

May 16th Coal Harbour Walking Tour

Twenty two walkers assembled at the Olympic Caldron in Jack Poole Plaza on a cool and dreary morning. Our tour guide, John Atkin, began with a brief history of the area from the time of the first Europeans. The rain held off and the cool weather was ideal for the walk.

Three early settlers were lured to the area by coal and clay found by the natives. The coal seam was very small and not worth pursuing however the name stuck. The value of the natural harbour was obvious and eventually the CP rail line came through and connected with steam ships plying the Pacific and on to Asia. The route from Britain through Vancouver to the South Pacific and the Orient was significantly shorter and quicker than through the Suez. Vancouver grew and prospered as a major stopping off point.

A bit of interesting history we learned was that the present fields at Brockton Point were all created by logging to feed a proposed sawmill on the point. It was soon realized that with the strong tidal currents, ships would not be able to tie up there, so the sawmill was relocated to an area just east of what is now Gastown. The open playing fields have remained. The three early settlers who had been lured by the coal and clay were able to purchase the entire west end for a few hundred dollars but never were able to really capitalize on it.

The area also developed into a shipping hub for ocean and rail freight towards the end of the twentieth century. However, with the growth of containerization, the size of the area was deemed unsuitable for this mode of shipping. Containers and bulk shipping moved away leaving what was to become a choice residential area.

The CP rail tunnel from False Creek was twinned vertically and now connects the sky train via downtown underground stations to the sea bus terminal and Pier C (now the cruise ship terminal). Piers A and B have long since gone and have been replaced by the convention centre, marinas, and the sea plane terminal.

Vancouver has done a complete job of planning for this transformation. Green areas such as Harbour Green Park were established. New York rules are 30 feet between large buildings. Chicago's are 50 feet. Vancouver chose 80 feet. Also, an early Vancouver City Council had wisely passed a by-law that no buildings could obstruct the view at the end of any street. This rule applies to all of Vancouver and when coupled with the 80 foot separation, has led to excellent views being available from many vantage points. There is a very open feeling at the water front, especially where two streets intersect and end there.

John took us through these areas pointing out the varied original art work that must be included with each development. He also explained the complex rules and guidelines that have led to many affordable dwellings being possible among the million dollar plus high rise condos. This more vibrant mixture was evidenced by the young mothers with strollers we had to make room for during our many information stops along the way. We walked on the roof of one of the city's largest community centres that for all intents is invisible.

One noteworthy little enclosure houses two large firefighting water cannons. They have an independent power source in the case of a serious emergency such as a big earthquake and resulting fire. Most of the buildings in downtown Vancouver can be reached with a fire dampening spray drawn from the harbour. If you notice any blue coloured fire hydrants around Vancouver, they are also tied into this emergency water source. Hopefully it will never be needed.

After two plus very interesting hours we ended up near Cordova and Burrard and most of us made our way to the Lions Pub for a good "pub food" lunch.

John Elliott



Our guide with the rapt attention of our group.



Our guide with three happy PROBUS walkers.