

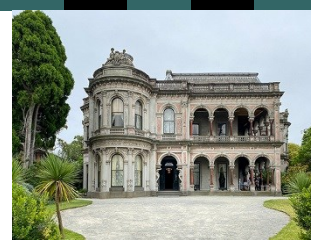
# Labassa *lives*

Volume 11, Issue 1, 2023



NATIONAL  
TRUST

Labassa



## The party girl and the activist



*Left:*

*Back* left to right:  
Denise Keetley  
(Gwen Ackerly's sister);  
Gwen Ackerly and  
Howard Ackerly.

*Front* left to right:  
Dawn Keetley and two  
unknown girls.

*Photo:* Andrea Webb.

### Gwen and Howard Ackerly Residents, c.1940–1947

Howard Ackerly is remembered as the mechanical, electrical and technical genius who hooked Labassa's doorbells up to the communal telephone.

Howard was more than your average handyman; he had studied Production Engineering and Refrigerator Servicing and Electrical Mechanics at Melbourne Technical College.

He also started a Commerce-Law degree at the University of Melbourne, he never completed; but it led to a career with the Prahran Branch of the State Savings Bank.

Gwen (nee Nancarrow) and Howard Ackerly moved into Flat 9 shortly after their marriage in August 1940<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Flat 9: Downstairs Servants' Quarters comprising Servants' Hall, Boot Room and Scullery.

Neither Gwen nor Howard lived up to the expectations of their churchgoing, conservative families. Gwen had a reputation within the family of being "a party girl" and "a bit wild". Howard had strong views on social and environmental issues which at the time were considered 'on the fringe'.

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**Labassa reunion 7 May 2023. See page 7.**

## The party girl and the activist (cont.)



**Above:** Gwen Ackerly (nee Nancarrow) on the day of her marriage to Howard Ackerly in 1940.

**Photo:** Andrea Webb.

Howard wrote regularly to the editors of the *Melbourne Herald* and *The Age* correcting anything he believed to be misinformation. In 1945 he admonished the *Herald's* finance writers for promoting the resumption of gold production<sup>1</sup>:

"While Australia is so short of houses, it seems ridiculous to suggest that manpower should be diverted to removing gold from a hole in the ground just to store it in bank vaults — another hole in the ground!

We now know that gold is totally unnecessary to trade and commerce; and mining, it causes the ruin of country by slag heaps, creeks poisoned with cyanide, and muddied rivers denuded of fish.

Let us, therefore, provide homes for everyone, community centres, an educational system and a medical service of which we can feel proud, and let us give up this foolish practice of digging holes in the ground. — Yours etc., H. ACKERLY, 1 Manor Gve, Caulfield, Sept. 3."

<sup>1</sup> *Herald*, Tuesday 4 September 1945, page 9.

**Top:** Howard Ackerly's application for the Australian Airforce giving his address as Labassa.

**Bottom:** Howard's service record. He joined the RAAF hoping to use his technical skills as an Air Observer.

**Images:** Department of Veterans' Affairs.

As Honorary Secretary of the Victorian Compost Society, Howard wrote to *The Age* in 1954 to correct the impression given by an article that flies bred in compost:

"Flies do not breed in them," he wrote, "nor is there any offensive smell from a properly made compost heap. If a compost heap is offensive in any way, it should be re-made and not sprinkled with insecticide."<sup>2</sup>

Howard enlisted with the RAAF in 1941 and trained at the Air Observations Unit, Cootamundra, NSW, attaining the rank of Leading Aircraftman. He was hospitalised twice over the next year for undocumented reasons and discharged as medically unfit in March 1942.

Howard and Gwen left Labassa in the late 1940s. Their marriage didn't last and they divorced in 1954.

<sup>2</sup> *The Age*, 2 March 1954, page 2.



## Vale Hans Poulsen

07.03.1945 — 17.02.2023

One of Labassa's legendary figures, Hans Poulsen, passed away on 17 February 2023. Hans lived in Flat 3<sup>1</sup> in the mid to late 1960s. To some he was the man who lived in the tower with his pet crow but it is the music he brought to the house for which he is most remembered. Auditions and rehearsals with his band, the 18th Century Quartet, resonated throughout the house. His song *Rachael* released in 1966 made him a celebrity among all the residents.

