

OUR OWN  
GATSBY

HUGO BRASSEY OF DUNK ISLAND



BY KEN GRAY

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*Author:* Ken Gray. *Editor:* Margaret Remilton.

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## PHANTOM ENGAGEMENT

“Sounds like, Danny DeVito”, says Tom tempting Sarah’s avid curiosity.

“He’s that dwarf, funny guy who does movies, right?”, says Sarah, hoping to end the conversation so she can continue with her computer game.

“Christ, Sarah, you can’t say that these days.” “Anyway, he’s history Tom, no one knows who he is now.”

“This is history Sarah, but Danny DeVito’s not history yet. He made two movies in 2019 and did a voice over for a movie released in 2020 so he’s still up and about and making his mark.”

“Well, I haven’t time for that politically correct stuff as well as your mad stories; he is only 4 foot 10 inches tall I hear so that’s pretty short .... but who the bloody hell sounds like Danny DeVito? Do you mean their name sounds like Danny DeVito?”

“Yes. The answer is, Lily Damita!” “Oh my god, that sounds nothing like Danny DeVito. Spare me Tom, I give in; tell me, who is this mysterious Lili Damita; I’ve never heard of her?”

“She was a glamorous Hungarian Hollywood actor who was born in Paris as Lillian Carré and made more than 30 movies and stage musicals in the 1930s. She was one of the most successful female actors of the time when talking pictures first came out. In late August 1934, she announced that she was recently engaged to Hugo Brassey, and they would be married in New York in October. No one had heard of this Hugo dude, and her acting contract with Samuel Goldwyn had a clause in it stating she could not ‘fall in love’ before the contract ended. That caused a hullabaloo which is probably exactly what Lili intended!

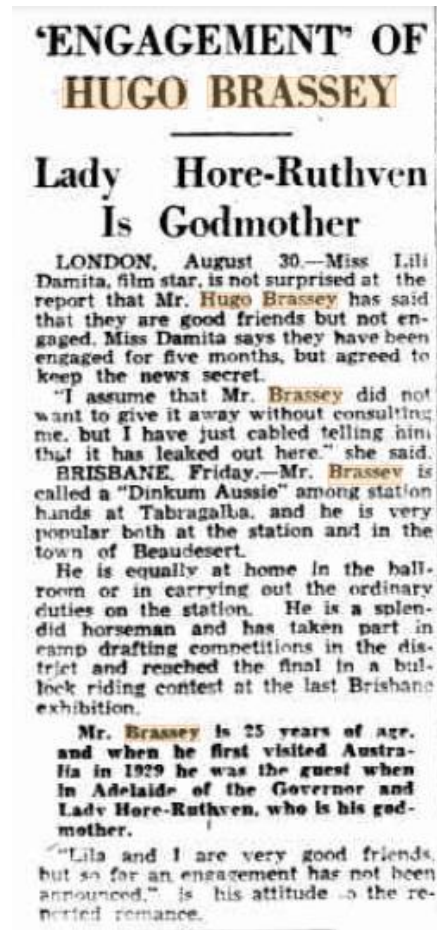
The Australian press could not get enough of this story; it was featured in literally every newspaper across the country for three months, so Hugo was quickly becoming a celebrity. Look, I have a press cutting of them, from the *Newcastle Sun* September 1934, together in Paris at the time ...”



MR. HUGO BRASSEY AND LILY DAMITA, photographed in a Paris street.—Mr. Brassey is at Tabragalba Station, Beaudesert district, Queensland. Miss Damita says they have been engaged for five months, but had agreed to keep the news secret.

“Old photo Tom, bit fuzzy. She does seem to be a pretty lady though. What happened?”





“This was a typical news coverage of the engagement at the time, from *News, Adelaide*. 30-year-old Lili said they met at a London house-party late 1933 and claimed that she had been engaged twice before. She was first engaged to Prince Ludwig Ferdinand of Germany in 1929 then later to a rich American, William Vanderbilt, who was killed in a motor accident soon after. She hoped the third engagement would be ‘lucky’. She was in London, making the stage musical, *Sons of Guns* and a movie called *Brewster’s Millions* when the news broke. This is what she looked like, and this picture is not fuzzy:”



Lili Damita



Lili in 'Devil on Horseback' (1936)

“Wow, that’s glamour, I’m listening .... If she was into Hugo, he must have been a catch.”

“She was described as *a provoking, dashing, mischievous little lady* and starred with many of the big names like Cary Grant and Gary Cooper. That’s the big time:”



Left: *This is the Night* (1932) with Cary Grant (Screenland Magazine).

Right: With Gary Cooper in *Fighting Caravans* (1931), Gary Cooper (Scrapbook, Paramount Pictures.)

“Interesting Tom, but who the hell was this Hugo Brassey and why are you banging on about them so much?”

