

Esquimalt, British Columbia
Bickford Tower
Building D118, CFB Esquimalt (Dockyard)

HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

The Bickford Tower, on Grant Knoll overlooking Esquimalt Harbour, was erected as a signalling tower in 1901 to the designs of the Royal Navy's "Officer in Charge of Works," T. Woodgate, part of a modest upgrading of strength that was to mark the British Admiralty's last direct investments for Imperial defence in Canada. It is currently the property of the Department of National Defence, within the bounds of the Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Esquimalt.

See FHBRO Building Report 87-138.

Reason for Designation

The Bickford Tower has been designated a Recognized federal heritage building as a unique structure associated with a particular theme of national military history, as a carefully designed and executed example of maritime architecture and engineering, and particularly as a highly visible element of great importance in its harbour surroundings.

The sole instance of its type in the nation, the Bickford Tower was among the very last of Britain's Imperial defence works in Canada. A purpose-built structure for semaphore, signal flag and other means of naval visual communication, the tower became substantially obsolete at the introduction of a military telephone system two years after its construction. Britain withdrew her naval units in 1905 and the Royal Canadian Navy assumed control of the site in 1910. Nevertheless the tower has remained militarily useful from time-to-time up to the present, and its presence helps define visually the narrow harbour entrance at Esquimalt for both military and civilian vessels. Both its exterior and its painted wooden interior evince the maintenance and care of detail typical of naval facilities.

The tower is sited prominently on an attractive peninsula.

The designation applies to both exterior and interior, and especially to the tower's physical presence and setting on its peninsula.

Character Defining Elements

Bickford Tower is a lighthouse-like column of brick topped by a glazed signal room.

The external heritage character of the tower is of an octagonal brick column, with brick corbel tables beneath a projecting concrete and iron floor of the glazed signal room. This is in turn surmounted by an eight-faceted conical roof.

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Esquimalt, British Columbia
Bickford Tower (Continued)

The tower's narrow door and window openings, which appear on different elevations at each storey, are themselves corbelled segmented arches, permitting the openings to appear more generous and admitting more light to the lower storeys. The stone windowsills punctuate and relieve the uniformity of the brick shaft. The concrete signal floor and foundations are early uses of the material in military construction. A simply designed railing around the external gallery of the signal room provides attachments for flagstaff and semaphore post, the original means for communication from the tower.

The four interior levels are interconnected by steep narrow wooden stairs about the perimeter, giving access at second and third levels to small rooms partitioned off from the stairs. The ground-floor mess and fourth-level signal room are open in plan.

As a whole, the building retains almost all of the characteristic features of its original construction, and these should be protected and retained in the course of any future work. It is entirely fitting that its original and existing use continue; it is a well-recognized landmark for vessels navigating the harbour entrance. The internal character of the building has apparently been well-maintained and little altered, apart from periodic repainting and refinishing. As there is no evidence of any substantial deterioration, a regular program of maintenance and repair should continue.

The wooden sash and glazing of the signal room's doors and windows are essential features of the elevations, and should be replicated precisely in the event of any replacement glazing. Consideration should be given to sampling and recording finishes, paints and colours, both existing and hidden, before any future refinishing.

The Bickford Tower is related by design, material, texture, and detail to the other Royal Navy structures at the base. All of these are representative and strong characteristics of the base. These characteristics should be incorporated in any components of the continuing evolution of the base.