**Hollywood Glamour at Skipton**

**THE STORY OF MOORAMONG**

**Early History - the ‘Scottish squattocracy’**

**Mooramong**, in the heart of Victoria’s Western District, is a sheep station renowned for the production of fine wool. In the pioneering days the area was taken up in vast ‘runs’ and the little town of Skipton, which celebrated its 175th Anniversary in 2014, was established.

The property is part of the 15,000 hectare squatting run originally occupied in **1838** by the Scottish immigrant **Alexander Anderson** and his two partners. When the run known as **Baangal** was divided in the 1860’s, Anderson took over the northern portion, which he named **Mooramong**.

Anderson was prominent in the development of the Skipton area, supporting the famous Skipton Sheep Shows and the Presbyterian Church. His brother Henry Anderson for some years held the nearby **Borriyalloak** run.

By 1871 Anderson had sold off all but about a third of the run and had made sufficient money to commission the Geelong architects **Davidson & Henderson**, who a few years earlier had designed **Barwon Park**, to draw up plans for a very well-proportioned timber house. Built in **1873**, the house was surrounded by a neat garden and hedges.

Anderson sold the property in 1889 and **Mooramong** passed into the hands of the **Stoddart** family. They were popular in the district and the football prowess of the ‘Stoddart boys’ is still remembered. The youngsters were said to have played league football whilst still attending **Geelong College**. It is thought that this family added the **Staff Wing** to the homestead.

By 1908 Mooramong had been acquired by **Robert Carstairs** **Bell** and soon the Melbourne architects **Smith and Ogg** were engaged to extend the homestead, with the **Bedroom Wing** being added in 1909.

**Mackinnon ownership and horse racing – L K S Mackinnon Stakes**

**Mooramong** was sold to **W H** **Johnston** in 1920 and then again in **1926** to **L K S Mackinnon**, who bought the property for his son **Donald**, to present to him on his **21st birthday**. Originally comprising 11,300 acres, the farm was later reduced to just over 6,000 acres by Soldier Settlement acquisitions and to the present 3,800 acres upon its bequest to the **National Trust** in 1978, which was finalised in **1981**.

**Donald John Scobie [D J S] Mackinnon** was born in **1906**. Donald’s mother Jessie was a member of the Simson family, who in in the mid 1800’s were owners of **Trawalla Station** near **Beaufort** and later of **Trawalla**, a grand Italianate mansion in Toorak.

His father [L K S] was a senior partner in the Melbourne firm of solicitors, **Blake and Riggall** and a noted racehorse owner. The famous sprinter **Woorak** was part of his stable, as was the **1914 Melbourne Cup** winner, **Kingsburgh**.

Chairman of the **Victoria Racing Club** for twenty years, L K S was so admired by his racing peers that the Melbourne Stakes, run at **Flemington** on **Derby Day**, was re-named the **L K S Mackinnon Stakes**. The Mackinnons lived in Domain Road, South Yarra and spent summers at their family holiday house in Sorrento. They drove **Rolls Royce** vehicles with personalised number plates, relaxed in the Committee Box at Flemington Racecourse and schooled their son at **Geelong Grammar**, where he excelled at rowing.

It was usual for sons of ‘well-to-do’ families to complete their education at Oxford or Cambridge and Donald [or Scobie as he was called] was no exception to this rule. After finishing at Geelong Grammar he was enrolled at **Jesus College, Cambridge**. A tall and talented oarsman, he was a very popular captain of the college’s first eight. Under his captaincy, the crew won carnivals in 1926, 1927 and 1928. The decoratively inscribed oars used by his winning crews adorn the walls in the Library at **Mooramong**.

Along with the **Mooramong** property, for Donald’s 21st birthday his father also had delivered to Cambridge a Rolls Royce, for his use whilst studying in England. Donald had a successful and enjoyable time at Cambridge. His academic career was relatively undistinguished, however he livened up his studies with frequent trips to London’s theatres and restaurants. Term holidays were spent at the Mackinnon’s ancestral estate at **Duisdale** on the **Isle of Skye**, which L K S had inherited from two maiden aunts.

On his return to Australia, Donald took over **Mooramong** and set about the more serious business of becoming a grazier.

**Skipton meets Hollywood in London**

In **1937** Donald [Scobie], then aged 32, returned to England for a rowing re-union that was also centred around celebrations in advance of the coronation of **King George VI**. At that time Scobie was one of the most eligible bachelors in the Western District.