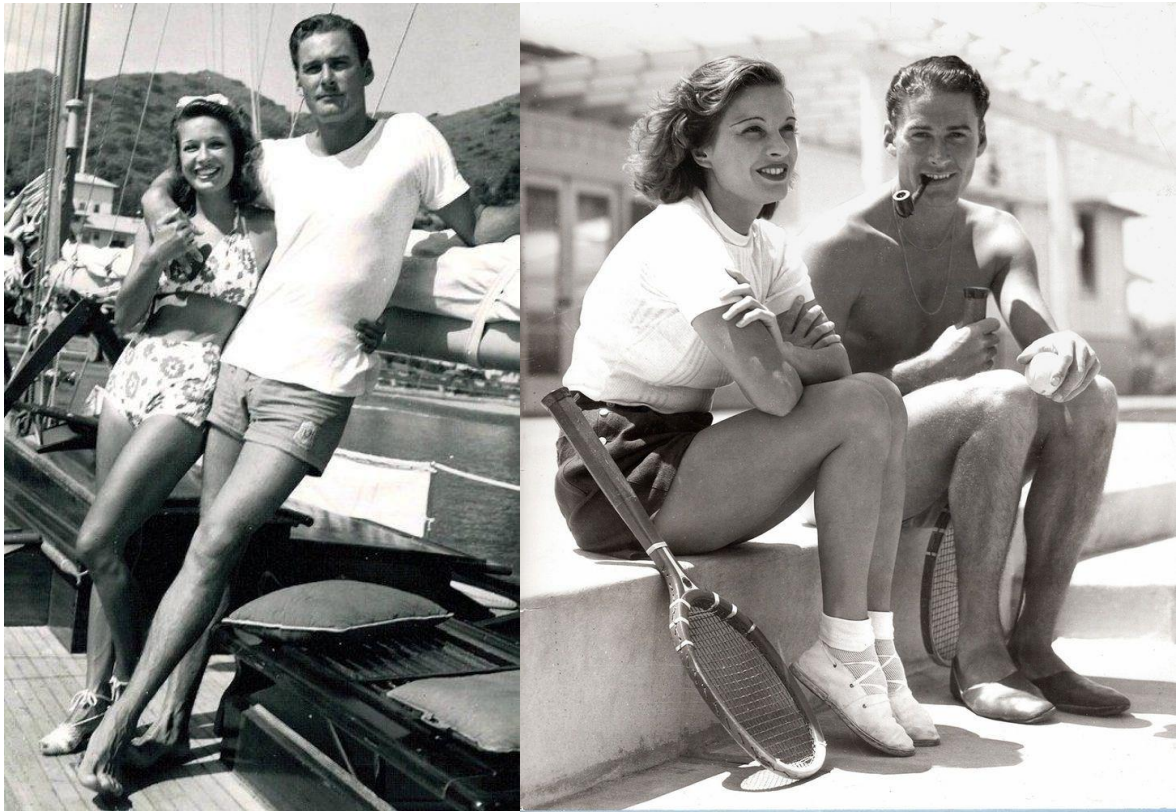
“I’m merely exploring some of the stories of amazing characters who once lived in the beautiful North Queensland district of Mission Beach, and Hugo was one of the most intriguing residents who lived there for a few years after this stage of his life in Southeast Queensland. He lived on one of the main near-shore islands, Dunk Island, and made a big splash in the district. This put us up there in the headlines and social gossip columns for a while.

Hugo was a Pommy guy who came from a rich old-English family with some aristocratic ancestors. He was 24 years old when this news broke and was staying on a station called Tabragalba near Beaudesert in Southeast Queensland’s Scenic Rim region. The owners of the station were the Persse family, and Baroness Sarah Persse was Hugo’s great grandmother on his mother’s side of his family, so they were related.

Reporters contacted Hugo at the station and learned that he was also the grand-nephew of Lord (Thomas) Brassey, a past Governor of Victoria, and Godson of the wife of the Australian Governor General, Lord Gowrie. That was probably so. Much of what was said of Hugo in the press was patently incorrect; some assumed he owned the sheep station and at times reporters called him the ‘Honourable Hugo Brassey’ or ‘Lord Brassey,’ but he had no titles. He was just Hugo Brassey, living the life of Reilly courtesy of his rich, connected family.

He stayed with Lord and Lady Gowrie in 1929 when Lord Gowrie (Sir Alexander Hore-Ruthven) was the Governor General of South Australia. After attending Agricultural College in SA for six months, Hugo moved to Tabragalba and worked on the farm for a year. He was reported as being a fine horseman and a capable bull rider who was popular and fitted in very well on the station and in the nearby town.

The story had legs, and some papers still had headlines in late October saying the engagement was on, but eventually they managed to obtain the truth from Hugo who had been complimentary about Lili yet vague on any commitment, saying, *We are very good friends, but so far no engagement has been announced*. Lili was unsurprised at that and said the engagement had occurred five months earlier, but they had agreed to keep it secret and now, she said, it was time for Hugo to fess up. However, Hugo grew impatient with the Paparazzi’s constant nagging and finally declared that the engagement was ... *all news to me*. Lili was not too devastated. She had no shortage of suitors and quickly moved on to become the first wife (of three) of actor Errol Flynn in June 1935.”



Lili with husband Errol Flynn

“Lili and Errol were married for almost seven years before they divorced. They had a son, Sean, raised by Lili. Sean Flynn became a successful war correspondent covering the Vietnam War. He went missing in the Cambodian Khmer Rouge Civil War, and his remains were not found until after Lili’s death.

Lili married a second time and divorced again. Errol’s career was over by 1941 and his lifestyle and many sexually transmitted diseases took their toll, and he died early of liver disease and heart attacks in 1959 at only 51 years of age.



## MOMENTARY MARITAL BLISS

Hugo, likewise, quickly recovered from the unexpected publicity and married gorgeous young German Baroness, Christa von Bodenhausen in July 1935. After her whirlwind marriage to Hugo she decided to drop the title and become plain 'Mrs Brassey' and some of Hugo's friends called her, 'Jack'.



Baroness Christa von Bodenhausen



Christa at Dunk, image courtesy Max Bell.

The Baroness met Hugo merely three weeks before they married. She was from German aristocracy and a distant relation of England's Queen Mary. Christa was genuinely aristocratic, stunningly attractive and well connected as well as being highly energetic. She adapted well to her new life. Christa was well educated, was a trained pilot and spoke five languages fluently. The news of the wedding hit the papers in July 1935 and this *Tweed Daily* column is typical of what was said:

### MR. HUGO BRASSEY TO WED

#### Bride Lovely Young German Debutante

LONDON, Friday:—Mr. Hugo Brassey, who recently was in Queensland and who formerly was engaged to Lily Damita, the film star, will marry Baroness von Bodenhausen, a kinswoman of Queen Mary, in a London Registry Office to-morrow.

The Baroness is a lovely young German debutante and an ardent aviatrix. The couple intend to honeymoon in Australia and will travel to Sydney by the Monterey to stay with Sir Alexander Hore-Ruthven (Governor of New South Wales), who is Mr. Brassey's uncle. Afterwards, the couple will live at Dunk Island, of which Mr. Brassey has just secured a freehold, and spend six months of the year there.



July 1935 wedding announced.



Hugo and Christa shortly after on Dunk Island, photo courtesy of Pauline Leeman.

“Was Hugo really related to Australia’s future Governor General?” asked Sarah. “Not sure about that,” said Tom, “many newspapers said he was a nephew or cousin of either the Governor or his wife, but most said he was linked to them as a Godson of Lady Gowrie, the Governor’s wife who was Irish (Zara Pollok). Her brother, Arthur Pollok, and his wife worked later for Hugo on Dunk Island managing the resort. It sounds most likely that Hugo was related to Lady Gowrie, the GG’s wife, in some way as a cousin or second cousin and she was probably also his Godmother.

