

NORTHUMBERLAND AND DURHAM

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A hall of grace and splendor, recapturing the days when Cobourg vied to be the capital of the country

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Cobourg's national dream

Our friends are saving Victoria Hall. For us

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by Jack Batten/photos by Peter Christopher



The courtroom, faithfully mirroring the design of Kivas Tully, the original architect of Victoria Hall

Cobourg's best days, you might think, lie buried in the distant past. It's a town of about 12 000, sitting snugly on the north shore of Lake Ontario about 112 kilometres east of Toronto, and, true enough, it's filled with ghosts. Sir John A. Macdonald's is one of them. He articulated there as a young law student with George Boulton's firm. Other 19th-century politicians distinguished the town: the Honorable James Cockburn, a Father of Confederation who practised law on King Street, and the Honorable Sidney Smith, once a postmaster general and once, right there in Cobourg, host to a

future king, Edward VII. The shades of artistic folk hang over the town, too. Archibald Lampman, poet, attended Cobourg Collegiate. Paul Kane, the painter, married Harriet Clench, a local girl whose father was renowned as a cabinetmaker, and Kane stayed on in town to pursue his gifts. And the actresses! Young Bea Lillie, growing up in Cobourg, made her first tottering appearance on stage in one of its theatres. Marie Dressler was born and raised in a house next door to St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, and Katharine Cornell, a summer resident, married Guthrie McClintic in 1921

from her aunt's home on Queen Street. But all of them, actresses and statesmen, poets and painters, have long since vanished. The brick cottage where Marie Dressler grew up is today a restaurant, a doctor lives in the Cornell residence, and the home of old Mr. Clench, Paul Kane's cabinetmaker father-in-law, survives as Jim's Pizzeria. Memories, all just memories.

But the proudest memory of all, perhaps the grandest of Cobourg's glories, is today in the process of becoming a fresh reality and, at the same time, is reviving in the 20th century the spirit that made the town

such a spunky, go-ahead centre in the 19th century. The focus of this rebirth is Victoria Hall, a graceful, intricate, breath-takingly lovely three-storey building that has dominated the centre of Cobourg since its construction in the 1850s. The hall fell into cruel disrepair through the years, but during the 1970s, at a cost of close to \$4 million, it has been undergoing renovations that will restore it to the complex beauty envisaged by the original architect, Kivas Tully. The building's mighty concert hall, for example, will materialize, according to Peter Stokes, the architect who's masterminding the restoration, as "the most beautiful room in Canada." Stokes, it's clear, isn't a man to mince words, and his aggressively optimistic stance is mirrored in the attitudes of all the town's people who've contributed money, work, and dreams to the project. The crucial point about Victoria Hall, you see, is that the impetus for its restoration has come from the citizens of Cobourg.

"It got awfully damned close to where the town was going to tear the building down and turn the space into a parking lot," says Cedric Haynes, the hard-driving president of the Society for the Restoration of Victoria Hall. "That was in 1971, and if it'd happened, it would have taken the guts out of this town. But we fought to save the hall. We've succeeded, and you can just see the life that it's given everybody around here."

The hall's origins provide in themselves an intriguing little chapter in Canada's early history. It was put up at a time when Cobourg's fortunes were so up-beat that local leaders could legitimately hope to see the town named the capital of the province or even of the Dominion. Cobourg's population at the mid-19th century, 5 000, put it close to Toronto's. It boasted wool mills and a distillery. It was a centre for farming and lumber. Its dandy harbor provided accommodation for ocean-going vessels, the iron-ore mines in nearby Marmora and Madoc promised future prosperity and, all in all, it was, as Charles Dickens recorded during a stopover in 1842, "a cheerful, thriving little town."

