

May – June 2024

OCS Annual General Meeting

The Old Cemeteries Society held its 2024 annual general meeting on April 18 at the [Kiwaniis Pavilion](#). Twenty-three people were in attendance. Outgoing President Gerry Buydens reported on the Society's accomplishments in 2023—the most important being the completion of the Memorial Gate. Past President Wilf Bruch and Board member Paul Taylor presented Gerry with a lifetime membership in the OCS and a plaque honouring his many years of service, as



well as a gift certificate from Bolen Books and a bottle of whiskey. Treasurer Gudrun Leys reported on the healthy state of our finances. The main business of the evening was the election of the Executive for 2024: President, Yvonne Van Ruskenveld; Vice-President, vacant; Treasurer, Gudrun Leys; Secretary, Michael Halleran; Members at Large, Wilf Bruch, Janet McMeekin, Paul Taylor, Shannon Johnson, Ken Sudhues, Amber Woods, and Diana Pedersen.

Guest speaker local historian and genealogist [Dave Obee](#) gave an excellent illustrated presentation on the history of [Royal Oak Burial Park](#), followed by extended discussion; he generously donated a box of free copies of his new book, *Royal Oak Burial Park: A Century of Service*. The evening concluded with a successful book raffle organized by Gudrun Leys. Both the

meeting room and refreshments were provided courtesy of Board member Shannon Johnson.

Four Old Cemeteries Society Presidents, past and present, graced the meeting: left to right, Wilf Bruch, Yvonne Van Ruskenveld, John Adams, and Gerry Buydens (Photo by Liz Taylor).

Around Town

Congregation Emanu-El has launched an anniversary fundraising campaign for the restoration of its 160-year-old synagogue on Blanshard Street. This is Canada's oldest synagogue in continuous use; it was designated a [National Historic Site](#) in 1979. See the [new campaign website](#) for a description of the needed repairs and an interesting [timeline](#) of the synagogue's history. The OCS will offer a guided tour of the interior of the synagogue led by **Amber Woods** on November 17.



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As one of Victoria's scenic attractions, with tree-lined pathways and views of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, **Ross Bay Cemetery** serves several constituencies, including walkers and cyclists, photographers, local historians and genealogists, tombstone tourists—and **birders**. The latter tend to ignore the grave markers, training their eyes, binoculars, and cameras resolutely upward. They may be users of [eBird.org](#)—a global online database allowing birders around the world to record their bird observations and contribute to the data about bird abundance and distribution available to scientists. Ross Bay Cemetery is one of many designated local **hotspots** created by eBird users; ideally these are small sites with public access and clearly defined boundaries. You can monitor [RBC's eBird page](#) for the latest observations recorded by eBird users; sightings of this Pygmy Nuthatch caused excitement in March.

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On March 20, World Storytelling Day, the **Royal BC Museum** celebrated the launch of a new online resource produced in collaboration with the **BC Archives** and the **BC Black History Awareness Society** (BCBHAS). This updated resource for genealogists, historians, teachers, writers, and researchers—the [BC Archives Black History Records Research Guide](#)—is a finding aid to help users locate materials related to the Black community in BC. It covers published and primary sources that are held at the BC Archives. This new resource complements the online exhibit [British Columbia's Black Pioneers: Influencing the Vision of Canada](#)—a 2020 project of the BCBHAS, funded by **Digital Museums Canada**. Several Old Cemeteries Society volunteers—**John Adams**, **Gerry Buydens**, and **Linda Richards**—[contributed](#) to this project that contextualizes the lives of the Black pioneer settlers who are buried in our heritage cemeteries.





Gothic Victoria is the newest exhibition at the [Wentworth Villa Architectural Heritage Museum](#), on view until September 25. Wentworth Villa is a landmark heritage house, showcasing beautiful Carpenter Gothic elements, that was built in 1863 for Captain Henry Bailey Ella and his family, who are buried in Ross Bay Cemetery. On May 19, Curator **Ben Clinton-Baker** will lead an OCS tour, **Wentworth Villa Connections**, at RBC.