There were many pre-coronation parties being held in London and it was at one of these that Scobie met **Claire Adams**, a **Canadian** born actress and famous **Hollywood silent movie star**. In 1937 she was in England to sing on **BBC Radio**. Prior to this Claire had enjoyed a stellar film career, spanning approximately **50** films, many of them “action movies” which involved doing her own stunt work on horses and with some featuring the original **Rin-Tin-Tin**. Born in **1894**, she was briefly a child actress, then a nurse in the Great War. In **1919** Claire won a beauty and talent competition that took her from **Winnipeg** to **America**.

After retiring from film work in **1928**, the year “talkies” were introduced, Claire married a very wealthy film producer, **Benjamin Hampton**, many years her senior. Widowed in **1932**, Claire forged a successful singing career giving concerts in Hollywood which then, fortuitously as it turned out, took her back to England where she had earlier completed her education.

It was at a party in Mayfair where Claire and Scobie’s eyes ‘met across a crowded room’, as the saying goes and Claire reputedly said to one of her friends – **“That is the man I am going to marry”**.

The two fell in love and three weeks later on the **1st of April 1937** they were indeed wed, at **Christ Church of England, Mayfair**. The event was recorded in the social pages of newspapers and magazines in Britain, America and Australia.

He was thirty-two and she was forty-three, although their **Marriage Certificate**, a copy of which is on display at **Mooramong**, shows that Claire somehow “lost” more than a decade when this document was signed. Regardless, they made a most attractive couple and following their wedding celebrations, embarked on a year-long honeymoon touring Scotland, Europe and America.

Claire always had a movie camera with her, as well as stills cameras. Throughout their lives together, both she and Scobie delighted in taking footage of their exploits, much of which is featured in the wonderful DVD, ***‘Mooramong - Private Hollywood’***.

**From Victoriana to Art Deco**

In **March 1938**, the Mackinnons arrived in Australia, also bringing with them their **Bentley convertible**, which is shown in film on this DVD being transferred from a ship to the docks in Sydney. The Mackinnons continued on to Melbourne and Donald introduced Claire to her new home, **Mooramong**.

Claire almost immediately set about re-modelling the Victorian era homestead into a building much more familiar to her in style, something that was at that time straight out of contemporary Hollywood.

The well-known Melbourne architect **Marcus Martin** was engaged to modernise the homestead and work swiftly began to alter it into the house one sees today, exceptional in its location and unique to Australia.

Mantelpieces, ceiling roses and other intricate details from the **Victorian** era were removed and replaced by the clean, uninterrupted lines and features of the **Art Deco** period, with the emblematic green colour from this era featuring in the wall-to-wall carpet, blinds and many other furnishings.

The weatherboards on the exterior were rendered over, the swimming pool and its cabana were built and the beautiful walled garden created. The pool, reputedly hand dug by 16 – 18 men and 9 feet deep at one end, was the largest in Victoria at the time and it was also heated, by a coke-fired boiler. Central heating had been installed, also fuelled by coke and the huge original cast iron boiler still remains in a bunker at **Mooramong**, a testament to engineering ingenuity from another age.

Mr and Mrs Mackinnon entertained lavishly and soon, a visit to **Mooramong** became one of the favourite pastimes within Western District and Melbourne social circles. The deep green bar in the **Mooramong** ‘Games Room’ was reputedly modelled on one that was on the **Queen Mary**. There was initial reluctance amongst the locals with regard to the introduction of ‘cocktail hour’ at the homestead, but it was not very long before this tradition was enthusiastically adopted.

**Diamonds, Rolls Royces and Philanthropy**

**T**he Mackinnon’s had very full and happy lives together at **Mooramong**, where they farmed, entertained and became very generous benefactors to many worthy causes, including the **Skipton Hospital** and the localprimary school, the **Melbourne University Veterinary School** and the **Lort Smith Animal Hospital**, together with many others.

Mrs Mackinnon was always a glamorous figure, wearing beautiful clothes, furs and jewels. She was the very best customer of **Georges**, often ordering new season’s fashions in every colour available. And she never sent anything back!

She was also a most loyal customer of both **Hardy’s** and **Kozminky’s** jewellers. Her diamond collection was quite famous and after her death in 1978, the sale of her jewellery realised a quarter of a million dollars at auction in Melbourne.

Scobie loved cars and the Mackinnons always had a **Rolls Royce** or a **Bentley** in their garage. Such was his allegiance to Rolls Royce, that Scobie had one converted into a ‘ute’ for working on the property.

