



July – August 2026

Our New Feather Flag!

Yvonne Van Ruskenveld



The Old Cemeteries Society is proudly flying a new feather flag. The idea of the flag arose out of a discussion at an OCS Board meeting about our need for something to help us stand out at displays and other events. We have a large banner but it is rarely convenient to use. We needed something that was easily transported and could stand on its own; a feather flag fitted the bill.

Working with Arifin Graham of [Alaris Design](#), we chose the Pooley Angel as a symbol of Victoria's heritage cemeteries. The angel at the Pooley family grave is the most recognizable grave marker in Ross Bay Cemetery. To that image, we added our distinctive round logo, the words "History • Heritage • Community," our website address, and a QR code, which, when scanned, goes to the OCS website.

The flag had its inaugural flight at our tour at Hatley Memorial Gardens on June 7. We were at a distance from the cemetery entrance, and the flag successfully helped to guide people to our starting point. Its second appearance was at the June 20 cleaning bee. At cleaning bees, we are often asked by passers-by who we are; now, not only do they have an answer but also an easy way to find out more about us. Watch for the flag at future cleaning bees and at other special events later this summer.

It's Cleaning Bee Season Again!



On June 20, we held our first cleaning bee of 2026 on a perfect Saturday morning at Ross Bay Cemetery—not raining, not too hot, and no wind or smoke! A multi-generational group of twenty volunteers gathered to assist our project manager, Wilf Bruch, in the eastern part of Section P and the adjoining strip of section M.

There are some significant monuments along this north-south walkway. Mayor Herbert Anscomb's imposing tomb received a much-needed scrubbing and scraping to remove years of grime and mossy growth. The elegant grave marker of George Byrnes also received special attention and a thorough washing, with Wilf applying his secret blend of dish soap to its grubby tiled surface. During the summer months, dried moss and leaves are easily lifted and swept from many graves with large flat surfaces.

At a cemetery cleaning bee, there are jobs for everyone—even those who need to protect their backs from bending and lifting. Those who enjoy the zen of cleaning can choose to work in solitude, but there are plenty of opportunities for interesting conversation. Two more cleaning bees are scheduled for July 25 and August 8, 10 AM to noon, weather permitting. All welcome!



Volunteers at work in the cemetery

Photos by Diana Pedersen

Ching Ming at William Head

Diana Pedersen

The second annual Ching Ming celebration was held at the [William Head Cemetery](#) at [William Head Institution](#) (WHI) in Metchosin on a sunny Saturday May 2. (The first event, held last year on April 5, was described in detail in the [May-June 2025 issue](#) of *Stone Cuttings*.) The ceremony was organized by **Mary Lindsay** with assistance from **Charlayne Thornton-Joe**. William Head Cemetery, at the site of a former quarantine station, contains the graves of twenty-six members of the Chinese Labour Corps (CLC). Thousands of Chinese men were recruited by Allied forces to serve as paid labourers on the Western Front during the First World War, freeing soldiers for fighting. For a century, their crucial role was largely forgotten. Mary's larger project honours those who died far from home during their transit of this country; it is documented on her Facebook page, [Chinese Labour Corps: Ching Ming in Canada](#).



Mary, Charlayne, and Ken at the William Head Cemetery

Photos by Diana Pedersen

Attendance was substantially increased over last year, with more than 100 people enjoying the afternoon—about half were staff and inmates of WHI and half visitors from outside, with everyone mingling freely. About ten faces familiar from OCS Sunday tours were in evidence. (Photography showing the faces of inmates was not permitted.) Most of the visitors were associated with sponsoring organizations, the OCS being a principal sponsor and providing important administrative support for the event. Among the speakers was our President, **Ken Sudhues**, who grew up in Metchosin and shared his childhood memories of the site. He noted that the OCS is pleased to support this rare opportunity for members of the public to explore this little-known heritage cemetery. We heard from Mayor Little of Metchosin, from the former archivist/librarian of WHI who explained the history of the site and of the CLC, from a Chinese

inmate who explained what involvement in the Ching Ming project has meant to him, and from Mary who recounted her personal journey of learning first about Ching Ming and then about the Chinese Labour Corps. We can best honour the ancestors, she concluded, by telling their stories.

Charlayne directed the ceremonial part of the afternoon, which included offerings of fruit and flowers at the individual CLC graves and the burning of joss sticks and joss paper in front of the central monument commemorating the CLC workers. The highlight of this year's event was a new addition—the [Ging Wu West Lion Dancers](#), who delighted everyone present. As Mary explained, lion dances are not a traditional component of Ching Ming ceremonies, but traditions evolve and we are in the process of creating a new one at William Head.



