

# James Dunsmuir's forgotten mansion beside Victoria's Gorge

By T.W. Paterson, The Citizen (Cowichan) December 15, 2010

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When James Dunsmuir made Oyster Harbour a shipping port for his Extension coal, he wasn't thinking of a future townsite. But such it became.

He named it Ladysmith, upon news that the five-month-old Boer War siege of that South African city had been lifted -- thereby forsaking an opportunity to prominently place the Dunsmuir name on the map. Ladysmith Harbour does pay homage, in a roundabout way, to James, however: Burleith Arm, west of Wood Island.

It's certainly nothing near as illustrious as its namesake and it refers not to Dunsmuir himself but to his Victoria estate, Burleith, his second mansion after Wellington's hand-me-down, Ardoon. In its day Burleith, a gingerbread palace on 20 acres beside the Gorge waterway, was second in its lavish appointments only to the senior Dunsmuir's Craighdarroch Castle. When James moved from Burleith, it was to his own castle, at Colwood.

Although its architectural style was said to be "Queen Anne," photographs show Burleith to have been almost eclectic in design. Architect John Teague (future Victoria mayor) seems to have borrowed his inspiration from numerous sources.

Burleith sprawled, it soared (three stories counting the centre tower), it had pitches, peaks and points going in all directions, at least four roof lines and slopes. Unlike Craighdarroch and the yet to be built Hatley Castle, Burleith was of wood frame construction (much against Teague's urging). There's no denying that it was ostentatious as befitting its owner's wealth and stature, and imposing. The Gorge, Victoria's inland seaway, was un-logged and undeveloped, Burleith surrounded by natural parklands, croquet lawns and tennis courts. Begun in 1891, the mansion cost \$50,000. You can probably multiply this by 20 to put it in modern context.

It had, to quote the Colonist, "every modern convenience." The newspaper was referring to its electric lighting, bells and speaking tubes for the summoning of servants. Other amenities above and beyond the average homeowner's budget were breakfast, smoking and billiard rooms, nurseries (for the 10 children), servants' quarters (in the attic) and reception areas. Rich oak, California redwood and native cedar panelling made Burleith almost palatial. Laura Dunsmuir entertained family and guests with her Steinway grand piano -- the most expensive piano in all of B.C. Although James was shy almost to the point of reclusiveness, his American wife, from an old and wealthy Southern family, made Burleith the centre for Victoria's high society.

As the eight Dunsmuir daughters came of age, Burleith was the scene of parties, dances, fancy dress balls and weddings that, to quote Dunsmuir grandson James Audain, were the wonder of

the whole of Vancouver Island. Among the guests during this period were the Duke and Duchess of York (the future King George V and Queen Mary). An invitation to Burleith, according to an historian, was "as eagerly sought and as highly prized as a bid to Government House." From its main tower (looking very much like a church steeple) one could see across the Gorge to another, albeit less pretentious, Dunsmuir manor, sister Emily's Ashnola.

Named for Robert Dunsmuir's Ayrshire birthplace, 12-room Burleith (some think it should be Barleith) served as James's home during his term as premier, although he resided at Government House while serving as lieutenant-governor. By 1907 he was tired of public office and took early leave as the province's royal representative. Among his plans for retirement were a complete rebuilding of Burleith, for which he'd commissioned the city's foremost architect, Sam Maclure.

Work was about to begin when Dunsmuir learned that Colwood's Roland Stuart wanted to sell his estate, Hatley Park. Overlooking Esquimalt Lagoon, Juan de Fuca Strait and Washington's Olympic Mountains, its 250 acres of forest were nothing less than spectacular. Two years before, Stuart's fine home and his family treasures were lost in a fire and, disillusioned, he placed his property on the market.

It sold quickly, to James Dunsmuir, for \$50,000. He immediately shelved plans for refurbishing Burleith, instead pouring his energies and millions of dollars into the construction of Hatley Castle. Dunsmuir died in 1920, widow Laura 17 years later.

When the Dunsmuirs had moved to Colwood, Burleith was let, rent-free, to James Hawthornwaite. He, with his family, lived in the front half of the massive house for a decade. The friendship of the socialist MLA and the multi-millionaire mine owner is a story in itself.

Beautiful Burleith was destroyed by fire in October 1931, the flames leaping so high that they could be seen from ships moored in the Inner Harbour.

Subdivision of the grounds followed and only a stone wall and gatehouse survive of Burleith. The name is perpetuated by a modern townhouse development whose design was inspired by John Teague's original creation.

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