

B.1 FIRST NATIONS HISTORY AND MINING COMPANY HISTORY

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Prospecting, Suffering, and Perseverance.

A common theme ties together the communities that have historically called what is now Britannia Beach home: prospecting, suffering, and perseverance. This is true for the first nations that lived here, as well as for the white prospectors who later arrived to seek their fortunes.

Pre-Contact

Britannia Beach lies within the territory of the Squamish nation, a culture that for thousands of years was adapted to living along river banks. This partially explains the lack of evidence of permanent settlements along the east shores of the Howe Sound. The immediacy of steep slopes against the water made much of the east coast of Howe Sound unsuitable for large villages, particularly given the numerous ideal places to live in the rich river valley to the north.

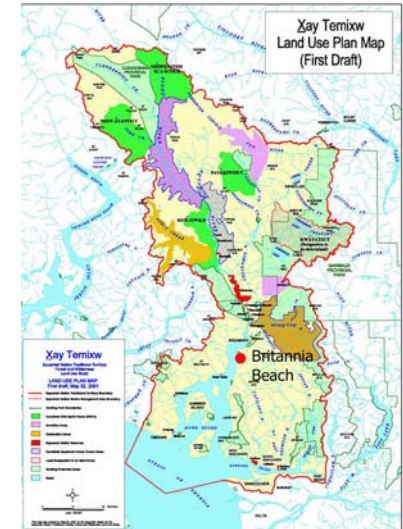
The best evidence that there was a village of any sort where Britannia Beach now sits comes from A Sto'lo Coast Salish Historical Atlas, which suggests that a small settlement, perhaps a stopping point along a trading route between the Squamish and Sto'lo nations, existed there.

Contact and Cataclysm

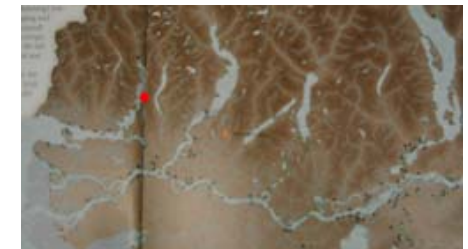
The first contact between the Squamish and Europeans is believed to have taken place on Friday June 15, 1792, the day Captain George Vancouver sailed into the waters of the Howe Sound. In the notes from those voyages, an interesting revelation is made. The people Vancouver met evidently had a remarkable interest in interest in trade and commerce. Comparing them to other groups met along the way, Vancouver noted that the Squamish :

“...varied in no respect whatever, but in possessing a more ardent desire for commercial transactions, into the spirit of which they entered with infinitely more avidity than any of our former acquaintances, not only in bartering amongst themselves the different valuables they had obtained from us, but when that trade became slack in exchanging those articles again with our people, in which traffic they always took care to gain some advantage, and would frequently exult on this occasion” (Hill-Tout, 29)

This contact also brought about disaster for the Squamish nation. Soon after meeting European sailors, up to two thirds of coastal native populations were wiped out by a smallpox epidemic. Thus began the cycle of prospecting, suffering and perseverance, a tragic pattern that continued for the century and a half that followed.



This Squamish Land Use Map locates Britannia Beach within the traditional territory of the Squamish Nation. http://www.squamish.net/news/land_use/land.htm



The red dot highlights a settlement of 60 people or less called an *okwumuq*, located at present day Britannia Beach. From Carlsen, Keith Thor A Sto'lo-Coast Salish Historical Atlas, Douglas and MacIntyre, Chilliwack, 2001.

Other Reference
Hill-Tout, Charles The Salish People. Talon Books, Vancouver, 1978.

Early 1900s - Suffering and Recovery

In *Britannia: The Story of a Mine*, Bruce Ramsay documents in detail the history of the holdings, ownership, and transfers of the Britannia mine. While these are relevant to the history of Britannia Beach, they feel less powerful than the stories of the men and women that lived and died there. Their stories are the ones that truly reflect the character of a mining town whose hard working residents responded with strength to the tragic series of events that began in the spring of 1915.

