

Labassa *lives*

Volume 10, Issue 2, 2022

Evolving time



NATIONAL
TRUST

Labassa



Left: One of Andrew Montana's designs, worn by Dena Grace and photographed on Labassa's verandah while they were living at the mansion in 1973.

Photographer:

Terry Wallis.

Photo: Courtesy of

Andrew Montana.

Andrew Montana Resident, 1973

For Andrew Montana, Labassa was a "retreat". "You came here, opened the door, saw the stained glass window, the architecture and the world was somewhere else. It was like a sanctuary where the pressures of the outside world didn't infiltrate. I was a young, non-conformist aesthete in a wider Melbourne footy culture. I used to sit on the ledge of our window, with my legs up to my breast and my hands over my knees and watch the changing sky. I really loved doing that."

"It felt very comforting and private. People generally kept to themselves. Labassa also felt 'right' culturally. Victorian and Art Deco designs became popular in the late 60s. People were wearing clothes from the 20s, 30s and 40s. Victorian furniture was fashionable."

Andrew moved into Flat 1 (former upstairs servants' quarters) in 1973 with his girlfriend Dena Grace, his brother Adrian and Adrian's girlfriend Sue Ross. Andrew is unsure exactly when: "I remember fireplaces and fires, the cold bathroom and Adrian's 21st birthday party in December so probably from the beginning of winter for around 6-8 months."

"I was involved with theatre through a charismatic school friend and actor who introduced me to La Mama and the Pram Factory in Carlton. Jane Clifton was involved with that circle. I was doing a few plays and gigs and Jane and I used to chat. She said, 'Look, I'm at Labassa at the moment and I'll be moving out. Would you guys like to take over?' I said, 'Yes, that'd be fabulous.' It seemed pretty seamless. All of sudden we were here."

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Evolving time (cont.)*Left:* Andrew Montana, c.1973.*Photo:* Courtesy Andrew Montana.*Right:* Dena Grace photographed in 1973 outside Labassa's stained-glass front door.*Photographer:* Terry Wallis.*Photo:* Courtesy Andrew Montana.

"The rent was ridiculously cheap. We paid something like \$4 a week, each, into the kitty. I can't remember dealing with any agents at all. No one ever came through. If we could avoid bureaucracy at any cost we were the ones to do it."

"We didn't have much in the way of furniture. I think it was pretty much the mattress on the floor, a rack for clothes. I remember I had a very beautiful art deco relief which was a profile of a man and a woman that was a bit androgynous and stayed above our bed."

"Life came and went. We were very young, fluid, quite gentle people. We'd congregate by the fire and chat. I was sketching away designing clothes, not making any money. I was doing some theatre design for different little places."

"No one was making any money. I was on unemployment benefits most of the time. Reading profusely – discovering more of the classics, the philosophy and history of art, Anaïs Nin diaries, Rimbaud and Verlaine, no rubbish – and going for walks and getting on with 'the show'."

"I didn't know many of the other residents, but do remember visiting Igor Persan¹ and having some good conversations with his beautiful French partner, Jackie, who was with the ABC. I also visited the cellar and liked the soulful and abstracted faces artist Antoinette Starkiewicz had painted on the cellar walls."

"A lot of the time at Labassa we were macrobiotic so eating Japanese type noodles, rice, seaweeds, miso soups and roasting chestnuts. No cheese or meat. We made chestnut purees for desserts."

¹ Igor Persan and Jacqueline Lesage lived in the Drawing Room flat (Flat 10).

"It was quite extraordinary when I look back. The stairs weren't too much of a trick for us because no one was getting inebriated. Paradoxically perhaps at the time, we liked our joints."

"We had a fabulous party, for Adrian's 21st, and danced the night away. Everyone came, Carlton came, guys and girls. There was 'new music' and such a diversity of people; everyone knew each other. Parties were very itinerant then. I'd get a call from a friend. 'Hey, Saturday, party, Drummond Street, Carlton'. So word would get out. Boom everyone goes. Flat 1 party. Boom Carlton arrives."

