

Tour of Irving House – English Version

Welcome to Irving House, the oldest surviving intact house in the Lower Mainland!

Irving house was built in 1865 and was occupied until 1950 by the Irving Family. At the time the house cost \$10,000 to build which was the equivalent of a year's salary for a very rich man. The site that Irving House was built on was purchased for \$4000 by William Irving from a Mr. Clarkson. Prior to this the Irving family had resided in Victoria.¹ This colonial house is built in the Gothic Revival style.

Captain William Irving was born in Annan, Dumfriesshire, Scotland in 1816. William first went to sea at the age of 15 as a cabin boy and by the age of 19 he had been promoted to first mate. Ten years later he became captain of his own ship and in 1849 headed to California.

Eventually Captain Irving made his way up to Portland, Oregon where he met his wife Elizabeth Jane Dixon. At the time of their marriage on September 27, 1851 Captain Irving was 38 years old and Elizabeth was 18. The couple had four children in Oregon (Mary (Dec. 25, 1852), John (Nov. 24, 1854) Susan (March 10, 1857), and Elizabeth (Dec. 29, 1859) before moving to Victoria in 1859 where their fifth child Nellie (Nov. 12, 1863) was born.² The family was drawn to Victoria by the Cariboo

¹ Irving Social Calendar

² Dates are from the Irving Social Calendar

gold rush where Captain Irving became involved in operating riverboats along the Fraser River from New Westminster to Yale. Captain Irving provided a safe and efficient paddlewheel service up the Fraser River for gold miners and in turn became a very rich man.

Irving House Stories

In 1862 Captain Irving launched a new sternwheeler named the Reliance. The Reliance was launched from Victoria. At the ceremony Captain Irving got a little bit relaxed in his parenting. Apparently, the event was attended by an eight year old John Irving who freely partook in the revelries and champagne. This caused him to get rather drunk and had to be carried home by one of his father's employees. Upon seeing John in such a state, his mother Elizabeth summoned the doctor, who took care to keep John's inebriation secret from his mother, diagnosing him with something different.¹

In 1872 at the age of 56, Captain William Irving died of double pneumonia. The funeral was held inside Irving House on August 30.³ His widow Elizabeth lived in the house for another 13 years to finish raising their children. In 1885 Elizabeth moved back to Portland, Oregon which she always considered to be her home.

Captain William Irving's only son, John, took over his father's business in 1872 at the age of 17. John Irving married Jane

³ Irving Social Calendar

Munro on June 12, 1883 in Victoria⁴. They had three children including one son by the name of William Alexander. William Alexander was killed during WWI at Albert in the Somme in 1916. His death marked the end of the Irving's patrilineal line.

Mary Irving married Thomas Lasher Briggs in 1874 and bought the Irving house at a public auction run by her brother John on October 3rd, 1884⁵. Ownership of the house was transferred by conveyance, a term in property law that dictates the transfer of property from one person to another.⁶ The Briggs raised nine children in this house. Their two youngest daughters, Naomi and Manuella, never married and continued living in the house until 1950 when they sold it to the city to serve as a museum.

The Story of New Westminster

The discovery of gold in Yale in 1857 would bring many fortune seekers from around the world to British Columbia. However, at the time the only real colony on the west coast of British North America was Victoria, an island separated from the mainland. Not having a colony on the mainland meant that the British had no military or colonial presence on land that was now seen as extremely valuable. The British were worried that the American's might annex the area if they did not develop a presence on the mainland. To combat this fear the British decided to build a mainland colony that would help them exert their own control and ambition over the area. The original site

⁴ Irving Social Calendar

⁵ Irving Social Calendar

⁶ <http://thelawdictionary.org/conveyancing/>

of the city was meant to be in Derby (Port Moody today). But when Colonel Richard Clement Moody sailed in from the mouth of the river he noticed an area with a steep incline and lots of trees. It was at this moment that he decided that the new colony would be built there instead of Derby. The steep incline was strategically defensible and would be easy to repel an American attack should it ever come to that. Colonel Moody commanded the British Columbia Detachment of the Royal Engineers. The British Columbia Detachment's major tasks included: the construction of New Westminster and survey of other town-sites, the construction and maintenance of roads, and the policing of the gold fields.¹ The British Columbia detachment operated out of a camp further up the river from where they planned to build the new city. This camp is where the area known as Sapperton gets its name. Sapperton was built around the site of the camp that the Royal Engineers operated out of. Sapper was the term given to British military engineers as far back as the Middle Ages. The term Sapper comes from the idea that their job was to "sap" strength from castle walls.¹ This was sometimes accomplished by burning pig fat in tunnels that engineers would dig under the castles wall.

