

# Labassa *lives*

Volume 11, Issue 3, 2024

## Defining a decade



**Above:** Paul Brunet, Willas resident 1976, taken in the Drawing Room flat (Flat 10). **Photo:** John Harland.



**Above:** Trevor Stevens, Labassa resident 1976, taken in the Butler's Pantry which was part of Flat 10. **Photo:** John Harland.



NATIONAL  
TRUST

Labassa

Each decade in Labassa's history is unique, shaped by an owner's ambition, distinct waves of migration and changes to living conditions within the building.

Most photographic records up until the mid-1960s show very little of the mansion's interior or the social life of its occupants. The cost of a roll of film and its processing was beyond the means of many residents and photography was reserved for special occasions.

That changed with the arrival of a new wave of residents, especially those studying photography at local colleges or working as film and television creatives with the ABC studios at Ripponlea. Some of Labassa's most captivating images were taken between 1964 and 1985.

By the 1970s, the residents were mainly young adults but often from strikingly different cultural backgrounds and life experiences.

Resident, John Harland's archive of more than 350 photos taken between 1973 and 1982 captures much of that diversity.

Other photos from John Harland's collection can be found in *Labassa Lives* Vol. 1, No. 2, p.4.

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## Labassa and the sport of kings

### by Andrew Lemon

What a sight it would have been: Mr Alexander Robertson, holding the reins, atop his handsome carriage drawn by a team of four matched horses, sweeping down the drive and out through the gates of his grand mansion home, Ontario—later Labassa. It was October 1892, and he and his family were on their way in style to Flemington Racecourse for Victoria Derby Day. This was the man who, with his fellow Canadian, Jack Wagner, had made his first fortune in the 1860s after buying the famous Cobb and Co. passenger coach business, and a second fortune in pastoral and mining investments. He had just spent a large chunk of that fortune on transforming the former home of Judge Billing into the opulent house that endures today. As you would expect for the man who ran Cobb and Co., Robertson had a deep knowledge of horses. He drove his coach-and-four with aplomb.

Robertson had a long involvement with the sport of racing in Victoria. He was a business associate and friend of Richard Goldsbrough, the rambunctious Yorkshireman who founded the Australian stock and station broking empire best remembered as Goldsbrough Mort. There was a family connection, by marriage, between the two. Robertson became a director and later chairman of the Goldsbrough company.

Richard Goldsbrough had been a committee member of the Victoria Racing Club from its foundation in 1864, and Robertson was first elected to the committee three years later. The VRC was responsible for Flemington Racecourse and the Melbourne Cup, and was already recognised as the racing authority for the whole colony. At that time Robertson resided in Castlemaine. He was chairman of the elected stewards, sometimes official starter, at the annual races. At the January 1866 Castlemaine race meeting with his horse, Exile, he won the rich two mile Great Centre Handicap, defeating the recent Melbourne Cup winner, Toryboy. Exile, under different ownership, went on to finish second and third, respectively, in the next two Melbourne Cups.

In that era, committeemen acted as hands-on officials and stewards at race meetings. We find references to Robertson occupying such roles at races at Flemington, Caulfield and Kyneton as well as Castlemaine. Robertson in his thirties was an accomplished horseman who rode to hounds with the Melbourne Hunt Club on the trail of deer, hares and kangaroos.



*Left: "Melbourne Cup: On the road to Flemington". Illustrated Sydney News, 5 November, 1892, p.10.*

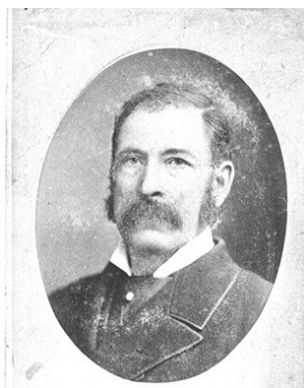
Unlike some of his wealthy contemporaries, Robertson never became an owner of racehorses on a large scale. The earliest reference to horses racing under his ownership was at the Inglewood races, north-west of Bendigo, in 1862. It was during the years between 1878 and 1883, after he had relocated to his new home, Ottawa, in Toorak, that he was most heavily involved in horse ownership. Most of his horses were trained by Phil Heywood at stables near Caulfield Racecourse. There was a brief racing partnership with his Cobb and Co. colleague, Jack Wagner. Their best horse was Great Western who in 1882 won the VRC Grand National Steeplechase at Flemington, ridden by the famous cross country jockey, Tommy Corrigan. Several of the racehorses carried Canadian names in tribute to the partners' place of origin, including the colts Ontario and St Lawrence. They had a good two-year-old, Welcome Jack, who dead-heated for first place in the rich Maribyrnong Plate at Flemington in 1880. Almost all the horses were sold when Wagner headed off to England in late 1883.

