

**LAIRD HOTEL**  
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

# Laird turns 30

As the Laird Hotel turns the big 3-0, *Southern Star Observer* takes you back through three decades of fur, fundraising, leather and manly men in a special birthday feature. A beacon for not just your average Bear but the queer community at large, we chat to some of its original patrons, take a look at its most memorable moments and some of the many organisations that have called the venue home since the 1980s.

WISHING THE ICONIC LAIRD HOTEL A VERY SPECIAL 30TH BIRTHDAY

also <sup>all of us</sup> celebrating 30 years





# HAPPY 30<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY

As the Laird Hotel celebrates its 30<sup>th</sup> year  
we would like to congratulate  
Brett and Mark  
and all previous management  
on bringing to Melbourne  
one of the world's truly great bars !

*Paul and Richard*

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# A lifestyle, not a job

Wow, where to begin? Although we've only been running the Laird for just over three years, we've experienced so much and had the pleasure of meeting so many wonderful people.

When Bill Saunders approached us about taking over the Laird, he said it would be a lifestyle, not just a job — and he was spot on! It's a lifestyle that has brought us new friends, countless laughs and its fair share of challenges.

The first of these challenges was stepping into the role as caretakers of one of the most respected leather and Bear bars in the world. While some locals may just think we're hyping things up when we say this, the Laird is truly recognised in international circles and, thanks to Bill Saunders, we've been able to keep that reputation alive.

Ron and David certainly had a huge following, and stepping into their shoes was not an easy thing to do. But thanks to the great staff we inherited, and those we took on in those first few months, we managed to convince the public, and ourselves, that we had what it takes to keep the Laird as a men-only destination for years to come.

To keep the tradition of the Laird while making sure it stays relevant and appealing to both our longstanding and newer customers is a challenge that has rewards far outweighing any difficulties faced.

Just recently we came across an old *Melbourne Star Observer* article from the mid-1980s which documented a public meeting held in the Laird's bistro (now the Pool Room) to address the 'gay disease' which had been devastating the local gay community. This meeting resulted in what is now known as the VAC. More than 20 years

later the Laird is proud to be working with the VAC, PLWHA and GMHC to raise funds and awareness for the ongoing fight in the war on HIV/AIDS.

There are hundreds of people to whom we owe sincere thanks. Thank you to our closest friends who have been our sources for inspiration, patience, honesty, and of course 'constructive criticism'! Thank you to Bill Saunders for this rare opportunity, and Jenny Patterson for keeping us on the right path.

Thank you to Paul Jones for being our right-hand-man from day one — your commitment to the Laird humbles us. Thank you to Laurie Lane, Paul Evans and Tex McKenzie — three of the most community-spirited men we have ever met.

Thank you to VicBears, Melbourne Leather Men and new kids on the block Melbourne Chargers RUFC for choosing to make the Laird their home ground; thank you to our regulars who see the Laird as a second home; to the VAC and other community groups and their dedicated workers and volunteers; to the entertainers, DJs and hosts; to the Laird Leathermen, past and present; Carmine Caputo and all of his models for the amazing photography in his *Men of the Laird* book (launching October 31).

Last, but certainly not least, to the awesome guys we've been lucky enough to have had working for us over the years — thanking you in person will mean more to us than it will in public. You are the face of the Laird and we wouldn't be where we are today without you.

Cheers, Brett and Mark



## Acceptance is the key

The Laird Hotel's appeal has long been its acceptance of patrons from all walks of life. It was an open and supportive environment for locals and international visitors, as well as the many organisations that made the hotel their headquarters over the last 30 years.

## Beginnings

The Laird O'Cockpen Hotel was built in 1847 and is one of Melbourne's oldest hotels. It has always been an important part of the local community in Abbotsford.

Like many hotels in Melbourne, the Laird has seen its share of owners and operators, some of whom were not necessarily on the right side of the law. The Laird was once famous as one of the meeting places for illegal gambling during the earlier part of the 20th century. Infamous patrons such as Squizzy Taylor were once common

visitors.