The Small Parlor

The small parlor is located to your right as you enter the building. The first thing you will notice about this room is that it is quite lavish. This is the room that the family would use to formally host guests who they wanted to impress. This room

would have been furnished with all of the family's richest furniture and possessions and contained pictures of the family. It is likely that children would not have been allowed in this room and the door would have remained shut most of the time.

Over the fireplace (which is a faux marble finish and is actually made of slate) you can see a picture of Captain William Irving. The photo to the left of Captain Irving is of his daughter Mary Briggs on her wedding day. To the right of Captain Irving is a photo of Thomas Lasher Briggs. The wall to the right of the fireplace contains photos of Captain and Mrs. William Irving on their wedding day, their son John Irving, and Mrs. Irving with her four daughters. On the wall to the left of the fireplace is a photo of Thomas and Marry Briggs and their nine children.

When the family first moved into the house the walls were plastered and there was no wallpaper. It wasn't until 1887 when Mary Briggs renovated the house that the wall paper went up. The wallpaper is original and dates to 1887. Most of the furniture in this room is original to the Irving and the Briggs family. The carpet in this room also dates to 1887.

About the Artefacts

John Franklin portrait – Portrait shows famous lost arctic explorer John Franklin, who disappeared not long after his vessel left England in 1845 to find and chart the Northwest Passage. This portrait is an interesting piece because there are

reports that the widow of John Franklin, Jane Franklin, appears to have made a trip to New Westminster and travelled on one of Captain Irving's vessels while she was here. According to extracts from the correspondence of Miss Sophie Cracoft (John Franklin's niece) Jane Franklin had travelled by the steamer "Maria" from Victoria. The chairman of the steam company that owned the Maria had recommended Captain Irving as a good steamship contact and an excellent commander.¹

About the artefacts

Most of the furniture in this room is original to the family. The settee (couch) and two matching black chairs are apparently from Mrs. Elizabeth Irving's Dixon family and were reportedly brought across the Oregon Trail from Missouri to Portland, Oregon by wagon in 1850 or 1852. The settee apparently has original horsehair stuffing which is prickly. The two chairs match it have been recovered. *"The furniture is short because Queen Victoria was 4' 10" and liked furniture that fit her. As the Queen had the best taste, of course, everyone copied."* The green chairs belonged to the Briggs and the lady's chair has no arms because of her large skirts. It was not considered proper for a lady to show her ankles when she was sitting, so the chairs would have to be shorter to enable the skirt to hide her feet.

The stools on the floor kept the feet off of the cold floor which was not insulated.

The painting of the cottage on the wall was done by Captain

William Irving's daughter Nellie.

The Large Parlor

The large Parlor is located directly across the hall from the small parlor and is also called the Drawing Room. This room is the equivalent of a modern living room and was used for less formal visits such as family gatherings. Ladies would have afternoon teas here, children would practice their music lessons, and girls would sit and learn sewing, embroidery and cross-stitching. The family would spend their Sunday afternoons in here. The adults would use this room after dinner or after church and provide their own entertainment such as playing the piano. The wallpaper and carpet in this room is original and also dates to the 1887 renovations. Before that the walls would have been bare plaster. The hawser rope design on the edge of the ceiling was put in to represent Captain William Irving's maritime shipping business.

This room was almost certainly used for the funeral of Captain William Irving after his death in 1872. Manuella and Naomi also used to give piano lessons out of this room.

The large gold mirror above the fireplace was a wedding present to Thomas Lasher and his wife Mary Irving in 1874 but it did not come into this house until about 1884 after Mary bought the house from her widowed mother and moved in.

The doll on the settee is apparently called a Sunday Doll. She has a porcelain head and lower arms. A Sunday Doll may refer to the child only being allowed to play with it on a Sunday.

The Front Hall/Main Entrance

The ceiling here is 12 feet high and the staircase contains 23 steps (today's 8ft ceilings have 13 steps). The ceiling medallion is a custom feature of the house. It is composed of thistles to represent Captain William Irving's Scottish heritage and roses which refer to Portland where Captain Irving met his bride.

In April 2018, the house's entrance and upper hall were restored to the late Victorian Period, revealing papers not seen since the mid-20th century. In 2009, while working with conservator Simone Vogel-Horridge, museum staff found original ca.1897-1903 papers in the entrance and upper hallway of the house — a 3-piece set consisting of a wallpaper, 18" frieze, and a ceiling paper. Last year, these stunning papers were meticulously redrawn and colour-matched by Stuart Stark, Heritage Consultant and wallpaper designer, to the original palette used in the house. They were then printed in England and shipped to New Westminster for installation. The hallway cornice work and entrance ceiling medallion were also painted to match the original colour scheme as a complement to the papers.

