



September – October 2026

President's Message

Ken Sudhues

Since becoming President of the Old Cemeteries Society earlier this year, I've taken great pleasure in working with a terrific Board. Our monthly meetings include equal portions of planning, decision-making, and laughter.

Our tours so far this year have included several new topics, new presenters, and a location not visited for some years—Hatley Memorial Gardens in Colwood. Our new feather flag made its debut that day and was an excellent navigation aid. As well, the OCS now has a supply of beautiful bookmarks that mimic the feather flag and contain a QR code and web address.



Other tours—at Ross Bay, the Chinese Cemetery at Harling Point, and the Jewish Cemetery in Oaklands—continue to highlight the history and national origins of early Victoria. A personal highlight for me was hearing acknowledgment of our presence on the land of the Lekwungen-speaking peoples given in the Lekwungen language on National Indigenous Peoples Day on June 21.

Cleaning bees at Ross Bay have been popular, grave restoration projects continue (including repairs to the Peter Charles Ogden grave), and the installation of new row markers at Plot 40 across the cemetery is complete.

Our garden party on August 23 was a definite success. Despite an “iffy” weather forecast, the sun shone on us and all was well. Many thanks to our volunteers, to Ross Bay Villa, and especially to Grace Walker for her assistance.

Many tours remain on this year's schedule—with more opportunities to learn about Victoria's past, its famous and not-so-famous pioneers, and its multinational community, complete with highlights and some darker moments ... all the things that make a city a city.

I look forward to meeting our members at tours and other events. The Old Cemeteries Society is truly a fascinating group and I feel very lucky to be part of it.

Ross Bay Villa Garden Party

Larissa Ciupka

Just shy of forty visitors dropped by the Old Cemeteries Society table at the Ross Bay Villa Garden Party on July 12. While most were aware of the Society, and many had attended and appreciated our tour offerings, others were new to the city (including a foreign exchange student whose host mom brought her). They were pleased to learn more about our activities, especially the tour programs. Opportunities to join both cleaning bees and Halloween patrols were of particular interest. Our feather flag and, for the first time, our new bookmarks, were on display. **Larissa Ciupka, Gregory Ciupka, and Ken Sudhues** staffed the table.



Larissa at the OCS display table



Photos by Gregory Ciupka and Diana Pedersen

Old Cemeteries Society Garden Party

Diana Pedersen

On August 23, thirty-three people attended the annual members' garden party at Ross Bay Villa following the Sunday tour. Our President, **Ken Sudhues**, addressed the gathering and thanked the Board and all the volunteers for their contributions. Ken conducted the always popular book raffle; this event raised \$219 (including a generous donation). As usual, Board member **Gudrun Leys** handled the catering arrangements with Thriftys; there were trays of sandwiches, devilled eggs, fruit and cheese, and cookies and squares—more than enough for everyone. Many thanks to Gudrun and also to **Chris Harris, Ken Sudhues, and Grace Walker** who assisted with set-up.