Gore-Ruthven became Governor General of Australia shortly after this and was Australia’s longest serving Governor General (1936 – 1944) with extensions being made to his tenure during the war. Alexander Gore-Ruthven was an experienced military man having reached the rank of Brigadier General and was honoured with a VC and DSO with a bar, together with many other medals. He was valued as a member of the Australian hierarchy when planning the war effort.”

“That was quite a big step for a city girl to take. Did the marriage last?” asked Sarah. “It was a giant step for them both, but more so for Christa who had been educated in England, France and Switzerland and had spent her childhood living in her family’s gigantic, castle at Neubeuern near the Bavarian Alps, midway between Munich and Salzburg. Take a gander at her grand family home and wonder at what her parents thought of this elopement and their marriage in a London Registry Office!



Christa, despite her great enthusiasm for her husband and this new life on Dunk Island, gave up after two and a half years, but she did not give up on the marriage because she could not hack the unusual lifestyle or living conditions or due to the distance from the bright lights. The couple travelled widely on their 68 foot yacht, *Sunbeam* and on their 37 foot motor launch, *Twilight* as well as via regular public transport and ocean liners. They did not like the wet season so were in Sydney or Europe often anyhow and seen at all the right places and at Randwick and Ascot.”



Christa’s modest new home on Dunk – quite a contrast. Christa did have a French chef and the bungalow was refurbished and had seven rooms and she was more than happy with her home and island life.



Sarah sits, sifting through the press clippings that Tom is quoting from and, looking sadly afar, she muses, “It seems quite unfathomable that this couple would come asunder. I wonder what happened. They were so happy in 1937 after a huge trip on the yacht to Timor, PNG, Indonesia and Borneo. They left in early October 1936 and planned to be away only two months, but Hugo flew on to London and was shown (below) at Ascot in March. He returned in June *on business*, and Christa spoke from London in July and seemed so full of beans and happy about her life and said she could not see herself living in the city anymore.”



Being cool at Ascot. March 1937 – from Telegraph Brisbane.

Tom agreed, “It was a strange turn of events. Late in July 1937, the Governor General and Lady Gowrie arrived at Dunk Island in the peak of the tourism season and the Brassey’s were not there. The Vice Regal party travelled in style on Australia’s flagship cruiser, the *HMAS Australia II*. They were there for the celebrations of the opening of the resort’s Dance Hall and brought their own orchestra for the event. The ship’s company joined in with local dignitaries attending and a fine time was had with the Polloks entertaining. Hugo and Christa were in London. Shortly after, in December 1937, Christa, still in London, petitioned for divorce. More headlines.

Artist, Valerie Albiston (nee Cohen), lived on nearby Timana Island at the time with her sister, another well-known artist, Yvonne Cohen. They rented Timana Island, and Valerie wrote an article for the *Canberra Times* in 1976 relating the story of their years on the islands during the war. She spoke fondly of Charlie, an old Aboriginal/Malay man who had worked for Ted Banfield. He deeply respected and liked Ted as he did Hugo who employed him as his resort gardener. His loyalty to Hugo never flagged, and he once said to Valerie, *He handsome feller! He good to me. I no care if he like ‘em ladies too much*. Valerie added, *and Charlies chuckle was knowing*.

Charlie nailed the cause alright, and Christa was taking no more of Hugo’s infidelity and successfully petitioned for divorce on the grounds of adultery. The great whirlwind romance was, sadly, over.”

## CAREER

By this stage of the story, after several discussions between Sarah and Tom on the life of Hugo, Sarah became interested in the topic too and started to do some of her own reading and delving. She noted that Tom was mainly retrieving information from the *Trove* Newspaper archives online. That was a rich source of information, because Hugo was often in the news, and there were over 1,100 articles available on the *Trove* site alone where Hugo Brassey was cited. He was forever featured in the ‘social’ columns.

Sarah decided to look on other sites online and also to read a fine book by James G Porter, *A Family of Islands, Dunk and Bedarra Island group*, North Queensland, Boolarong Press 2000. That has much detail and was well researched. It tells the stories of Banfield on Dunk, of Noel Wood and others on Bedarra and of the various artists who lived on Timana. It mentions Hugo briefly and speaks of island land ownership transfers over the years.

“What have you found about Hugo’s career or work Tom? To me it sounds like he never really worked at all and largely lived the high life on his family fortune. Is that a fair assessment?”

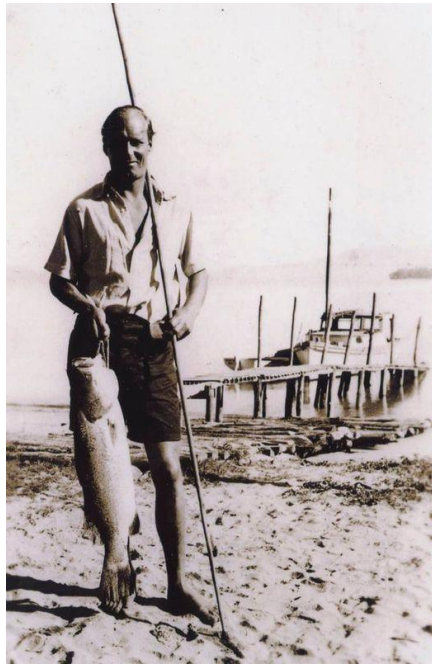
“Close to it. He was educated at Eton, as it seems most in the Brassey family were before him, and he often wore the old Etonian tie at social events and the races. Many of his ancestors also went to Oxford University, but for some reason Hugo did not do so. He was at Sandhurst Royal Military College for a short while; again many ancestors, including his father, a Captain in the 17<sup>th</sup> Lancers in WWI, had military careers, but Hugo did not choose that path. He stayed with the Governor General of South Australia in 1929 and attended Agricultural College for six months in Adelaide.”

“I will tell you what I found out about that connection later,” said Sarah, “but the SA Governor went on to become Governor of NSW for a year then GG of Australia, and Hugo had a job with him as Aide de Camp and that could have led to a successful career.”

“He did not seem interested in that field of endeavour and preferred the freedom he had it seems,” observed Tom, “He then spent a year on two sheep stations owned by the De Burgh-Persse family near Beaudesert; one was called *Wyambyn* with a huge old mansion and the other was *Tabragalba*. They were cattle farms in the 1920s but had converted to sheep by the time Hugo turned up to try a bit of Jackarooing. The newspapers had Hugo down as all sorts of things such as *A Jackaroo*, *Owns a pastoral property in Queensland*, *A rich Australian sheep raiser*, *An English millionaire rancher*, *A London Insurance Broker*, but he was just Hugo ... having a grand adventure.”