Another special memory was using Labassa as a backdrop for a photo shoot featuring his designs. Andrew was fascinated by flight and designed a 'bird dress' which was among several costumes modelled by girlfriend Dena. He returned over a decade later for another shoot of his designs with artist Vanessa Petropoulos, a friend from his RMIT days. The architectural setting still lingered for him.

Andrew went on to complete a PhD in Art History at the University of Melbourne and lecture at the Australian National University where he also co-ordinated the Art History and Curatorship internship program and was Honours convenor. Over the years, Andrew has authored and co-authored books on art, design, and the decorative arts.

Andrew has fond memories of living at Labassa but did it influence his choice of career? "Influence comes at a very early age and depends on the built and spatial environments you might experience as happenstance as a child and early teenager."

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Evolving time (cont.)

"In 1973, I was very different to what I am now. Labassa had a layering, incremental impact; it fitted in with that movement of interest in 'the Victorian' that was emerging within décor and architecture, away from the suburban, Anglo traditional gables, the cream brick veneer and the Australian architectural modern. Being young, I lived in the moment – it was cinematic, an everyday, lived experience. I absorbed the atmospheric beauty of the property, but other properties had an impact when I was older and travelled to Europe and Britain."

"Labassa is memory, again it's experience, and possibly why I didn't want to write something about the place despite my expertise in design and architectural history. It's too personal. I don't want to write about its architecture and interiors from the context of my own younger life. It wouldn't make any sense. It would be like sleeping with an old lover. Design history is another exercise."

Left: Andrew Montana returned to Labassa in 1985 to direct another fashion shoot for his designs. **Model:** Vanessa Petropoulos.

Location: Exterior door leading from courtyard to rear of Willas Flats.

Photographer: Unknown. **Photo:** Courtesy Andrew Montana.

Vale Bill Edeson

1942–2021

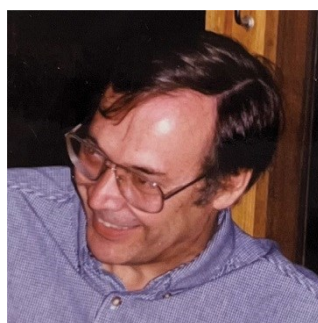
Bill Edeson lived at Labassa from around 1968 to 1970. He is remembered by former residents for his witty humour and introducing a circle of musicians to the household. Bill was a distinctive presence among the growing number of baby boomer residents. He drove a Wolsley, wore tweed and glasses and looked "professional".

He married Lyn Fleming in November 1969 and they continued to live upstairs at Labassa in Flat 6 before travelling overseas.

Flat 8 resident Judith Cordingley recalls:

"In June 1968 Bill Edeson and Keith Keen came separately to look over the 'Ballroom Flat' [Flat 2, Music room]. Both agreed to move in and it appropriately became a musical locus, not for performances so much as persons."

"Bill liked to study Marine Law to Beethoven at full stretch, an effective sound block. As well, Bill had a circle of Sydney and Perth friends who were following orchestral careers. That meant temporary seasonal terms with the Elizabethan Trust Orchestra in Melbourne."



Above: Bill Edeson.

Photo: *International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law*.

"Richard Divall, Graham Jacups, Alan Bonds, Suzie Powell and Alan Greenlees all became part of the Labassa population periodically and stayed with Bill, in Flat 2¹ and later Flat 6²."

Bill began his legal teaching career at Monash University in 1969. From there he went on to teach at the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology in Cardiff, University of Birmingham, Australian National University and University of Wollongong.

As a professor and an international lawyer he was widely respected for his almost encyclopaedic understanding of the practice of law at sea. He also advised governments across the world on the legal frameworks for sustainable fisheries and aquaculture.

Bill passed away 12 October 2021. He is survived by his wife Lyn, his three children Sian, Juliet and Gregor and their partners and children.

¹ Music room flat.

² Upstairs Balcony flat.