In the darkness of midnight, on March 22, only two days after geological engineers deemed the rock to be solid, between 50 and 60 men women and children were killed under an avalanche of debris as the face of Britannia Mountain collapsed onto the Jane Camp. In the days that followed, survivors worked ceaselessly to uncover the dead and treat the injured, highlighting the strength of spirit of the community and the people who lived here.

A mere setback by comparison, on June 23 1921 a massive fire destroyed the concentrator building, temporarily ending mining activities. Almost immediately thereafter, the San Francisco firm of Bradley, Bruff, and Labarthe began the task of building the 'absolutely fireproof' concrete and steel superstructure that still stands today.

Tragedy hit once again on October 19, 1921 when torrential rainfall caused a cave-in that trapped two miners. This was not an entirely irregular occurrence in an occupation that cost countless men's limbs and lives, but 9 rainy days later, the day after the town enjoyed celebrating a successful rescue, 37 people were killed as dams burst sending a wall of water through the centre of town. Once again, stories of heroism abound as people gave their lives in warning others, and as the community once again endured the painful process of recovery.

The remainder of the twenties was a period of good fortune, and record production levels were reached in 1926, but more trials emerged in the thirties with the Depression. Wages declined and labourers lost their jobs as shareholders demanded to somehow maintain a profit. By 1932 only 538 employees worked a mine that had supported 1100 men and their families only four years earlier.

In 1939, WWII broke out in Europe and the Britannia Mine became the largest copper supplier for Britain. Life at home remained quiet, but tense during the war, and of the 150 Britannia men who joined for duty, nine were killed in action.

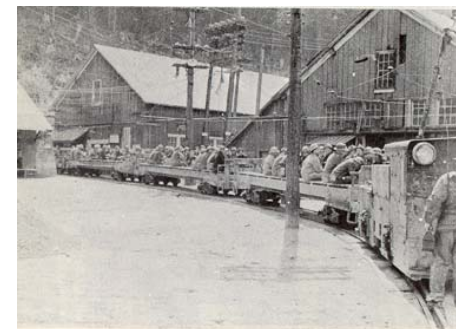
In the 1950s further prospects for economic development precipitated interest in the area. By the end of that decade, development of transportation infrastructure dramatically altered the character of the community in Britannia Beach.



The aftermath of the Jane Slide.
Photo from Ramsay, Bruce, *Britannia: The Story of a Mine*, Agency Press Ltd., Vancouver 1967.



The remains of the Concentrator Building after the fire of '21.
Photo from Ramsay, Bruce, *Britannia: The Story of a Mine*, Agency Press Ltd., Vancouver 1967



Day in the Life: A shift prepared to enter the mine
Personal collection: Faye Paul

B.2 RECENT HISTORY

Alison Maddaugh

Sources: BC Museum of Mining Website (www.bcmuseumofmining.org), NFB video ‘Britannia: A Company Town’ (2000), CR News Online, (http://www.cnews.bc.ca/foc_25.html), CEC (<http://www.cec.org/news/details/index.cfm?varlan=english&ID=2558>), (<http://www.shirleycollingridge.com/britannia.htm>), (<http://sea-to-sky.net/britanniabeach/community/index.html>), (<http://www.99north.com/1999-edition/britannia.html>) The Province, 2003 (<http://canada.com/search/story.aspx?id=21840c54-396b-4077-a753-f8e76ef16681>) The Vancouver Sun, 2003 (www.canada.com/vancouver/vancouversun/archives/story.asp)

Links to the world beyond - The community of Britannia remained had only marine access until 1948, when a gravel road linked it to Squamish, located 11km north. 1956 marked the arrival of the railway, connecting Squamish to Vancouver. The end of Britannia’s isolation undermined the tight-knit community life previously enjoyed. In 1958, the same year the highway between Vancouver and Squamish was complete, the Mount Sheer Townsite was abandoned, all mining operations were moved to the beach, and the number of employees reduced.