It was used for carting around hay, lambs and the many dogs that Claire adopted. She was renowned for rescuing numerous abandoned puppies and dogs from Lort Smith, including a blind spaniel that made its home on the couch. Claire in particular was extremely fond of all animals and the Mackinnon bequest to the National Trust in 1981 enabled the 800 acre **Mackinnon Nature Reserve** at **Mooramong** to be created, as well as ensuring the preservation of the homestead and its beautiful gardens.

**World War Two**

**Conflict and Compassion**

This western district sheep station worked with the community to grow and develop resilience, through fighting fire, establishing reserves, revegetation, hosting breeding programs and participating in the war effort. Claire Mackinnon sang at many benefit concerts, working tirelessly for the Comforts Fund and numerous garden parties were held at **Mooramong** to raise funds during WWII.

Following the outbreak of World War Two, rationing of materials and fuel brought significant changes to life at **Mooramong**. During annual shearing, Scobie harnessed draught horses into the old wool wagon and carted huge stacks of bales into Skipton in order to save petrol.

**Conflagration at Skipton**

One event of great significance to **Mooramong** and in the lives of the Mackinnons during this war period was a catastrophic bushfire that swept through the property in January 1944, following the careless lighting of a campfire by two young drovers.

Many buildings were lost in this tragic event, which also claimed a number of lives in the Skipton and surrounding area. However the **Mooramong Homestead** was saved, due in no small part to Claire’s determination and her own tremendous efforts at dousing flames and embers with a bucket and mop, while kitchen staff ran small hoses onto hedges - ways that are incomparable to the fire-fighting methods of today.

**Soldier Settlement at Mooramong**

After World War II, approximately half of the then existing Mooramong farmland was acquired under the Soldier Settlement and Rural Finance Commission Scheme. The scheme was established between 1946 and 1959 and was administered by the State Government to assist returning soldiers and other members of Australia’s armed forces. One important remnant from the scheme remains within the Mooramong estate - a Soldier Settler’s Hut, which is located in the horse paddock south of the homestead precinct, on the track towards the Shearing Shed and Shearer’s Quarters.

Soldiers were able to purchase or lease the blocks of land to start farming activities and visitors to Mooramong can explore a typical Soldier Settler’s Hut from the 1940’s/50’s post-war era, in order to gain an appreciation of the spartan life returning soldiers and their families experienced whilst establishing a farming enterprise.

Soldier Settlement schemes were administered in Australia by the state governments for the benefit of returned servicemen after both World Wars, although it should be noted that WWI aboriginal servicemen were denied access to the scheme and only a tiny number nationally we're given land after WWII.

**Life in peacetime, Endowments and Bequests**

Eventually the war was over, new fences and buildings including the Wool Shed and Shearer’s Quarters were constructed and **Mooramong** returned to normal. Claire and Scobie resumed their active social life, attending horse races and parties in Melbourne, but still spending a lot of time at **Mooramong**, where Scobie continued to participate in the day to day running of the property and Claire oversaw care of the very colourful gardens. The Mackinnons also travelled overseas extensively and collected many mementos of their journeys to other parts of the world.

In peacetime as in wartime, the Mackinnons supported their district’s activities and endowed a fund enabling the older students from the **Skipton Primary School** to have an interstate trip each year. The **Year 2** students attend an overnight camp at Mooramong each year, with the youngsters and their teachers having a wonderful time looking for bandicoots and possums whilst exploring the property after dusk.

Claire and Donald never had children of their own, but they became godparents to many. Children were always at **Mooramong**, as shown by the footage contained in ***‘Mooramong - Private Hollywood’***. Their outstanding generosity in life continued after their deaths, with many charitable bequests, the most important of which was to entrust ownership of the property to the **National Trust of Australia (Victoria)**.

**Mooramong - a Living Museum**

The **Mooramong** homestead is a fascinating example of Art Deco remodelling and refurbishment, with all of its stylish overhead lighting, the many very long windows and the green colour evident in carpet, blinds, bathroom fittings and crockery etc.

As the Mackinnons had no children, or other relatives to which the property and its contents could be passed, it remains intact with the many pieces of fine furniture and artwork collected during a lifetime of travel by Claire and Scobie. There is also a large collection of knickknacks throughout the house, many featuring the animals Claire so loved, including specially made **“dog booties”**,for outside canine romps.