A stirring of the senses

By visitor Conrad Miles

That Labassa smell

The 'Labassa smell' stays with me, now mostly gone due to improvements. The embossed wallpaper was like the smell of damp egg cartons. The parquet floor, devoid of sealer or polish, had the aroma of an old warehouse. No doubt the porous lead gas pipes added a heavy taint of old gas. The lower back door left open admitted cats, who over time had marked their territory with a pungent spray here and there. In the slightly damp atmosphere, all combined in a distinctive yet friendly smell.

All houses, especially vacant houses, exude a feeling, sometimes neutral, sometimes unease. Labassa was a 'good' place, a place where you could happily be alone, night or day without any feeling of menace.

First sight

Upstairs to the left, I was in awe of the ornate details. A timber wall divided the hall, like a construction site. Half way along was Laurie's room, facing west with two tall sashed windows, a fireplace, a good space. The kitchen, painted primary red, had a huge stove 'Early Kooka' style, but perhaps made for a commercial kitchen. The small breakfast room was citrus yellow – the only thing of interest being a 60 litre rubbish bin bubbling away with young beer, Elmer's. I met him then, a man who slept little, with amazing creative energy. He was responsible for the Union Jack door.

My favourite image that is 'so Labassa' is that of Penny – Botticelli angel, crimped strawberry blonde hair over her worn leather jacket, kick starting her recalcitrant motorcycle. Short exhaust, no muffler then heading off into the night, the engine misfiring and thumping until she was out of earshot down Manor Grove to Orrong Road. Her motor cycle, post war, single cylinder BSA or Ariel, chrome and green petrol tank was at one time upstairs in the front room for maintenance. It would have taken some effort to wrestle the oily beast up and around the stairs.

Night sounds

Evenings brought a stream of visitors to Laurie's room. With only seats for a few, people would sit on the floor leaning against whatever would support them. Music was always playing on the portable turntable. Sophisticated sound systems were still a few years away.

Right: Conrad Miles (standing) with Brighton Technical Art School classmates in 1968. (Paul Satchell, an art teacher at Brighton Technical School also lived at Labassa.)

Photo: Conrad Miles.



Laurie's interest in music was not in the popular area. So Blues and Black American bands were usually played, the record player amongst the guests on the floor.

A warm evening, a few drinks, a few friends gathered in Laurie's room and then above the conversations could be heard a louder voice from the hallway. We went out to see if there was a problem. One of the residents, a tall man who had swallowed possibly more than a couple of tablets of unknown type was standing on the bannister of the upper level, one hand on the end of the hallway dividing wall. He was quite agitated and calling out: 'I'm watching pictures on the inside of my eyelids. I can fly...' I think his partner was trying to reason with him. All we could think of was to stand on the stairs below him and break his fall, possibly badly injuring everyone. So with the group calling out and trying to avoid the inevitable, he carefully stepped back and disappeared. I saw him on other visits but that night was not spoken of.

Indulgences

The usual red wine was passed around at gatherings: perhaps Penfolds dry red \$1.31 a flagon and the occasional joint, very mild in those days.

Laurie and I had a favourite snack: a small block of Buttercup vanilla icecream which, when soft, we'd cover in Corio whisky, set up a line of chocolate Teddy Bear biscuits and use them as spoons, stirring the whisky in as we progressed down the tub. A small packet of Du Maurier costing 30 cents was the perfect, occasional after-dinner cigarette.

Labassa Women exhibition

The Labassa Women exhibition in May saw the return of many with a personal connection to the house. Among them was Jane Clifton who launched the exhibition and entertained guests with stories of life at Labassa in the 1970s.

The exhibition offered a unique overview of Labassa's history from a female perspective. Through costume, story-telling, lighting and multi-media it was also possible to acknowledge stories often difficult to explore in print.

A major theme was marriage and how it defined a woman's identity. Many Labassa women on the electoral roll had their occupation listed as 'home duties' irrespective of their working life or social profile. Annie Chadwick, for example, was a social activist who established Labassa's registered branch of the Red Cross Comforts Fund for servicemen and women.

Several Labassa couples did not conform to social expectations. Mrs Pearson was 43 years older than her husband. One woman was married to her uncle. Marrying a close family member was not uncommon within some refugee communities, especially when a displaced person needed to be brought to safety.