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On April 11, the [Maritime Museum of British Columbia](#) opened its newest exhibition, dedicated to the history of Vancouver Island's iconic **West Coast Trail**. Early in February, the Museum [appealed to the public](#) for personal stories from people who have hiked the trail. **Heather Feeney**, Collections and Exhibits Manager at the Museum, was [interviewed](#) for the CBC's "On the Island" (7 minutes). The original Dominion Life-Saving Trail was a response to the tragic sinking of **SS Valencia** in 1906. Some victims of this disaster were buried at RBC. In 2014, **Kate Humble**, who sometimes leads OCS tours, wrote an account of the shipwreck and the construction of the trail for the *Victoria News* ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)).



Preserving Black History at RBC

Diana Pedersen

There are more than fifty Black pioneer settlers and their descendants buried at Ross Bay Cemetery. On February 25, the annual OCS **Black History Month** tour, offered in conjunction with the [BC Black History Awareness Society](#) (BCBHAS), attracted fifty-five people, on a grey day with a fierce wind blowing. About a third of those present were attending their first OCS tour. This joint tour has been offered for more than two decades and has resulted in the erection of several commemorative markers on previously unmarked graves. This year's tour was a team effort with contributions from **John Adams** from the OCS and **James Gatsi, Fran Morrison, Door Gibson, and Silvia Mangue** from the BCBHAS. We visited some of the graves of the pioneers and also of people who influenced the migration of Black settlers from California to Vancouver Island in the 1850s.

This year's tour had two additional highlights. We visited a new grave marker that was installed this past November, courtesy of the [Last Post Fund](#) (LPF) and its Unmarked Grave Program. **Captain (Retired) Door Gibson**, who is also a member of the LPF, delivered a tribute to Private Richard Stokes (1835-1885) of the [Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps](#). At several points on the tour, we were also fortunate to hear from experienced stonemason **Shawn Thibault** of **Ravenstone Masonry & Conservation, Inc.**, who has been responsible for the preservation and conservation work recently undertaken on some of the graves we visited.



Black History Month tour; new Stokes grave marker

Photos by Diana Pedersen

In 2023, the Black Settler Gravesite Project received a grant from the Heritage Conservation program of the [Heritage Legacy Fund](#), administered by Heritage BC, for the restoration of up to nine grave markers at Ross Bay Cemetery. The funding application stressed that RBC and the annual Black History Month tour help the BCBHAS to educate Victoria residents and visitors about the history of the Black presence in the area and, specifically, to preserve the history and legacy of the Black settlers invited to Vancouver Island by Governor Douglas in 1858. The ongoing restoration is intended both to conserve the original grave markers and curbing and also to preserve the integrity of the gravesites by maintaining and stabilizing the existing forms and materials. The techniques and methods used were explained by Shawn Thibault at several of the newly restored graves visited on the recent cemetery tour.

The Black Settler Gravesite Project team was led by **Door Gibson**, with **Paul Schacter** and **Fran Morrison** also representing the BCBHAS. The Old Cemeteries Society also contributed three team members: **John Adams**, **Wilf Bruch**, and **Gerry Buydens** helped to identify the graves and their locations, walking the cemetery with the other team members and with stonemason **Shawn Thibault** to identify the nature and scope of the needed restoration work. The BCBHAS will be publishing a full report on the project later this year.