Joss sticks, joss paper, and lion dancers

Photos by Diana Pedersen

Principal fundraiser/organizer Mary Lindsay and “Master of Ceremonies” Charlayne Thornton-Joe are to be congratulated for their hard work in creating this meaningful occasion. This initiative by William Head Institution deserves our support. Attendance at this two-hour annual event is limited to fifty visitors and, for security reasons, requires pre-registration and pre-screening. When the invitation comes around next year, OCS members who have never visited this unique heritage cemetery in a stunning setting are strongly encouraged to take advantage of this opportunity.

Gratitude to Event Donors & Sponsors
Chinese Labour Corps: Ching Ming in Canada
William Head site, May 2, 2026

Bank of Montreal / Breanna & Michael Kroeker / Chinese Canadian Historical Society-BC / Discover the Past / Elements Dental / Ging Wu West Lion Dancers / Golden Happiness / Gilman Deters Harbourfront Wealth Management / Hotel Grand Pacific / Iris Hesketh-Boles / Jackie Andrews / Jade Phoenix Club / Jack & Sylvia Gin Foundation / Mortimer's Monumental Works / Neighbourhood Small Grants / Old Cemeteries Society / Randall Robertson / Royal Canadian Legion Britannia Branch #7 / Thrifty Foods (Island Hwy) / Victoria Canada-China Friendship Assoc. / Westside Instaprint

Special Thanks to William Head Institution

Tombstone Tourist

Tim Fitzthum

Highgate Cemetery, London, England

Years ago, I recall seeing a photo of [Highgate Cemetery](#), depicting it as a hopelessly overgrown jungle of vegetation cascading over graves and impeding the passage of anyone who dared to visit. When I visited the cemetery in May of 2026 with my husband, Mark, we didn't find that Amazonian jungle, but Highgate is still a wild parkland consisting of overgrown, self-seeded trees creating a canopy over crumbling grave monuments. The ground is covered with weeds, flowers, ivy, and shrubs; grave monuments pierce the groundcover as if growing towards the light.



Highgate is nevertheless a remarkable place. Built in two sections totalling thirty-four acres, it has had about 53,000 burial plots with 170,000 interments since its opening in 1839. As first-time visitors, we chose to take a 75-minute guided tour of the western section to understand its key features and learn some remarkable stories. We were not disappointed as our tour guide, Hannah, was well versed in the Highgate story.

Hannah described how Highgate Cemetery was popular in the Victorian era due to its elaborate, often Gothic-styled, monuments; it became a fashionable place to be buried and to be seen. Early cemetery officials encouraged the location of prominent monuments near pathways, selling cheaper and smaller plots farther away from paths so that they would not be seen. The cemetery was much admired and visited for its presentation of death in a park-like setting. And the place was not covered by trees back then. The south-facing slope had views of London.



Hannah also discussed the rescue of the cemetery by the Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust, formed in 1975 after years of decline.

Our fellow tourists became quiet once we entered the Egyptian Avenue—a passageway lined with sixteen burial vaults with heavy cast-iron doors and home to rare spiders. (No spider hunting that day!) The Avenue opened into the Circle of Lebanon where more burial vaults are laid out along a circular, below-ground path crowned by a Lebanese cedar at its centre. Next, a visit to the Terrace Catacombs, where more than 800 burial niches are held along a cool and dark corridor. Vandalism and decay have left some of the niches open, exposing rotting wooden outer coffins and revealing inner lead liners where the wood has fallen away. Back in the bright light, we continued the loop route, where Hannah continued to point out various mausoleums and well-known persons buried in other graves before ending the tour.

Then, we made a quick visit to the eastern section of the cemetery to view the graves of writer George Eliot, communist Karl Marx, and others. Three hours at Highgate and it was time to leave. Since returning home, I've found more interesting monuments that I missed seeing. Does this mean another visit to Highgate Cemetery?



Views of Highgate Cemetery

Photos by Tim Fitzthum

A Boost for the Row Marker Project

One of the Old Cemeteries Society's most appreciated ongoing projects at Ross Bay Cemetery has been the [Row Marker Project](#), under the direction of our Project Manager, **Wilf Bruch**; until 2009, cemetery visitors had to locate graves with only a map to guide them.



Initially, OCS members were asked to “adopt a marker by donating” and, over the years, many markers have been funded from OCS general revenue. This is one way the Sunday tour admission fees are put to use.