Prior to 'no fault divorce' legislation anyone seeking to end their marriage risked public humiliation. Details of Vi Miller's contested divorce were published in *The Argus* while Mona Love's divorce required her daughter to bear witness to her parents' sleeping arrangements.

Among the women featured or acknowledged in the exhibition were: Fanny Aisen, Lois Benkel, Lily Betheras, Mary Billing, Williamina Billing, Justine Bradley, Emily Brearley, Nurse Brissenden, Maie Brown, Lydia Buchanan, Penny Carruthers, Annie Chadwick, Jane Clifton, Judith Cordingley, Di Coulter, Lucy Davidson, Dot Ede, Lillian Fenton, Jennie Gibson (nee Lum), Margaret Gleeson (nee Brown), Bettina Gordon, Leonie Gregory, Miriam Gregory, Rose Gruner, Vera Halford, Carole Harper, Ethel Herald, Alice Hodgins, Hinda Kazer, Deirdre Knaggs, Olga Kohut, Louise Lovely, Rosamond Elspeth Love, Rosamond Pridham Love, Irene Marriott, Vi Miller, Eliza Morgan, Marie Vera Nell, Elizabeth Pearce, Elizabeth Pearson; Emmie, Eva and Nina Robertson, Helen Rodgers, Lillian Sergeant, Antoinette Starkiewicz, Jennie Tate, Bridget Walsh, Flora Kate Watson, Mary Frances Webster, Molly Webster, Ann Weir.



Top: Afternoon dress, c. 1890. National Trust Costume Collection (not worn by the Robertson sisters but of their period.)

Photo: Jessica Charleston.

Middle: Tableaux telling the story of the Robertson sisters whose father wanted them to marry into British aristocracy.

Photo: Jessica Charleston.

Immediately above: An homage to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* New Year's Eve party produced by Ann Weir, Ian Hance and friends in 1977.

Photo: Jon Boughton.

Other tableaux included: An Edwardian widow, Kate Watson's sitting room in 1911; a meeting of the Red Cross Comforts Fund fundraising committee c.1942; caretaker Emily Brearley's sitting room; 1930s glamor with Louise Lovely and Rosamond Love; Labassa women artists throughout the decades; Linen mistress Elizabeth Pearson c.1890; Racing car driver and milliner Vera Halford; Lois Benkel, business woman.

U3523 (part 1)



Left:
Margaret Brown,
1941. Margaret
was bridesmaid
at her sister
Moyra's
wedding.

Photo: Gleeson
family.

By Margaret Gleeson

Margaret Gleeson (nee Brown) was the niece of owners William and Sarah O'Callaghan. Margaret visited Labassa regularly in the 1930s, finally moving into the mansion with her mother in 1940. Margaret died in 2015. Her memoir was published in the Labassa Quarterly, June – August 1995. Some minimal editing has been undertaken, mainly to correct the spelling of names.

Uncle Will, the eldest of seven children, was a well-to-do gentleman. I have pictures of him (sent as postcards to my mother and signed always in full as 'Your affectionate brother Will O'Callaghan') where he looks like the cock of the walk on Collins Street.

I remember his very first job was at *Kyabram Free Press*. He used to enjoy telling how his mother waited outside the premises to take charge of his first pay of 2s.6d. He went on to become joint owner of the *Free Press*, as well as owner of a wine saloon his father had built in the town in 1885.

In 1908, Uncle Will married Sarah Murphy. They moved to Barnawartha, where they bought the Star Hotel. It was the first of a number of country pubs Uncle owned in Glenrowan, Myrtleford, Devenish and elsewhere. Uncle Will and Auntie Sal seemed to spend their time on the road between their hotels, but they always detoured to visit the family in Shepparton (my mother was his youngest sister).

His Morris Cowley was always a talking point – there weren't many cars on the road in the 1920s. We eagerly looked forward to their visits, for Uncle always treated us and our young neighbours to a game of football or cricket in the afternoons and a tune on his Jew's harp, around the fire, in the evenings.