“Yes”, Sarah responded, “these farms were also owned by his relatives, so he did not need to have a career to maintain his exotic lifestyle.” Saying he was a *London Insurance Broker* sounds highly unlikely at this early stage; did you find anything to support that assertion in the *Trove* research?” “No evidence at all,” replied Tom. “His next attempt at earning a quid was probably the Dunk Island resort business. We will look at that later, and that was not an earner for him; more a way to spend his family fortune very quickly!”

“When he sold Dunk and went to Ireland to live on his father’s estate at Clonmel in Tipperary County Ireland, he must have done something for work?” mused Sarah. “Not much sign of any work,” replied Tom, “He did have a brief try at breeding Racing Greyhounds for a while, but that was a token gesture. He mainly wanted to go fishing in Norway or jet-set in bars and at the races. In all, he had no real career.”



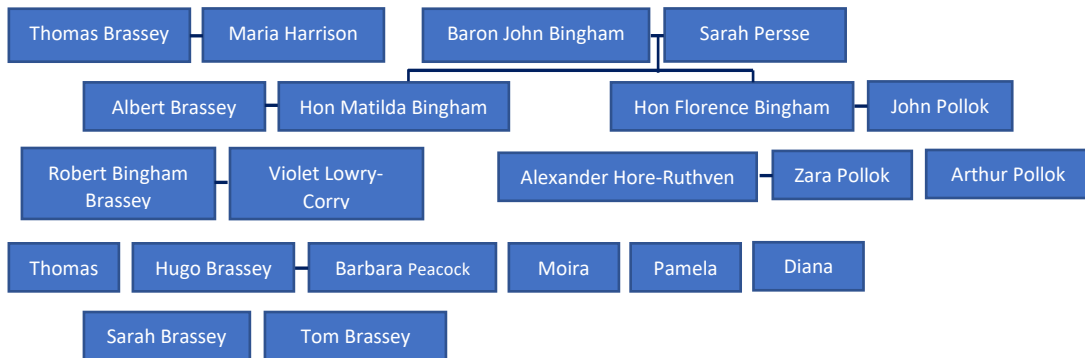
Above: Hugo at Dunk pier (his launch, *Twilight*, in background). This photo was shown on the *Tully Then & Now Facebook* page. It was posted by James Sing who said: *My grandfather, James Sing senior, used to go pigeon shooting with him often. We have an old shotgun with his initials on it that he gave to my grandfather. Hugo sure loved outdoor sport and the fishing was better at Dunk Island than in Europe.*

In 1936, Cardwell Shire Council appointed an honorary health inspector and ranger to protect the wildlife and ensure sanitation was maintained. Ted Banfield had been very tough on anyone who attempted to shoot the nutmeg pigeons on the island so would have turned in his grave at the thought of Hugo's pigeon hunting ventures.



## FAMILY

“You said earlier that you could not ascertain what the relationship was between Hugo and the Australian Governor General and that newspapers said many different things like the GG was his uncle or Lady Gowrie was his aunt or cousin, second cousin or Godmother. Very confusing. I cracked that one by visiting a few genealogy sites and here is an abbreviated family tree:”



“Well done Sarah, that trumps me! I managed to find the link to the Persse family and Sarah Persse’s father was a ‘De Burgh’. The Australian farms at Beaudesert were owned originally by a guy called ‘De Burgh Persse’, a Queensland MP, so these people were Hugo’s kin too. Your research shows Hugo is a first cousin to Lady Zara Hore-Ruthven, and her brother, Arthur Pollok, who ran Dunk Island resort for Hugo for a short time. That gels.”

“There is more information on the family,” says Sarah. “I see Hugo’s children with Barbara Peacock were named Sarah and Thomas, that’s a big coincidence Tom! And the home he lived in as a child, Cottesbrooke Hall, in Northamptonshire, was very grand. It was built in 1702 and Robert Brassey owned it from 1911 to 1937. It is regarded today as one of the best examples of Queen Anne architecture remaining in England, so Hugo had it good as a child:



However, Hugo’s Mum died young at 38 years-age when he was only nine. They had five children. The first son died a few days after birth leaving Hugo as the only son. His father remarried in the year after Violet died, this time to Lady Dorothy Grosvenor, so, for seven years, Hugo had a stepmother who was an aristocrat. Robert divorced Dorothy in 1927 and married Constance Britten.

The main link with the Pollok family was via sisters Matilda and Florence Bingham, his grandmother and grandaunt. It’s interesting to see how often the family given names repeated themselves and how often a family name was used as a given name later. His father was named, ‘Robert Bingham Brassey’ keeping Baron Bingham’s name up front. That was common practice in families with peers as descendants of course. Hugo’s children were also named after aristocrat ancestors, Thomas after his uncle, Lord (Thomas)

Brassey and Sarah after Lady Sarah Persse. Hugo's second name was 'Bulkley,' an unusual name and there were seven named Viscount Bulkley in the peerage from Tipperary before 1822, so that was also using aristocrat names to remind people they were an important family.

Uncle Thomas was educated at Rugby rather than Eton and graduated MA, MCL in Law at Oxford and was a Liberal MP for two short durations then Governor of Victoria 1895 - 1900. On return to England on his yacht he was promoted to the title of First Earl Brassey. He donated the yacht (*Sunbeam*) to the Indian government in 1915 for use as a hospital ship at Gallipoli.

His nephew, Henry was a Conservative MP and became Baron Brassey of Apethorpe, so there were some peers in the family. Lord Brassey (Thomas) had his peerage passed on to his son Thomas 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Brassey, but the title lapsed when he died without any living descendants.

"You're such a pedant Sarah," laughs Tom, "getting things exactly right."

Sarah explodes, "That's the pot calling the kettle black Tom, no one is fussier than you about the fine detail and determining the truth!"

"OK, fair point" says Tom, leaping back a little, "go on."

"Another peer in the family was John Bingham, Baron of Clanmorris. Many of the family were involved in the armed forces or as politicians. His grandfather, Colonel Albert Brassey, was an MP for Banbury and a rower at Oxford."