In February 1887 Robertson's eldest daughter from his first marriage, Emmie (Emily Blanche), married Harry Cooper Bagot at Trinity Church, Balaclava, with a reception at the yet-to-be transformed Ontario. Harry was the son of the late Robert Cooper Bagot, the man who in the Australian Racing Hall of Fame is acknowledged as making Flemington a showpiece and the Melbourne Cup an annual ritual. There have been some suggestions that Robertson disapproved of the marriage, but he and the widely respected Bagot senior would have known each other well.

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## Labassa and the sport of kings (cont.)



*Far left: (L-R): Alexander, Eva, Nina and Harold Robertson.*

*Left: Mr Alexander Robertson.*

*Photos: Neil Robertson.*

Robertson now took the rest of his family to England, leasing the Ontario property while contemplating the rebuilding of the mansion upon his return. He resigned from the VRC committee in January 1887, after twenty years, his place taken by Sir William Clarke.

Based in England for the next two and a half years, Robertson determinedly made an impression as a lavish spender. It began with a visit in style to Epsom for the 1887 English Derby, as described by a contemporary reporter:

"I looked in during the morning at the Hotel Metropole, where a big colonial contingent is quartered, and saw several well-known Australians preparing to brave the perils of the road. A well-appointed drag, horsed by four splendid "coachers", was ready to convey Mr and Mrs Walter Hall, Mr and Mrs Tom Hall, Mr A.W. Robertson, Mr D'Arcy, of Rockhampton, and others to the course. Jack Wagner held the ribbons, and showed 'how they do it in Australia.' A pile of hampers testified that the wants of the inner man had not been unprovided for, and provision had evidently been made for the possible invasion of hungry and thirsty friends." (*Australian Town and Country Journal*, 16 July 1887.)

By the time Robertson was driving his own coach-and-four to Flemington for the local Derby Day in 1892, he had recently resumed his place on the VRC Committee. Apart from a couple of short breaks thereafter, he continued as a committeeman until his death, but his role was marginal. He was now in his sixties and no longer the prominent racing man of yesteryear.

Misfortunes came upon him in these later years: a fire at the brand new Ontario stables in April 1892 when four of his carriage horses perished; a serious accident in a new-fangled elevator in a Sydney hotel in May 1892; and most profoundly a hit to his fortunes as the economic depression worsened. All contributed to a dramatic decline in health and his death in 1896.

As documented in *Labassa Lives*, the house and grounds were then leased for a time to the man known as George Gray, purportedly a Western Australian mining millionaire. 'Is This Labassa's Greatest Rogue?' the article asked (Vol.7 No.1, 2017), and the answer is probably 'Yes'. In a strategic move, Gray shifted from Perth to Melbourne in 1898, hoping against all logic that well-publicised race-track and betting success would be remunerative and build reputation to help him float the Chesney gold and copper mine at Cobar in outback New South Wales. While still in the west he had begun buying expensive horses: successful performers and well-bred yearlings, including a son of the great Carbine. In Melbourne these were first placed with the Caulfield trainer, James Redfearn. One of Gray's horses was a full brother to Redfearn's 1891 Melbourne Cup winner, Malvolio. With marketing in mind, he named the horse Chesney.

Nothing in Gray's stable lived up to its promise. Chesney won only a modest two-year-old race at Caulfield. Gray reportedly lost large bets on big races. Reading between the lines, he must soon have been in debt to horse breeders and trainers. With little fanfare, in July 1899 he sold all the racehorses. Some of them went on to win good races for their new owners. Chesney was snapped up for his original purchase price by Harry Skinner, a caterer on a large scale at sporting events. The astute Skinner immediately sold the colt for twice as much to an agent acting on behalf of an English owner called 'Mr Jersey', whom everyone knew was the actress Lily Langtry, close friend of Edward, Prince of Wales.

