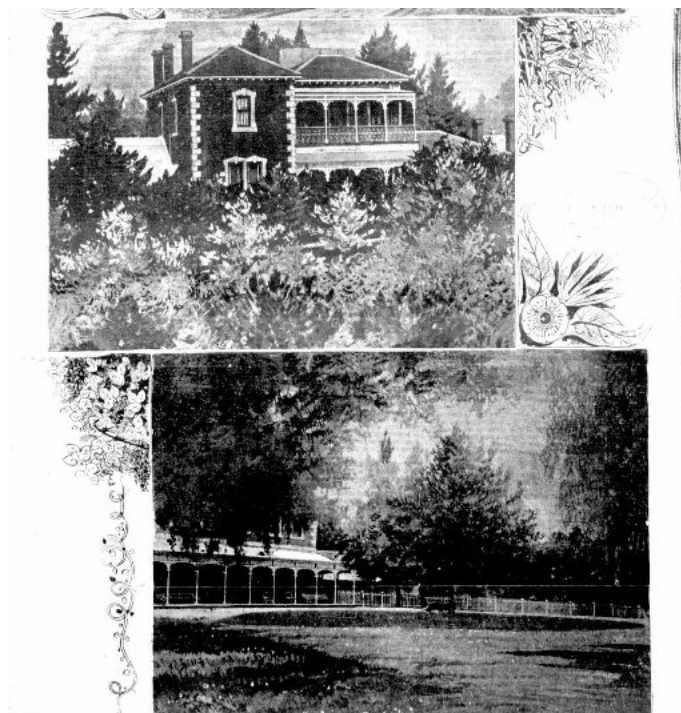
The absence of the Sargoods may have been simply a matter of intervening circumstances but there are other possibilities.

In October 1889, Sir Frederick Sargood was a member of a small committee investigating a power struggle at Goldsbrough Mort & Co where Mr Robertson was Chairman. The Committee's report was highly critical of absentee directors and found that the power struggle had broken out when Mr Robertson left the colony in April that year leaving the company without a controlling influence.

The report concluded: "The present members of the board are Mr A. W. Robertson, who is in England; Mr Booth, who lives in the country, and is seldom able to attend the board meetings; and Mr Rowan, and we recommend that the vacancies now existing be filled up by the shareholders electing one of their number who are able and willing to give the necessary time and attention to the business of the company."

Much of the wealth that fostered Marvellous Melbourne's social elite and its extravagances was eventually dissipated by two depressions (1890s and 1930s) and a world war.

¹ No relationship to Labassa's Watsons.



Above: Perricoota, where the Robertsons entertained the upper echelons of colonial and European society.

Image: *Australasian*, 2 April 1892, p. 41.

However, the relentless subdivision of large estates and the demolition of their mansions also meant there were fewer grand venues in which the elite could readily circulate.

After Ontario was put up for sale, Eva Robertson and her brother Harold entertained their friends at city hotels such as the Menzies, Oriental and the Grand (now the Windsor).

By 1909 the days when the Clarkes of Cliveden hosted large balls and strawberry parties² during Melbourne's Spring Racing Carnival were gone.

²A strawberry party was a Devonshire tea with a strawberry on top. The Clarkes held these teas twice a week throughout Melbourne's racing season.

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If you would like to know more about the writing of the new Labassa book, the Glen Eira City Council offers an online conversation between historian Alicia Cerreto and the author.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJd7qXH-lmI&t=296s>

Nightlife

Conrad Miles (visitor, late 1960s)

Conrad Miles and Laurie Davidson became mates while studying art at Brighton Technical School. When Laurie moved into Labassa mansion, Conrad followed and became a regular visitor or “hanger on” staying once a week or once a month.

Conrad recalls: “There was a lot of drinking and some dope. It was a ‘new age’ thing. It was a time when many were worried about conscription. Marijuana was everywhere in Australia — in music venues and among surfers in seaside towns.

The tower room was a great party space and we would sit around drinking and playing music. Some people came down from Sydney with a lot of Benzedrine (aka bennies or amphetamines) which we got through at a tower party. That was a one-off and the tower continued to be a good place to go and enjoy cheap wine and socialise.

The house had a moving population and came alive at night. There were lots of visitors and parties. Lots of hair and beards. I attended a rent party in the Music Room. It was around \$1 entry to listen to string instrumentalists.”

So far, Conrad is the only known eyewitness to the theft of a newel post lamp during a wild party in 1969.

“A party was in full swing in one of the upstairs flats when someone came in and yelled that someone was wrecking one of the newel lights. Everyone immediately ran out and down the stairs. It was like that scene from *Battleship Potemkin* with the crowd running down the Odessa steps.

We ran after the guy and got it away from him. He dropped it on the nature strip and I think someone took it inside. The story about the Hells Angels taking it isn’t true. The thief looked like anyone else around the house at the time – he had a goatee and page boy haircut. I don’t know what happened to the lamp that was ripped out but the one on the right side of the staircase was still there after the party.”

Even when there wasn’t a party, Conrad and Laurie always found some way to entertain themselves. Conrad remembers being in Laurie’s room one day and going through his record collection. “We said: ‘Do you want this one ‘yes’ or ‘no’? If the answer was ‘no’ we chucked it out the window onto the tennis court in the next property.”



*Above (Left to right): Conrad Miles and Laurie Davidson.
Image: Conrad Miles.*

In 1969, Conrad and Laurie decided to have a hitch-hiking race to Sydney with female friends. The boys stayed at Bondi where there was a casual, reciprocal arrangement with people who had stayed at Labassa. The girls, who stayed at a Kings Cross hotel, went off to see the musical *Hair*. Meanwhile, Conrad and Laurie wandered around Kings Cross and for 40 cents decided to take their photo in a photo booth. Conrad later photocopied the photo and then recopied it again, hence the lack of tones.