

Craigflower fire a useful warning



Craigflower manor.

Photograph by: Adrian Lam, Times Colonist

We came close -- far too close for comfort -- to losing one of British Columbia's oldest treasures, the Craigflower Manor in View Royal. A fire blamed on a space heater caused more than \$100,000 damage, but it could have been much worse. The manor could have gone up in flames, suffering the same fate as many other historic buildings around the province.

The wood in these old structures can be tinder-dry. Walls do not have modern fire-resistant insulation, and the buildings were not designed with fire suppression in mind.

Every time a building like that goes up, we lose another vital link with our past. The last of the five Birdcages, the original provincial legislature, was destroyed by fire in 1957, but that was just one of the more visible examples.

Every year, it seems, another B.C. community loses a historic hotel to a fire. Old schools and churches are destroyed. Historic homes are lost.

With the Craigflower Manor, the damage was confined to the storage area and the staircase, thanks to the quick, careful work of the View Royal Fire Department, which contained the blaze as delicately as possible to minimize water damage.

Built in 1853, Craigflower Manor is the third-oldest building in B.C. and has been owned by the provincial government since 1967. It is managed by The Land Conservancy.

Heritage resources throughout B.C., including Craigflower Manor, Point Ellice House and the Emily Carr House in Greater Victoria, were transferred to private operators after the B.C. Liberals were elected as the government in 2001.

That means there is no longer a province wide approach to managing the sites; decisions are made locally. And since it's tough for a heritage site to make money, the local control also tends to limit the amount of funds available for maintenance and preservation. There is a limited subsidy rather than deep pockets in times of need.

The involvement of The Land Conservancy has helped Craigflower Manor, because the organization has a lot of volunteers and fundraising methods, and a solid reputation. It keeps a watchful eye on the property.

Still, the weekend fire is worrisome and raises fears that our other treasures might be at risk.

The heritage branch is working on a strategic plan; perhaps a province wide system of sharing information on the care of historic buildings could be included. Perhaps also the old provincial historic sites advisory board could be revived, with the protection of properties as part of its mandate.

In tight financial times, it can be easy to ignore our heritage. But these are priceless treasures and they need to be saved for future generations.

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