Historian, Andrew Lemon, is the author of the three volume *The History of Australian Thoroughbred Racing and the historical novel The Pebbled Beach at Pentecost, among many titles. He lived at Labassa 1975-78. His book on the steeplechaser, Crisp, The Black Kangaroo, is forthcoming. Chesney gets a mention. Andrew wrote 'The Gardener's Son' in Labassa Lives Vol.6 No.2, 2018 about Alan Cooper, prolific and profligate racehorse owner and gambler in the 1920s and 1930s.*

## Letters from America

*Labassa was a flop house for “approved” travellers in the late 60s and throughout the 70s. Penny Wilson hosted two girls travelling around Australia even though she only knew their first names: Vicky and Lynn. Peter and Mary Hitchens, who were travelling the world in a 1930s Rolls Royce hearse, were welcomed by Judith Cordingley. Then there were the “young Americans”: Dave Hill and Parke Poindexter Lightbown who spent six months or so in Australia while on a world trip in 1969-70. Parke made a home for himself in Labassa’s tower while Dave stayed with David Innes in Flat 5 (Old Laundry flat).*

### Dave Hill writes:

“I have a box with hundreds of letters from the period beginning when we left California for Australia until we got home from Europe. Many are from Parke in Australia. It has been eye opening to me. Old memories have been flooding back and I find some details I had forgotten.

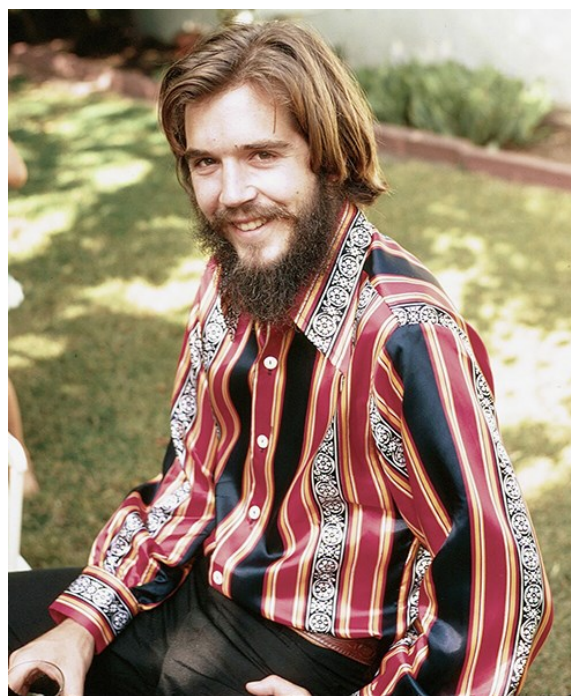
Parke Poindexter Lightbown was named after his uncle Parke Poindexter Jones – a prominent bookstore owner in Washington D.C. He attended George Washington University and was just a few credits away from graduating. Parke was the best friend I could ask for and he was one of the brightest and most well-read persons I have known. He died of cancer in the late 1990s.

We became close friends during high school and after I returned from serving in the US Navy we became ‘best’ friends. In 1968 we moved to Los Angeles where I had a job waiting. We both had a desire to explore the world and so began planning a trip around the world.

Our plans became complicated because during our year in California I met Mary, the one who would become the love of my life. Mary and I sensed something special right away but by this time my travel plans were advanced and couldn’t be cancelled.

Parke and I decided we would start our journey in Australia. We landed in Sydney in late 1969 and hitch-hiked our way to Canberra, then along the NSW coast down to Walhalla finally arriving in Melbourne where we stayed for about a week with Ron and Mary Heath who had given us a ride along the way. Ron knew someone who lived at Labassa.

We then headed north to Brisbane and worked on the Queensland railroad for a few weeks. Arriving back in Melbourne in early January 1970, we stayed with Chris and Annette Bayley, one of the couples who had given us a lift during our previous trip to Melbourne. They invited us to go camping at Princetown on the Great Ocean Road with some Labassa residents.



**Above:** Dave Hill, June 1969, shortly before departing for Australia. **Photo:** Dave Hill.

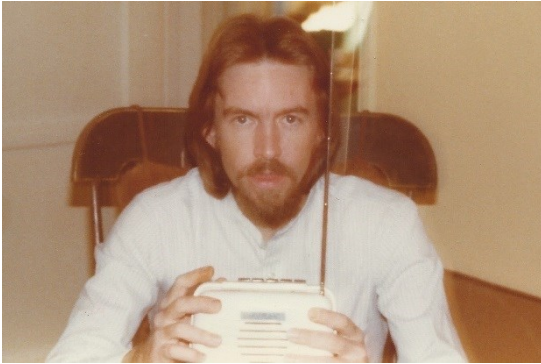


**Above:** Dave and Parke camped out with Labassa residents and friends at Princetown. **Left to right:** Unidentified man, Judi (in background), unidentified man. Jake and Penny’s green van in the background. **Photo:** Dave Hill.