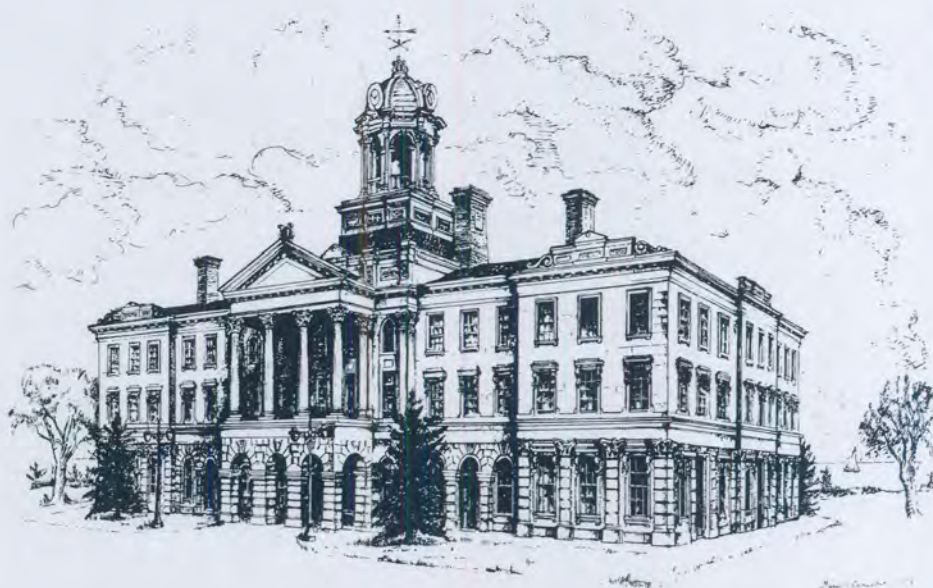
In the 1850s the town fathers elected to reach for the future by undertaking two ambitious enterprises. The first was a railroad connecting Cobourg, the port on the lake, with Peterborough, the town 56 kilometres away that was expected to emerge as a centre for inland commerce. The second was

Victoria Hall, a building that would not merely illuminate Cobourg with its beauty but would provide administrative offices on that day, one hoped, when the town became a seat of government. The hall cost \$110 000 to build, and the railroad ran to \$1 million. Most of the money came from local businessmen, and both projects were completed before the decade was out.

Kivas Tully won the competition to design the hall. He was a Toronto architect who had most notably conceived the gracious Trinity College building on Hoskin Ave. in Toronto, and he poured into Victoria Hall all of his considerable talents for an architectural style that leaned to busy elaboration. He chose the Palladian mode, one that favored Greco-Roman temple fronts and roofed porches, and he came up with a 15-metre-high building covered on three sides by highly detailed stonework. Tully gave the

This was a spectacular room, 25 metres long, 14 metres wide, and a towering 10 metres high. Its ceiling was painted in a great lozenge design, with laurel wreaths and arabesques and floral motifs scattered through the decor in orderly abundance. It was a room designed for every social occasion: musicals, staged tableaux, gymnasium displays, theatricals, and horticultural exhibitions. And lit by gas-jet lamps, it was a room that just naturally danced with a gay and lively magic.

The town council was so delighted by Tully's creation that it arranged to have Victoria Hall officially opened by a future monarch, the Prince of Wales, Victoria's son, Edward. He reached Cobourg on board the steamer *Kingston* on the evening of Sept. 7, 1860, and his arrival was the signal for a parade, speeches, music, drinking, dining, and dancing at a festive ball in the concert hall. The prince was an active participant and waltzed with 15



