

# A Harbour to Call Home

VICTORIA HARBOUR IS THE epicentre of Vancouver Island.

The robust daily traffic across its glittering shores—including float planes, ferries, cruise ships, pleasure craft, fishing vessels, tour boats and water taxis—mingled with waterfront parks, residential development and hotels, attests to the complex vitality of this beautiful West Coast community.

Ranked as the second-busiest cruise port in Canada and boasting the first certified water airport in the world, the harbour is a source of pride and economic stability for the Island.

The history of Victoria Harbour, and the ebb and flow of its fortunes, is closely connected with the growth and development of the city and the surrounding communities. First Nations peoples made the southeast tip of the Island their home 10,000 years ago, treasuring the harbour's calm waters and abundant hunting and fishing grounds. The Songhees and Esquimalt peoples showed their reverence for its gifts with soaring totems and intricate artwork.

With the arrival of Captain James Cook at Nootka Island on the northwest coast of the Island in 1778, came European colonization. Key to their growing interest was the “safe harbour” explorers had discovered at the Island's



The harbour eventually became renowned for its shipbuilding. Through World War I, wooden ships were its mainstay; in World War II, 10,000-ton steel freighters or “Victory ships” became its pride.

southeastern tip. Spurred on by the area's wealth of natural resources, Europeans began to trade with the First Nations people for furs and salmon, as well as to take advantage of the abundance of lumber. The flourishing of the fur trade and forestry industry, and the discovery of coal in 1835 brought international interest to the area.

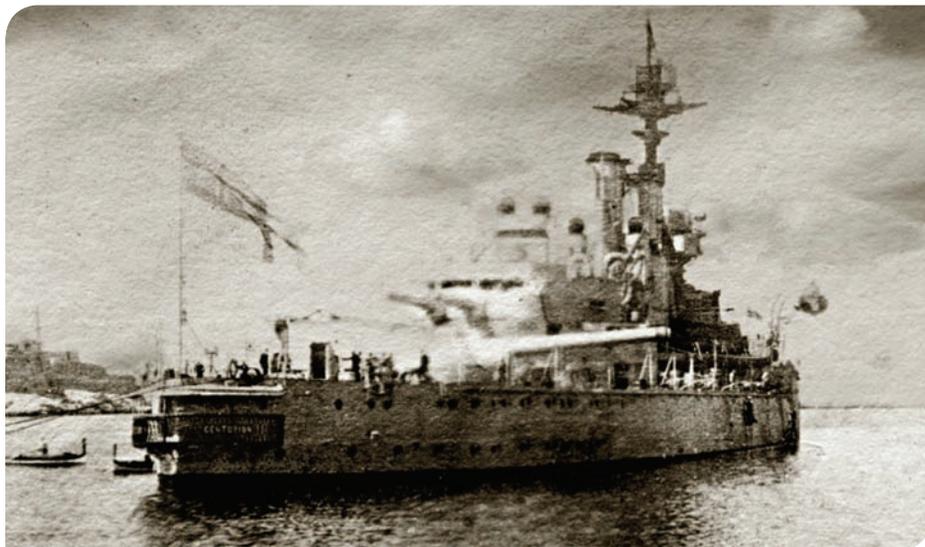
In 1842, the Hudson's Bay Company proclaimed Victoria (or Camosack, as it was then called) as its Pacific Northwest base. Subsequently renamed Fort Victoria—after Britain's young queen—the harbour quickly became a commercial and naval port. In 1849, Britain recognized Vancouver Island as a colony, chose Victoria as its capital city and began to encourage settlement.

As a frontier town during the Fraser Valley gold rush that began in 1858, Victoria drew thousands of people to its port to stock up on supplies. In 1868, Victoria became the capital city of British Columbia, and three years later—upon Canada's promise to build a transcontinental railway linking the coast with the rest of the country—B.C. joined confederation.

Unfortunately, the transcontinental railway ended in Vancouver, increasing that city's fortunes at Victoria's expense. Victoria Harbour experienced a dramatic decline in cargo shipments beginning in the early 1900s as shipping migrated to Vancouver. However, tourism picked up in 1908 after the Canadian Pacific Railway built a magnificent luxury hotel known as the Empress on the harbour's rippling shores.

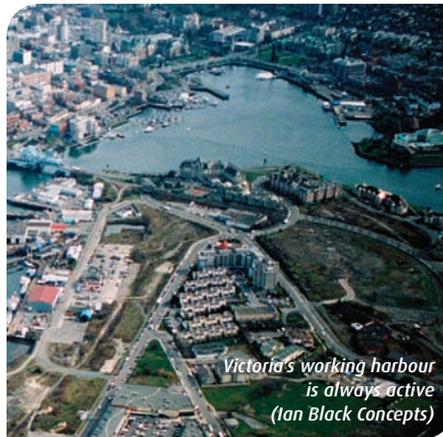
The harbour became an important transportation link between Vancouver and Seattle, Washington. Elegant Canadian Pacific liners including Empress of India, Empress of China, and Empress of Japan made regular stops at Victoria for over 50 years, carrying mail, passengers and freight swiftly across the Pacific.

With the construction of the Panama Canal, Victoria Harbour was expected to become a major industrial centre and cargo terminal for deep-sea vessels. In anticipation, construction of a 2,500-foot breakwater, two piers and a cargo warehouse were completed by 1918. Fish processing plants and a grain elevator soon followed. The harbour eventually became renowned for its shipbuilding. Through World War I, wooden ships were its mainstay; in World War II, 10,000-ton steel freighters or “Victory ships” became its pride. However, shipbuilding declined after the war and the fishing industry increased.