➤ *GO UPSTAIRS*

The Nursery

This room was most likely used as a nursery. As the children grew up, it would have been used as a simple bedroom. When the Briggs family occupied the house they employed a live in nanny. It is believed that she slept in this room.

About the artefacts

The light-coloured furniture belonged to the Briggs Family.

“The odd looking tea pot next to it is actually an invalid’s cup, the handle is on the side, allowing someone ill to take medicine through the spout and not have to get up.”

The picture on the wall beside the bed is "*Her Majesty when Princess Victoria, Aged Four Years.*" from a painting in the Dulwich Gallery, London, England.

The blue bottle on the dresser is a night light,¹ it has a candle inside and when it would burn down you had better be asleep.

The doll at the foot of the bed, sitting in a chair, survived the fire of 1898. It belonged to Lexy Ewen and there is a photo of the doll in a chair in her family home before the great 1898 Fire.

The Master Bedroom

Down the hall towards the balcony and to the right is the master bedroom. This is the room that Captain and Mrs. Irving shared. Several pieces of furniture in this room are original to the family including the bed, the marble top dressers, and the two chairs. Since this house was built before the availability of running water you will notice that there are several water jugs and washing basins in the room. There is also a chamber pot which would have only been used at nighttime when it was too cold and dark to make one's way to the outhouse on the property. You will also notice that there is a doorway that connects this room to the adjacent room which is the nursery. It is thought that this door was added after the house was built. Part of the reasoning for this is that the doorframes of the open doorway and the closet beside it are different sizes. The small cast iron stove is original to this room and would have kept this space nice and warm in the winter. It is likely that there would have been a stove like this in every bedroom.

The closet itself is an unusual feature in a Victorian home mostly because they take up a lot of space and are expensive to build. The fact that there are closets in all of the bedrooms is a testament to the wealth of the Irving family.

The Girl's Room

Directly across the hall from the master bedroom is another bedroom known as the girl's room. During the Victorian era it was quite uncommon for children to have a bedroom of their own. Thus the girls of the family would share one room and the

boys another. This is the room that the four Irving girls, Mary, Susan, Elizabeth, and Nellie shared. The room is set up to show what a typical young ladies room would look like. You will notice that there are two large display cases to the left of the room. These display cases used to be closets. One closet opened up to this room, the other to the adjacent room. The closets were converted into display cases when the house came into the possession of the city.

In the display case to the left you will see a plaid dress on the left hand side. This dress belonged to Mary Irving later Briggs and there is a photograph of her wearing it behind and to the right of the dress. The dress on the right hand side is the wedding dress of the youngest Irving daughter, Nellie. Also contained in this display case are a variety of items that a woman would have worn or used in everyday life. At the bottom of the case you can see a variety of hair combs. Hair accessories were very important to the Victorian woman as her hair was the crowning glory of her beauty. Women kept their hair as long as possible and wore no make-up as it was of common opinion that a woman's beauty should be natural and in need of no artificial enhancement.

In the display case to the right there is a blue dress spread over a travelling trunk. This dress belonged to Mrs. Irving when she was a young girl. Mrs. Irving was born in Indiana. She and her family made the perilous journey across the Oregon Train before permanently residing in Portland, Oregon. This is the dress that Mrs. Irving wore while she was travelling across the

United States. Also contained in this case are a variety of navigational tools that are similar to what Captain Irving would have used on his ships, and several photos of the family. In this display case there is a porcelain doll with red hair sitting on a chair. This doll belonged to one of Captain Irving's Granddaughters by the name of Mary Aileen Cox (Susan Irving's daughter). The doll possesses Mary Aileen's own hair and it is said that it is the same colour as Captain Irving's hair. A photo of Mary Aileen can be seen in the bottom right hand corner of the display case (note the length of her hair).

Also of note in this room is the pink orb-like object sitting on the left side of the dresser. In Victorian times when a woman brushed her hair she never threw away the strands of hair that fell out. Instead they were collected and stored in containers like this one. Victorians would use this hair to make things like jewelry or what is called a hair wreath. An example of a hair wreath can be seen on the right side of the door as you are exiting the room. A hair wreath like this would have been composed of the hair from several members of the family. This was a good way of keeping family members with you – especially those who had passed on. Photography in this time was available but was very expensive so hair woven into these wreaths were often all a family had left of an individual once they had passed on.

Some of the girls in the Irving and Briggs family were crowned May Queen. The May Day celebration was an annual

community celebration. In May 1871 Elizabeth Irving was crowned May Queen.