Stonemason Shawn Thibault and newly restored grave markers at RBC

Photos by Diana Pedersen

International Women's Day at RBC

Diana Pedersen

On Friday, March 8, 2024, **Ross Bay Cemetery** was the site of a special event celebrating International Women's Day (IWD). A ninety-minute guided walking tour, **10 Remarkable Women**, was presented by the [Zonta Club of Victoria](#) as a special IWD project in keeping with its goal of empowering women. The Old Cemeteries Society of Victoria was also a presenting sponsor, assisting with tour preparation and publicity; OCS tour coordinator **Yvonne Van Ruskenveld** provided help with locating the graves and planning the route. The tour was conceived and proposed to the Zonta Club by **Marilyn Jones**, founder of [Emily Carr Chronicles Walks, Bus Tours & Courses](#). The three tours on March 8 (10 am, 1 pm, and 4 pm) were researched and led by **Catherine Deluz** and **Marilyn Jones**—self-described non-historians who retired to Victoria after careers in finance and communications respectively, now enthusiastically devoted to learning about and sharing the history of women in Victoria.

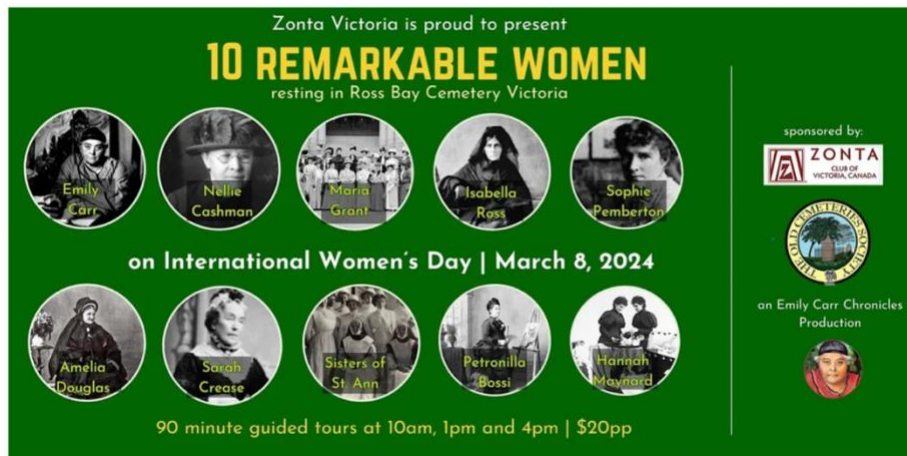


Learning about Nellie Cashman (left) and Emily Carr (right)



Photos by Diana Pedersen

Although some light rain fell during the 10 am tour, the rest of the day was overcast and mild; total attendance was about eighty-five. OCS volunteers **Mike Woodcock**, **Diana Pedersen**, and **Gudrun Leys** each attended a tour to deliver introductory remarks about the cemetery and the OCS tour program. The ten remarkable women presented on this IWD tour are familiar to longtime OCS tour-goers, although their graves have never all been visited on the same tour. It was an inspired selection for IWD that clearly engaged the mostly-female attendees, offering an enjoyable introduction to women's history, local history, and the charms of Ross Bay Cemetery.



Tombstone Tourist

Yvonne Van Ruskenveld

Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris, France

This past March, I was lucky to have the opportunity to travel to Paris with a friend. We were there for eight days, and our focus was on visiting art galleries (my friend is an artist) but I made sure to slot in one cemetery tour. It had to be [Père Lachaise](#).

By the early 1800s, the cemeteries of Paris were filled to overflowing. Descriptions from the time refer to horrific sights of body parts poking above ground and powerful stench wafting through the city. Several new cemeteries were planned around the city to create attractive spaces for mourning. Père Lachaise was the first of these, opening in 1804. Montmartre and Montparnasse Cemeteries soon followed.

At first, though, Père Lachaise was not a success. It was considered inconveniently located far out of town, and few burials took place. At the time, it was 42 acres in size (Ross Bay is 27.5). In the first year, there were only 13 burials. Numbers increased very slowly until 1817 when the cemetery managers decided on a marketing strategy: they moved the bodies of famous people from other cemeteries into Père Lachaise, beginning with Molière and Jean de la Fontaine. This explains why there is a medieval grave in a 19th-century cemetery. Heloise and Abelard were famous star-crossed lovers in the 1100s. Though not buried together at the times of their deaths, they became an attraction in Père Lachaise when they were brought together there. The marketing strategy worked—the people of Paris wanted to be buried among the famous.