By the 1960s, the harbour had lost so much of its industrial base and seen such neglect that it became known as the region's "Rust Belt". This perturbed locals who envisioned the harbour as a thriving hub that married marine industrial facilities with urban development, tourism and transportation. However, only a long and dedicated commitment to its restoration, infrastructure, stewardship and growth would see that vision realized.

The blend of federal and provincial ownership, and the disjointed management that resulted from the conflicting needs and desires of various stakeholders, precipitated a growing demand for local control of the harbour. The idea of setting up a Harbour Commission surfaced but swiftly sank as the struggle for ownership continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. During that period, the landmark Outer Wharves at Shoal Point were demolished to make way for a new Canadian Coast Guard marine base, which opened in 1980. In 1976, Canadian National Railways pulled out of grain shipments through the Outer Wharf, and in 1977, freight operations took a further blow when a fire ravaged much



*Victoria's working harbour is always active (Ian Black Concepts)*

of the CNR's Ogden Point facility. Transport Canada resumed ownership of Ogden Point and in 1978 constructed a 100,000 sq. ft. concrete warehouse that included a lounge for cruise ship passengers. Meanwhile, the shipping trade declined further and increasing residential development along the waterfront jeopardized the port's future as a "working harbour".

Finally, in the 1990s, local control appeared to be on the horizon. The Harbour Advisory



*Victoria Harbour hosted the tall ships in 2005 (Transport Canada)*

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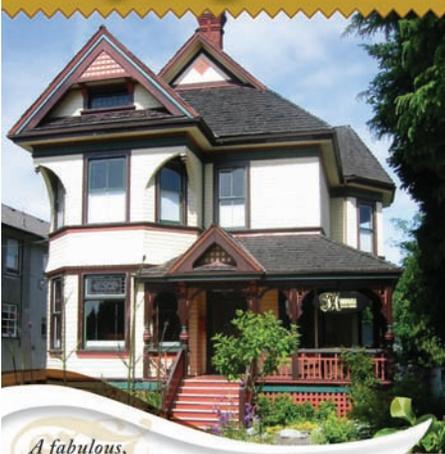
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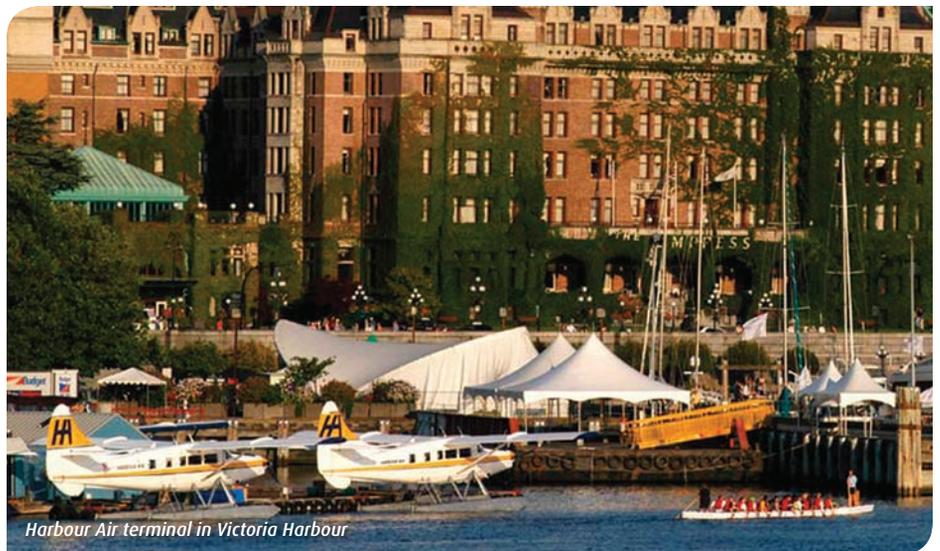
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Harbour Air terminal in Victoria Harbour

Seaplanes began regular operation in the harbour in the early 1930s, carrying mail and people.



Victoria Clipper Ferry in the harbour (Transport Canada)

Committee, representing diverse interests—from marinas to the cruise ship industry, and float planes to tourism to passenger ferries—formed in 1996. Through the hard work of various committees and the growth of a “harbour partnership” of all interested parties, the non-profit society, the Greater Victoria Harbour Authority (GVHA) was born on February 8, 2002. Since then, improvement and beautification projects to clean up properties and ensure that they meet environmental standards have fostered a revitalized docks and waterfront area.

“The harbour is as relevant to Victoria’s economy now as it has ever been,” says Don Prittie, Chair of the GVHA. “The GVHA is committed to ensuring that the harbour continues to fulfill its destiny as an outstanding place to live, learn, work and play.”

**Seaplane Aerodrome**

The first float plane entered Victoria’s Inner Harbour with a shipment of airmail in 1919 when Bill Boeing and Eddie Hubbard carried 60 letters en route from Vancouver to Seattle.

Seaplanes began regular operation in the harbour in the early 1930s, carrying mail and people. After World War II, aviation activity gradually increased. By the 1970s, scheduled commercial aircraft service was operating out of the harbour.

Today, the harbour’s seaplane base is one of Canada’s busiest with over 32,000 takeoffs and landings annually, a high aircraft compliance rate, and movement of over 300,000 people per year. The cooperation of the various seaplane operators makes for a harmonious and unified operation.

In April 2000, Victoria Harbour became the first certified water aerodrome in the world. Transport Canada continues to operate the harbour’s water airport and carry out its aviation and marine regulation responsibilities. The department has been active in creating guidelines, procedures and restrictions on harbour traffic to ensure safety and reduce noise levels.

Victoria Harbour, gateway to millions of visitors each year, continues to be a working harbour and a shining jewel of the Coast. —Belinda Bruce 