

The Bastion: Restoring our history

BY DEREK SPALDING, Nanaimo Daily News
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Randy Churchill uses the back of his hand to wipe the sweat from his forehead before pointing to a series of circular saw-blade markings left on the timber, created during one of the previous restoration projects for Nanaimo's 157-year-old Bastion.

"We're going to take an axe to that," he said with a smile. But the hatchet work of Churchill's team will match the type of carpentry used when the 30-foot octagonal tower was first built from squared, hand-hewed logs that were likely chopped down on the original site.

Churchill's team from Macdonald and Lawrence Timber Framing specializes in restoration projects. Their high-profile work also includes the 44-metre tall and 188-metre long Kinsol Trestle that crosses the Koksilah River in the Cowichan Valley. The company's Gordon Macdonald has also worked on the Windsor Castle in England and Sir Ernest Shackleton's Nimrod Hut in Antarctica.

The internationally renowned restoration specialists finished taking down most of the historic Bastion last week.

The heritage building will be completely refurbished and returned to its Front Street location in early October. Though it's going to disappear for a about six weeks, the Bastion is in good hands, said Churchill.

"Once we got into it, we realized there was much more rot in the foundation," he said. "That's when we realized we had to take it all apart in order to do the repairs properly."

Churchill can gauge the talent of the original workers just by looking at the types of markings on the support beams. This type of forensic carpentry has uncovered more historical details about the Bastion's construction.

French Canadian axemen Jean Baptiste Fortier and Leon Labine are credited for the construction, under the supervision of company clerk Joseph McKay. But two types of markings tell Churchill that some of the work was done by less-experienced workers.

"We learn a lot from the craftsmen of 150 years ago," he explained. "I'm thinking the two master builders had some unskilled help with them. You can see that on one side, there is some excellent work, but then on another part you see how a person hacked it up."

His crew plans to preserve 90% of the original wood and all the work should come within the \$300,000 budget. About \$145,000 of that money comes from fundraising through the Nanaimo District Museum. The Hudson's Bay Company donated \$80,000, while Nanaimo's self-made millionaire and philanthropist Sidney Sharman donated \$50,000. The remaining \$155,000 will come from the city.

"When you get into it, you can see the quality of the cut, the chisel work, the hewing work," he said. "We don't want to get rid of any of that, that's priceless."

The Bastion originally stood on the other side of Front Street until 1891 in what became one of the first examples of heritage preservation in B.C. It moved a second time to its present location in 1974. The building has had six refurbishings in its time, but this latest one should put a much longer shelf life on it.

The tower stood as a beacon of western civilization when it was first erected. The Hudson's Bay Company received title to Vancouver Island in 1849 and was tasked with settling the land with immigrants. The company brought over 24 families by 1854 to start coal mines.

Workers built the Bastion in 1853. The company set up an office on the ground floor, while two cannons were set up on the second floor. The third floor could have housed every original settler if they came under attack.

The twenty-four families arrived on the Princess Royal between June and November 1854, nearly tripling the size of the community, according to the Nanaimo Historical Society. That same year, right next to the Bastion,

Governor James Douglas signed the last of the Douglas Treaties with the Snuneymuxw First Nation.

The rich history of the Bastion encourages Churchill and his team to do everything they can to preserve the structure and use whatever skills they have to make any alterations match the original skills and tools used when it was originally built.

Workers are not trying to hide their work. They will mark every modification they make, so that future workers can delineate between the original wood and the repairs.

The Bastion has suffered from rain and southeast winds. It had been leaning about three degrees south and was closed to the public before restorations began.

Churchill and his crew will take steel support beams that have been inside the building and put them inside the original wooden beams so they can no longer be seen by the public.

The city's parks maintenance and construction manager, Ian Blackwood, said this restoration should last longer than previous repairs and will prepare the building so it will be easier to restore in the future.

"I don't want to be doing this again in 15 to 20 years," said Blackwood. "We're really trying to maintain the historical component, and we're doing our best there, but we're also trying to make this thing structurally sound so that it will last that much longer."

The city plans to wrap the building in a protective tarp during winter to preserve the structure.

Bastion Timeline

1853 -- The Hudson's Bay Company built the Bastion in 1853 as it set up its first site completely dedicated to coal mining.

1891 -- The Bastion became one of B.C.'s first heritage preservation sites in 1891. The building was moved from its original location on the in-land side of Front Street.

1974 -- The Bastion was moved a second time to its present location in 1974.

1985 -- The city designated the Bastion a local heritage site on Dec. 12, 1985.

2010 -- The latest restoration is one of seven, but it will protect the Bastion longer than before. The \$300,000 repair job will include techniques used in the original construction.

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