In the late 1920s, Uncle Will and Auntie Sal decided to live in Melbourne. First, they boarded in a terrace house opposite the Fitzroy Gardens, in East Melbourne. I remember a holiday I had with them there as a six-year-old, in 1931. The public gardens became my personal playground where I bounced a ball along the sloping paths, played games with imaginary friends and visited the Fairy Tree.

During my holiday, I vividly remember my aunt calling me to the window: 'Watch, dear Marg, and always remember you saw this special funeral.' It was the cortege of Dame Nellie Melba, passing along Clarendon Street on the way to Scots Church for the service.

In 1933, Uncle Will sold his country pubs and put his money into purchasing Labassa – for £16,000! He loved showing his new acquisition off – I could see he was so proud of Labassa. The property had already been divided into flats, yet it still had charm and dignity. A couple of years or so after purchasing Labassa, he built the redbrick flats adjoining the old Laundry, as part of Labassa's new life as a tenement house, and named them Willas (an amalgam – or anagram – of his name and his wife's). The garden (what was left of it) was magnificent. The garden centrepiece was, of course, the cherub¹ fountain, which sat beneath huge magnolia trees. Their branches reached right to the top of the balcony, and their dish-sized blooms carried such a sweet perfume, especially at night.

My next holiday with my uncle and aunt was at Labassa when I was nine. On my first night, I was put to bed in the first little room of the tower, which gave off their smallish flat. This tiny room smelt musty and the narrow staircase right over my head seemed menacing somehow in the dark. I had to carry a candle alone to bed for there was no electric light. I remembered my brother had told me owls had been trapped up there in the tower and starved to death. I imagined owl ghosts swooping down from above to attack me; to this day, I am convinced it was those owls I heard hooting throughout the night!

¹ It was a boy holding a fish not a cherub.

U3523 Part 1 (cont.)

But it was I howling next morning to go home to my family. A compromise was reached and I slept the remainder of my hols on the couch in the little lounge of their flat.

Mr Aiken was employed as a full-time gardener. He made garden seats and a sun dial, and carved pathways through waist-high ferns and shrubs. My aunt, who was not in very good health, used to sit in one of his pleasant arbors for hours, doing her needlework.

It was sometime in the 1930s that Mr Aiken discovered one of the storks [sic]² adorning Labassa's parapets had become dangerously loose. It was decided the best thing to do was take down the stork. It was a huge operation. Scaffolding and ropes were used to lower the heavy concrete ibis-like bird from the north-east corner on to the ground. It stood in the garden for years; in fact, when I had my wedding photographs taken in the garden many years later, in 1948, I made sure it was out of sight, for a picture of a bride beside a baby-bringing stork seemed quite unseemly! Now, it's missing, along with all the other storks removed at a later stage.

My mother and I came to live permanently at Labassa in September 1940, when I was 15. All the tenants at Labassa seemed so old – to me, at least – and so quiet, I hated it at first, because everything was so silent. There were no young people. By nightfall, the tenants were all slippered and dressing-gowned. And, of course, I was so noisy! They looked at me with such disapproval; they must have thought my hijinks would be the death of them.

There was a hierarchy of tenants, I soon discovered. The shufflers had Mrs Brearley to look over them. (She was already well in charge of Labassa when Uncle Will bought it in 1933.) Mrs Brearley was the heart of the place; she kept everything running smoothly. A tiny woman with hair pulled back into a bun, she was a Lancastrian (from the same street as Gracie Fields) who never lost her delightful accent. Her eyes were always twinkling, smiling. She and her husband were the caretakers, cleaners and general fixers. No matter what was the matter, they found a solution. They meant so much to us all. They delivered milk to each tenant's door first thing each morning and collected and distributed any mail to the house. Every afternoon at 4pm, Mrs Brearley went down to the main cellar to stoke the hot-water furnace, to ensure the tenants had their hot water for the evening.



Left: Margaret on the occasion of her debut in 1943.
Photo: Gleeson family.

(There was no hot water for the morning and, if you were tardy in the evening, you could have missed out altogether.) I often accompanied her to the cellar; when she had finished, we would climb out through the small green door at the back of the old servants' wing and lock up for the night.