John's Room

As mentioned before, siblings often shared a bedroom with each other. Seeing as John was the only boy in the Irving family he was lucky enough to have his own bedroom. This room is made up to look how a typical young man's room would appear. Against the far wall of this room you can see what is called a wardrobe. This is typically where a Victorian individual would store their clothing and accessories in place of a closet. On the dresser you can see several of the effects that a young man would require in daily life, such as a top hat, and removable cuffs and collars. Cleanliness and good hygiene were of the utmost importance to people in the Victorian era but they did not wash their clothing as often as we do today. Instead they would clean only the parts of their clothing that got the dirtiest. This included the collar and the cuffs of a shirt. These parts of a shirt were removable and generally made out of a material called celluloid, which is a primitive form of plastic.

The Bullet Story

As you leave the entrance to John's room and make your way to the rear of the house, you will pass through a door frame. On the left hand side of the door frame near the middle you will

notice a small hole. If you look inside the hole you will see a small metal object. This is a bullet from 1896.

As the story goes, it was a cold winter's night at around 4am when two men decided to break into what was then Briggs family home. At that time one of the older Briggs children, Beryl, sleeping in the bedroom beyond the doorframe got up to get a drink of water, which was at the other end of the hallway. As the child passed the staircase she noticed an unfamiliar man staring up at her. Quickly, she woke her father and brothers, and in a matter of minutes all the children were out of their beds peering over the banister. In a panic one of the intruders fired a gun up the stairs in the direction of Thomas Briggs who had begun to descend the stairway⁷. It is unknown if he meant any harm to the family or if he simply meant to scare them away. Fortunately the bullet missed and was lodged in the doorframe at the top of the stairs.

The family never repaired this damage and the bullet still sits lodged into the doorframe to this day. As for the two intruders, they managed to escape the house but only made off with around \$80 worth of stolen items. Some of the items the burglars meant to take were left on the floor in the entrance. According to an article written about the incident, the investigation concluded that the burglars had gained access to the house by prying open the parlor window. The police also found a screwdriver and the burner and oil-vessel out of a Bull's Eye Lantern outside the house in the morning. Articles written

⁷ Ivring Social Calender

about this event paints this break-in as similar in nature to other break-ins around Vancouver, including three break-in attempts on Royal Avenue over the previous week. It warned residents to take steps to protect family members from dangerous break-ins in the future.

An article printed on Dec. 3, 1896 provides some answers about the success of the subsequent police investigation. According to the article, some of the Briggs' stolen belongings were found in an empty house. A police stakeout by Constables Dominy and Miller was rewarded at 6am when a man came to enter the home. Unfortunately for the police, Constable Dominy "evidently lost his head" and attempted to apprehend the suspect before he had properly entered the house.⁸ The suspect fired a shot at Constable Dominy that went off so close to his head he received powder burns. The suspect fired nine more shots as he fled the scene. The bullets fired were .44 caliber, which corresponded with the shot fired at Thomas Briggs three nights earlier.⁹

The Rear of the House

As you move through the doorway you will immediately notice that this section of the house is not quite as well made as the rest of it. It is likely that when the Irving's built this house they intended to use this section of the house mainly for storage. When the Briggs family moved into the home they opened up

⁸ Irving Social Calendar

⁹ Irving Social Calendar

this area for more practical uses. To the right you will see a room that was remodeled into a bedroom.

Across the hall to the left is a linen closet made entirely out of cedar. Cedar was the building material of choice for any linen closet as it is a natural repellent of pantry moths. Also to the left you can see the bathroom. This was literally a “bath room” as the toilet was separated from the rest of it and given its own space next door. This area would have been converted to a bathroom in 1906, when the house finally connected to water. The rest of this space we use today for our children’s educational programs and it may have been used as a work area for the Briggs family.

You may have already noticed that there is an additional staircase in this area that leads back downstairs. This is what it called a servants staircase. When the family was living in the house they had three Chinese servants which included a cook. This is the staircase that would have been used by the servants to ensure they did not disturb the family as they were performing their daily tasks. As you move down the staircase you will notice that it is incredibly well built. It was relatively rare in the Victorian era, to put time and money into properly constructing a second staircase or servant staircase as there was not as much concern for the safety of those using it. The fact that this staircase is so well built leads one to believe that the family must have been using it as well.