Hans' first memory of Labassa was the music coming from Peter Homewood's flat<sup>2</sup> especially Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. Although contemporary music was his main oeuvre he also wrote classical pieces. And, according to an interview he gave to the *The Bulletin* magazine in 1969 Labassa's tower had a role in the evolution of his unique 'sound'.

Hans developed the technique of blending natural noises into his music:

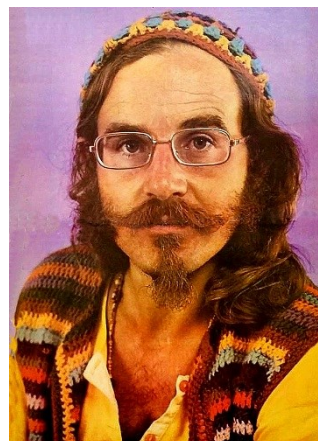
"while living in a tower built above an old house in the Melbourne suburb of Caulfield, writing nocturnes, preludes and concertos and living on \$4 a week. He had sold his radio and while lying on his bed listening to a crystal set, he heard music coming at him in waves – 'waves of silence and sound. I began to realise there was something in that silence, something was cooking there, it was a knock-out really.' The bridging of the gulf between the tower and the pop world occurred by chance and he doesn't regret it."<sup>3</sup>

Hans was diagnosed with cancer in the 1970s and later suffered a couple of strokes. Following his recovery, he worked as a music therapist. When he attended Labassa's 2013 reunion, Hans's one regret was that he was unable to visit his upstairs flat or the tower.

<sup>1</sup> Flat 3: Upstairs west side, former principal bedrooms and tower.

<sup>2</sup> Flat 2: Music Room, Billiards Room, Smoking Lounge.

<sup>3</sup> *The Bulletin*, 1 March 1969, page 48.



Left: Hans Poulsen.

Image: *History of Australian Music*, blogspot  
8 September, 2013.

Hans is fondly remembered by fellow tenants as gentle, warm and funny. Susan Weiss (nee Heinz) recalls his generosity to his poor flat mates downstairs. "He was always ready with a bowl of something healthy."

Susan's flatmate Deirdre Jack (nee Knaggs) adds: "In his tower he shared bowls of brown rice or porridge and showed me his method of multi-tracking on his old tape deck. For decades, though sadly not now, I kept a suede bag he sowed for me to which he attached his special laughing Buddha with arms upstretched."

The song most identified with Hans is the national Top Ten hit *Boom Sha La La Lo* (co-written with Seeker Bruce Woodley) which was released after he left Labassa. His songs have also been recorded by Cliff Richards, Dione Warwick and Julian Lennon.



Above: Hans Poulsen (front centre) at the 2013 Return to Labassa. Front row left: Susan Weiss; Front row right: Robin Dullard. Back row (left to right): Kathy Neilson, Deirdre Jack, Bettina Guthridge.

## Vale Miriam Gregory

24.12.1955 - 31.1.2023



**Left:** Miriam Gregory in Labassa's Music Room (standing) with husband Shane Pieper (seated) and their son Ardian.

**Photo:** Shane Pieper. Photographer unconfirmed.

Miriam Gregory, one of Labassa's long-term residents, has passed away only five months after being diagnosed with mesothelioma.

Miriam "inherited" the Music Room flat (Flat 2) from her sister Jessica after she, her husband Peter Tarpey and their son Malachy moved to Bairnsdale. Miriam lived in Flat 2 for almost a decade making her residency one of the longest for that era.

Before meeting Shane Pieper and marrying at Labassa in 1980, Miriam shared the flat with her sister, Leonie, and artist John Money. Miriam and Shane's sons Ardian and Liam were born at Labassa – Ardian in the Billiards Room (1979) and Liam in the Music Room (1984). Miriam later reflected that "despite its grandeur the Music Room has had a lot of children's laughter in it." Ardian tragically passed away in 2000.

Miriam was known for her exceptional kindness towards others needing a place to stay, including the Kohlman family and Gabrielle Brunsdon (formerly Gabrielle Patience) who recalls: "I had seen myself almost homeless on many an occasion, and yet for the generosity of those around me I can gratefully say I had a place there to settle for a while."

In 1980 Miriam hosted the Women's Liberation Halfway House Collective Film Group for a series of workshops with director Dr Erika Addis.