Members at OCS garden party



Photos by Diana Pedersen

Two More Summer Cleaning Bees

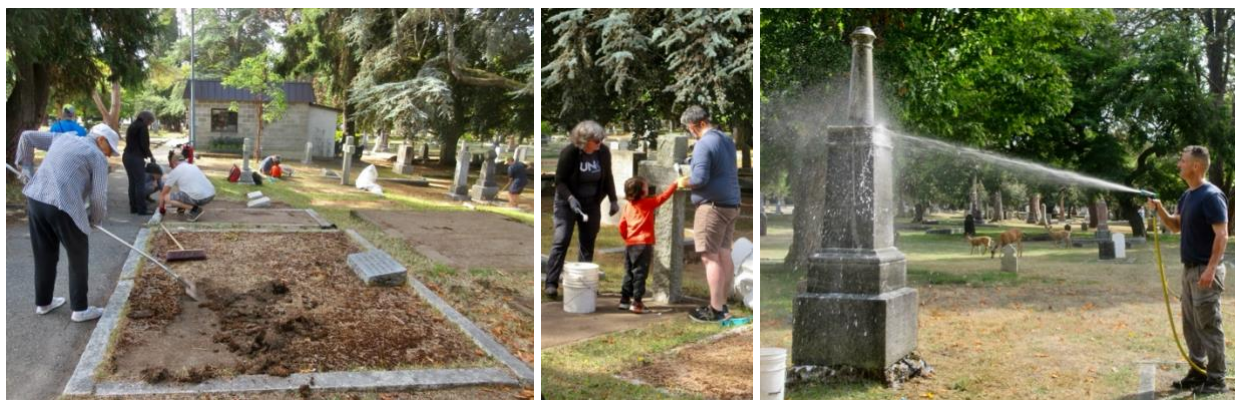
Diana Pedersen

On July 18, the Old Cemeteries Society's summer cleaning bees received some [advance publicity from the *Victoria News*](#). A reporter dropped by when OCS volunteers **Wilf Bruch** and **Gregory Ciupka** were beginning work on the restoration of the Peter Charles Ogden grave.

Saturday morning July 25 was cloudy and cool, but not unpleasant for working in the cemetery. Fifteen volunteers arrived in Section R, in the northwest corner adjacent to Fairfield and Memorial. This area was selected by our cleaning bee coordinator, **Tom Esakin**, since it hadn't received any special attention for a few years. There were many large flat grave surfaces covered by several inches of dried moss and grass, which is easily removed when it has dried out in the summer sun. In one case, some lovely porcelain tilework was rediscovered. In other cases, even the curbing seemed to be disappearing into the ground. It was especially gratifying to see hidden inscriptions revealed, allowing some diligent volunteers to scrape the moss and dirt out of the lettering with that essential grave-cleaning tool—the chopstick.



On August 8, twenty-one volunteers turned out on another pleasant Saturday morning. This time, **Tom Esakin** and **Gregory Ciupka** chose the Fairfield Road entrance almost opposite Ross Bay Villa and adjacent to the caretakers' shed. Not everyone enters via the Memorial Gate, so many people form their first impression of the cemetery at this location. We cleaned more than four dozen graves, mostly in Section M with a few graves in Section 1. Several prominent monuments were scrubbed and hosed, but most of the work involved scraping and sweeping large flat surfaces, then bagging the dried moss and grass and washing off the dust. Tom and Gregory made many wheelbarrow trips to the debris pile, where our contributions will be hauled away by City workers. More lost inscriptions and family names on curbing were recovered.



July 25, above; August 8, below

Photos by Diana Pedersen

Tombstone Tourist

Shirley Waldon

Gabriola Community Cemetery, Gabriola Island

In early June, while visiting Gabriola Island, I took the opportunity to visit the local cemetery, on the southwest side of the island across from the southern tip of Mudge Island. The Pioneer Cemetery, now more commonly known as the Gabriola Community Cemetery, was established in 1882, when settler Magnus Edgar donated a piece of land. According to Jared Hooper, Chairman of the Gabriola Cemetery Trustees, there are approximately eighty-five pioneer burials in the lower section. The current Community Cemetery, which surrounds the pioneer section, has 408 burials—a mix of cremated remains and full burials, as well as ten green burials.

A section of the lower portion of the Pioneer Cemetery has been roped off and is closed to the general public due to safety concerns about erosion. The problem is not from water but rather from a midden, estimated to be about three feet deep, that is slowly sliding seaward over the harder bottom layers. Jared indicated that over the past eighteen years, the cemetery has lost more than three feet from the top of the bank edge. They have already moved three pioneer markers farther up the hill and intend to do the same with others along the bank edge. The goal is to relocate all of them eventually, with some signage explaining the reasons for the move.