At the same time, the Laird has been the birthplace of some of Victoria's most treasured institutions. Doc Whitehead, a founder of some central Victorian social structures, held many of his planning discussions over cool ales at the Laird.

Being around the corner from the Town Hall and police station, next to the Masonic Lodge and four blocks from Victoria Park football ground, the Laird became a central component of Collingwood and Melbourne life.

In September 1980 the Laird changed hands. This time all the local and loyal supporters of the hotel found themselves in for a challenge. The Laird went gay.



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 VAC/GMHC



### Under the hammer

Of the many fundraising events hosted by the Laird Hotel, its annual auctions (including the popular slave auctions) raising money for the VAC's David Williams Fund were some of the most successful and widely attended. They finished up in 2009 when fundraising stalwart Paul Evans called it a day after decades of organising them. This image captures one of the first.

### The '80s

Because of the strong links to the local community it was decided that the hotel would be divided into two separate areas. The public bar remained as the local bar for the longstanding local community, while the back bar was redesigned to reflect the taste and style of the new clientele.

Over the next two years the Laird emerged as the major venue for men in Melbourne. The hotel policy was

to attract the element in the gay community that was tired of drag shows and discos and preferred to drink in a hotel environment with men.

The decor of the hotel was masculine, featuring a Western theme with a horseman as the hotel logo. Local clubs catering for the masculine end of the gay community made it their home. The SCMC (Southern Cross Motor Club),

the Jackaroos and the Cruisers Motorcycle Club were all centred on the Laird.

In 1988 the public bar was redesigned to become 'Nuggets Bar', dedicated to the leather and motor club community. Despite its new focus and décor, many members of the local community continued to use the Laird as an early evening meeting place, sometimes creating a very interesting mix of clientele.

## It's about community

Over its 30 years, the Laird Hotel has become synonymous with some of the biggest fundraising and support initiatives in the queer community.

Paul Evans, a long-time patron who has been a part of its fundraising events through No Attitude Guys since inception, first developed the ideas for the Mooning and Slave Market HIV/AIDS support events in the hotel with fellow organisers.

"I remember sitting at the bar and discussing how we wanted to honour those friends who'd passed and the ideas for Mooning and Slave Market grew from there. These events sort of became what the Laird was all about," he said.

Victorian AIDS Council (VAC) health educator Tex McKenzie has also had a long relationship with the venue, both in his role with the VAC and on a personal level. The VAC had its first meeting on the premises in 1983 and went on to hold major fundraising events such as the popular auction nights which ran for 13 years.

"The auctions were wonderful initiatives and always provided a lot of laughs. I remember one year we were selling this tacky vase and we even offered it with a hammer for the lucky bidder to smash it with after they'd bought it," he said.

As MC for its popular '60s night, outside his role with the VAC, McKenzie said the hotel was also a wonderful platform to spread the safe-sex message outside fundraisers. Along with hilarious leather queen-led renditions of *Ave Maria* and *The Lonely Goatherd*, the event was a pivotal chance to spread awareness.

"We weaved the safe-sex message information into the night's events back when it was incredibly necessary to do so," he said.

In recent years, the Laird has sponsored the Melbourne Chargers Rugby Union Football Club, Victoria's only gay and gay-friendly rugby club, which holds regular support BBQs and even jelly wrestling nights at the hotel.

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a Happy **30th** Birthday!



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## The '90s

While the 1980s may have established the Laird as the most famous 'man's hotel' in Australia, the 1990s further cemented it in gay culture.

After establishing close links to other leather and denim bars around the world, the hotel soon became the first stop for many international tourists. The Laird became known globally as a supportive and exciting place for gay men to stay while in Melbourne.

In 1998 the Laird took the unprecedented step of applying to the Anti-Discrimination Board to become the first male-only hotel in Victoria. While many considered this to be an impossible goal, the Laird put forward its case based on its long history of service to the gay community and its position as a social centre for Melbourne and visiting gay men.