The result was the film *Women Break Out* set in a feminist refuge. *Women Break Out* was only one of many occasions when Miriam allowed film makers to use the Flat.

The feature film *Apostasy* was shot in the Music Room over a three month period in 1977. Several residents were involved in the production and the credits acknowledge Miriam Gregory, Leonie Gregory and Ann Moir amongst others.

Miriam also appeared in resident Howard Watkinson's film *La Vie Ignoble* in the same year. In the 1980s, Russell D. Clarke and Jim Nicolaides filmed a belly dancer sequence in the Music Room for their music clip *Stranded*.

Miriam herself was a writer and an experimental artist. She even created an in-house string installation in the Music Room with sister Leonie. A matrix of string was woven between existing nails and fixtures, eventually covering the 1890 coffered ceiling.

Miriam passed away on 31 January 2023. She is survived by husband Shane Pieper, sons Liam and Sean and her extended family.



## My Labassa

By John Laurie

*The act of looking backward, like looking into the future, is an act of divination; and if the prophet is well called an historian of the future, the historian is just as well called a prophet of the past.*

Karl Daub, 1765–1836

Here's an old Russian custom: when one is leaving on a journey, or for good: all sit together in silence for a while before departing.

Another custom, from somewhere else: sit in silence for a while, alone, in a prospective home.

I gather these customs and many others from my travels, to try and map a more serene passage through life than the chaos and tumult that surrounds me.

I live in many places over the years and each has its own 'aura' — welcoming and warm, indifferent, hostile — nothing to do with decor, style, age or condition. I live well in loved old hovels, but in some, possibly beautiful, I sit down for just a minute then rush out.

For a while I inhabit an old long-departed captain's house overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Beautiful and tragic all at once with ruthless beauty and hypnotic calm punctured by ferocious storms which whip in frenzy and bend the palms horizontal and break the louvres in their frames. I feel it seducing with its beauty to a dire end — and so it comes to pass.

But Labassa is a place I sink into like a favourite armchair, a picture from Mussorgsky's Exhibition or Tiepolo's Banquet of Cleopatra. It welcomes my dreams — it understands the romance of the past and accepts any fantasy.

I'm in my old flat, a couple of years ago, as a 'Living Relic' on Open Day. I'm tapping away on my portable typewriter, just like I did 56 years before. Bo Peep stops outside my window, then takes a selfie against the column. At the same time, the lives of past tenants and owners flow through the house, its history and the transformations in society over the years speak in its walls. The continuity is unbroken.



*Above:* Open Day 2021. Labassa still welcomes the fantastic. *Photo:* John Laurie.

When Adrian Rawlins declaims Ginsberg's "Howl" from the empty statue plinth it isn't just random happenstance, it's the essence of "beat", invited by Labassa, which understands. The plinth is empty in readiness, the poet arrives, there's no question what needs to be done and said.



*Above:* The Poet in the Plinth. *Photo:* Nigel Buesst.

*continued page 6*

*My Labassa (cont.)*

*Left:* The sheltering roof of Labassa.  
*Photo:* John Laurie.

*Above:* John Laurie, 2021.  
*Photo:* Jon Boughton.

We watch, on a borrowed 16mm projector against a sheet on the wall, Jean Cocteau's *Blood of a Poet*, and *Les Enfants Terribles*. We identify with Elisabeth and Paul because Labassa has its own poetry.

I'm lying in my room stoned for maybe only the third time. Bill Wyman's bass lines in *Now I've got a witness* are propelling my mind into a state of bliss when flatmate Peter (Barrett) wanders in with a sarcastic remark and we laugh forever.

Huddled around the Valor Junior as the wild wind off the bay rattles the windows, our hands around the hot tea, breath hanging in the air. It's all before us — after those years of protection, the cold only opens our eyes wider and food is an afterthought.

The myth of down-at-heel aristocracy in dilapidated castles is ours. In *Visions of Cody* (1960) Jack Kerouac declares "Everything belongs to me because I am poor."

The peeling faded paint, mould stains in the walls, crumbling ceiling plaster with lathes exposed, merge with the gold embossed wallpaper, the stained glass and statues, the faded ornate carpet and the woodwork worn with ages and proclaim all the travails, pains and pleasures down the years.

