

# Heritage Renfrew

## Renfrew Ontario

N E W S L E T T E R

January, 1988

Dear Member:

We trust that you had good times in 1987, a pleasant Christmas with family and friends, and we wish you the same for 1988. In addition we trust that you will continue to support Heritage Renfrew in its plans for this year.

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**\*\*\*NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING\*\*\***

*Time: January 21st, at 8 p.m.*

*Place: The Library Program Centre, Raglan Street.*

*Agenda: Reports, Plans for 1988, election of Directors for 1988*

*Speaker: Mr. Hugh McMillan, Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture.*

*Coffee and Social Hour*

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As you know, our major project, Bonnington House Restoration, came to an abortive end. We had planned to make it a place for our meetings, a repository for our archives and a centre for community ceremonies where appropriate, and we had the dollars to do it. This money sits ready to finance some new venture.

Right now it might be useful to 'put you straight' on the role played by each of the three groups who tried to save Bonnington House. Since none of us on the Heritage Renfrew Executive is an expert on matters architectural and structural, our role was secondary. It was L.A.C.A.C. who played the lead part. LACAC..... a Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee...composed of such members as founding member MARGE Lindsay, local architect Richard White, municipal building inspector Murray Gahan, exists to advise Town Council on what buildings in our town are worthy of being designated as 'Heritage Buildings'. For years this committee operated quietly and met with a great deal of success in persuading downtown merchants of the heritage value of their properties.

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As a result, a great many of them have given their consent to abide by regulations governing the alteration of the exterior of their buildings; consequently we have a business street which, as the years go by, will be more and more treasured as a vital part of the Ottawa Valley scene.

LACAC met its first major test in its struggle to save Bonnington House, a building that had already, a few years back, been plaqued as a heritage building following its designation as such by Council. To lend more credibility to the advice it was giving Council, this committee applied to Heritage Canada for the expertise of its architectural consultant, Mr. Martin Weaver. He gave a detailed report based on minute examination of the structure of the house from top to bottom, and strongly supported LACAC's case.

Then Heritage directors Harry Hinchley and Les Church supplied information which showed the historical value of preserving Bonnington House. Meanwhile, Dorothy Skinner and others appealed to the public through letters in the Mercury, by way of carrying out a resolution "that Heritage Renfrew, in order to comply with its aims, as recorded in its constitution, felt compelled to attempt to convince the citizens of Renfrew that Bonnington House was a building worth preserving".

The third group was the 'Save the Bonnington House Committee' formed by Richard Lloyd to arouse public interest in the controversy. Petitions were made available in local stores where John Q. Public could express himself by affixing his signature, and letters for and against preservation poured in to the Mercury. Hundreds of people must have found out for the first time where and what Bonnington House was! This activity was far more spectacular, even overshadowing that of LACAC and Heritage Renfrew. We can only hope that the people in this group will stay alert and give consistent support to the two on-going Heritage organizations in the future.

In conclusion we must all agree that some of the members on Council were torn by conflicting desires, while all of them were in the most unhappy situation of having to make the final decision. Heritage directors also sympathize with the many members of the United Church who had to decide between two opposing ideals.

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It's all over now. Let's put it all behind us and get on with new plans.

President and Editor.....

Les Anderson

### In Memoriam

We honour the memory of Mrs. Eileen Eady, long-time supporter of Heritage Renfrew. Eileen's ready smile and willingness to chat about things, whether of the past or present, will be missed greatly. For several years, also, according to Treasurer Helen Clark, Eileen served by doing the year-end audit of our books.

### GOODBYE TO THE WHITE HOUSE

by Harry Hinchley

With the demolition of the White House Renfrew has lost another of its historic buildings. Long a landmark and show-place of the town, it will be missed by town and country people alike. Renfrew is the poorer for its loss.