Tom interrupts, "The *Trove* search reveals that his father, Robert Brassey, was a Captain in WWI and was an MP fleetingly for Banbury but when in Western Australia in 1936 he was reported as saying that he would not stand again in politics because:

- He did not agree with paying MP's as it meant unfitting people were elected to parliament
- He did not agree with voting rights for women, and
- Felt strongly that voting should be restricted to property owners as only they knew enough to vote sensibly (he owned large estates in Northamptonshire and Tipperary)."

"Hell, he was a truly modern man," gasped Sarah.

"Yeah. Real feminist and quite the emancipist! The news articles indicate that Hugo seems to have had much respect for his Uncle, Lord Brassey and his wife, Auntie Annie. Lord and Lady Brassey had a large steam-sailing yacht named *Sunbeam* and Hugo purchased a yacht in 1935 and changed its name to *Sunbeam* as well. Lady Brassey wrote two popular travel books about her experiences on the *Sunbeam*; *The Voyage of the Sunbeam* and (posthumously) *The Last Voyage* (1889). She died of tuberculosis on board the *Sunbeam* when sailing, just seven days out from Port Darwin and was buried at sea."

"Now who's being pedantic Thomas?"

## DUNK DAYS

“I could not find the exact date of purchase of Dunk Island by Brassey,” noted Tom, “did you find anything about that in your research?”

“The Porter book has the details. Apparently Banfield leased 360 acres of the island from the Queensland Government in 1897. He converted that to freehold later. The whole island is around 2,400 acres so he owned about 15% of the land area.”

“That’s interesting,” interjected Tom, “many of the press articles said Hugo was *the owner of Dunk Island* though some corrected that and acknowledged that the State owned the bulk of the island, which they declared a National Park later. Who did Banfield sell it to?”

“Apparently, when in his mid-sixties just after the 1918 cyclone, Banfield was struggling financially as the revenue from his four successful books was meagre. He had negotiated a poor deal with his publishers. Fortunately, the son of a wealthy English mercer in Townsville, Spenser Hopkins, became close to the Banfields and visited them often and he noticed Ted Banfield’s melancholy and asked what it was about. Ted explained his financial woes and Spenser came back shortly after with an offer to take a half share in the land to free up enough income for Banfield to live out his days comfortably. Banfield eagerly agreed.

When Bertha Banfield died in 1933, she had bequeathed her half of the island freehold land to Spenser, on the proviso that he provide her Irish aide, Essie, with a pension for the remainder of her life. Spenser wanted to move on and sell the land by then and Porter’s story was that Hugo, *the son of a wealthy baron* arrived on his yacht at Brammo Bay in 1934 and, soon after, purchased the land for £10,000. It also stated that he married Christa before that and that Lady Gowrie was his Aunt so we know some of that is in error.”

“That helps a good deal Sarah. The sale price sounds right, but he did not buy the yacht in 1934, that was in 1935. He announced his intention to buy the yacht in March 1935 and was planning a visit to the Great Barrier Reef islands. In a newspaper article in 1935, he told reporters that he had not yet been on the island and had only seen it from a distance. It seems that he purchased it in July 1935, about the time he got married. That makes sense as his father bought it for him as a wedding present.”

Sarah explained, “James Porter said that Spenser Hopkins had put a manager on the island after Bertha’s death. He planned on building a small resort to aid the sale of the land, and appointed Swiss restaurateur, Frederic Treuthardt to set up the resort for him, but those ambitious plans did not eventuate.”

“That’s so for sure,” says Tom, “and Treuthardt landed Hugo in a spot of bother with another flurry of newspaper articles appearing across Australia when Frederic and his wife, Enid Treuthardt, who were employed to manage the new resort, sued the Brasseys for wrongful dismissal in January 1936.

Nepotism was alive and well in the Brassey clan, and Hugo had invited his cousin, Arthur Pollok, with his wife to do the job instead, and he gave the Treuthardt’s no notice of their dismissal. Arthur left Ireland in November 1935 for Dunk Island, so the writing was on the wall. This was early days for a court case on unfair dismissal, but these legal disputes are commonplace today, after laws were made to enable that in 1972. The claim was for £1,550 damages which sounds small, but that is equivalent to \$150,000 in 2019 currency! The Treuthardt’s lost the case but were awarded £175 damages for the lack of notice given. That is \$17,000 in today’s dollars, yet after they paid the court costs awarded against them they would almost certainly have been out of pocket.”



About the same time there were a few reports, with similar wording, saying that Hugo had purchased Bedarra Island a little south of Dunk, and that he planned to build a resort there as well. My recollection of reading the history of Bedarra is that this was not so, but what did James Porter say on that Sarah?"

"Your instincts are spot on; that one is a Furphy for sure. James Porter outlines all of the Bedarra ownership changes. The island was sold by the State to Captain Henry Allason in 1913 for £20. Yes, I can see by the expression on your face; you think that was an incredible bargain. He also had beautiful Timana Island thrown in – that was the steak knives! Captain Cook had named Bedarra Island, *Richards Island* and for a while it was renamed, *Allason Island*, then later it was renamed after the European's interpretation of what the Aboriginal name for it was; *Bedarra*.

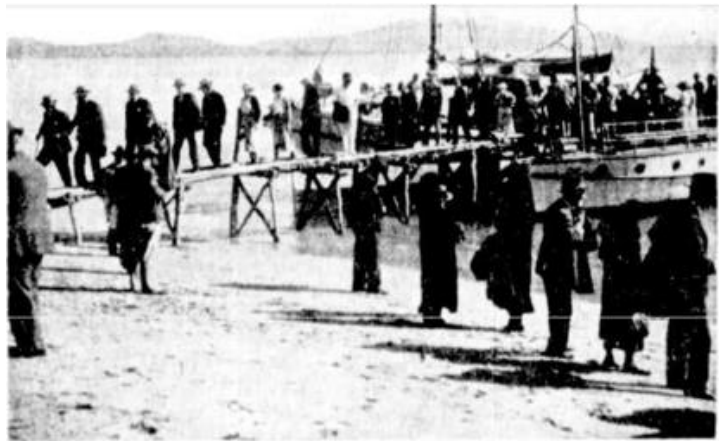
In the 1920s, Allason sold Bedarra for £500 to Ivan Menzies of Gilbert and Sullivan fame. Shortly after, it was sold to Jack Harris as part of a London syndicate. In 1936, Jack sold 15 acres of it to artist Noel Wood, retaining the remaining land (just over 200 acres.) Your press articles suggested that Harris sold to Brassey, but that apparently fell through, as he sold his share to Arthur and Charlie Coleman and Frank Coleman retained his share. They sold to Dick Greatrix and Pierre Huret in 1940, just after John Busst arrived and leased part of the island. Then Busst and his sister, Phyllis, purchased it from the Colemans in 1947. They split the land approximately in half and sold part to Ken and Cynthis Druitt in 1957 and part to Colin Scott from Omeo, Victoria in the same year. Scott sold to Swede, Tor Hulten, in 1979 who built a small resort he named, *TorAnna Plantation*. In 1981, the island's land, apart from Noel's 15 acres, was sold to airline, TAA. Noel subdivided his land and left, at 84 years age, in 1996. By that time, a resort had been built at Hernandia Bay."

