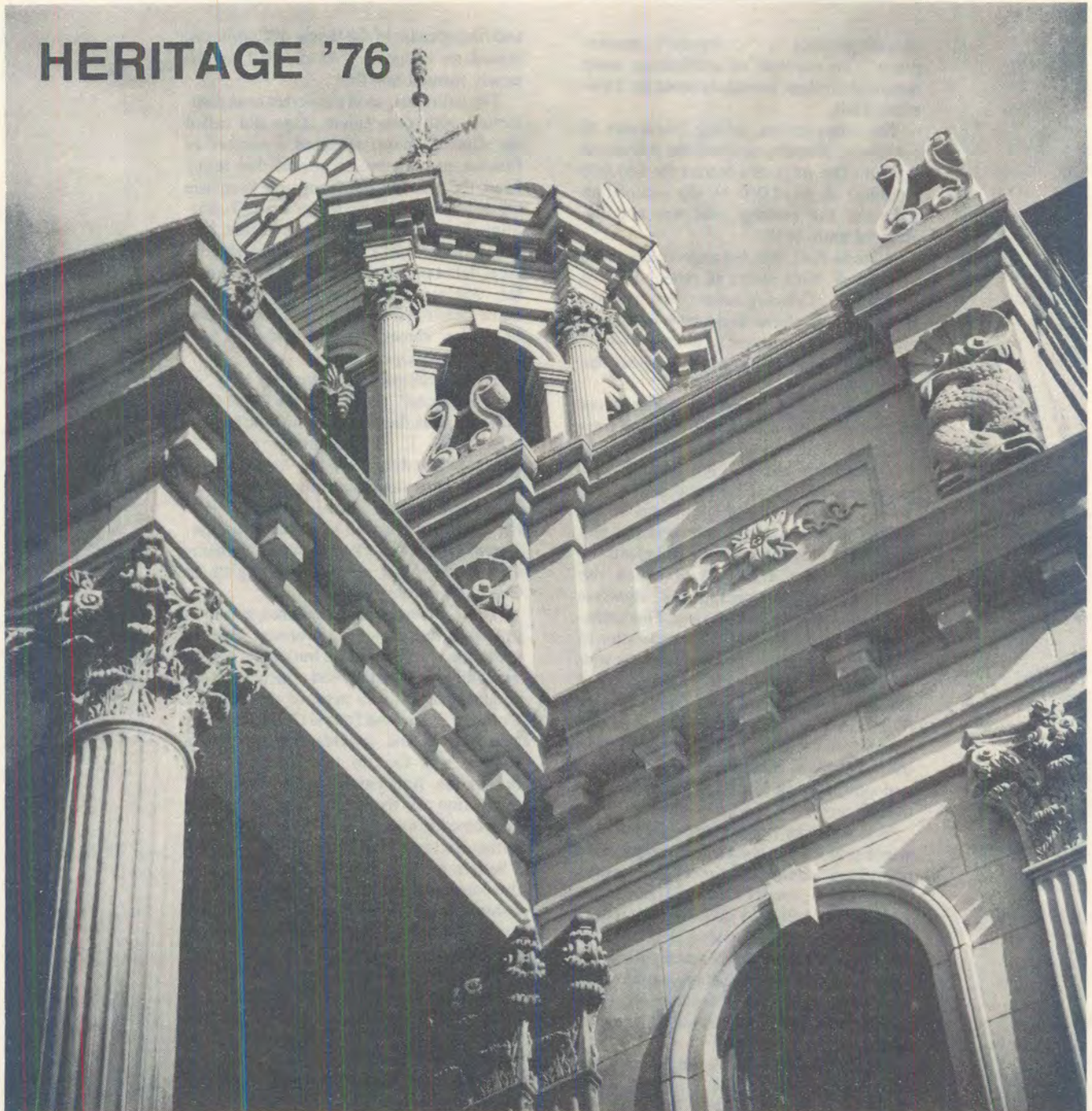


HERITAGE '76



A CRAFTSMAN'S MASTERPIECE

In this decade of spiralling inflation, company expansion and investment have become issues of considerable controversy. Theories of economic restraint abound and when even the free market system is thrown into the arena for attack, stability and permanence become catch words of considerable desirability. To a group of business men and professionals of Southern Ontario, the restoration of Victoria Hall has become a viable method of reinforcing these important qualities. They are convinced that keeping pace with the present and preparing for the future must include preserva-

Campaign underway to restore a 'grand jewel in the diadem of Ontario's heritage'

By Linda Manning

tion of the past so that future generations may have concrete examples of their Canadian legacy.