Père Lachaise Cemetery; grave of Heloise and Abelard

Photos by Yvonne Van Ruskenveld

Today, Père Lachaise is 110 acres and includes an ossuary, a crematorium with galleries of niches for cremated remains, and over 5,000 trees. It is still an active cemetery but burial rules are strict: the deceased must be a resident of Paris or have died in the city. Plots are for sale and can be purchased for 10 years, 30 years, 50 years, or in perpetuity. If a “lease” is not renewed, the bones are removed and placed in the ossuary, and any monument on the grave is destroyed, leaving the space for sale. The total number of graves in the cemetery is about 70,000. The estimated number of burials over the years is about one million (remember that buried remains may be removed to the ossuary, and replaced with others).

One of the highlights at Père Lachaise is the grave of Oscar Wilde (below left)—surrounded by glass because fans were planting lipstick kisses on the stone, causing serious deterioration. The owner of one of the newest graves—so new that the owner isn’t dead yet—commissioned a statue of herself (below centre). A typical family tomb has a beautiful bronze door (below right).



Highlights from Père Lachaise Cemetery



Photos by Yvonne Van Ruskenveld

Tour Notes

On March 3, twenty-six people enjoyed **John Adams’** Zoom presentation (90 minutes) on the **History of Ross Bay Cemetery**. This was an opportunity for John to share his decades of research on the history of the cemetery with a wider audience, incorporating maps, paintings, and photographs that we don’t get to see during a walking tour of the cemetery. If you missed this informative presentation, [it’s now available](#) on the **OCS YouTube channel**.



Kathryn and Nick at Ross Bay Villa; checking out the “before” pictures (right)

Photos by Diana Pedersen

On a chilly and overcast March 10, twenty-five people attended the tour of the [Ross Bay Villa Historic House Museum](#), across the street from Ross Bay Cemetery. We divided into two groups that were led by our excellent guides—**Kathryn McAllister**, President of the Ross Bay Villa Society, and **Nick Russell**, architectural historian. They are part of the team of dedicated volunteers who have laboured for two decades to purchase the house and restore it to its 1860s glory. We learned about the challenges of restoration, the history of the house, and the life of the Roscoe family in early Victoria. The OCS office occupies what was once a children’s bedroom.

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A balmy Emily Carr tour at Ross Bay Cemetery



Photos by Diana Pedersen

On an unseasonably warm March 17, eighteen people, mostly first-time tour-goers, joined the **Emily Carr Tour—Part 1**, led by the team of **Yvonne Van Ruskenveld**, **Ann-Lee Switzer**, **Larissa Ciupka**, and “Emily” herself, **Molly Raher Newman**. We visited some of the graves of Victorians who were known to Emily and who appeared in her writings. “Emily” read from her books and stories and sang several songs to the accompaniment of her ukulele.

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Nancy introduces the Chatelaines at RBC

Photos by Diana Pedersen and Ellen McMillan

On a sunny but chilly March 24, forty people attended **Nancy Kostyrka**’s well-researched new tour on the **Chatelaines of Government House**. Nancy is a volunteer at the [Costume Museum](#) in the Cary Castle Mews, and other volunteers from Government House were among the attendees. We visited the graves of the wives of one Governor and seven Lieutenant Governors. See photos for the graves of Ellen Chislett Richards (left) and Genevieve Wright Prior (right). The tour anticipated a special exhibit on this topic that will open at the Costume Museum on May 21.



