

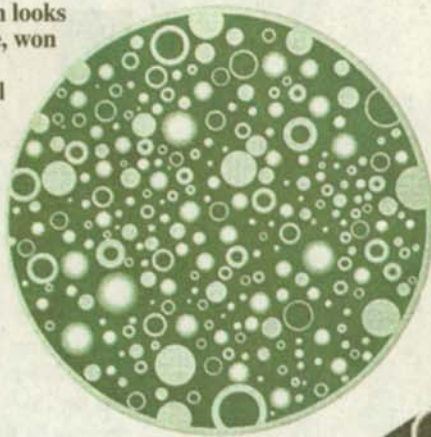
# COVERS

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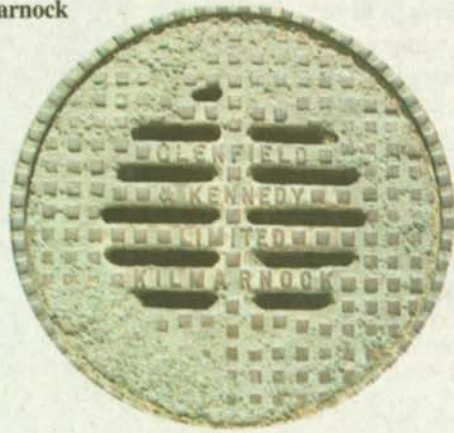
An Oak Bay manhole cover made by Ham, Baker & Co.



This design by Jen Weih, which looks like specks under a microscope, won \$2,000 in Vancouver's Art Underfoot competition and will be used on new city sanitary sewer system manhole covers. There were 640 entries in the design contest.



Manhole cover from Kilmarnock



## History beneath our feet

BY JANIS RINGUETTE

One-hundred-year-old artifacts are lying in the streets, out there in the traffic and the rain. While other venerable artifacts lie in temperature-controlled museum displays, manhole covers stay on the job decade after decade.

"One of cast iron's traits is that it lasts," said Ron Betts, a foundry worker for more than 30 years. That's why car, truck and bus tires roll over hundreds of the same manhole covers that carriage and wagon wheels bumped over in 1900.

The oldest manhole covers have square knobs, Betts says. "They have been around since horse and buggy days. The knobs were hoof-holds for horses."

The safest location to see those historic covers in downtown Victoria is at the southeast corner of Douglas and Yates streets. Large and small covers were salvaged and combined with old storm drains and granite curbing to create a sidewalk sculpture in 1999. Locals call the art installation "burnt waffles" because the waffle-patterned covers are painted glossy blue-black.

The region's oldest manhole covers are in Oak Bay. Imported from Scotland in the 19th century, possibly as ballast in sailing ships, they have a square-knob, horse-friendly pattern on the cover and outer frame as well as the foundry name "Glenfield & Kennedy Ltd. Kilmarnock." Covers labelled "Ham, Baker and Co. Ltd, Engineers & Iron Founders, London England, Municipality of Oak Bay," were imported after Oak Bay was incorporated in 1906.

Though largely ignored, manhole covers have their aficionados. University of Victoria graduate student Fiona MacRaid calls them "historic gems floating in a sea of asphalt." Tourists Scott and Gail Lindsay are fascinated by them. "Victoria and Oak Bay should advertise old manhole covers as a tourist attraction," Scott said. The Portland,

Ore., couple look for unique manhole and utility covers wherever they travel.

Collecting covers is not an option for the thousands of aficionados world-wide, so they collect photos. A "manhole cover" image search on Google showed more than 4,000 photographs. There are manhole cover art exhibits with the largest being in Moscow in 2003. *Sewers of the World Unite!* featured 3,052 images of covers from 71 countries.

Manhole covers prevent anyone falling into holes used to reach subsurface utilities. In Victoria alone, there are about 5,553 access holes, some a foot or two deep, others so deep workers need ladders to descend. Weights and sizes vary, but all manhole covers must be heavy enough to stay in place and to discourage people from moving them.

Cast-iron lettering on local manhole and utility covers provides a written record of long-gone foundries and extinct utility companies. The Victoria Machinery Depot (VMD) was in business from 1898 to 1994. Victoria Foundries (VF) operated from 1954 to 1996. There are VF traffic and street light utility covers on almost every downtown street corner.