Victoria Hall, described as a "grand jewel in the diadem of Ontario's heritage", has a fascinating and prestigious history. It

was first conceived of in the 1840s by the citizens of Cobourg who foresaw the possibility of their town becoming the provincial or even national capital of Canada. A good harbour and imminent construction of the Cobourg-Peterborough railway, fired their imaginations and with relatively little capital the Cobourg municipal council hired the noted Toronto architect Kivas Tully "to design a hall commensurate with future greatness". In 1856, the cornerstone was ceremoniously laid by Sir Allan MacNab, Prime Minister of the United Provinces of Canada. The building of Victoria Hall

would produce a "craftsman's masterpiece", an example of architecture more magnificent than Toronto's noted St. Lawrence Hall.

The construction, taking four years to complete, severely strained the municipal budget. The original contract for \$80,000 stretched to \$110,000 by the completion date and the ensuing debt was not discharged until 1938.

Victoria Hall, situated majestically on its own block, rises above all other buildings on King St., Cobourg's main thoroughfare. It stands three stories high and is fronted by an impressive speaker's balcony whose four Corinthian columns tower above the main entrance.

The detailed stonework on three sides of the building are carved in Cleveland freestone, and reveal a revival of the exuberant mid-Victorian period. A bearded head looks solemnly out from the arch of the main entrance while the emblems of the United Kingdom above the speaker's balcony reflect loyalty to England, Ireland and Scotland. Four stately lyres which rise above the parapets on the roof, signify a dedication to music and the arts. Fine craftsmanship is also evident in the decoration of the thirty-four pilasters and ninety-six windows around the building. In the center of the roof is a crown-topped cupola bearing four stately clocks. For one hundred and fifteen years, these clocks have looked out over the town, a landmark for lake boats and symbol of permanence for the citizens of Cobourg.

When it was first opened, the building was equipped for a variety of purposes—a courtroom, county and town offices, council chambers, sheriff's office, Masonic hall and concert hall. The courtroom, a replica of the Old Bailey in London, England, and the concert hall with its sprung floor and elaborately decorated ceiling gave the building a unique quality, a regal air that warranted a dignified and auspicious inauguration.

On September 7, 1860, the building was officially opened by the Prince of Wales (later to be Edward VII of England). Arriving by boat, the Prince proceeded to Victoria Hall by horse-drawn carriage and was enthusiastically cheered by the 20,000 spectators that had gathered for the great occasion. Immediately following, the Royal party, local dignitaries and invited guests attended a grand ball and dinner held in the spacious concert hall. It is reported that the festivities lasted until broad daylight the following morning.

Although Cobourg was never to become a political capital of Canada, this glorious beginning in 1860 was followed by a number of historic events. Ten royal visitors, including Queen Elizabeth II, have visited the hall, since the Prince of Wales officially opened it. The Honourable James Cockburn, active as a Father of Confederation,

and first speaker of the House of Commons, rented an office in Victoria Hall for his newly formed law firm.

The ballroom, soon converted to an auditorium with proscenium stage and called the Opera House, attracted a number of famous personages. It is said that Jenny Lind, the noted Swedish soprano, sang here while touring with the legendary P. T. Barnum. The comedienne, Beatrice Lillie, herself a resident of Cobourg, made her musical debut on the same stage. Marie Dressler, American stage and moving picture comedienne, was born in Cobourg and began her career in amateur shows, very likely in the Opera House.

The Dickensian courtroom, with its "trompe l'oeil" painting of the Royal Coat of Arms, was the scene of a historic lawsuit after W.W. I. Sir Arthur Currie of Cobourg, who led the Canadian Armed Forces in many critical battles, was accused of incurring unnecessary losses on the brink of the armistice. After a vigorous court case, Currie's name was cleared and he "remains one of the most respected strategists in Canadian military history".

Years of minimal maintenance and a growing reduction of revenues due to changing emphasis of the building's worth, gradually rendered the old structure nearly vacant and badly in need of repairs. The Cobourg Opera and Drama Guild, for years guardian of and provider for the Opera House, was first to take action toward restoration. Being aware of the growing deterioration of the auditorium floor, this concerned group prompted a review of the entire Victoria Hall structure in 1970-71. "Severe rot was discovered at the ends of the composite floor beams, so severe that a consulting engineering firm recommended the building be closed down pending further investigation."