The Anti-Discrimination Board recognised the importance of the hotel to the gay community in Melbourne and the exclusion was granted. The result was also very important in paving the way for other Victorian venues to apply for similar exclusions, including the nearby Peel Hotel, which was granted exclusions based not only based on gender, but also, controversially, sexuality.



## The main event

As well as providing considerable community support, the Laird can always be relied upon to provide a wicked party and theme night. From early days of bootscooting through to the more recent events associated with the Southern HiBEARnation festival, organisations such as VicBears and Melbourne Leather Men (MLM) credit the venue with providing a fantastic space for some of their biggest highlights.

VicBears vice president Luke Mitchell said the organisation's Underbear parties and Mr Australasian Bear competitions have been standout examples.

"Underbear is always packed and we actually had to turn people away from Mr Australasian Bear ... there were patrons lining up outside in the rain wanting to

come in and watch the action," he said.

"Brett and Mark are always regulars at our meetings, contributing their own ideas as well. We think of them as venue partners and friends."

Richard Gilman, convenor of MLM who've had an ongoing partnership with the Laird since 2004, said the organisation's monthly pub nights are proof of what an important space the hotel provides.

"Pub night is an event where guys and leather can come together in a non-threatening environment and feel comfortable, as well as those interested in the culture who'd like to get advice or simply admire," he said.

"I couldn't think of any other venue I'd want to have this sort of event at."

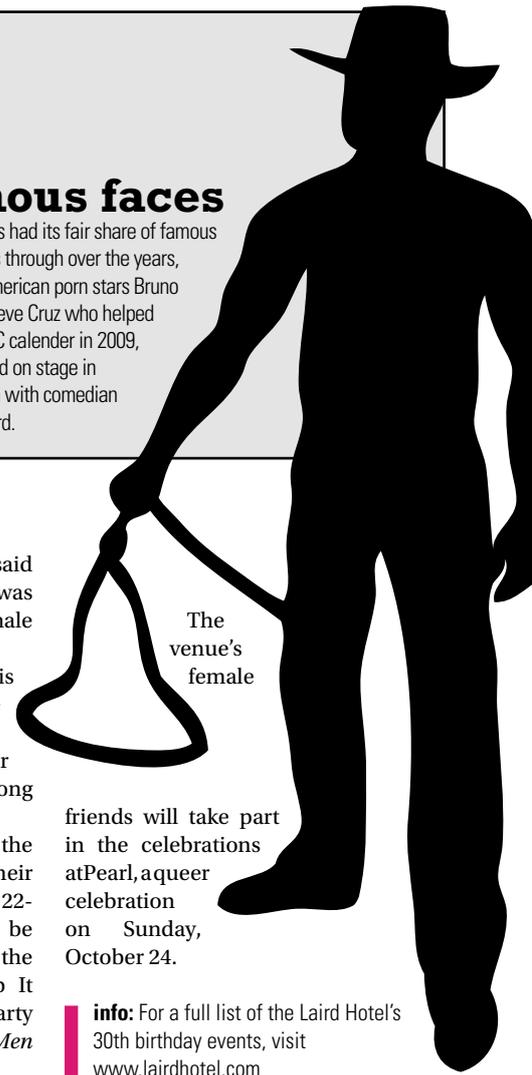
The VAC's Tex McKenzie said a particular highlight for him was comedian Rachel Berger's first all-male performance at the hotel.

"I remember she was wearing this sequined gold top and the audience was screaming at her to 'take it off'. She asked if they all wanted to see her tits and the reply was something along the lines of 'No, we want your top.'"

2010 will see the continuation of the Laird's colourful events during their birthday celebrations from October 22-24. The special one-off events will be accompanied by a few twists on the regular nights, including the Wrap It Up on Cup Weekend — a cocktail party which will include the launch of the *Men Of The Laird* book and exhibition.

## Famous faces

The Laird has had its fair share of famous patrons pass through over the years, including American porn stars Bruno Bond and Steve Cruz who helped launch a VAC calendar in 2009, and appeared on stage in conversation with comedian Adam Richard.



