



Built in 1919 for BC lumber baron Joseph Ogle "J.O." Trethewey

Abbotsford – January 2021

Trethewey House was a place we planned to visit for quite some time. Currently it's only open on weekdays which can be tricky but it finally worked out one particular Friday in January. We were also fortunate in that the typical dark and dreary Pacific Northwest downpour of rain in the forecast didn't materialize. Our backdrop for the day was a sky awash with dramatic clouds and plenty of moody lighting. Sunlight poked out from behind voluminous, turbulent cloud formations and streamed through dark, skeletal tree branches.

Moments after we all stepped out of the car we grabbed our gear and cameras. A typical beginning to our investigations or visits usually begins with us taking pictures of the outside. We always give the grounds much deserved attention as many historic sites also have very charming and historically significant gardens. Here, the heritage gardens opened in 2002 named after local environmentalist, Sylvia Pincott, who was the founder of Abbotsford's Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program. She was also an advocate for the establishment of the provincial initiative, the Naturescapes program.

Even in winter, though the flowering plants might not be out, we enjoy the experience of wandering around a building in order to get a feel for the energy of a place—inside and out. We're not sure what it is exactly and again, this will sound strange, but we seem to have a



knack for going to places that let us know they know why we're there. Just then, as if right out of a movie, a young man, skateboard in tow, walked past the outside of the house. He noticed us taking photos and as we snapped away he remarked to us that he lives in the area just a few streets down yet never visited the inside of the house. We told him we were about to venture in after our picture taking session and his next words were, "Ya, I hear that it's supposed to be haunted." We couldn't have written a better segue. Now what are the chances? We could practically hear the elegantly eerie music kick in as we made our way to the stairs.

Trethewey House isn't a particularly old house. It was built in 1919 for B.C. lumber baron Joseph Ogle "J.O." Trethewey and for his third wife Reta. The Trethewey family moved to Abbotsford from the city of Haney in 1927 and were instrumental in

developing the city of Abbotsford. The Abbotsford Lumber Mill employed many people in the area. The Tretheweys, who settled in Canada in the 1870's from England, had success in mining ventures at home and continued to be very entrepreneurial in their new homeland. J.O. eventually took over running his father's mill and business continued to boom throughout the 1920's.

A darker part of history reveals that J.O.'s brother, Samuel, seemed to be someone with a hot temper. He was not discreet with his many relationships and later became involved with the Canadian chapter of the Ku Klux Klan as did his son, Howard. There has been much conversation around renaming the site because of the affiliation. The conversation continues to be very relevant today and is necessary in educating people about the past and present. The topic of racial injustice and equality currently pertains to us today.

Due to the pandemic, only two of us were allowed to go inside so Victoria and I went in. Upon entering the home, with its rich wood adornments and panelling it feels sophisticated and sturdy. It is built in an arts and crafts style and is constructed using primarily local materials. From our tour guide, Natalia, we learned that it was once offered as a kit house in the Sears Roebuck catalogue! This was so intriguing we had to look it up and apparently from 1908 to the 1940's, Sears did sell an estimated 70,000 kit homes in about 370 different styles, from Colonials to bungalows. In the 1920's, prices ranged from about \$600 to \$6,000, which is roughly \$8,400 to \$84,000 in today's dollars.

Located in the city of Abbotsford, the house has undergone extensive restoration work and has been restored to c.1925 by the Heritage Abbotsford Society, with the help of local families and

assistance from the Province of BC. Trethewey House was designated a municipal heritage site in 1983. The house is a one and one half storey plus basement, wood-framed, Craftsman-styled home. The house was built of materials directly from the Trethewey's mill and everything was constructed to the finest specifications. The bricks in the chimney and fireplaces were made from clay obtained from the Sumas Mountains and manufactured at Clayburn's brickworks in the nearby city of Clayburn. The house has its original light fixtures and at the time was unique in that it had electricity, central heat and a built in vacuum!

The grounds are a good size and have several outbuildings which were quite significant. Joey's playhouse is a two storey playhouse for J.O. and Reta's son, Joey. The carriage house compliments the home's outer architecture and was used to house the family vehicles, Joey's motorcycle and a pony. Also there is a small building on the grounds which used to be a train station on the outskirts of town. We will want to return at some point in the summer when the flowering plants are in bloom as we imagine the gardens must look very impressive and vibrant.

During our tour we came to learn that Reta loved to entertain and her home was her pride and joy. She would often throw very lavish gatherings. Friends and family would board the train in Vancouver to come to Abbotsford for one of Reta's dinner parties or celebrations. Standing in the dining room we could definitely imagine hearing the clinking of glasses and cutlery, animated conversations stirring in the living room and music coming from one of the vintage radios in the home. The stern eyes of family members seemingly watch you from the portraits which hang in each corner of the living room. Everything in the house is richly textured, refined and very well-preserved. The fine China is out, the crystal glasses are on the table, the place settings are set. We learned that during many of these luxurious parties each guest would be served not just one or two glasses of champagne, but their very own bottle! A bottle would be placed next to each person's glass on the elaborately set dinner table.



As we took in the riveting history of the house with its very complex family history we did ask about the reports of hauntings. There are many different ghost stories about the Trethewey House and speculation as to who might still be around. Neighbours in the area say they sometimes see unexplained figures wandering inside the house as well as seeing apparitions on the grounds. This may be staff working late but no one is for certain. Visitors have reported that they have seen the reflection of a woman in the widows and mirrors of the house. Some have captured orbs in photos and many say they feel the presence of someone in the house, almost as if they are being followed. During our research, we did come across an online review by a

visitor in February of 2020 who wrote, 'There is definitely a spirit in this house. Can't confirm if it's a friendly one. This place is definitely haunted.'

In chatting with our tour guide she did say that some of the stories may have originated from the family who lived in the house during the 1960's. They had two boys who were quite mischievous and apparently loved to scare their babysitters. The boys would make sounds from the basement that would travel up through the heater vents in the floor. The ghostly noises would result in several babysitters spooked enough never to return. There is also a story of a woman who may have died in one of the rooms of the house but, this too, is not confirmed.

Our feelings after visiting? Honestly we feel some sort of presence or energy definitely remains at Trethewey House. We say this because after the two of us chatted about our visit we both felt a very similar energy. For a place that doesn't have anyone living there it feels strangely lived-in. Even my husband, Bill, as he viewed the photos at home afterwards, asked, "Does someone still live there?" We've been to other similar such museum homes and this one feels uniquely different. It felt like we had just entered someone's home. Someone who is expecting you. It may be empty but it doesn't feel unoccupied. Had we stayed any longer, we felt as if the lady of the house, who obviously loved to entertain, was just around the corner. It felt as if she was ready to come out at any moment to offer us a cup of tea or perhaps to grace us each with our very own bottle of champagne.

