

Cobourg's Victoria Hall

Kivas Tully's town hall, restored to its former grandeur, is again the heart of the community

RIGHT: Government of Canada historic sites board plaque in the entrance to Victoria Hall gives no hint of the efforts required to restore the building between 1972 and 1983.

BELOW: Now the centrepiece of Cobourg, Ontario's downtown, the Hall was almost demolished and its grounds turned into a parking lot. BOTTOM: Still used, the courtroom is a replica of London's Old Bailey.

by Katherine Sedgwick



When the Prince of Wales paid a visit to a small town on the shore of Lake Ontario one September day in 1860, the townspeople had something very special for him to see. Their new town hall, named after his mother, Queen Victoria, was a showplace to rival any building in Upper Canada; proof, they were sure, that Cobourg would soon be an important city.

Victoria Hall had taken four years to build and had cost \$110,000—an enormous sum at the time, and one that left the town in debt until the 1930s. It had been designed by renowned Toronto architect Kivas Tully, who, legend has it, was trying to outdo Toronto's St. Lawrence Hall, the work of his arch-rival, William Thomas. Whatever Tully's motives might have been, he created a building that could only be described as magnificent. Three storeys high, in the Palladian style with Corinthian columns adorning the front, faced with intricately carved stone, Victoria Hall was indeed a wonder, especially because it sat in the midst of a town with a mere 5000 inhabitants.

And the interior of the hall was, if anything, even more spectacular. Off the elegant foyer were the town offices, a Masonic Lodge, a deep-well courtroom modeled after the Old Bailey in London, and the great ballroom, destined to become the social centre of the town. It was a stunningly beautiful room, 26 metres long by 14 metres wide, with *trompe l'oeil*

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architectural details—pilasters and moldings—painted in fresco on the walls and elaborate floral friezes painted on the ceiling.

The prince had been invited for the official opening of Victoria Hall, and the ceremony and the celebrations that followed marked the greatest day in the town's history. Huge crowds turned out to welcome the man who would later become King Edward VII. Ornate archways were constructed in the streets. And when all the speeches and formalities were over, the prince and the towns-

folk retired to Victoria Hall's ballroom and danced until dawn. It was an occasion—so the good citizens must have mused, as they finally made their way to their homes and their beds—never to be repeated.

The ghosts of those Victorians would have felt right at home had they been hovering around that same ballroom on an October evening 123 years later. Once again the people of Cobourg had gathered for a glittering event in celebration of Victoria Hall, but this time they were marking the completion of its restoration, after a

massive effort that had lasted 11 years and cost \$6.5 million. Once again the walls echoed with the strains of orchestral music; once again the people of Cobourg danced until dawn.

Different eras bring different hopes and dreams. While the revelers of 1860 hoped that their glorious town hall would show the world that Cobourg was ready to leap into the forefront of life in Canada West, the townsfolk of more than a century later harbored no such grandiose visions. Cobourg had once rivaled Toronto and Kingston as a major commercial centre, but by the 1980s those days

were long past. Instead, Cobourg sits happily on the lake, halfway between the two cities, and is very much the "cheerful, thriving little town" Charles Dickens described after a visit in 1842. The citizens who celebrated Victoria Hall's restoration in 1983 had hopes, though, hopes that the Hall would help Cobourg become something of a regional arts centre,

that it would confer on the town a place in the annals of heritage preservation and that it would attract people—visitors and residents alike—and prosperity.

This year, as Cobourg celebrates its sesquicentennial—the 150th anniversary of becoming a self-governing municipality—those dreams have in large measure come true.

Don Philp was the first president of the Society for the Restoration of Victoria Hall, a small group of residents fired by a dynamic woman, Lenah Field Fisher, who banded together in 1972 to try to save the Hall from demolition. Although the building was still in partial use at the time, it was dirty and semi-derelict, suffering from many years of neglect. To the horror of the Hall's few loyal defenders, there was a move afoot to have it torn down to make way for a parking lot.

"No money had been spent on it for years," recalls Cedric Haynes, who took over as president of the restoration society in 1977 and saw the project through to completion.

While it was common knowledge that the Hall was in bad shape, an engineering study in the early 1970s confirmed everyone's worst fears: Victoria Hall was downright unsafe. Dry rot was discovered in the beams supporting the floor of the ballroom, by that time called the opera house.

At that point the restoration society's fund-raising campaign began. A total of \$2 million was raised from the public. The provincial government gave \$2.6 million, the federal government \$1.2 million and the town chipped in about \$600,000. The campaign was highly successful, but it was far from easy. "Ten years of blood, sweat and tears" is how Haynes describes it.

One of Canada's most renowned restoration architects, Peter John Stokes, of Niagara-on-the-Lake, was responsible for the early stages of the work, while Toronto architects Howard Chapman and Howard Walker oversaw the final phase, including the restoration of the Concert Hall. In the beginning, efforts were concentrated on the structural improvements necessary to make the building safe again. Decayed floor joists were



ABOVE: The two-storey-high Concert Hall in Victoria Hall, as restored by painter Roman Svoboda among others, is used, on average, about four nights per week.



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reinforced with steel, and new wiring, plumbing, air-conditioning and heating systems were installed.

The exterior masonry was cleaned and repaired while the Hall's interior was slowly and painstakingly returned to its original beauty and grandeur. One of the greatest challenges was the restoration of the elaborate fresco decoration in both the courtroom and the Concert Hall. Artist Roman Svoboda reproduced the original patterns; the colors, which had faded badly, were reproduced in their original brilliance.

By 1983 the job was done. With a distinguished award—the National Award of Merit from Heritage Canada—and many accolades bestowed on it, the time had come for Victoria Hall to become a useful, living space.