John visiting former friends and neighbours at RBC

Photos by Diana Pedersen

On March 31, a beautiful Easter Sunday afternoon, twenty-four people gathered for **Alas Poor Yorick—John Adams’** unique personal tour of graves of his friends and acquaintances buried at RBC. These include descendants of Victoria’s famous old families encountered by John when he was a Boy Scout and “nerdy teenager” with a keen interest in history, as well as others he met during his civil service career in heritage conservation and during the early years of the OCS. Tour highlights included John Alexis, owner of Johnny’s Coffee Shop; Madge Wolfenden, archivist; Inez and John O’Reilly, who rescued Point Ellice House; and descendants of the pioneer Pottinger family who owned (and possibly haunt) John’s house in Fairfield.



Amber and Wilf at the Jewish Cemetery

Photos by Diana Pedersen

On April 7, twenty-six people braved a chilly wind to attend the tour of the **Jewish Cemetery** led by **Amber Woods**. After a brief introduction to the history of the site, Amber explained some of its features, including the Holocaust Memorial and the Zachor Wall, as well as some Jewish burial customs. In this new tour, Amber shifted her focus from the gold rush era and the founding families of Victoria’s Jewish community to the 1930s and several families who were active in the synagogue, business, and community organizations. OCS Project Manager **Wilf Bruch** outlined the restoration work on the Sarah Oppenheimer grave to be undertaken this summer.



On April 14, a mild sunny afternoon, forty people attended **Grocery Wars**, a new tour by **Larissa Ciupka**. There were six stops where we learned about some of Thrifty’s predecessors in

Victoria—Fell, Lester & Gibbs, Bossi, Iredale, Ross, and Rogers. Larissa drew on her extensive research in the daily newspapers, reading lengthy passages with dramatic flair. The highlight was the entertaining story of Leah Rogers, wealthy widow of the chocolate merchant, who has been accused of mismanaging the fortune left to her by her husband on his death in 1927. Larissa suggested that the trusting Leah was bilked out of much of her fortune by her nephew Alfred—a con artist who enjoyed living the high life during the 1930s.



Lester commemorative marker (left); Larissa introducing her tour (right)

Photos by Diana Pedersen



On April 21, the sun came out just in time for the tour at [St. Luke's Cemetery](#), the historic churchyard of St. Luke Cedar Hill Anglican Church in Gordon Head. The cemetery, which includes a Garry Oak meadow, is well maintained by an active Cemetery Committee that has its own [newsletter](#). Thirty people attended this new tour, **The Women of St. Luke's**, which was coordinated by **Yvonne Van Ruskenveld** and **Barb Prescott** and included contributions from a team of eight volunteers. One highlight was the grave of local historian [Ursula Jupp](#). Especially enjoyable and affecting were the family stories and personal reminiscences of the descendants of people buried in the churchyard, who brought photographs of their mothers and grandmothers. At the end of the tour, we were given the opportunity to view the interior of this [landmark Gothic Revival church](#) and its beautiful stained glass windows.



Highlights from St. Luke's Cemetery

Photos by Liz Taylor and Paul Taylor

Tour Schedule for May–June 2024

Tours are every Sunday at 2:00 PM. Charge: \$5 for non-members; \$2 for members. No reservations needed. Rain or shine. Tours at Ross Bay Cemetery (RBC) start at the Memorial Gate on Fairfield Road, opposite the south end of Stannard Avenue. Other tours start where noted.

May 5. **Chinese Cemetery.** This tour coincides with the beginning of Asian Heritage Month in Canada. For two decades, former City Councillor **Charlayne Thornton-Joe** has provided the fascinating history of this national historic site and recounted the lives of many who are buried here, including her own grandfather. She will also feature the recently refurbished heritage interpretation panels that she arranged to have installed. Meet at the Chinese Cemetery, foot of Crescent Road, below King George Terrace.

May 12. RBC. **White Bronzes of Ross Bay Cemetery.** Scattered throughout Ross Bay Cemetery are remarkably distinctive grave markers, many of them 140 years old. They are “white bronze” markers, each of them cast in zinc. Despite their antiquity, these markers are as well preserved as they ever were, their inscriptions as legible as the day the markers were installed. **Alan MacLeod** will shed light on what brought about the popularity of these markers, the reason their popularity waned, and the significance of the symbols they bear.