Victoria Hall

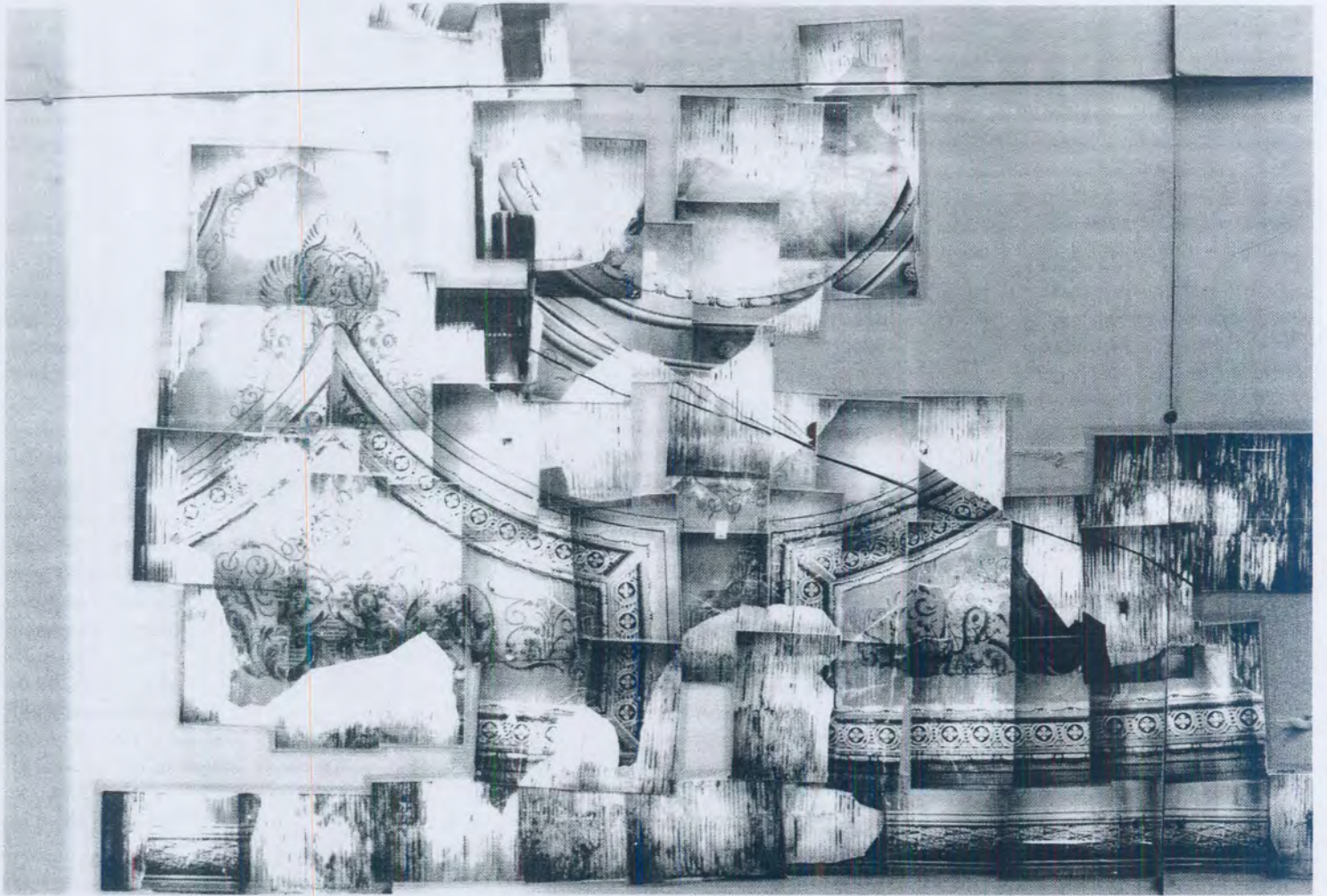
(Artist, Mary Schneider, 1971 - Drawing revised 1978)

entrance four Corinthian columns, with a solemn bearded head of stone gazing down from the arch above. Then, for visual splendor, he added parapets over the entrance, 34 pilasters, 96 generous windows, and the crown-topped cupola on the roof holding four stately clocks.

Inside, Tully provided a courtroom, quarters for town officials and the sheriff, various other offices, rooms for the use of the Masons (as a small nod to the industrious Masonic Order that dominated politics in the area), and, the crowning touch, a concert hall.

local ladies, leading off with the radiant young Louisa Beatty, daughter of Mayor John Beatty. It was a night of glitter and pride and joy, and for it, the largest single crowd in Cobourg's history, 20 000 men, women, and children, thronged through the town's streets till almost daybreak.

That night, alas, saw Cobourg at its peak, and the rest of its immediate history was a sad record of decline. The railroad to Peterborough failed, partly because the bridge that carried it over Rice Lake insisted on collapsing, partly because a competitive line to



*(above) Snapshots of the original ceiling design before the plaster was removed, used as a guide in the restoration
(left) The cupola, housing four giant clocks, was totally rebuilt*



Peterborough from Port Hope, just down the lake from Cobourg, proved more efficient. Commerce fell off in the town, and the growth in its population stalled. By 1863 an editorial in the local *Sentinel Star* contemplated a gloomy future: "Our fate is to be forever the victims of accursed railway speculations. Our harbor has become the haunt of the wild duck and resounds with the crack of the sportsman's rifle instead of with the busy song of the jolly tar. Cobourg, we fear, has seen the summit of her glory. No wonder the shrewd Yankee observed on beholding Victoria Hall, 'That is indeed a splendid building, but where is the town for whose use it was built?'"

During the decades into the 20th century, Cobourg stabilized itself as a comfortable, hard-working town, a community that was more substantial than a backwater but hardly a major centre. Victoria Hall, for its part, was variously used for town offices and for performances in the concert hall by such groups as the local Opera and Drama Guild, but its end seemed certain in 1971 when an engineering study pronounced it unsafe. Among other calamities, there was dry rot in the supporting beams of the concert hall and wet rot where the beams entered the foundation walls. The building was ordered vacated, and Victoria Hall faced condemnation.