Someone had a relative who owned a farm and we camped on the farm for several days, loaded hay onto a tractor, hunted rabbits for making into rabbit stew and generally had a fun time. There were a few Labassa residents there including Derek Hambly, Ken Forrester and his partner Judi.

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*Letters from America (cont.)*

**Above:** Parke Poindexter Lightbown.

**Photo:** Dave Hill.

Following the camping trip we went to live at Labassa. The tower where Parke stayed had no windows and it was so coooold. This was not too much of a problem though because we had sleeping bags and had been living outdoors during our travels. Labassa was very comfortable as the people there felt like fellow travellers. Everyone was kind, or at least tolerant of us – Judith Cordingley, David Innes, Di Coulter, Derek Hambly, someone named Darrell, a tall man with long blonde hair, and Jake and Penny who hosted a small going away party. Penny baked a 9 X 12 one layer cake with chocolate frosting and lettering on the top saying “Yankee go home”. It was a very sweet gesture.

Parke and I then went our different ways for several months. He got a job at a chemical factory and I signed on to work on an off shore oil rig off Robe, South Australia. When I had time off I would return “home” to Labassa. After two stints on the oil rig I decided to return to California. I hadn’t realised how much I talked about Mary and her son, Matt, until someone suggested that I bring her to Australia. For many reasons that was impractical and over the next month or so I spent time earning money and preparing for my return. I left Labassa in late April, 1970. I was leaving my best friend half way around the world to go be with the love of my life. Mary and I married in May 1970.

I still have the letters Parke wrote to me from this period. One dated 5<sup>th</sup> June 1970 says: *Boris put Randall’s bed 7 feet high up on four posts & painted his bedroom black. Klaus has a night shift job & David told me you wrote to him. Jake & Penny are fine – Penny has a new job. Darryl & Jenny are \*\*\* as ever<sup>1</sup>. Ken & Judy whom I dined with last night & really miss you & were \*\*\* on the idea of you settling here eventually. They also had Glenda, Judy’s sister for dinner too.*



**Above:** Parke attended the marriage of Judi and Ken Forrester at St Peter’s Eastern Hill in May 1970.

**Left to right:** Penny Jakobson, Ross Horman, Parke, Ken Forrester, John Smith, Daryl Muxworthy and the unknown partner of Ross Nicholson.

**Photo:** Judi Forrester.

Parke remained part of the Labassa scene and in July wrote to say he was going camping at Walhalla with Jake and Penny and a “passle of other people”<sup>2</sup>. After moving out of Labassa he lived in Malvern Road, Toorak, later continuing his round the world trip with new partner Liz Chandler whom he had met through Chris Bayley.

I fondly remember Labassa as a wonderful place for travellers to stay with so many creative people who seemed to get along and were very friendly to strangers. All this came with the backdrop of the dusty and sometimes faded but beautiful furnishings and architecture of the mansion.”

#### **Memories of Parke by Derek Hambly**

Drawing Room flat resident and artist Derek Hambly, who now lives in the USA, remembers Parke very well. “I was just thinking about him last week, wondering where he might be living here, in the states, to maybe catch up. Parke and I used to talk through the days and some nights. A lot of talk was about education and what it did for us.

I remember he loved the thick paints on my palette and how he thought it spoke volumes about me.

I also remember him helping to replace a ring in the motor of my old Mark 7 Jaguar. It was a huge mess of a job but he seemed to love doing it. We did it inside my flat on the big dining room floor. Brought the motor through the huge bay window.”

<sup>1</sup> \*\*\* These words were indecipherable.

<sup>2</sup> Passle or passel meaning group.