May 19. RBC. **Wentworth Villa Connections.** **Ben Clinton-Baker**, Curator of Wentworth Villa Architectural Heritage Museum, will present today’s tour. He will focus on the Ella family, who built Wentworth Villa in 1863, and explain how their home became the centre of social life in Victoria. He will include many of their friends and contemporaries who are buried at RBC.

May 26. RBC. **Point Ellice Bridge Disaster.** On this day in 1896, an overloaded streetcar plunged through the rotten deck of the old Point Ellice Bridge (today better known as the Bay Street Bridge), resulting in the deaths of 55 people. **Yvonne Van Ruskenveld** will visit the graves of many of the victims from this tragedy—the worst streetcar accident in the history of North America.

June 2. RBC. **Murder Most Foul.** A team of storytellers will take us to graves of murderers and their victims and tell the grisly tales found in coroners’ files, old newspapers and through interviews with family members. As the TV shows say, viewer discretion is advised.

June 9. RBC. **Early Public Servants of BC.** Ross Bay Cemetery is the resting place of many of BC’s early public servants. To kick off 2024 Public Service Week, **Mike Woodcock**, retired BC public servant, introduces some of the fascinating characters who sought to provide a semblance of order over this brand-new rough and rowdy province.

June 16. RBC. **Métis Connections.** Métis are First Nations people who have had a European fur trader marry into their Indigenous family. They are one of the three recognized First Peoples in Canada. Today’s tour will demystify confusion about the term and visit graves of many Métis buried at RBC and explain their historical importance to the city and the country.

June 23. RBC. **City Fathers Since 1862.** Many of Victoria’s early mayors are buried in Ross Bay Cemetery. **Mayor Marianne Alto** will lead this tour to the graves of some of our earliest mayors, who helped to shape the city we live in today. Their stories reflect the very different times through which our city grew.

June 30. RBC. **OCS Projects.** Over its 37-year history, the OCS has undertaken a wide range of projects in Ross Bay Cemetery to help maintain the character of this beautiful heritage site. **Wilf Bruch**, OCS Project Manager, and other members of the OCS team will visit these completed projects, explain how they were carried out, and introduce you to the individuals buried there.

Ladybugs at the Jewish Cemetery

Diana Pedersen

The recent April 7 OCS tour of the [Jewish Cemetery of Victoria](#), led by Amber Woods, included some commentary about the ongoing cleaning and restoration of historic graves. One of the graves highlighted was that of [Julius Franck](#) and [Mollie Franck](#), who died in 1910 and 1926. On the cemetery blog, [“Cleaning and Restoration of the Graves.”](#) you can scroll down to the posts for August and September 2023 to see the dramatic “before and after” pictures of the Franck grave—especially the black and white tiles. During the tour, Amber also responded to a question about [the custom of leaving stones or pebbles on Jewish graves](#). This practice, she



Franck grave

Photos by Diana Pedersen

explained, goes back to Biblical times. It is similar to the custom of leaving flowers, but stones are preferred because of their permanence. Keen observers on the tour may have noticed some other tokens left by visitors to the cemetery—tiny spotted creatures,



including one lurking on the Franck grave just below the inscription on the headstone. The [Ladybug Project](#) was initiated last year by Noeli Urud who returns to Victoria every summer to visit the grave of her grandfather, [Dr. Nicholas Cohen](#), who died in 2010. Noeli began by painting stones to leave on his grave but switched to ladybugs, beloved by her grandfather.

Noticing that some graves didn't have any stones, she also left ladybugs at other graves. Many cultures consider these colourful insects to be symbols of hope, good fortune, and protection.

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Annual memberships in the Old Cemeteries Society run from January 1 to December 31. Individual \$30, Student \$20, Household \$45. Payments can be made by cheque or e-transfer. To join or renew, see the [Membership page](#) on the OCS website for more information.

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