"That is a comprehensive account of the island's ownership and since there was no sign of a sale of Bedarra by Hugo at any stage in the press, it's watertight," says Tom. "Almost a year after he purchased Dunk from Spenser Hopkins, the island's small resort opened in May 1936 with much fanfare and many notable visitors including a Vice-Regal visit from the Governor General and Lady Gowrie of course, and a gaggle of reporters came on invitation.



Hugo's sister, Moira, with her English jockey husband, John O'Brien, (seen arriving in Australia above) had also visited Dunk early on. The social pages loved that as she was also way out there in their eyes and arrived dressed in light blue flared slacks with a scarlet top and a cigarette hanging out of her mouth in true Brassey style. Hugo was well known for bright clothes and had been cited in the gossip columns at different

times wearing for example, *bright red braces*, or, *sunbaking in the snappiest canary swimming trunks at Sydney's Lady Martin Beach*.



DISSEMBARKING at Dunk Island.—The *Sun* and *Twilight* had full passenger lists.

Press delegates on the jetty at the resort opening — from *The Morning Bulletin*, Rockhampton, 24 July 1936.

The resort had been built quickly, and when it was sold the assets were substantial. At the peak of activity there were 52 persons working for Hugo and Christa on Dunk in December 1935. Hugo had purchased the two large diesel generators used to power the town of Ballina in NSW. He planned to build 14 bungalows with septic tanks and these were to accommodate 60 people at 10 shillings a day each, but the tender for sale said there were only five *chalets*. They also built a Dance Hall, improved the water supply system markedly, built a substantial jetty and renovated the Banfield bungalow. In 1939, they built a small airfield which opened in May. Lady Gowrie came on an early flight.



Three RAAF men silhouetted against the open window of the spit bar.  
The RAAF used this as a workshop. Australian War Memorial, donor M. Williams.



Dunk Island, Qld. Honeymooners' bungalows which were taken over by the RAAF for quarters.  
Australian War Memorial, donor M. Williams.

The commitment of the Brasseys to the resort business was weak in reality. They feverishly built it and loved the dream, yet running it had no appeal at all. It was opened mid-1936, and shortly after they left on a long cruise, but to make the resort a success it needed their high profile presence. By January 1938, Hugo had given up on the resort and had sold the *Twilight*. He continued building infrastructure to aid the sale then left for the war in December 1939.



Hugo's Dunk Island Spit Bar.

The infrastructure investment was estimated at £20,000 and, added to the cost of the land at £10,000, the sum invested by Robert Brassey, his father, was around £30,000; that is \$3 million in today's currency. On top of that he purchased the 68 foot yacht (*Sunbeam*) the 37 foot ocean-going motor launch (*Twilight*) and four motorboats. He advertised the land for sale initially at £80,000, but the newspapers expected a sale at £20,000 at the time. Captain Robert had not made a mint out of that investment!

However, the RAAF appreciated this infrastructure when they annexed Dunk and Purteboi Islands in 1942 for a Radar station and for Naval use. Hugo's spit bar was very popular.

Hugo advertised the land for sale and eventually put it up for tender and sold all but a small holding with the home on it to Mr E C Doepel of Ballarat in January 1952. Hugo returned to the island a few times with his second wife up until 1954, when they attended the wedding of Brenda Jago in Tully. Hugo gave the bride away and helped officiate the event."

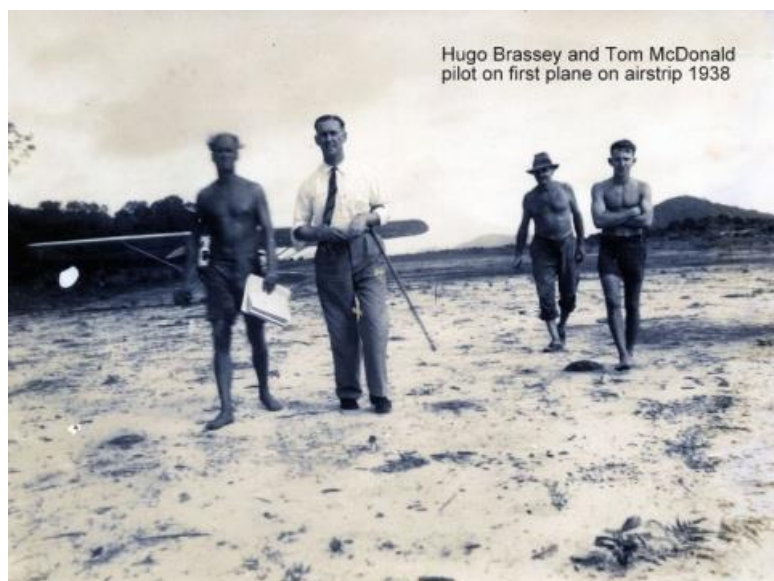




Photo courtesy Pauline Leeman; her father, Walter Anderssen is top row left alongside Harry Guy, George Mossis, Len Morris, Len Foster, Ray Wilson, ? Guy and Bill Rankine. Front row is from left: unknown person, Barbara Skaggs, Arthur Pollok (manager), Miss Eunice Peberdy (Tully Band Assoc.) and Lewis Wiskar cook, holding Susan (Frieda Pollok's Australian Terrier). Max Bell provided the names.



Clearing for the airstrip by Morris brothers. Image courtesy Max Bell.