British Columbia Electric Railway Company (BCER) and British Columbia Electric (BCE) covers date from the 1890s. British Columbia Hydro Authority (BCHA) covers go back 45 years, when the government expropriated BCE to form a publicly owned company.

Until the 1990s, manhole covers were made locally. Each foundry prepared its own unique moulds or casts. Melted iron, combined with carbon and other elements for strength and durability, was poured into moulds. Each hardened piece was machined so the cover fit into

a perfectly matched sleeve.

Ron Betts and his brothers Gord and Jim know that making manhole covers takes skill and a strong back. All three worked at Victoria Foundries before opening their own shop, Achinback Industries. They specialize in custom casting and patterns in aluminum, brass and bronze because they can't compete in the cast-iron manhole cover market.

New, inexpensive covers come from China. Rob Hathaway, a Shaw Cable worker, said one split down the middle when he moved it recently. "Old covers like this one, though, are solid," he said, taking a Victoria-made cover off a Toronto Street hole.

Even well-made cast-iron manhole covers don't last forever, said Hector Furtado, Victoria's streets manager. In high traffic locations, they "wear down like wooden stairs and become slippery." Worn-out covers are sold to Budget Steel to be melted down.

Many cities enliven their streets and sidewalks with artistic manhole cover designs. In a 2004 Art Underfoot competition, Vancouver chose one winning design for new storm-sewer covers and a second for sanitary-sewer covers out of 640 entries.

Victoria sidewalks could feature new cover designs, too, if Hector Furtado's dream comes true. He envisions a walking trail with the area's history told on manhole covers. The hitch is money.

Janis Ringuette is a freelance Victoria writer.

## HUNTING FOR OLD MANHOLE COVERS

Old manhole covers hide in plain sight down quiet lanes, dead-end roads, in sidewalks, cross-walks and next to curbs. Here are a few known locations to begin your quest. There are lots more to be discovered.

### OAK BAY

- Newport Avenue from Windsor Park to Beach Drive holds more than 21 "Glenfield & Kennedy Ltd. Kilmarnock" manhole covers from Scotland. In place before 1900, they might have been used as ballast in sailing ships. Watch for cars: Newport Avenue can be busy. More Scottish covers are on Estevan and Dalhousie; one is in front of Willows School at 2290 Musgrave.

- More than 33 "Ham, Baker and Co. Ltd, Engineers & Iron Founders, London England" covers are in sidewalks along the same stretch of Newport Avenue. They were imported after Oak Bay was incorporated in 1906. There are more on Hampshire Street.

### VICTORIA

- The oldest manhole covers in Victoria have square knobs, a waffle pattern and no foundry name. Avoid those in the middle of busy downtown streets. Look near curbs, such as the southwest corner of Superior and Douglas by the Helms Inn and the Yates Street curb at Waddington Alley and in the alley opposite 1113 Langley. Two — one worn, one not so worn — lie in the north crosswalk at Fort and Vancouver. Visit the sidewalk sculpture at the northeast corner of Douglas and Yates streets. In James Bay, old covers stretch down narrow Toronto Street from Douglas Street to Menzies. They can be seen from sidewalks loaded with different Victoria Machinery Depot (VMD) covers.

- VMD utility covers labelled "City Light," possibly dating back to the original installation of cluster lights in 1911, can be found downtown by heritage lights lining Douglas Street.

- Victoria Foundries (VF) "Traffic Signal" covers are located on most downtown corners, including the northeast corner of Fort and Blanshard streets and the southeast corner of View and Quadra streets.

- British Columbia Electric Railway (BCER) covers are at 747 Fort St., 703 Fort and at Fort and Wharf. A British Columbia Electric (BCE) cover is at Gordon and Broughton.

Coast Salish artist Susan Point and her daughter Kelly Cannell won \$2,000 in Vancouver's Art Underfoot competition with a design depicting four tadpoles and four frogs. Their design will be used on new city storm sewer manhole covers. *City of Vancouver*



City Light utility cover



Survey cover



Victoria Foundries storm drain