Cemetery entrance; grave markers of Magnus and Ann Edgar

Photos by Shirley Waldon

Magnus Edgar was born in 1826 and came to BC in the 1850s from the Shetland Islands to work for the Hudson's Bay Company. He originally worked in the Nanaimo coal mines before taking up farming on Gabriola in the 1870s. When his wife, Ann, died in 1882, he donated the piece of land that became known as the Pioneer Cemetery. Magnus died in 1894 and is buried beside Ann; they and their descendants are in the lower mid-section closest to the cliff edge.

Robert Gray was born in 1833 in Bangor, Ireland. He arrived in Victoria in 1858 while working as a mate on a sailing ship. He moved to Nanaimo and ran a shipping company which transferred coal between Nanaimo and Victoria. In 1876, after retiring from the sea, he became the lighthouse keeper on Entrance Island. He stayed there for twenty-one years before leaving in 1896. During his tenure, he saw his share of tragedies, including a fatal shipwreck in 1881 in which he tried unsuccessfully to rescue a number of sailors off the nearby rocks. Robert died in 1908 at the age of seventy-six. He and several of his descendants are buried not far from the grave of Magnus Edgar.

But perhaps the most notable headstone is that of Thomas Martin, who was born and raised on Gabriola Island. He died tragically in 1887 at the age of twenty-one in a mine explosion at the No. 1 Esplanade Mine in Nanaimo. The mine was located at the foot of what is now Milton Street in Nanaimo. Some of the shafts and tunnels of the mine extended out into the harbour and across the channel towards both Newcastle and Protection islands. Thomas had been working on the first level at the time of the explosion. He was one of approximately 148 miners, fifty-three of whom were Chinese, who perished on May 3, 1887. The subsequent fire took nearly two weeks to extinguish; despite repeated attempts, some of the bodies were never recovered. The explosion became known as the worst mining disaster in British Columbia's history.



Robert Gray marker, second on right; Thomas Martin headstone



Photos by Shirley Waldon

Row Marker Project Update



Photos by Diana Pedersen

You are likely to notice more gleaming new white row markers at Ross Bay Cemetery, thanks to the work of Old Cemeteries Society volunteers in July. The markers were funded by a generous grant from the [Greater Victoria Savings Credit Union Legacy Fund](#); they were engraved by [Mortimer's Monumental Works Ltd.](#) Wilf Bruch and Gregory Ciupka were responsible for all the advance preparation—identifying the areas where more markers were needed, cutting the quartz tiles, and mortaring them to their bases. On July 6, Wilf and Gregory placed the new markers at their assigned locations to await the diggers. On July 7 and 8, volunteers responded to our appeal and, in two mornings of work, they installed fifty-four markers; another twenty-eight engraved tiles have been ordered.



Tour Notes

On a pleasant June 28, **Tim Fitzthum**'s new tour brought fifty-eight people to Ross Bay Cemetery, about a third of them for the first time. **More Queer Lives** was a sequel to last year's **Detecting Queer Lives**. Both tours were researched and written by Tim; this time, **Ken Sudhues** assisted with the presentation of several stories. Highlights included the careers and enduring relationships of several First World War nursing sisters, and the remarkable lives of James Knight Nesbitt and Ira Dilworth. The last section of the tour was a fascinating exploration of Victoria's vibrant theatre scene that lasted until the 1930s—Victoria theatres being on the touring circuit—with the popularity of first minstrelsy and then vaudeville providing opportunities for male and female impersonators and the exploration of gender identities.



A large crowd for Tim's stories about Queer Lives

Photos by Diana Pedersen



On a beautiful July 5, thirty-six people came out for an appropriate tour for Canada Day week—**A Canadian Who's Who at Ross Bay Cemetery**, presented by the OCS team of **Diana Pedersen, Yvonne Van Ruskenveld, Dakota Farenholtz, Kate Fisher, and Mike Woodcock**. Seventy-six entrants in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* are buried at RBC and we visited eight of their graves: Henry Crease, Sarah Crease, John Fannin, Captain Thomas Walbran, James A.J. McKenna, Nellie Cashman, Sr. Marie du Sacré Coeur (Salomé Valois), and the Honorable Edgar Dewdney—a varied and interesting assortment that offered something for everyone.



