

DERBY REACH/BRAE ISLAND  
PARKS ASSOCIATION (DRBIPA)

Do you enjoy this park? Do you enjoy outdoor activities, appreciate wildlife, the environment, heritage and culture, or support park-based education? Join us! Share your interests and have a voice on how the park is cared for, used and developed.

PACIFIC PARKLANDS FOUNDATION

Encouraging philanthropy, enriching communities, and protecting greenspace, the Pacific Parklands Foundation fosters awareness of regional parks and raises funds for special projects. For more information or to make a donation, please visit [www.pacificparklands.ca](http://www.pacificparklands.ca).

ABOUT THIS PARK

Derby Reach Regional Park is one of 33 regional park sites managed by Metro Vancouver. Its 320 hectares acres of Fraser River frontage, pleat bog, upland forest and farm meadows are located on the river's south shore four kilometers west of Fort Langley. For more information about Derby Reach and other regional parks, call 604-432-6200 or visit [www.metrovancouver.org](http://www.metrovancouver.org).

*Written by K. Jane Watt with the generous support of Timothy Watkins. Artifact photos by Georgie Antle.  
Cover: Ambrotype of unknown sergeant taken in Victoria around 1858. Wm. Schultz MD Collection*

For more information about the Royal Engineers, go to [www.royalengineers.ca](http://www.royalengineers.ca).

Produced by Derby Reach/Brae Island Parks Association with support from:



metro vancouver



Pacific Parklands  
FOUNDATION



Est. 1973



Mixed Sources  
Product group from well-managed  
forests and other controlled sources  
[www.fsc.org](http://www.fsc.org) Cert no. SW-COC-1563  
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

ISBN 0-7721-0114-0 October 11/4,000

Historic SELF-GUIDED TOUR



# Derby Reach REGIONAL PARK



## Royal Engineers at Derby Self-Guided Tour

“British Columbians walk with the ghosts of the Royal Engineers”  
*Beth Hill, from her book, Sappers: The Royal Engineers in British Columbia (1987)*

### ROYAL ENGINEERS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

The Corps of Royal Engineers was the cream of the crop of the British military, active in both civil and military projects in England and throughout the British colonies.

A century and more ago, it was said that if you needed “skilful, intelligent, and industrious mechanics to perform any task requiring judgment, energy and accuracy” the Royal Engineers were the men to choose.

While working in the new colony of British Columbia between 1858 and 1863, these men

of “superior discipline and intelligence” performed many tasks in the public domain – from surveying the border, townsites and roads, to drawing and printing maps, to designing the province’s first stamp and coat of arms, to building the province’s first school and designing its first church. The Royal Engineers and their families also provided the social background for the new capital at New Westminster, organizing theatrical productions, musical concerts, and other social events during quiet moments in the winter.

**DERBY REACH REGIONAL PARK**

GRANTS LANDING

EDGEWATER BAR

HERITAGE AREA

LANGLEY BOG  
NO PUBLIC ACCESS

HOUSTON TRAILHEAD

2018 St

104 Ave

102 Ave

McKinnon Cres

TO HWY #1  
EXIT 58  
5 km

TO FORT LANGLEY 2 km

0 500 m

**ROYAL ENGINEERS TOUR**

The Heritage Area at Derby—a bustling place in the 1800s—sets the stage for the story of the Royal Engineers. The original Fort Langley occupied the Fraser River's shore from 1827 to 1839. During the late 1850s, gold fever sparked a new wave of activity, big ideas, and a need for order. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine a different time...

- Regional Park
- No Public Access
- Dog Off-Leash Area

You are going to a distant country, not, I trust, to fight against men, but to conquer nature; not to besiege cities, but to create them; not to overthrow kingdoms, but to assist in establishing new communications under the sceptre of your own Queen.

— Secretary of State for the Colonies, Edward Bulwar-Lytton addresses the first contingent of the Columbia Detachment on its departure from England, 2 September 1858.



ROYAL ENGINEER RE-ENACTOR FIRES HIS MUSKET TOWARD THE FRASER RIVER, FEBRUARY 2011. PHOTO BY LISA DUNCAN.

### THE BRAINS AND BRAWN OF THE BRITISH ARMY

Two groups of Royal Engineers passed through the Fort Langley area:

#### • THE BRITISH BOUNDARY COMMISSION

In the summer of 1858, the Boundary Commission moved eastward along the 49th parallel, slashing timber and marking the international border. It visited Fort Langley for provisions.