Final Years of the Mine – Low copper prices forced the mine to close for seven months in 1958, and the following year the Britannia Mining and Smelting Co. Ltd. liquidated, transferring its assets to the Howe Sound Co, which sold them four years later to Anaconda Mining Co. The new owner was forced to resolve a bitter union strike which shut the mine down for one year, while facing dwindling ore reserves. When there was no ore left to extract, Anaconda shut down the mine November 1, 1974, and terminated 300 jobs in the community. During its 70 years of operation, the mines employed thousands of men, taken numerous lives, and compromised the physical and environmental health of the community. When the mine closed, it left the legacy of being North America’s largest single point source metal contamination, as 160km of abandoned mine workings discharged 1000kg of copper, zinc, and other heavy metals into Howe Sound each day.

Marketing History – When Anaconda shut the mine down, it donated land and buildings for the establishment of the BC Museum of Mining History. The Museum opened in 1975 with a mandate “to preserve the mining heritage of B.C. and educate the public about mining.” (museum website). Its revenues are currently generated through the film industry, its gift shop, and admission fees from its 35,000 annual visitors. The development of Whistler has had a significant impact on Britannia as a destination, as the number of visitors has fallen roughly 30% from the mid 80s. In 1988 the mine’s concentrator was declared a National Historic Site, and in 1989 the Museum site was designated a B.C. Historic Landmark.



photo credit: Alison Maddaugh

an end to isolation: highway 99 and the railway



photo credit: BC Museum of Mining

an abandoned townsite: Mt Sheer



photo credit: Alison Maddaugh

a tourist attraction: the museum

Disaster Strikes Again...and Again - In the summer of 1991, heavy rains created intense pressure behind the floodgates of Britannia Creek. Emergency Services decided to blow a small 6' square hole in the dam to alleviate the pressure. They miscalculated. Moments later, a flood of water hit the community, carrying 6700 tonnes of sand, rock and debris. The fast action of the community spared all lives, but thirty homes were destroyed. Four years later, fire struck Britannia and the Power House Burned down.

Running From Responsibility - An estimated 1.2 billion dollars has been extracted from the land and mine. Following closure of the mines, ownership flipped from Anaconda to ARCO to Copper Beach Estates. Previous owners of the mine were sent remediation orders from the provincial government, yet they continued to evade responsibility. In 1990, Copper Beach Estates sold an uncontaminated portion of the land for \$14.8 million, none of which went towards remediation. However, several years later Copper Beach proposed to cover remediation costs by charging fees to dump contaminated soil into the open pits. It was hoped that filling the open mines would reduce exposure to air and water, and mitigate the toxic discharge leaching through the mines. In 1999, the developer proposed to Britannia residents that he would give them clear title to the land their homes rested on in exchange for their consent to the proposal. This was attractive to the residents, since the land has always been company-owned and many were otherwise unable to afford property. However, the community strongly voiced their distrust of the developer's intentions and wanted to be involved in a democratic process. Copper Beach Estates then went bankrupt and the land became the subject of court battles. In the meantime, UBC Engineering installed the 'Millennium Plug' to block toxic effluent from entering Howe Sound. In 2001 the provincial government released all former owners of liability in exchange for \$30 million, in an out of court settlement. Remediation costs have been estimated at \$75 million or more. Ownership reverted to Rob Macdonald when Copper Beach Estates defaulted on their mortgage, owing him over \$17 million. Macdonald then decided to donate all but 202 ha of the land to the province, 162 ha of which he intends to develop. A portion of profits from the development will be spent on remediation. The provincial government is also seeking remediation funds from Ottawa, since the mines operated as federal crown corporation during WWI and WWII.

Community Strength – The estimated 400 residents of Britannia share a love of the landscape, and know all of their neighbours, and their neighbours' pets. Doors are left unlocked. Due to the circumstances of ownership, they do not have any political representation, but they want to be involved in a democratic process of determining the future of Britannia.



photo credit: BC Museum of Mining

a community ravaged by floods



photo credit: Alison Maddaugh

a history of extreme pollution



photo credit: BC Museum of Mining

a story of strength in suffering