Learning about significant Canadians at RBC

Photos by Paul Taylor and Larissa Ciupka

July 12 was an excellent sunny day for a topical tour in honour of the 250th anniversary being celebrated south of the border. Despite stiff competition from other events, twenty-four people attended **John Adams'** tour featuring some of the Victoria dead who were **Born in the USA**. Highlights included the stories of Captain William Henry McNeill, Boston trader; Sierra Nevada Madden, born in California; Charlie Mitchell, escaped slave; James and Laura Dunsmuir; Laura Heisterman; Charles Kincaid, murder victim; and Allen Francis, personal friend of President Abraham Lincoln who appointed Francis as the first US Consul in Victoria in 1861.



John at the Francis and Madden graves

Photos by Diana Pedersen



On July 19, we had a warm sunny day at Ross Bay with a cool breeze off the water, and thirty-five people turned out for **Yvonne Van Ruskenveld's** new tour, **Grave Messages**. Yvonne has given previous tours showcasing epitaphs and symbols found on elaborately carved Victorian monuments. Some of these were featured, including a white bronze (zinc) marker, but for this tour Yvonne researched some of the newest monuments commemorating the more recent dead in varied, striking, personalized, and very modern ways. **Diana Pedersen** concluded the tour with one stop devoted to the new military markers being placed at RBC by the Last Post Fund.



Yvonne introduces some of the new additions to the cemetery

Photos by Diana Pedersen



July 26 was overcast and humid, with a light drizzle falling, but thirty-two very interested people arrived for a tour about **Victoria's Italian Settlers** led by **Giovanna Greco**; about half the attendees were first-timers. Giovanna emigrated from Italy to Montreal with her family and then

moved to Victoria with her husband in 1977. She has been actively involved with the [Da Vinci Centre](#) and the promotion of Italian culture in Victoria ever since, first hearing the stories of living community members and then researching the history of the Italian pioneers buried at RBC. The early families, mostly from the northern regions of Italy, established many successful Victoria businesses and were prominent in the Pioneer Society, the Freemasons, and the Oddfellows. The tour started and ended with monuments to the Bossi family, with **Yvonne Van Ruskenveld** explaining the OCS project to restore the Anita Bossi grave, undertaken in 2021.



Visiting old and new Italian graves at RBC

Photos by Diana Pedersen



On a pleasant sunny August 2, thirty-three people attended **Mike Woodcock's** new tour, ***Norman Morison: Victoria's Mayflower—Part II***, a sequel to last year's tour about the experiences of passengers on that ship's voyages to Victoria in the 1850s. For the third voyage, the Hudson's Bay Company recruited families; they formed the core of the early settlement. Mike drew on diaries and memoirs to tell us about their difficult working conditions and some eventual successes. We ended at the marker for Eliza Lyall, born during the 1852-3 voyage and named for the ship; it was a [special project](#) of the OCS and the Victoria Genealogical Society.



Mike at the new Eliza Lyall marker, erected in 2025

Photos by Diana Pedersen



On August 9 at Ross Bay Cemetery, responsibility for the Sunday tour about **Japanese Victoria** was turned over to the [Victoria Nikkei Cultural Society](#) (VNCS), and the usual admission fee was waived. Twenty-eight people attended the "heritage walk" to graves of Japanese pioneers,

led by **Mike Abe**—current president of the VNCS and a leading researcher on the Nikkei diaspora. Many of the Japanese pioneer graves are concentrated in the southwestern section of RBC, near the Kakehashi Monument which was erected in 1999. When the tour reached this area just before 3 pm, preparations for the annual **Obon Ceremony** were well underway; the Japanese graves and the monument were already cleaned and decorated with flowers, and stuffed toys had been placed on the graves of children. Awnings and chairs were arranged for the ceremony; an altar held symbolic offerings of incense, fruits, and vegetables; and a refreshment table was loaded with sweets and savouries—with the new OCS feather flag displayed behind it!