A **Steinway** pianogracesthe music room, along with a Wire Recorder and microphone**.** Claire had wanted a white piano but this request was denied and the first Steinway that arrived was sent back, reportedly because the tone was not quite right. The replacement instrument is a rarity in that this piano is made of Walnut. It was hand crafted in **Hamburg, Germany** and is dated **31st August, 1938**.

The **Wire Recorder** is a highly unusual piece of equipment to have in a private home, due to its great expense. These were usually only found in radio studios, but Claire used it to record her own singing. Remnants of these recordings, some under the tutelage of her father **Stanley Adams**, feature on ***‘Mooramong - Private Hollywood’***

Other interesting features within the homestead include the **Film Projector Cupboard** with its original equipment, Scobie’s impressive desk and the original papers in his Study [complete with gun cabinets] and Claire’s desk which is set up as a stage when opened. Thegrand table in the Dining Roomwouldseat 26 when fully extended towards both ends.

The full genealogy of the Mackinnon clan back to the **600’s** appears on one wall of the Library, in a large hand-written document embellished with the Mackinnon tartan, opposite the rowing oars from Cambridge.

In addition to the green ‘Queen Mary’ bar with its highlight thin red stripe, there is a very early remote controlled television, with a 10 metre lead to allow viewing anywhere in the Games Room, including from a **Grant Featherston** chair.

The main kitchen features a huge oil-fired **AGA** stove and the adjoining ante-room has a fascinating array of cooking equipment and gizmos from the 40’s through to the 70’s.

Outbuildings at **Mooramong** including the chauffer’s hut, the stables and tack room, dairy, laundry and meat house can also be viewed by visitors, along with some of the old farm machinery and the extraordinary cast iron water boiler in the bunker, a testament to engineering ingenuity from another age.

Nearby is a tennis court built in the 1930’s and the site of the old orchard and vegetable gardens, with a more recent drip-irrigated orchard planted within a protective fence.

**The Mackinnon Nature Reserve**

The creation of this Reserve formed part of the bequest to the National Trust and it is the home of many species of native birds and animals, including the endangered **brolga** and **Eastern Barred bandicoot**. A partnership with **Zoos Victoria** will soon see a trial of **Maremma dogs** bonded to a flock of sheep and also acting as guardian dogs for the bandicoots, against predation by foxes and other feral animals.

This is also one of the largest reserves in Victoria actively devoted to the protection of native grasslands and much of the area has had sheep excluded from it since 1988.

Recent works funded by the **Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority** have redeveloped a major causeway bordering the reserve, which will enable retention and release of water via sluice gates, from within the main **Horseshoe Swamp** wetland area. Completion of the project in April 2015 will now enable control of this most important of resources, in periods of both drought and flood.

**Walled Gardens**

There are two walled gardens at Mooramong. The inner pool garden formed part of the major changes made in 1938 when the swimming pool was dug and the cabana (changing rooms) built. This area reflects the Californian style garden of the 1930’s and it was the scene of many garden parties and ‘comfort’ parties during WWII. The flowers planted were bright and colourful, such as dahlias and gladioli.

The enormous bay tree is a remnant from pre-1938 when the outer walled garden was Victorian, with a hedge and grass walks between cottage style flower beds.

The gardens today reflect a mix of older trees and shrubs, colourful flowering plants and salt tolerant species which cope well with the bore water that Mooramong is reliant upon during periods of low rainfall.

**Forever Together…….**

As requested in their Wills, Claire and Scobie’s ashes are buried together in the walled garden, beneath a beautiful flowering peach tree. Theirs is a remarkable love story, now part of the district’s folklore and worthy of being recounted in one of those motion pictures that they both enjoyed so much.

**Donald John Scobie MACKINNON died in 1974, aged 68.**

**Claire Adams MACKINNON died in 1978, aged 84.**

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**GUEST ACCOMMODATION AT MOORAMONG**

Visitors to **Mooramong** now have the opportunity to stay on the property in one of the refurbished worker’s houses, the **Stockmans** and **Overseers Cottages**. Set in delightful gardens and comprising three bedrooms, beautiful furnishings and fabulous new bathrooms, these cottages are a great way for families or couples to soak up the atmosphere at **Mooramong**.

Cottage style pet friendly accommodation is also available in the very comfortable **Rouseabouts Quarters**.

Enjoy a few tranquil nights immersed in the unique history of Mooramong. Guests have free use of the swimming pool and tennis court, together with a complimentary guided tour of the homestead.

For more information please call **03 9656 9804** or visit **www.NationalTrust.org.au/Vic/Mooramong**