The Kitchen

After you make your way down the stairs and past the back door, the first doorway to your left is the kitchen. In here you can see a Victorian era cast iron wood and coal burning stove. The stove is original to the Briggs family and dates to 1915. This front of this stove features a thermometer, although most women at this time knew how to tell the temperature by sensing the heat. This stove would have not only have been used for cooking but it also would have provided heat for the house in the colder months. When it was hot in the summertime all of the cooking would have been done in a summer kitchen, which may have been located on the back porch or in the basement¹⁰. Throughout the kitchen you can see a variety of kitchen gadgets including a butter churn and an egg beater on the kitchen table. There is also a rudimentary bread machine on the back counter (looks like a metal bucket with a crank handle) as well as a mechanized knife cleaner. The cleaner is operated via a crank handle on the side. Knife blades are inserted in the top and the hand crank turns the brushes on the inside of the contraption. The brushes have an emery compound which polishes the blade. This was also known as a servant's helper.

The Dining Room

As you pass through the connecting doorway you will arrive in the dining room. In the style of the Victorian era, the woodwork

¹⁰ A former guide, Jean Dorgan, talked about a stove being moved to the basement and used for cooking in the summer. (LI)

around the lower portion of the room would have been varnished dark wood and that would have made the room look smaller. The blue paint that you see today was put on during the museum period. There are many stories in the Columbian newspaper that tells of the extravagant parties that were held in this room. Mary Briggs did a lot of entertaining in here. She held many dinner parties and social teas that usually benefited her favorite charities.

The main meal would have been eaten at noon when business and schools closed for a few hours and everyone went home. The Victorians ate substantially well. When served, the meat was carved by the master of the house seated at the head of the table in an arm chair. The lady of the house would have been seated at the opposite end of the table and was responsible for dishing out the vegetables. If an honored guest was eating with the family he or she would be seated to the right of the host and was served first. Then each person was served in turn. After everyone was served, they would say Grace. After supper, the ladies may have retired to the drawing room (the large parlour) and the men might have remained to discuss business matters over port, fruit, and nuts.

In this room you will notice that there is a closet. This is what is referred to as a butler's pantry. This room was originally connected to what is now the electrical closet. This may have originally been used an access for servants who were serving from the kitchen. However, there is no evidence that the family ever had a butler.

The Library

As you exit the dining room and move into the main hallway of the lower floor, the library is the first room on your right. This room is believed to have been used as an office and a gentleman's room, meaning that women would not have been allowed in this room except to clean.

The large arch way is believed to be a renovation that was done in the early 1900's. Before that, there was likely a simple door for this room. The curtain is called a draft curtain and was installed by museum employees in the 1990's. We do not yet know if the Briggs had such a curtain installed. A curtain like this one would have helped keep heat in from the fireplace or stove and keep help keep drafts out.

In this room you will notice that there are several First Nations baskets. Baskets like these would have been sold door to door by the First Nations women who made them. They were usually traded for used clothing or maybe even coffee, tea, or sugar. Mary Briggs loved these baskets and had many of them. She would fill them with fresh flowers and place them throughout the house. Mary also used these baskets to display wedding gifts at the house during the reception for Beryl and Walter's wedding in 1912. "In the large drawing room where the many beautiful presents were displayed, the bowls of roses were arranged among them and in the hall and the library they were

in Indian baskets.”¹¹ Unfortunately we do not have Mary’s collection of baskets, but we do have a photograph of them. The photograph was taken by a Japanese photographer by the name of Okamura and a copy of the photograph is displayed on the wall directly behind you as you face the library.

At the back of the room there is an 1887 version of the “Premier Chagrin” (first sorrow) sculpture with a built in lamp, by the Italian born Luca Madrassi. It is believed to have been brought to the house in 1914 by the Briggs when electricity was installed into the house.

The Grandmother’s Room

The last room on our tour is the Grandmother’s room and it is located across the hall from the library. As the story goes, after the widow Elizabeth Irving sold the house to her daughter Mary Briggs and moved back to Portland, she would stay in this room when she came for visits. Her visits were apparently frequent and it was convenient to use this room as a bedroom for an older woman as she would not have had to go up and down the stairs. Also, in a house full of 9 children this room would have been a lot quieter for her.

This room may have also been referred to as the “Morning Room” or the “Breakfast Room” as the family would on occasion take their light meals here. This room may have also been used to plan parties over cups of tea. This room is

¹¹ The British Columbian, Saturday, June 29, 1912, p.9

currently decorated as a “Morning Room” and it is where the lady of the house would spend a great deal of her time when there were no guests. Children would have been allowed to enter this room and it can be compared to a modern day family room.

Today the museum uses this room to host Christmas and Mother’s Day teas where guests can come and have tea and a light meal in the Victorian fashion.

Conclusion

This concludes the end of our tour. Please do take the time to sign our guest book located on the table across from the library. A donation to the museum may also be made here.

Thank You for visiting the Irving House. We hope you enjoyed your time here!