

Green Scene: Appreciating Riverview's Heritage

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A century ago on April 1, 1913, care for the mentally ill was initiated at Riverview Hospital with the official opening of its first facility, West Lawn. Its design was the outcome of an architectural competition. West Lawn was intended to be a monumental building which would set the tone for a new era of mental health care. It incorporated "modern" features such as an abundance of natural light and spacious verandahs where close contact with nature was encouraged. Inside the building were spectacular wrought iron stair railings, marble bathrooms and a grand sense of architectural design. West Lawn was clearly built to endure.

Riverview Hospital's West Lawn building nearing the completion of its construction in 1913. BC ARCHIVES photo.



In conjunction with nearby Colony Farm, West Lawn was intended to offer a new mode of treatment for the mentally ill which relied on healthy activities such as farming and outdoor recreation complemented by a diet of nutritious, locally-grown food. The architect of West Lawn clearly intended his building to stand and serve for decades into the future. However, this was not to be the case; West Lawn was closed in 1983 when its large dormitory-style accommodation came to be viewed as outdated and inappropriate. The fact that West Lawn is still standing after thirty years of complete neglect is a testament to its sound construction.

Following the opening of West Lawn, other facilities were constructed in subsequent years to accommodate a growing patient population at Riverview. These buildings include Centre Lawn (1924), East Lawn (1930) and Crease Clinic (1932). In addition to these massive and significant heritage buildings, Riverview is also graced by over twenty other heritage buildings which contribute to the site's sense of character and campus-like feel. These include the Arts and Crafts style Nurses' Home (1930) and a number of residential buildings constructed in a similar style. The entire site was designed in the manner of grand English country estate enhanced by magnificent trees and other pleasing landscape features such as stone walls and curved driveways. Riverview now hosts western Canada's most significant collection of mature trees with over 1800 inventoried trees which adds tremendous visual appeal and botanical interest for those who stroll through its majestic grounds.

Riverview was originally called Essondale after Henry Esson Young, the provincial Minister of Education and the Provincial Secretary. It was his vision along with that of the medical superintendent, Charles Doherty, that was responsible for the innovative planning for this new provincial health care facility. In 1911, prior to the opening of West Lawn, Esson Young hired John Davidson from Scotland

as BC's first provincial botanist. Davidson set to work on establishing a botanical garden at Essondale as well as undertaking a survey of the native flora of BC. The famous Royal Gardens at Kew in London became one of the inspirations for the layout of Essondale's grounds where patients worked on a voluntary basis to plant trees and maintain the grounds. When the University of British Columbia was established, Davidson moved the botanical garden to the university where it remains today. In 1917, Jack Renton was hired to maintain the grounds at Essondale. As he had trained at Kew Gardens, he also maintained the grand tradition of planting a diverse and interesting mix of trees to complement the buildings and enhance the overall appearance and biological value of the site. The mature trees that grace the site today remain as a legacy of Davidson's and Renton's work as well as that of subsequent Head Gardeners.

Riverview Hospital officially closed last summer after almost a century of providing mental health care to thousands of BC residents. Its patient population peaked at over 4400 in the 1950s. Today, mental health care continues at Riverview albeit on a more limited basis. The Fraser Health Authority operates three smaller buildings on site, the Connolly, Cottonwood and Cypress Lodges, that together provide about 65 long-term beds for mental health care. In addition, the provincial Forensic Psychiatric Institute and some non-profit mental health care groups also use some of the older buildings as halfway homes or treatment facilities for their clients. Future uses of the Riverview site remain undetermined but are expected to be the subject of a provincial land use planning process. Many people in this community are interested in working to ensure the future uses of Riverview will remain as inspired and compassionate as its history.

On Sunday, April 21 at 1 pm, there will be a special heritage tour at Riverview offered by the Burke Mountain Naturalists and the Riverview Horticultural Centre Society to celebrate West Lawn's first century and Riverview's significant history. The tour will depart from the uphill side of the Henry Esson Young Building which can be found by following the main road, Holly Drive, through the site, turning uphill at Oak Crescent and then right to park. This route will be marked with colourful banners. Wear sturdy shoes as the grass can be uneven and slippery in places. For more information on Riverview and other upcoming tours, see www.bmn.bc.ca or www.rhcs.org.