Mrs Brearley loved to have a flutter on the races at the weekend. She would ring up an SP bookie who was on friendly terms with her. He would give her incredible odds, even though she always won on such amounts as 9d. 1sh., or 1sh. 6d. Of course, it was always under the lap. Mrs Brearley was definitely not to be disturbed whenever she was ensconced in her flat with the racing forms or on the communal phone. (Mondays were settling days; the bookie would arrive and have a chat and a cup of tea before passing over the pay-out to a gleeful Mrs Brearley.)

One Saturday, I had Mrs Brearley place a bet on each race with her kindly bookie. Perhaps it was beginner's luck, but I won 9sh. 2d. on the day. Horrified, Mrs Brearley went straight to my mother to confess; perhaps she felt responsible should gambling get into my blood!

Uncle Will was himself a great racing man. Most Saturdays would see him heading off to Caulfield or Flemington racetracks. He was rather knowledgeable about races; his one big win was in 1939 when Rivette (a mare) won the double – the Melbourne and Caulfield cups. He loved to 'yarn' about his win to anyone who would give him the time of day.

² The birds were brolgas not storks.

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Forthcoming Open Days

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

Springtime at Labassa



Photo: Val Connor.

Sunday 18 September 2022

10am – 4.30pm

(last entry at 3.15pm)

5 timed-ticketed sessions available.

Plants from the garden will be on sale.

Bookings essential:

nationaltrust.org.au/places/labassa

Labassa is open on the third Sunday of each month, except in December when it is open on the first Sunday. Please check the National Trust website to confirm dates, times and booking details: nationaltrust.org.au/places/labassa

Join landscape architect Elizabeth Peck for a special guided tour of Labassa's renewed garden. In 2014, Elizabeth created the masterplan that would transform the mansion's surrounds into an elegant and lush garden. Her design has redefined Labassa's sense of place within an incompatible suburbia and provided a captivating frame for the mansion's grandeur. Today, the garden not only retains a sense of a bygone era, but offers shade, texture, some colour and spaces to move through and enjoy. Elizabeth's tour will highlight the evolution of the garden and the thinking that went into creating the garden as we see it today.

U3523 Part 1 (cont.)

Tradesmen called at the house daily: there was the baker, the grocer from Balaclava, the iceman and 'Charlie', the Chinese market gardener. Charlie, (everyone called him that), used to slowly make his way up the Manor Grove hillock in a covered wagon before tying his weary horse to a shady tree beside Willas. Once he had fed and watered the animal, he would go from door to door, selling his fresh fruit and vegetables. Both Charlie and his horse seemed so ancient to me; so, when there came a time he just didn't call any more, we could only guess that he had moved on to the celestial plane.

The original fire-bell for the house was – and still is – under the verandah roof near what are now the Tea Rooms. I remember when I was about seven-years-old I thought I'd impress a friend I had over. I grabbed hold of the rope dangling from the old bell and gave it a good tug. The bell rang out loud and clear. My friend was quite impressed by the commotion and panic I caused the tenants! Mrs Brearley came flying out of her flat and, realising it was one of my pranks, gave the two of us a good talking to. She warned us that there was a hornets' nest right above the bell which, once disturbed, would surely send a swarm of hornets out to attack us. Even though I never checked its veracity, this vespine admonition worked, for years, I never even walked under that bell without first making sure there were no hornets around.



Above: Margaret Brown's wedding day, 1948, with her uncle William O'Callaghan, who owned Labassa 1933-46. *Photo:* Gleeson family.

When war broke out, my brothers Jack and Brian went into the forces. Mother and I had moved to Labassa, and my sister, Moyra, married there a few months after we moved in. We moved to be with Uncle Will, for Auntie had died in 1940 of pernicious anaemia. What a sweet, gentle, soft-spoken lady she was. In the latter days of her illness, Uncle had placed a chair for her on the landing, just below the magnificent stained glass window, so she could take a breather on her way to their more spacious flat upstairs. Uncle was very lonely without Auntie Sal.

to be continued