This year, the Row Marker Project received a generous grant of \$5,625 from the [Greater Victoria Savings Credit Union Legacy Fund](#), administered by [Vancity Community Foundation](#). The OCS is committed to adding seventy-five new markers in Sections N, O, and Q, and along some of the main pathways, by the end of this year. The quartz for the markers was donated by [FloForm Countertops](#), then cut to size by Wilf. [Mortimer's Monumental Works Ltd.](#) was engaged to engrave the first batch of markers, now mortared to their bases by **Gregory Ciupka**. In July, we will be asking for volunteers to help install the new markers. If you like to dig, this will be your chance to contribute to a worthy cause!

Tour Notes

On May 3, an unseasonably warm “summer” afternoon, nineteen people attended **Mayor Marianne Alto’s** third annual tour at Ross Bay Cemetery—**Meet the Mayor(s)! City Fathers Since 1862**. There are so many mayors buried at RBC that this tour always features new stories. This year we met Mayors Grant, Barnard, Harris, Carey, Hayward and Hayward (father and son), Anscomb, Porter, Redfern, Robinson, and Macdonald. In her usual entertaining fashion, Mayor Alto told us about the landmark civic institutions her predecessors helped to establish and about some of the more scandalous aspects of city government. She thanked the OCS and urged everyone to support and contribute to its important work.



Meeting the mayors with Mayor Alto



Photos by Diana Pedersen



May 10 was a sunny and breezy Mother’s Day afternoon at RBC. Eighteen people attended a special tour, **Mum’s the Word! A tour to celebrate Mother’s Day**, led by **Yvonne Van Ruskenveld, Dakota Farenholtz, and Kate Fisher**. We visited eight graves, sometimes getting a new perspective on familiar names: Josette Work, Joan Dunsmuir, Kate Wolfenden, Nancy Lester, Maria Grant, Helen Grant, Catherine Whittier, and Elizabeth McCormack Comerford. Our presenters were impressed by the accomplishments of their subjects, who also raised large families and coped with tragic personal losses. The tour included a brief stop at the grave marker of Esther Maria Holness—one of Yvonne’s favourite examples of memento mori at RBC.



Kate (left) and Dakota (right) at the graves of Catherine Whittier and Maria Grant

Photos by Diana Pedersen

On May 17, on a warm and sunny holiday weekend, twenty-three people attended **Dennis Minaker's** engaging tour on **The Gorge of Summers Gone**. His book of the same title, originally published in 1998 and now out of print, remains the definitive history of Victoria's inland waterway. For decades, the Gorge was the site of an annual regatta held to celebrate the Queen's birthday; the boat races encouraged consumption of food and drink that greatly benefitted the hotels at either end of the bridge. Some of Victoria's wealthiest families built magnificent homes and hosted splendid garden parties on the Gorge. Generations of Victorians enjoyed musical entertainments, amusements, and swimming in the Gorge waters. Dennis drew extensively on his interviews in the 1990s with Victoria "old-timers" who still had tales to tell.



Dennis Minaker evokes the Gorge of another era



Photos by Diana Pedersen



Forty-five people turned out on a beautiful summery May 24 for our annual tour of the **Chinese Cemetery** led by **Charlayne Thorton-Joe**, former city councillor and now Visitor Experience Manager at the [Victoria Chinatown Museum](#). Some extra walking was required as a construction project blocked our usual entrance, but this provided more opportunities to appreciate the profusion of California poppies and the sparkling waters of the Strait. Charlayne recounted her own family history and her connection to the cemetery through her grandfather's grave. She provided a fascinating overview of the history of Chinese burials in Victoria, the siting of the Chinese Cemetery at Harling Point, and its evolution into a treasured [National Historic Site](#).



Appreciating the Chinese Cemetery with Charlayne



Photos by Diana Pedersen

On May 31, another pleasant sunny day at RBC, thirty-two people enjoyed an entertaining new tour, **Deaths by Mistake**. Team members **Kate Fisher**, **Yvonne Van Ruskenveld**, **Diana Pedersen**, **Dakota Farenholtz**, and **Morag Wehrle** all contributed stories of accidental death that offer an unusual window into the daily lives of Victorians of an earlier era, before the safety regulations that we take for granted. The featured fatal hazards included streetcars and jitney cars, a harpoon in an office setting, a bad combination of guns and dynamite, a bite from a rabid wolf, a shipwreck, a diving accident, and an explosion during the production of soda water.