## Island of beauty in a sea of ugliness

By Victoria Hammond

*This is memoir first appeared as two overlapping articles in Labassa Quarterly Vol 7, No. 2 and Volume 8, No.3. The text has been edited for continuity.*

It was my privilege to live at Labassa from 1969-72, in the flat that stretched from the Drawing Room to the small barred room beneath the tower. Most of my fellow tenants were also young and associated with the arts, but there were enough in other walks of life to make it a truly interesting and often exciting community. The occupants at that time included five painters, a sculptor – all graduates of Caulfield Tech – three musicians, two writers, a librarian, a couple in advertising, two public servants, a factory shop steward, a Hell's Angel, a seaman, an English teacher, various undirected flower-children who came and went, a Californian traveller with the wonderful name Parke Pointdexter Lightbound [sic]<sup>1</sup> the Third, and a mysterious elderly couple who for decades had lived in the isolated upstairs flat.

Most of us were united by our adoration of Labassa, our endeavours to care for it even though we feared it to be doomed and our curiosity about this dignified elderly couple. They never spoke and we never saw them apart. They would come in the front door – she in a slouch hat half-covering her Garboesque face, he in his cashmere cardigan solicitously holding her arm – and silently glide along the hall and up the stairs. Legend had it that she was Australia's first woman racing car driver. Why one of us didn't simply satisfy our curiosity by speaking to them, I can't imagine, except to say they had an aura of wanting to be left alone.

Life was so rich living with this community of people in such inspirational surroundings that it is difficult to place any one incident that is somehow representative of that time. I remember feeling terribly irritated one afternoon when one of us pronounced that we were all 'escapists' – we drove beautiful old cars; played antique grand pianos<sup>2</sup>; we often wore period clothes – the women long velvet gowns and fur coats, the men old leather coats or antique military uniforms (all of these could be had for a song in those days – like Labassa they were not valued), and generally lived in another world, out of touch with the real one.



*Left:* Victoria Hammond with fellow resident Ross Hambly. Victoria was known as Cheryl when this photo was taken in 1969.

*Photo:* Carole Harper.

This state of affairs seemed to me perfectly reasonable – Labassa was after all an island of beauty in a sea of ugliness – but only a month or two later I understood exactly what she was getting at. One of the occupants was an eccentric Scottish writer who for eight years worked as a public servant by day and read or wrote all night. He was always white with exhaustion. Although he lived in the small room under the tower that was part of our flat, the library at Labassa, appropriately enough, was entirely given over to his books – thousands of them, everything from Plato to Einstein to Sylvia Plath – stacked high in teetering columns.

A certain furtiveness in his manner was one day explained when I answered the door to a very large, pleasant woman from Wagga Wagga and her five attractive children. When I told him his wife and children whom he'd never mentioned were waiting to see him, he reeled back, turning even whiter. "How could they possibly have found me here?" he groaned, clutching his temple. This event goaded him into action of sorts, for a month later his majestic mother, a Boston columnist, turned up and whisked him off to America. Generously he told a few of us we could have whichever of his books we wanted. I still have at least a hundred.

<sup>1</sup> Parke Pointdexter Lightbown.

<sup>2</sup> Victoria had a piano saved from the Tivoli Theatre in the south bay Drawing Room of her flat.

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## Island of beauty in a sea of ugliness (cont.)

Although we didn't live in each other's pockets, there was a lovely spirit of friendship and fun among the tenants. I remember a New Years' Eve party when two young men painted their bodies and stood in the stairwell niches. They stood there most of the night, looking like gorgeous statues

Only one deliberate act of vandalism occurred at Labassa during the time I lived there; the bronze lamps on the newel posts of the grand staircase were ripped out and stolen, presumably by one or several of the Hell's Angels who had attended a party at Labassa that night. This pair of lamps has not been recovered.<sup>1</sup>

When a number of us simultaneously received notices to quit, we assumed the worst. With the best of intentions, a few committed acts of vandalism by removing fixtures like door pelmets, the pendant lights in the hall and the bronze devil above the entrance door, believing that one day these mementoes would be all that remained of Labassa.