#### • THE COLUMBIA DETACHMENT

165 men formed the Columbia Detachment sent to British Columbia to survey and keep law and order. Two advance parties travelled to Derby in late 1858 and were joined by the remainder of the men in the spring of 1859.

### PROCLAIMING BRITISH COLUMBIA

The Royal Engineers arrived at Derby via the steamers *Otter* and *Beaver* just in time to participate in the ceremony at Fort Langley proclaiming the Crown Colony of British Columbia on November 19, 1858. Residents of Langley continue to commemorate this occasion each year with a dinner that celebrates Langley's pioneers.



PISTOL AND LEATHER CASE

### WHY DERBY?

The Derby area in 1858 was a beehive of activity—with the buildings, farms and orchards of Fort Langley just upriver, and the homes and farms of Indigenous Hawaiian settlers and local Kwantlen First Nations families at hand. By summertime, the area was filled with thousands of gold seekers, en route up the Fraser to the gold bars of the Fraser Canyon.

Change was afoot—the era of Hudson Bay Company (HBC) control was waning. In August, legislation was passed in Britain that made the Crown Colony of British Columbia a reality. Many hoped that its capital city would be Derby—a longstanding settlement with close ties to the Fraser River.

### NO BUILDINGS HERE FIT FOR OCCUPATION

Twenty of the Royal Engineers, mainly surveyors, arrived in Victoria with Captain Robert Mann Parsons on 29 October 1858 after a journey from England via Panama and San Francisco. Parsons had reservations about the Derby site.

He wrote to Governor Douglas on 3 November 1858:

*I am induced to think it absolutely necessary that [a] preliminary inspection should be made,...Some Officers attached to Colonel Hawkins...state that they did not observe any buildings that are at present fit for the occupation of Her Majesty's Troops;—I should have great objection to keep the men under Canvas in a wet locality for any period at this late season of the year.*

Parsons and his men arrived at Derby on November 18th.

### CAPITAL CONCERN

In the meantime, Royal Engineer Captain John Marshall Grant and 11 men, mostly carpenters, made haste to Derby, arriving ahead of Parsons to find the townsite had already been surveyed and advertised for sale. The officers were caught between Governor Douglas' enthusiasm for Derby as the site for the new capital and their written orders from Colonel Moody to consider alternative sites.

### A SMALL SETTLEMENT ON THE RIVER

Parsons and Grant found not an empty land, but a small farming and fishing settlement in the process of being vacated by Peeopeeoh, a retired HBC employee. Driven off in Governor Douglas's haste to get the town of Derby established, his family moved across the river and settled around Kanaka Creek, becoming some of Maple Ridge's first homesteaders.

### BUILDING AT DERBY

With no good accommodation available on shore, the Royal Engineers lived on the cutter *Recovery*, a ship anchored in the Fraser off the Derby escarpment. Their work constructing new barracks was complemented by the work of others. In December of 1858, Governor Douglas let a contract for the building of a parsonage, church, courthouse and jail.

But not everyone liked Derby: one former resident noted in the *British Colonist* on 21 April 1859 that

*They have barely a place there to build twenty houses...Any one who thinks favourably of that place ought to go over the ground. If the barracks remain there longer, it will be requisite to have a hospital alongside. I caught marsh fever for only one night's sleeping there.*

### A DECISION IS MADE

By February of 1859, the decision was made that would forever alter the future of Derby: the colony's capital would be built at New Westminster and Derby would remain the farmland and bush you see around you today.



WOODEN CANTEEN

### THE ARK OF THE ROYAL ENGINEERS

In early April 1859 the main group of the Columbia Detachment containing 118 Royal Engineers and their families arrived in Victoria. This group included 31 women and 34 children and all the necessities of immigration such as livestock. It had set off from England aboard a clipper ship in 1858.

During their six-month odyssey at sea, eight more children were born and one woman died in childbirth.

But if the ship was a place of immense drama, it was also a place of tremendous gaiety. Inhabitants of this ark held dances, created variety shows and musicals, sometimes featuring engineers in blackface, or dressed in women's clothes.

After a stop in Victoria, the cargo of women, children, and livestock were sailed up the Fraser River to newly-built barracks at Derby, their new home until accommodation could be carved from the hillsides at New Westminster. With this task complete, the Royal Engineers and their families abandoned the townsite of Derby.

### THE LURE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Most Royal Engineers were volunteers. Their incentives for coming to British Columbia were significant – including the chance to bring their wives and families to the colony and generous land grants upon completion of service.