

SOCIETY FOR INDUSTRIAL ARCHEOLOGY

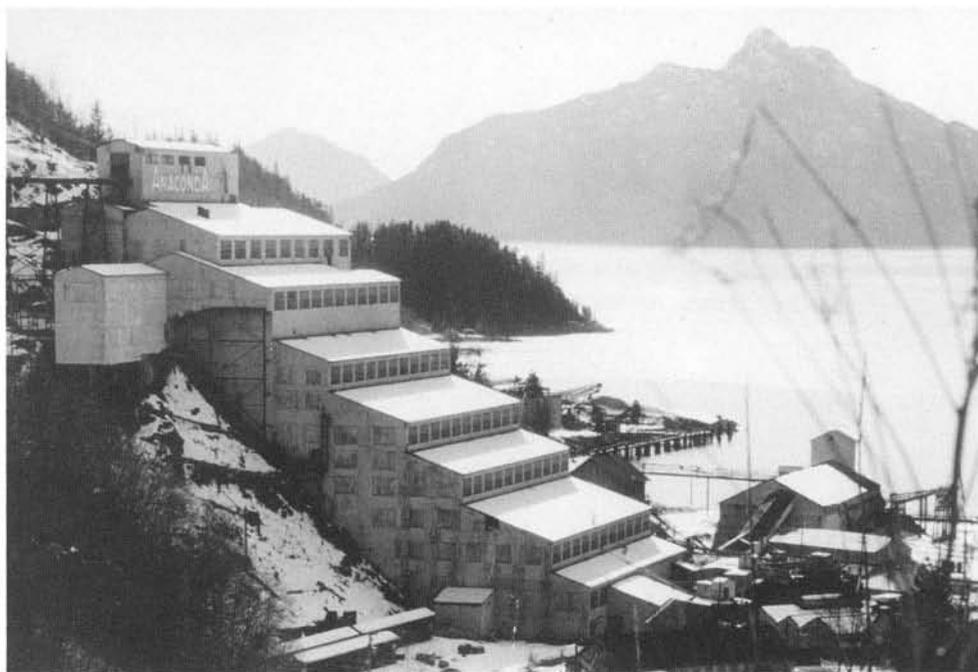
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Britannia Mines declared Canadian National Historic Site



Britannia Mines Concentrator No. 3, photographed in 1974 when the complex was closed by its last owner, Anaconda Mining. The Britannia stands on the shore of Howe Sound, between Vancouver and Garibaldi Provincial Park, British Columbia. Photo courtesy B.C. Museum of Mining.

In conjunction with this year's centennial celebration of the discovery of copper ore at Britannia, British Columbia, the Historic Sites & Monuments Board of Canada declared the Britannia Mines ore-concentrating complex a National Historic Site. This is the first time a Canadian mining site has been designated, according to former SIA president Diane Newell, historical adviser to the B.C. Museum of Mining which occupies the mill. Britannia Beach Historical Society, the museum's governing body, can now focus on developing a mining museum of national status and has an incentive to negotiate with the federal and provincial governments and the private sector on cost-sharing agreements for museum and historic site development.

Britannia's significance as a major world copper producer is well documented. During its 70-year history, Britannia employed over 60,000 people and produced over 50 million tons of copper ore. From 1925 to 1930, it was the largest copper producer in the British Empire.

The last remaining gravity-fed concentrator in North America that is accessible to the general public, Britannia is only 52 kilometers from Vancouver on the well-travelled "Sea to Sky" designated tourist route.

Mineralization in the Britannia Beach area on the east shore of Howe Sound was first discovered in 1888 by Alexander Forbes, who could not raise the capital for development despite a decade of trying. The Britannia Copper Syndicate (later the Britannia Mining & Smelting Co. Ltd.) developed mines and smelting operations after 1904. Concentrators were built to process the low grade ore into an economically transportable product for smelters.

The third concentrator at the site (the one surviving today) was Mill

No. 3, built 1922-23 of concrete and steel and intended to be nearly fireproof. It was designed by Bradley, Bruff & Labarthe, metallurgical engineers of San Francisco. Built on a steep, 45-deg. rock slope, gravity carried the ore through the mill and pumping was almost entirely eliminated. Originally designed to treat 2,500 tons per day, capacity gradually increased to over 5,000 tons daily. Peak production was reached in 1929 and began a gradual decline after World War II. In 1959 Britannia Mining & Smelting went into receivership and was purchased by Anaconda Mining in 1963. After sporadic operations, the complex finally was closed in Nov. 1974. It was the oldest operating mine in British Columbia.

Six months later, in spring 1975, the B.C. Museum of Mining opened in the Britannia mill. The site includes Mill No. 3, flanked by the foundations and remains of No. 1 (built 1904, demolished 1917) and No. 2 (built 1913, burned 1921). Mill No. 3 is built over a network of service tunnels, raises, drifts, and ore chutes driven to service the first mills. The museum uses the tunnel network to interpret underground mining operations through live demonstration of the ore extraction and materials-handling processes. Every year the B.C. Institute of Technology and the Univ. of B.C. conduct field study sessions in the Museum tunnel to teach about geology, mine tunnel surveying, and mining engineering.

Future development of Britannia may involve industrial archaeological work at the No. 1 and No. 2 sites, research and interpretation of mine and mill workers, and the study of ore transportation, mine safety procedures, and materials handling processes.