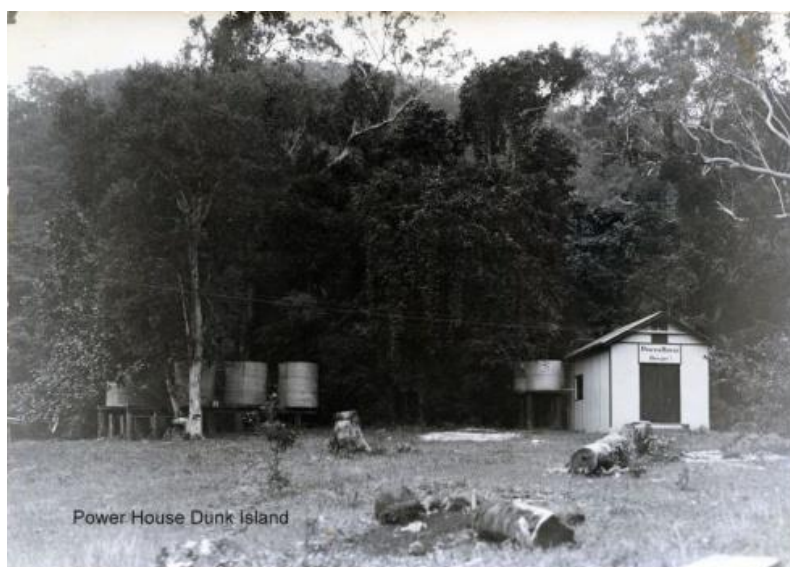
First landing 1938. Image courtesy Max Bell.



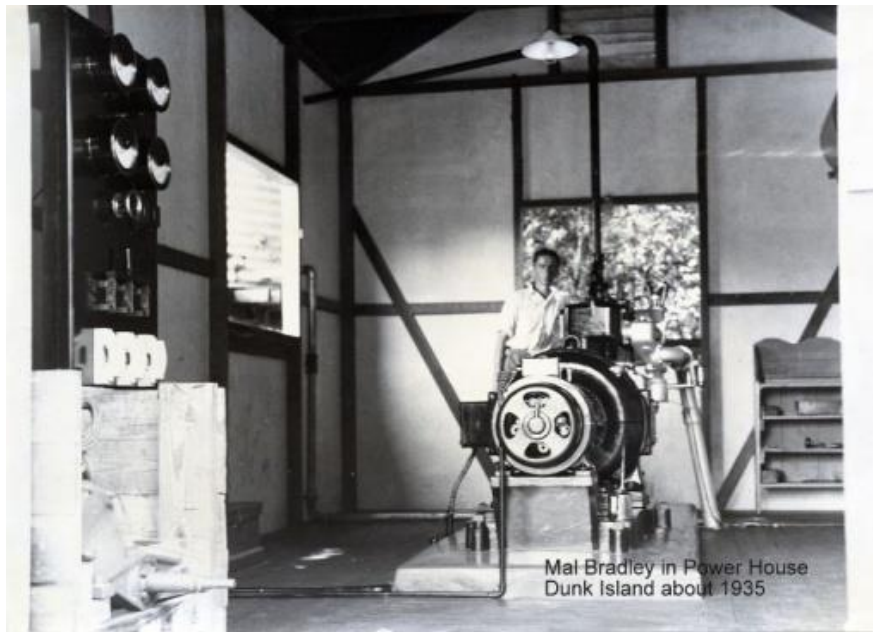
One of the first flights to arrive. Image courtesy Max Bell.



Opening the resort 1936 with Percy Pease Deputy Premier. Image courtesy Max Bell.



Powerhouse. Image courtesy Max Bell.



Generator from plant that once ran the town of Ballina, NSW. Image from Max Bell.



## WAR

“Over to you on this chapter Tom. There is not a great deal available on his years of service in the war, but he did his bit, and while he was not a senior officer, he was in the action.”

“Thanks Sarah,” said Tom, “I found a little on those years. When the RAAF annexed Dunk Island in 1942, those few people remaining to run the resort left the island, which was still owned by Hugo. As soon as the news of the war broke in 1939, Hugo joined the Royal Australian Naval Reserve and returned to England to serve in the Royal Navy. The island is only 4.5 Km from the mainland at Mission Beach. The tallest peak (Mt Kootaloo 271 metres) was ideal for locating the strategic radar station. The island also had sufficient flat land to expand the handy emergency landing airfield that Hugo had built in 1939.

Hugo left George Morris to run the resort until the RAAF and RAN arrived in 1942 and took control of the entire island as well as Purtaboi. George and his wife stayed on to cater for the RAAF Radar teams. The US and Australian naval task forces frequently used the area as well, mooring at the islands and conducting naval exercises and enjoying rest and recreation activities in the area.

In the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve, initially, Hugo was a Commander of a small trawler (M218) operating out of Scarpa Flow, which was engaged in anti-submarine patrols. As a Sub-Lieutenant later, he was with a British force vainly attempting to defend Norway in April 1940. Three trawlers were sunk or badly damaged by German Heinkel bombers in Namsen Fjord when attempting to evacuate French troops.

## Mr. Hugo Brassey Rescued From Sunken Trawler

LONDON, May 10.—Sub-Lieutenants T. W. C. Prentice, of Sydney, and H. B. Brassey, of Dunk Island, Queensland, both naval reservists, were among the survivors of the naval trawlers, Gaul and Saint Goran, sunk on the Norwegian coast.

After being bombed and machine-gunned every few hours for several days off the Norwegian coast, the crews sheltered in the woods, but even there they were subjected to continual attacks from machine guns and bombs.

Lieutenant W. G. Wheeler, R.A.N., of New South Wales, is among those rescued from the Afridi. Previously he had served in the Cossack, and was present at the capture of the Altmark.

Courier Mail 11 May 1940

## Sheltered two days in bombarded cave

Lieutenant Hugo Brassey missed death by inches in Norwegian fiord battle

By Boom Wireless from MARY ST. CLAIRE, our special representative in London

Lieutenant Hugo Brassey, a kinsman of Lord and Lady Gowrie, and a popular figure in Australian social circles, missed death by inches in the din and horror of a Nazi air attack on British ships in a sea and air battle in Namsen Fiord, Norway.

Only a few months earlier he had been swimming, fishing, and sunbathing in the idyllic peace at Dunk Island, the tourist resort he owns in the Barrier Reef.

AFTER being bombed and machine-gunned continuously for two days during patrol work in Namsen Fiord, Lieutenant Hugo Brassey, R.N.V.R., had a miraculous escape from death when his ship, the St. Goran, received a direct hit from German guns.