The White House was built in 1904 by Tom Low while he was still a young man in his 30's. It was to be the home for his bride, Mamie Dean, the only daughter of Noble Dean, one of Renfrew's leading merchants. It was remodelled in 1917 when it was surrounded by beautiful gardens laid out and cared for by a professional gardener, Ernest Maidment. The house was often the scene of dinners and parties and sometimes the gardens were used for garden parties.

Tom Low had come to Renfrew as a poor boy, but he had imagination, vision and creative ability. He saw great possibilities for Renfrew if developed as an industrial centre. It was served by the trans-continental line of the C.P.R. as well as three other lines. Moreover, it had ample water power which, if used to develop electricity, would be a cheap source of energy to run the factories.

From the Martin Russell Estate Tom Low acquired property on the south bank of the Bonnechere, and with it the rights to the water power. With the help of local capital he organized the Renfrew Power Company to generate electricity at the river. Before this project was completed he organized a company and built a

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flour mill beside the C.P.R. track and near the power house. In later years he re-organized it as the Renfrew Flour Mills and opened a branch in Pakenham. After the mill burned down in 1923 he rebuilt a bigger mill which was later sold to Ottawa Valley Grain Products. Next Tom Low bought the town's three planing mills and brought them together to form the Renfrew Manufacturing Company which is now the Woodworks of Renfrew.

Encouraged by the success of these companies, Tom Low then formed other companies and built more factories. These included Renfrew Machinery Company, and Renfrew Knitting Company, both of which were sold to M.J.O'Brien and the Renfrew Electric Co. Along with Frank Vickers he bought the Renfrew Refrigerator Co. and enlarged the building. This is now the Renfrew Tape Co.

In 1928 Tom Low amalgamated all his companies to form Renfrew Industries Limited, which was administered from the office building on Bridge Street that is now owned by Renfrew Hydro. The next year, before the company could get operating smoothly, the great depression struck and business stagnated. Big companies with plenty of reserves were able to survive but many smaller companies faced failure. Renfrew Industries was in this class.

To make matters worse, in 1931 Tom Low died. There was no person able to take over in his place so the business suffered. In 1936 the shareholders voted to sell the assets and recover what they could. Buyers were found for the factories and then under new management they began to run at a profit.

Besides his business interests Tom Low also took part in public life. In 1906 he was Warden of Renfrew County, and in 1908, 1911 and 1921 he was elected to Parliament. He was taken into the Cabinet at first as Minister Without Portfolio, and later as Minister of Trade and Commerce. He contested elections again in 1925 and 1929, but was defeated both times.

In 1918 Tom Low, with approval of Council, and at his own expense, landscaped the property at the corner of Raglan and Railway Streets into a park. In it he later built the Soldier's Memorial Cenotaph, but before it was unveiled, Tom Low was dead.

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But his name lives on in the Park he landscaped, and which A.A. Wright declared " from this time on and for all time to be known as 'Low Square'".

Harry Hinchley

Random Thought-Harry Hinchley, our imperishable and most valued historian is concerned about the negative image that Tom Low still projects in Renfrew. I share this concern, now that I'm learning more about Low's career, and now also that I've been bringing his name up in conversation with longtime Renfrew residents. Was he the 'double-dealer...the crook', even, that I've heard him called?

Set him in the days of 'free-wheeling', when a man with ambition and daring plus good business sense could make a fortune if he had the desire, and all this with a minimum of government restrictions, and Low comes out simply as a man of his times. And don't forget the return he gave to society in public service and civic betterment.

Someone in Heritage Renfrew could assign himself the chore of salvaging Low's reputation in our Town. Think about it!

And do come to hear Hugh McMillan on the 21st.

L.A.

*Flash:* Harry Hinchley brought in four - the first four memberships for 1988 last week! The fee remains at \$3.00 per couple, or per individual.

*Cash* - Helen Clark has received a letter from long-time member and well-wisher Eddie Hall, of Ottawa, with a generous donation and encouraging words. Many thanks Ed - & come to see us!

Joyce Lami  
1777 Raydon