The ending of one era prompted the beginning of another. Late in the fall of 1971, concerned citizens formed a Society for the Restoration of Victoria Hall. As it had been declared a National Historical site nine years prior, the hall's restorative worth was already established.

Envisaging the building as both a community centre and a historical site for tourists and visitors, the committee drew up a program consisting of three phases. This program will involve not only the citizens of Cobourg, who will benefit culturally and socially, but also the entire nation, whose heritage is so magnificently portrayed in this old building.

In June, 1972, Premier William Davis officiated at "a cornerstone re-laying ceremony" which officially introduced Cobourg and the nation to the proposed restoration of this historical landmark.

Fund raising began and local contributions were sought from private donors and industry. To get the project underway, General Foods of Canada, whose head

office is located in Cobourg, generously signed a pledge for \$100,000. Many government agencies have supported the project and pledges to date total \$2,388,147 of which \$554,000 is from the private sector. Business and industry are currently being approached to support this important heritage cause, emphasis being given to the significance of their role in preserving our Canadian heritage.

An imaginative and impressive method has been devised to commemorate those who contribute to this vital restoration work. Using government funds for structural and electrical/mechanical repairs, the Restoration committee has reserved individual and corporation donations for artistic and architectural refurbishing. "The meticulous and careful restoration of millwork, carved stone, and fresco-style murals, the concert hall's ornate ceiling, the courtroom finishings and other architectural details" have been divided into categories and donors' names will be suitably acknowledged on plaques displayed in the foyer of the restored hall. This commemoration of contributors from all across Canada, will point out to tourists and visitors that not only government but also business and industry are significantly interested in preservation of the past.

In order to insure that the refurbished hall would be both artistically and architecturally sound, the Restoration committee appointed Peter John Stokes, an architect with an impressive record in restoration. In assessing the necessary removal and restorative procedures, Mr. Stokes outlined the number of structural improvements to be vital to adequate restoration. Included were the underpinning of walls, repair of brickwork, the roof and drainage system, the installation of a new heating system, and new plumbing, wiring and lighting. The initial motivation for renovation, the decaying floor joists would be replaced by a combination of wood and steel.

The committee is optimistic that the building will be operative by September of this year. It is planning an official gala opening for September 7, 1977 with high hopes that the present Prince of Wales will officiate, initiating a new beginning for Victoria Hall, 117 years after its original opening.

The restored building will include a variety of rooms and functions. The concert hall, when restored to its original grand style, will be "the most beautiful room in Canada", according to the architect. As the focal point of the building, it will seat 340 people when used as a theatre and at other times can be used for conventions, trade shows, dances, seminars and other social events.

The town administration, originally housed in this building, will return to the east wing. Georgian furniture, generously

donated for the Mayor's Office, will add dignity and atmosphere to his Honour's quarters.

The Old Bailey courtroom, one of the last of its style in Canada, will become a provincial court. The judge's chambers and court offices will also be improved.

The Cobourg Art Gallery, in the west wing, will be open to the public afternoons, evenings and weekends.

In the future it is hoped that a continental-fare restaurant may be opened to serve visitors and after theatregoers.

As with the original builders of Victoria Hall, the Restoration committee has been constantly beset with financial problems.

The goal of project is to restore the visual dignity of an earlier era

Inflation has doubled the \$1.7 million estimate given in 1971. Hard work and generous donations leave \$600,000 still to be procured. Of this amount, \$500,000 is targeted for business and industry. Beginning this month an eight week nation-wide campaign will be undertaken to gain the remaining necessary funds.

The stated goal of the Restoration Society is to "restore the visual dignity of the 1860s while incorporating the efficiency of the 1970s". The past, which is always the foundation for the future, must reflect permanence and stability as part of its encouragement for the next generation. Just as the free enterprise system depends upon business and industry to preserve the present, thus insuring the future, the Restoration committee is convinced that financial investment in this fine example of Canadiana will stand to future generations, as a concrete testimony to the imagination and dedication of our Canadian forefathers.

The Society for the Restoration of Victoria Hall is a registered charitable institution (#0392134-52-12). All donations eligible for tax credit. Correspondence should be directed to the office at 55 King St. W., Cobourg, Ontario. K9A 2M2.