Obon (oh-BONE) is an annual Japanese Buddhist festival honouring the ancestors and expressing gratitude for their sacrifices. The Ross Bay event honours the Japanese pioneers in Victoria; their descendants who experienced internment and displacement eighty-four years ago; and the small group who came together in the 1990s to repair neglected graves, add new markers, and erect the Kakehashi Monument. Most of the Sunday tour-goers, including half a

dozen familiar faces from the OCS, opted to remain for the simple ceremony that was conducted by the Reverend Grant Ikuta, resident minister for the Steveston Buddhist Temple; many of the sixty attendees had come by bus from Steveston. After words of welcome, participants learned some simple Buddhist chants and were invited to thank their own ancestors with a brief bow before the altar. On a less sombre note, volunteers took part in a circle dance, [Tanko Bushi](#) or the “Coal Miners’ Dance,” that features in Obon festivals throughout the Japanese diaspora; it had special significance for the community on Vancouver Island. Refreshments and conversation followed. During the ceremony, a family of deer could be seen checking out the decorated graves, making short work of the hydrangea and dahlia blossoms. Those who missed this enjoyable afternoon will have another opportunity next year on the second Sunday in August.



Japanese Victoria heritage walk and Obon Ceremony



Photos by Diana Pedersen



On a pleasant but cool August 16, forty-five people (about a third first-timers) attended a new tour by **Jenny Seeman**, Curator of [Craigdarroch Castle](#). **Builders of the Dunsmuir Legacy** was a fascinating exploration of Dunsmuir connections at RBC, based on the excellent research in Jim Wolf's recent book, [Craigdarroch Reconstructed](#). We are fortunate that many of the key figures involved in the construction of Craigdarroch—architects, stonemasons, carpenters, roof slaters—are buried at RBC; most of them were Scotsmen. Jenny devised a creative route through the cemetery, starting at the Dunsmuir monument, that took us in stages from construction of the foundation to the roof. Other highlights included the grave of James K. Nesbitt, who was largely responsible for saving the Castle in its present form as one of Victoria's treasured historic sites.



Jenny explaining the history of the Dunsmuirs at the family monument, centre

Photos by Diana Pedersen

On August 23, twenty-seven people attended **Linda Boon's** new tour, **A Charming Rogue: The Scandalous Life and Death of J.H. Hawthornthwaite**, based on Linda's research on her step-great-grandfather and her new self-published book. Linda was unable to attend, so her text was presented by **Yvonne Van Ruskenveld**. Hawthornthwaite—BC's first Socialist MLA and co-founder of the Socialist Party of Canada—was buried in a large family plot but his grave was unmarked until 1975, when he was recognized with a granite marker from the NDP government of Premier Dave Barrett. Illegible and covered with lichen, it was restored for this tour by OCS volunteer **Gregory Ciupka**. Six of Hawthornthwaite's descendants were among the attendees.



Arriving at the Hawthornthwaite grave, right



Photos by Diana Pedersen

Tour Schedule for Sept.—Oct. 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.

Sept. 6. RBC. Salty Tales: Victoria's Maritime Heritage. Victoria's history has been shaped by our island location. Shipping, ship-building, and all kinds of boats were central to life in early Victoria. This Labour Day weekend, [celebrate classic boats in the Inner Harbour](#) and then hear "salty tales" in the cemetery! Coastal steamers, luxury yachts and racing yachts, tugboats, RCN war ships and patrol vessels, and car ferries—and the people who built, owned, and sailed them—will all be featured on this new OCS team tour, which will end at the Naval Memorial.

Sept. 13. RBC. A Day of Signs and Wonders. Today's tour title is the name of award-winning author **Kit Pearson's** novel about a fictitious meeting between Emily Carr and Kathleen O'Reilly on a beach one day in 1881, a day in which a comet appears. Kit is a frequent tour leader at RBC and is the author of many novels for young readers.