Cedric Haynes admits that there were fears, even among the restoration group, that after all the expense and work the Hall would not be used. "I even worried about it myself a few times," he confides. But the society canvassed community and artistic groups and found both a need and a desire for an all-purpose facility.

While the municipal offices, the courtroom and the offices of the Crown Attorney and the mayor take up a whole wing of the building, and are in constant use, the heart of Victoria Hall for most members of the community is the ballroom, now known as the Concert Hall. There everything from live theatre to orchestral concerts, chamber music to jazz, fashion shows to meetings and wedding receptions takes place.

"One of the greatest assets of this place is that it has enhanced the cultural life of the community," says the Hall's energetic manager, Mark Finnan. "It has become the social and cultural centre of the region." Finnan enjoys the astonishment of visitors who arrive for a wedding reception "expecting just another community hall" and instead find themselves in what Peter John Stokes has called the most beautiful room in Canada.

Rental charges for the Hall are variable, depending on the group and the event, and are remarkably low, starting at \$125 for an evening, as part of a conscious effort to make the Hall

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available to all townspeople.

Finnan is convinced that Victoria Hall has sparked artistic activity in the town. "It's a catalyst," he says simply. "There was a feeling at first that it would be a terrible white elephant, Cobourg's Mirabel. But how could we fail? The assets we have here are so tremendous."

In addition to the Concert Hall, those assets include a smaller room, the Citizens' Forum, which houses intimate arts gatherings such as performances by the local jazz and folk groups; the James Cockburn Room, named after a Father of Confederation who practiced law in Cobourg in the mid-1800s, and designed like a small-town lawyer's office of that period; and the Art Gallery of Northumberland, which displays both local and traveling exhibitions.

Angus Read, Cobourg's mayor and an active member of the restoration society, doesn't need to be convinced that the restoration of Victoria Hall has been a boon to the town. "We've

still got people around Cobourg who don't like Victoria Hall, who decry it as a waste of money," Read concedes. "But they don't see what it's done for the town. It's revitalized the downtown; it's made it a people place."

James Johnston, former publisher of the *Cobourg Daily Star*, concurs.

"It has made Cobourg a better place to live," he says. Close to 30,000 people use the Concert Hall each year; it is booked, on average, four nights a week. "That," says manager Finnan, "is quite phenomenal for a community of this size." But then Victoria Hall always was a phenomenon. □

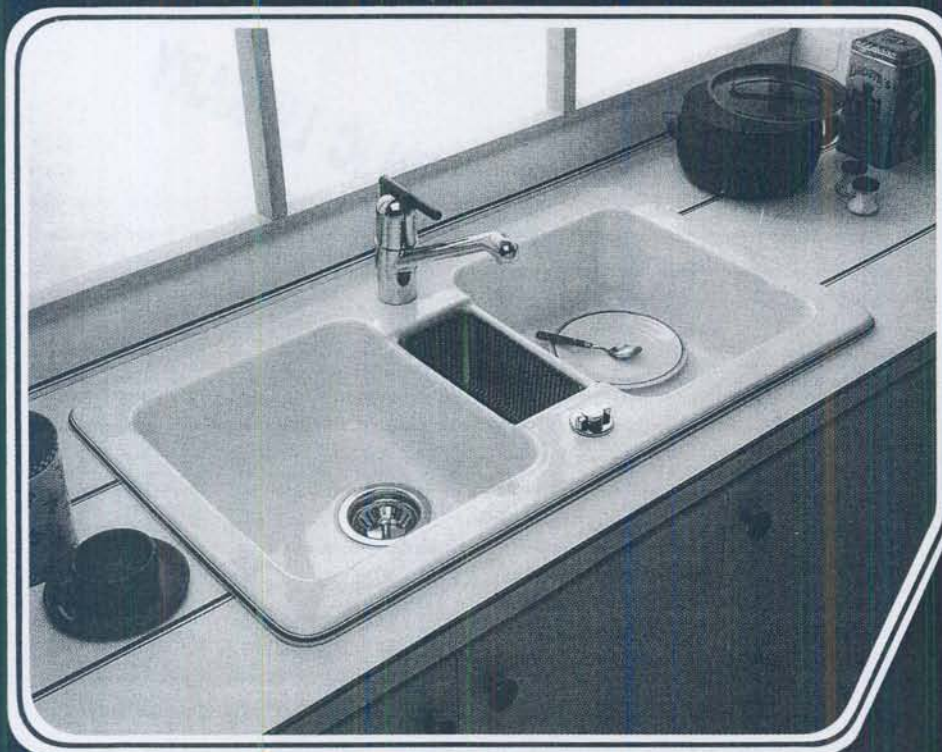
VICTORIA HALL AND THE SESQUICENTENNIAL

Many of Cobourg's sesquicentennial celebrations take place in or have some connection with Victoria Hall. A highlight this year is a house tour that includes Victoria Hall and seven heritage homes in and around Cobourg. The tour will take place on Saturday, June 13. Tickets and information from Mrs. Judith Kerr, 4 Hamilton Court, Cobourg, Ont. K9A 1V1; telephone (416) 372-2875. Tickets will also be sold (if available) on the day of the tour at Victoria Hall from 9:00 a.m.

On Saturday, June 27, there will be a reception at the Hall for Lieutenant Governor Lincoln Alexander.

On Thursday, September 24, the first in a series of classical music concerts will take place in the Hall.

Throughout the year, especially during the summer months, there will be special performances in the Hall. For information contact Concert Hall manager Mark Finnan, Victoria Hall, 55 King St. W., Cobourg, Ont. K9A 2M2; telephone (416) 372-4301.



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