Namsen, which was soon a blazing inferno. But, though the damage was deadly, they received a fair bit of their own back from our anti-aircraft guns and the guns of the battleship in the fiord.

"All over Saturday the bombardments continued and we had to zig-zag through the fiord to avoid direct hits. Though the annihilation of bombs falling in the water close by made it very difficult to keep on



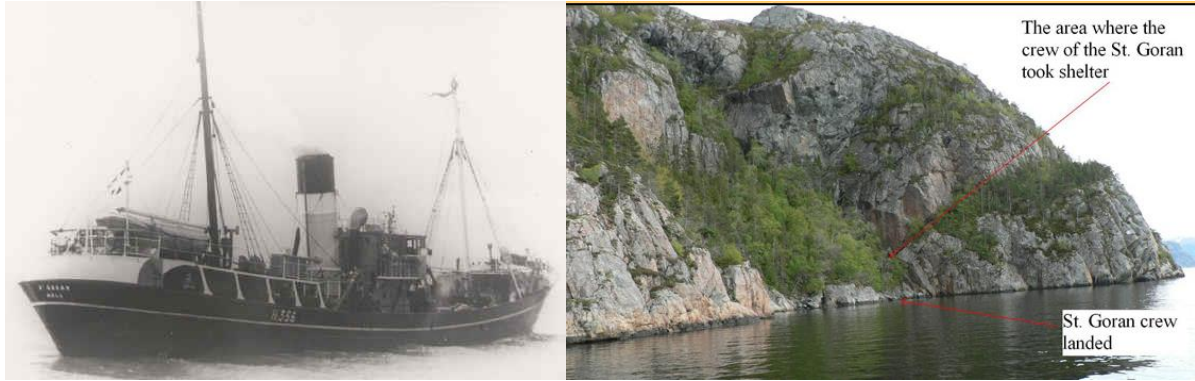
Woman's Weekly 8 June 1940

Hugo was a junior officer on one of the trawlers, the HMT *St Goran*. It was not directly hit by the bombs yet was badly damaged and taking in water, and five sailors, including the Captain, died on board before the crew took shelter among the rocks on the steep shore of the fjord. They returned to the boat at dusk but were warned of a German destroyer and three submarines approaching and decided to scuttle the boat rather than give it to the Germans. The crew were returned to Scarpa on the HMS *York*, after reaching Namsos in Norway on a small fishing boat that rescued them.

An Admiralty Report in 1940, written by Lieutenant Alan Reid, replacement Commander of the HMT *St Goran*, following the loss of the three anti-submarine trawlers in Norway, commended Hugo: *I have pleasure in reporting that the entire ship's company behaved very well throughout the trying experience. Sub-Lieutenant Brassey was most resourceful in dealing with the wounded and during our period in the*

*hills where he did much to keep the men in good spirits. I cannot speak too highly of him.* Alan Reid, Lieutenant R.N.V.R. Glasgow, 8 May 1940.

It was said by some locals that Hugo became a submarine commander during the war and that, *He commanded one of the submarines that sneaked in on the Tirpitz (sic) and sank it at its moorings.* That sounded highly notable, yet a search of the war records, including the lists of the commanders of all of the subs involved in sinking the *Tirpitz* showed that Hugo was not one of those sub commanders.



HMT *St. Goran* and where the crew sheltered before they scuttled the ship



Survivors of HMT *St. Goran* sheltered on the shore of the fjord;  
not sure if that is Lt Alan Reid or Sub-Lt Hugo Brassey in front of the man standing on the left.

A press notice on 19 September 1940 recorded Hugo Brassey as being on the war wounded list. Hugo survived the war and reached the rank of Lieutenant before returning for a short while to Dunk after the war.

## HUGO MARRIES 'BUBBLES'

"I'll relate this small story," said Sarah, "we're on the home straight now Tom.

Hugo was in and out of Australia after the war and mainly living in Ireland by then, and he continued his close relationship with noted Bedarra Island artist, Noel Wood who stayed with him at the Brassey family estate in Clonmel, Tipperary County, in the early 50s.

At 38 years age, in 1948, Hugo married again, this time to Irish-English girl, Barbara ('Bubbles') Peacock of London. They met during the war, and when they married, Hugo was 38 and Bubbles was 25 years old. She had a major accident when driving an ambulance for the Royal Navy in London and was many months in hospital. Surgeons managed to reconstruct her face with extensive skin grafts but could not save the sight in one eye.



Sun, Sydney November 1948

This was not the same sensationally glamorous situation as with his earlier partners, Baroness Christa or actor Lili and we hear far less of him after this. Bubbles was heavily involved in horse racing and owned a few thoroughbreds. She came asunder in June 1954, when the Jockey Stewards ruled that they were not satisfied that Bubbles owned some of the horses she raced, so she was banned from entering further races.

After marriage, they lived for a time at Doonass House in County Clare but later returned to the family estate he inherited in Clonmel, Tipperary County. I did not find an image of that, but it was no doubt another substantial old residence.”



Doonass House County Clare, Ireland. Sun Woman's News.

“In 1951, Hugo did not return to his Dunk home for winter because he was in plaster for an extended period with a back injury” added Tom. “He returned in 1954 with Bubbles, and that was the last mention of the couple in the newspapers.”

“That story ended up being fun,” declared Sarah. “I thought you were barmy when you first started your chats on Hugo’s life, but you soon had me interested and immersed. We did OK researching the history together and found a few snippets.”

“I am sure we only captured half the fun this man had, probably not even that. It was a wild ride for Hugo at times and, while he was born rich and lucky, he died young at 53 years-age and had not achieved very much in life. However, he probably enjoyed himself immensely, which matters most.”

“Sure,” said Sarah “he lived life to the fullest by all accounts and had some fabulous romances and adventures so I expect he was happy with his lot in life!”

“Agreed. And there is no doubt that in his short time living here he created widespread interest in our district and added to the interesting Dunk Island stories that Ted and Bertha Banfield created earlier. You could not buy such valuable publicity for a budding tourist town, but it would not be until the 1980s that tourism became significant for the district.”

## HUGO BRASSEY, 10 MARCH 1910 – 24 DECEMBER 1963

Social butterfly, romantic adventurer and popular playboy. He entertained.



Hugo Brassey – image courtesy of Max Bell.