Its early days, fresh and young with starry-eyed new owners basking in the wealth of colonial enterprise, give way to its life work — as a refuge, a haven for dreamers, a sanctuary after struggle, as "downstairs" down tools and embrace their freedom with love and creativity. Labassa is a welcoming host.

It hasn't changed much underneath. It's now quieter, like me, living more in memories and a sadness that all its children are grown up and gone. I haven't changed much either. I still think the future only ends when you're dead, I still love Bill Wyman's bass lines and I still try to walk into mirrors.

I take a photo that Open Day which shows Labassa as it is for me, then, now and always. A darkening lurid sky, with the parapets, chimneys and roof shining wet as it stands tall over the surrounding suburbs stretching away to the sea. I see Quasimodo climbing over the gables, hear Raskolnikov howling in the cellar, Peter Homewood hosting a party in the Music Room and my mates tapping away at their novels in Flat 6. Long may it stand.



## Return to Labassa 2023

Former owners, residents, their descendants and those with a special connection to Labassa are invited to an exclusive gathering on Sunday 7 May. This reunion will be an opportunity for you to share memories, and, view films, photos and memorabilia collected since the last reunion in 2013.

**Return to Labassa essentials:**

**Date:** Sunday 7 May 2023

**Times:** 11am – 3pm. Invitees can attend any time during the event but note the following:

The reunion is not open to the public. Due to capacity limits only those with a connection to the property, plus one guest, will receive an invitation. 'Walk ins' may be admitted on the day subject to eligibility.

**Cost:** \$10 per person (to cover Eventbrite administrative costs and light refreshments)

The National Trust is interested in the return of decorative items. Finding one of the brolgas removed from the parapet in the 1930s would be on the 'most wanted' list.

Decorative features, with a provenance to the property, would also be of interest along with ephemera, photos of residents and the building. Photos showing the interior are especially rare and highly valued.

Please alert other 'alumni' you have contact with.

**Return to Labassa essentials:**

**Date:** Sunday 7 May 2023

**Times:** 11am – 3pm. Invitees can attend any time during the event but note the following:  
*11am – 1pm:* Focus on pre-1960 era.  
*1pm – 3pm:* Focus on 1960 – 2005.

**Cost:** \$10 per person (to cover Eventbrite administrative costs and light refreshments)

**Disability** By prior arrangement.

**Access:**

**Enquiries:** [vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au](mailto:vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au)

**Please register your interest in attending via this link:**

<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/returning-to-labassa-2023-expression-of-interest-to-attend-tickets-596542493657>



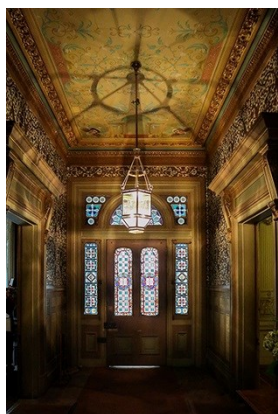
## Volume 11, Issue 1, 2023

## 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

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](http://nationaltrust.org.au/places/labassa)

## Special Open Day events

**21 May 2023: Luminosity**

Experience the brilliance of Labassa's original extravagant stained and etched glass.

**16 July 2023: Christmas in July**

Celebrate the sights, sounds and tastes of a mid-winter Christmas in the lavish surroundings of Labassa.

**15 October 2023: Labassa Garden tours**

Tours of Labassa's renewed garden with landscape architect Elizabeth Peck.

**Bookings are recommended for all open days.**

## It's all in the detail

The Return to Labassa on Sunday 7 May has the potential to greatly enhance our understanding of the property and its lived history. Photographic records, documents, objects and ephemera can enlighten us in unexpected ways.



**Image 1:** Although the purpose of this photo was to capture these unidentified residents at the front of their magnificent home, it has also captured a previously undocumented stencilled ceiling above the balcony.

**Photo:** Irene Watkin.

**Images 3, 4, 5:**

At present, the best images of the brolgas that once decorated the parapet were taken in the 1940s and early 1950s.

These photos (left and below) were taken by the Hodgens and Westwood families and reveal how varied they were in size and detail.

**Photos:** Lee Kennedy, Maxine Pritchard.



**Image 2:** While human memory is often unreliable, this letter from real estate agent LJ Hooker to the tenant of Flat 8 makes it possible to precisely date certain events.

**Image:** Judith Cordingley Collection.