It was at this crucial juncture that Cobourg's citizens dug into themselves. When the crunch came it was clear that enough local people cared about the hall and its traditions. On Feb. 14, 1972, they incorporated as the Society for the Preservation of Victoria Hall, and they set out to gather together the money and talent necessary, not merely to reclaim the building's original grandeur, but to make it a hub of the community. The society's goal, it stated from the start, was "to restore the visual dignity of the 1860s while incorporating the efficiency of the 1970s." Nothing less.

"It hasn't been easy, no *sir!*" says Cedric Haynes. And Haynes should know, because in many ways he stands as a handy symbol for the sort of citizens' effort that has gone into the society. He's a big, vigorous man in his early sixties, accustomed to command as a former army colonel and, before retirement, as president of the Toronto-based Radio Bureau of Canada. He's still active on behalf of the Canadian Executive Services Overseas, traveling off for two-month stands in such countries as Costa Rica and El

Salvador, where he helps local businessmen organize corporations. But it's obvious that rescuing Victoria Hall has been the task of the 1970s closest to his heart.

"It isn't just raising the money that's been a tough grind," Haynes says. "It's also the pushing and needling that a lot of us in the society have had to do to keep the local council on the rails till the job's finished. You need *complete* community involvement for a project like this. No foot-dragging from anybody. But, heck, I'm an optimist by nature. I've had to be because there were times when I had to go down to the bank with colleagues and cover notes for work on the hall. And at those times we didn't know where the money was going to come from."

Where it eventually has come from, thanks to the society's indefatigable persuasions, is from the federal and provincial governments (Wintario, for example, agreed in 1976 to give for part of the reconstruction two dollars for every one dollar the society raised in the private sector), from charitable groups (the R. Samuel McLaughlin Foundation came up with \$50 000), and from public-spirited businesses (General Foods Limited, the largest employer in Cobourg, plunked down \$100 000). The society has been especially inventive in devising attractive schemes to coax money out of nongovernment donors. A gift of \$1 000, for instance, enables the proud subscriber to "own" one of the hall's 96 handsome windows, with a plaque duly recording the "owner's" name. More modestly, a \$100 gift entitles the donor to have his name recorded in a prominently displayed book called *The Friends of Victoria Hall*. In such ingenious ways donors both humble and grand are encouraged to give, and thus the necessary \$4 million has been rolling in.

And with the funds, the restoration has proceeded toward glorious completion. "The hall," says Peter Stokes, the architect overseeing the renovation, expressing his enthusiasm for the job, "has a quality that couldn't be economically created in our age. Grandeur, an expression of civic pride, inspiration — there are few opportunities like this today."

First, Stokes attended to the nuts and bolts matters, repairing and reinforcing the original structure, installing new heating, plumbing, and ventilation, and a new electrical system. Then he turned to the building's visual treats, and gradually splendid new rooms have emerged from the disrepair

of the ancient hall. The courtroom on the first floor is a unique jewel modeled on the gorgeous lines of London's Old Bailey. The first floor also holds the family court, the mayor's chambers, and other offices all shiny in their reclaimed loveliness. The third floor is home to the town-council chambers, public meeting rooms and, most conspicuously, to an art gallery that is at once functional and elegant. All of these rooms have been open for business — and for viewing — since as early as January, 1977, and all, in terms of use and beauty, are clearly successes.

"But," says Cedric Haynes, "we aren't out of the woods yet." So they aren't. As the hall moves toward a projected finishing date in late 1979, the task of cleaning the building's exterior still remains. "Can't sandblast," cautions Haynes. "The stone's too fine for that. Have to do it the hard way, by washing with detergent." More essentially the concert hall that occupies most of the second floor awaits completion. A poured-concrete floor is intact, but the awesome responsibility of re-evoking the ornate splendor that Kivas Tully designed into it lies ahead for Peter Stokes and his fellow workers.

"It's a massive job to get back the regal touches they dreamed up back in those Victorian times," Cedric Haynes says. "For complexity, a thing like this is on a par with the Sistine Chapel. That takes money, which is why we're still plugging away for donations."

Haynes doesn't doubt that he and the others devoted to this project will get the money. He's an optimist and a believer. All the citizens of Cobourg seem to be believers these days. They're caught up in the spirit of their town, the spirit that reaches back in time to the years more than a century ago when brave little Cobourg dared to dream that it might become a capital city and dared to celebrate the dream by erecting a small masterpiece of a building. The building, Victoria Hall, as Ontario Premier William Davis said when he relaid its cornerstone on June 6, 1972, "is something worth preserving, something worth developing." The people in Cobourg think so, and, in the act of preserving and developing the old building, they've satisfied themselves that, after all, the town's best days don't lie buried in the past. □