The venue's female

friends will take part in the celebrations at Pearl, a queer celebration on Sunday, October 24.

**info:** For a full list of the Laird Hotel's 30th birthday events, visit [www.lairdhotel.com](http://www.lairdhotel.com)

**FROM ALL AT CIRCUIT  
CONGRATULATIONS  
ON REACHING  
A 30 YEAR MILESTONE**



**CIRCUIT**

After years of support, VicBears would not be the club it is today if it wasn't for the Laird Hotel. It's our home, our den, and we wouldn't have it any other way. Happy Birthday, boys!

**WOOF**





### 2000 and beyond

The addition of the Cub Bar at the rear of the Back Bar was one of the big improvements during the 'noughties'. It ensured easy access to drinks while remaining in the beer garden.

A major change occurred when the Laird said goodbye to managers Ron Watkins and David Allen, who went off in search of adventure in the outback. The pair were responsible for ensuring the Laird remained a vital part of the scene in not only Melbourne, but Australia. This included strong support of Melbourne's Bear, leather and fetish scenes, and ensuring the Men on Men Art Competition grew into a well-respected annual event.

This is when current managers Mark and Brett took over, vowing to honour the legacy created by previous owners and managers such as Bill Saunders, John Wain, Paul Jones, Ron and David. This was marked by the emergence of the Laird Leather Man Competition.

In both 2008 and 2009 Leather Man winners Mal Guest and Peter Fitzgerald went on to be runners-up at Mr Australia New Zealand Leather Competition, an integral part of the newly revised Melbourne Leather Pride.

Mal Guest also went on to compete at the 31st International Mr Leather Competition in 2009, further strengthening the Laird's international leather reputation.

The new millennium also saw the VicBears grow in popularity, with the Laird being an integral part of their success, including hosting most of their Southern HiBearnation events.

**CONGRATULATIONS**

**FROM ONE  
30 YEAR OLD  
TO ANOTHER!**

Est. 1980

**LAIRD HOTEL**  
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

Publishers of

**star** sydney **observer** **southern star**

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On July 12, 1983 about 70 people packed into the **Laird** Hotel to debate and pass a motion to establish the Victorian AIDS Action Committee, this was the beginning of **VAC/GMHC**. We want to thank the **Laird** for 27 years of partnership in the response to HIV/AIDS in Victoria.



Francesco D'Macho pictured at the Laird Hotel during the February 2008 launch of VAC/GMHC's *Protection* campaign.

**This October we celebrate 30 years with special one-off events and a few twists on some regulars!**

**MON 4TH AUSSIEBUM UNDERWEAR PARTY**

**SAT 9TH MELBOURNE LEATHER MEN PUB NIGHT**

**THURS 14TH SPIT N' POLISH: XXX**

**SAT 16TH VICBEARS PRESENT: BEARTRADE**

**SAT 23RD  
THE BIG ONE**

**DIRTY 30**

**SUN 24TH**

**Pearl**  
A QUEER CELEBRATION

**FRI 29TH**

**MAN FRIDAY PRESENTS:**

**MICOLOGY**  
THE ART OF OPEN MIC

**SUN 31ST**

**'WRAP IT UP' COCKTAIL PARTY**  
**+ 'MEN OF THE LAIRD'**  
BOOK & EXHIBITION LAUNCH

ALL EVENTS MEN ONLY EXCEPT SUNDAY 24TH GLBTIQ INCLUSIVE (VCAT A201/2010)

**BRETT AND MARK WOULD LIKE TO THANK EVERYONE WHO HAS HELPED TO MAKE THE LAIRD WHAT IT IS TODAY, YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE, WHICH IS GREAT BECAUSE WE COULDN'T FIT ALL THE NAMES ON ONE PAGE...**

[www.lairdhotel.com](http://www.lairdhotel.com)

\*\*Thanks to Southern Star Observer for recording the history of the Laird on its 30th anniversary, and to MCV for allowing us access to their photo archives.