Sept. 20. RBC. Splish Splash, They Were Taking a Bath. From the 1850s to the early 1900s, twenty-five different bathing facilities in Victoria allowed users to satisfy their personal hygiene needs, cure their ailments, and enjoy recreation. One could find hot, warm, and cold-water baths, seawater, steam, aromatic, sulphur, medicated, needle, friction, floating, Turkish, and electric baths. Meet the barbers, hoteliers, physicians, instructors, promoters, businessmen, and charlatans who presided over this watery world. OCS member **Tim Fitzthum** will present this new tour. No towels required!

Sept. 27. RBC. Murder Most Foul. We often look back at the past as a time free of 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 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.

Oct. 4. RBC. Gold Rush Women. Beginning with the Fraser River in 1858, gold rushes shaped BC economically, socially, and physically. While most gold-rush prospectors, miners, and business people were men, many women were also drawn to BC during these lively times—and not just in ways you might think. This year, **Yvonne Van Ruskenveld** focuses her annual women's history tour on women in gold-rush BC.

Oct. 11. RBC. Harvest Festival: Farmers of Early Victoria. Victoria's story is not just about the gold-rush and maritime tales—Victoria also has a rich agricultural heritage. Some early farmers were brought out by the Hudson's Bay Company; some stayed after the gold rush. The OCS's team brings to life the stories of the farmers and their families who were key in the development of early Victoria.

Oct. 18. RBC. Spiritualism in Victoria. From small beginnings in rural New York State in the 1840s, spiritualism went viral. By the 1860s, it was all the rage in Victoria and other places across the continent. Even Abraham Lincoln is said to have participated in seances at the White House. **John Adams** will talk about its main proponents here in Victoria, many of whom are buried at RBC, and what they experienced during their seances.

Oct. 25. RBC. Annual Ghost Tour. One of the OCS's most popular annual tours is based on ghost stories linked to people buried at RBC. On some of the graves, the occupants might even seem to come to life and tell their tales. Extra guides will be on hand for large numbers.

Summer in the Cemetery, Oh Deer!

Photos by Diana Pedersen



Volunteer Profile: Thomas Esakin

Diana Pedersen

If you participate in an OCS cleaning bee at Ross Bay Cemetery, you will meet our new cleaning bee coordinator, Tom Esakin. Since 2024, he has been learning about tools, techniques, and cleaning products from our project manager, Wilf Bruch. As coordinator, Tom arrives early to get tools and cleaning supplies out of our storage area in the shed used by City Parks workers; other participants need bring only their gardening gloves. Tom answers questions, gives helpful directions to newcomers, and ensures that everything is put away afterward. He believes that participants enjoy the sense of accomplishment they get from cleaning gravesites. These working bees “are also community building activities where new friendships are made.”



Tom grew up in Vancouver and Burnaby. His longtime interest in strategic planning has taken him to the west coast of the Island, the West Kootenays, Ottawa, Toronto, Saskatoon, and Mexico; he also spent time in Haiti on a mission trip. He has a BA in Political Science from Simon Fraser University and an MA in Sustainable Development from Staffordshire University, UK; he is an experienced instructor in the academic field of Sustainability Studies. He spent ten years in the political sector as a Campaign Manager and Senior Policy Advisor on Parliament Hill, followed by more than two decades as an Executive Director/CEO of Canadian-based national and international charities in the environmental, educational, and cultural fields. Tom has taken many counselling-related and interfaith trainings, and he is currently the Executive Director of [The Contemplative Society](#), based in Victoria.

Tom moved to Victoria in 2021. He and his spouse discovered the OCS on a Sunday shopping trip to Fairfield Plaza, where they were diverted by our sign on the boulevard. They attended that day’s tour and promptly joined the Society to support its promotion of local history education, cemetery upkeep, and other good works. As an OCS volunteer, Tom has helped out with the Halloween cemetery patrols, the annual members’ garden party, one Sunday team tour, and now the summer cleaning bees. He is also an active volunteer with the [Friends of Government House Gardens Society](#), the [Camossung Biosphere Region Project](#), and the [Toronto Centre for Applied Buddhism](#).

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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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