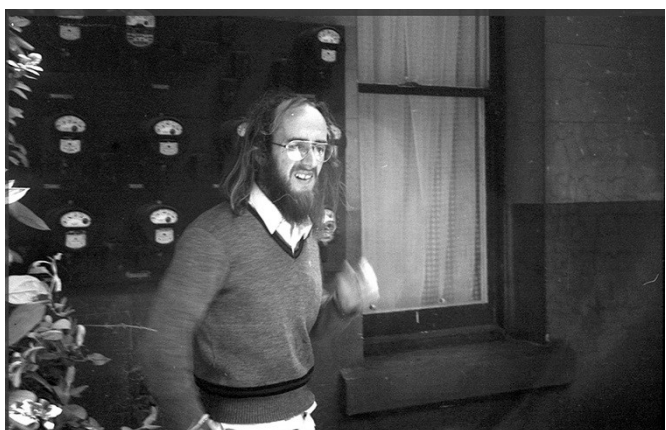
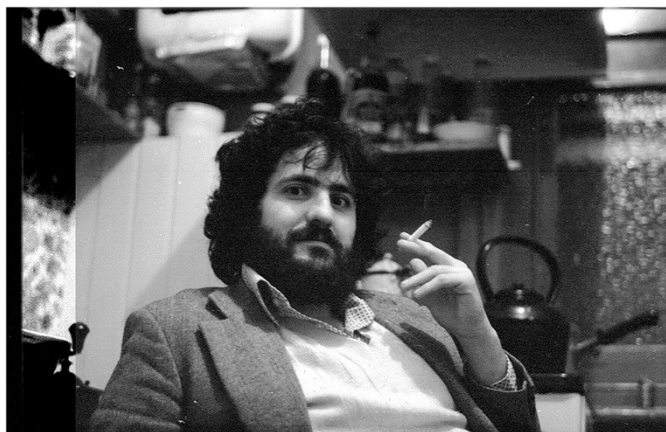
**Left:**  
The rococo carving taken by Victoria when she left Labassa has been reinstalled above the Drawing Room door.

**Photo:**  
Jessica Hood.

I took a beautiful piece of rococo carving from above one of the doors. Of course, when we found the National Trust had bought the house, we returned the decoration so it could be restored to its rightful place.

<sup>1</sup>For an eyewitness account see *Labassa Lives*, Vol. 5. No.2, p.4.

## Defining a decade (cont.)



**Photos:** John Harland.



**Above:** Judy Cordingley (right), "very pregnant, in oldest, biggest dress", back at Labassa to clear her flat for Johnny Kesselschmidt (top left) to move in. Judy lived in the Dining Room flat (Flat 8). Pictured with visitor Heather Witts in Tower c.1978.

**Top left:** Johnny Kesselschmidt, resident Dining room flat (Flat 8) c.1978, in the now demolished kitchen annexe.

**Left:** Geoff Lawson, resident Kitchen flat (Flat 7), 1973-76.

## Volume 11, Issue 3, 2024

## Forthcoming Open Days

Contributions, corrections, information, comments, photos 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 for special events and to confirm dates, times and booking details: [nationaltrust.org.au/places/labassa](http://nationaltrust.org.au/places/labassa)

## Enriching lives

Thanks to the dedication and support of many people, a significant number of whom have been profiled in this journal over the years, the wonderful Labassa and its stories live on.

You too, can leave a legacy that lives on for ever. You can help to secure and protect Labassa's future by making the most personal gift of all – leaving a gift in your Will for Labassa.

No matter how much you are able to leave as a legacy (there is no minimum or maximum) your gift will help to conserve Labassa. It will be invested in the National Trust of Victoria Foundation – Labassa subfund, whereby the capital is invested in perpetuity and the earnings (interest) are spent on priority conservation work and projects.

You may have already seen some of the recent work that has been completed, for example, interior plastering and ceiling conservation in the first floor front bedroom, restoration of the two bases of the columns at the front entrance, partial repairs to damage in the music room and new carpet in the entrance hallway.

Did you know that 30 per cent of Australians say they will consider leaving a gift in their Will to a charity, but only around 8 per cent actually do so? You can help close this gap – any amount, no matter how small, will make a difference and help to save our irreplaceable heritage.

The generous people who tell us that they have left a gift in their Will, become members of the Armytage Society. They receive special invitations to events and activities. (However, if you wish to leave a bequest and not tell us, we also love surprises!) The Armytage Society is our way of showing appreciation during your lifetime for your future generosity.



*Above:* Thanks to generous donations from benefactors and the National Trust of Victoria Foundation the 40-year-old brown carpet in Labassa's hallway has been replaced. The colour was chosen based on the recollections of early residents. *Photo:* Jon Boughton, December 2023.

If you would like to find out more, please reach out and get in touch! Telephone our bequests team on 03 9656 9871, or email [willsandbequests@nattrust.com.au](mailto:willsandbequests@nattrust.com.au) and come to one of our complimentary morning teas or events. Or find further information here: [www.nationaltrust.org.au/about-us-vic/foundations-vic/](http://www.nationaltrust.org.au/about-us-vic/foundations-vic/)



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