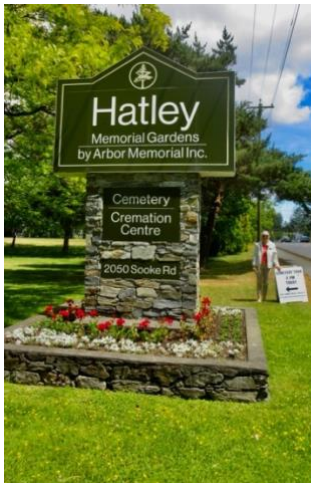
The conclusion of another successful team tour; one of RBC's newest residents



Photos by Larissa Ciupka



On a sunny June 7, the OCS Sunday tour returned to [Hatley Memorial Gardens](#) for the first time in eleven years. This privately owned heritage cemetery opened in 1932 as the Colwood Burial Park. Twenty-four people enjoyed presentations from an OCS team consisting of **Yvonne Van Ruskenveld**, **Dakota Farenholtz**, **Kate Fisher**, and **John Azar**. Hatley's Family Services Director, **Andrew Jornitz**, hosted the event and provided an interesting overview of the history of the site and its founding philosophy. Offering 53 acres of woodlands, beautifully maintained open spaces, dedicated niche gardens, and mostly flat markers, Hatley resembles Royal Oak Burial Park more than Ross Bay Cemetery. Some fascinating people whose lives spanned the twentieth century are buried there; this was a successful experiment that we hope to repeat.



The OCS at Hatley Memorial Gardens



Photos by Diana Pedersen

On an unusually hot June 14, twenty-nine people attended a new tour, **Merchants for the Mines**, at the [Jewish Cemetery of Victoria](#); it was led by **Amber Woods**, author of the OCS's [Guide to Victoria's Historic Jewish Cemetery](#). Victoria was a major supply depot in the gold rush era. Many young Jewish men arrived in Victoria from San Francisco with prior experience in provisioning the miners; they included the Levy and Oppenheimer brothers, who established successful Victoria businesses. We also viewed the progress of the Cemetery Committee's [new landscaping project](#), which is replacing concrete grave covers with native ground cover plants.



Amber tells tales at the Jewish Cemetery



Photos by Diana Pedersen



The thirtieth anniversary of Canada's first **National Indigenous Peoples Day** fell on a sunny Sunday, June 21, and the OCS offered its first dedicated theme tour celebrating this occasion at RBC. Twenty-nine people joined the team of presenters, consisting of OCS volunteers **Yvonne Van Ruskenveld**, **Ava Pettman**, and **Diana Pedersen**. **Rachel Perkins**, a direct descendent of Isabella Ross, made a guest appearance to talk about her 4x great-grandmother, also providing new information about her "auntie," Rachel Marsden. Both Rachel and Ava contributed introductory words of welcome and acknowledgment in Indigenous languages. We heard stories at some familiar and some lesser-known graves of First Nations and Métis people at RBC, ending with Frank Calder, trailblazing BC politician and Nisga'a "Chief of Chiefs."



Ava, Yvonne, and Rachel highlight Indigenous stories at RBC

Photos by Diana Pedersen

Tour Schedule for July—August 2026

Tours are every Sunday at 2:00 PM. Charge: \$5 for non-members; \$2 for members. Cash or e-transfer only. 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.

July 5. RBC. A Canadian Who's Who at RBC. Did you know that seventy-six “residents” of Ross Bay Cemetery have qualified for entries in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography (DCB)*? So far, the *DCB* has profiled more than 9,000 Canadians who died before 1940 and whose lives had “national historic significance.” On this tour, an OCS team will introduce an interesting assortment of *DCB* entrants. Some were prominent in the history of Victoria, and some lived most of their lives in other parts of the province and the country.

July 12. RBC. Born in the USA. This year, the USA is celebrating its 250th anniversary, so **John Adams** will mark the occasion with a tour about Americans who left their place of birth to live (and die) in Victoria. The roster is long and includes men, women, and children from almost every state and from many walks of life. Today's tour features a small sample of some of the most interesting and colourful characters who fit the criterion. On the list will be ship's captains, pioneering women, ne'er-do-wells, soldiers, teachers, confectioners, and even a premier.

July 19. RBC. Grave Messages. While the permanent residents of Ross Bay Cemetery can no longer speak to us directly, the words and symbols on their grave markers give us glimpses of who they were and how they were loved. Join long-time OCS member **Yvonne Van Ruskenveld** as she explores the meanings behind a new set of some of RBC's most interesting epitaphs and symbols and the stories they can reveal. This tour will include some of the newest stones in the cemetery.

July 26. RBC. From Italy to the Island: Victoria's Italian Settlers. During and after the 1858 gold rush, many Italians settled in Victoria. They became important members of the community in business, the arts, and community service. **Giovanna Greco** will tell the stories of some of the early Italian settlers who made Victoria their home.

Aug. 2. RBC. Norman Morison: Victoria's Mayflower — Part 2. The Hudson's Bay Company ship *Norman Morison* made three voyages from Great Britain to Victoria. The third voyage, in 1853, was the HBC's first attempt to introduce settlers. Many of the families entered five-year indentured commitments to the HBC in return for their own land. These settlers became the early core of the Capital Region, so the *Norman Morison* can be considered our *Mayflower*. **Mike Woodcock** will build on last year's tour by highlighting more of their stories, ending at the grave site of a notable *Norman Morison* passenger, where a new marker has been installed.

Aug. 9. RBC. Annual Obon Ceremony. Obon is a festival for the Japanese Buddhist Day of the Dead, when graves are cleaned, incense is lit, and prayers are said. **Mike Abe** will begin the program with a tour, starting inside RBC's main gate. The Obon ceremony will begin at 3 pm at the Kakehashi Monument in the southwest corner of RBC, near the corner of Memorial Crescent and Dallas Road. The public are invited to the tour and ceremony.

Aug. 16. RBC. Murder Most Foul. We often look back at the past as a time free from crime, where everyone went about their days in safety. This rosy view will be clouded by today's tour. A team of storytellers will take us to the graves of some murderers and their victims, telling grisly tales gleaned from coroners' files, old newspapers, and interviews with family members. As the TV shows say, viewer discretion is advised.

Aug. 23. RBC. A Charming Rogue: The Scandalous Life and Death of J.H. Hawthornthwaite. This tour will highlight just a few of the many scandals and rumours about British Columbia's first Socialist MLA, James Hurst Hawthornthwaite. One of the most significant politicians in BC, he represented Nanaimo from 1901 to 1912 and Newcastle from 1918 to 1920. He was elected as a Socialist in 1903 and co-founded the Socialist Party of Canada in 1904. During his entire personal and political life, Hawthornthwaite was embroiled in controversy, scandal, and mystery. **Linda Boon** will share her discoveries about the life of her step-great-grandfather.

Aug. 30. RBC. Emily Carr Tour — Part 2. Emily Carr's grave is one of the most visited at RBC. Every year, a team of OCS guides visits the graves of many people Emily knew. Emily herself (a.k.a. **Molly Raher Newman**) will delight us with readings about these people from Emily's prolific writings. This is a different Emily Carr tour from the one held earlier this year in March.

Volunteer Profile: Yvonne Van Ruskenveld

Diana Pedersen

Our Past President and current Board member Yvonne Van Ruskenveld is a familiar sight at Ross Bay Cemetery tours—for school groups and private gatherings as well as the regular Sunday afternoon program—and she sometimes says there are people who think she lives at the cemetery. Certainly, she has been there longer than most other OCS volunteers—ever since she arrived in Victoria thirty-six years ago. Today she is one of our busiest volunteers.



Yvonne was born in Alberta but grew up in Ottawa and studied geology at the University of Ottawa. She worked in the federal government until 1987, when she made a career switch and became a freelance editor and writer. She and her husband, John Azar, then moved to BC, trying first Vancouver and then Vernon before landing in Victoria.

In November 1990, Yvonne saw a notice in the newspaper about a meeting of the newly organized Old Cemeteries Society. She began volunteering and quickly joined the Board. Soon she was leading tours; writing for the OCS magazine, *Stories in Stone*; serving on the research committee; and joining Halloween patrols. She launched her annual Women's History Tour in October 1992. Over the years, she has researched and led countless tours, with BC gold rushes and the First World War also among her special interests. She has served two terms (1999-2001 and 2024-26) as OCS president.

Yvonne says: "I volunteer for the OCS because I believe heritage cemeteries are important and the OCS is an ideal organization to raise awareness and actually work in and on these cemeteries. Right from the start, I found the members to be welcoming and fun to work with, and the range of volunteer opportunities within the OCS interesting." She is now primarily involved with the tour program—collaborating with John Adams to set up the annual schedule and find guest tour leaders, and, of course, leading many tours. Moving with the times, she is working with Wilf Bruch to oversee the ongoing recording of monuments at RBC and the digitizing of decades of OCS records. She is also busy recruiting the volunteers needed for these challenges and, in the process, helping to train the next generation of OCS leaders.



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.

	The Old Cemeteries Society of Victoria P.O. Box 50004, RPO Cook Street Victoria, BC V8V 4Z8 tel: 250-598-8870 email: oldcemvictoria@gmail.com website: http://www.oldcem.bc.ca Facebook: https://facebook.com/OldCemeteriesSociety
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