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968 Balmoral Road

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LANDMARKS

Balmoral home displayed the brickmaker's craft

Geoffrey Castle

For more than a hundred years, brickmaking was an important industry in Victoria. Initially, bricks came from England, but there was an early brickfield near the Cook Street end of Park Boulevard, at the edge of Beacon Hill Park.

In 1875, George Mason produced up to 16,000 bricks daily, and a few years later, Kempster Brothers were employing 60 men. By 1895, the industry numbered several firms in the vicinity of what is now the Mayfair Shopping Centre. They included James Baker, Maurice Humber on Topaz, the B.C. Pottery and Terra Cotta Works, Coughlan and Mason, McGregor and Jeeves and Elford and Smith, which became Victoria Brick and Tile Company and was located on George Graham's (also a brickmaker) estate.

Baker built a fine house at 38 Frederick Street (now 968 Balmoral Road and designated heritage) to show his wares and craftsmanship. This Victorian Queen Anne style of house has a multi-gabled hip roof and the high windows have

ashlar sills emphasizing the height of the building. It was the residence of William McHaffie of R. T. Williams and Co., the book binding firm which produced B.C. directories for some years.

James Baker had numerous business interests. He owned the Victoria Ice Company on Discovery Street, having started in a small way cutting ice from the middle of Swan Lake and supplying such important customers as Mrs. Duncan McTavish, a daughter of Sir James Douglas. As a teamster and building contractor, it was appropriate that he should make bricks. He was also a city alderman for three years.

The blue clay found at a depth of five to six metres proved best, and the mix was dumped in a pit and stirred with a horse-drawn scoop. The "green" bricks were hand-cut at first but soon wire was used for this. Since the bricks would be

dried in the sun before firing, it was largely a seasonal business. Five or six days later, the beehive kilns were unloaded and sometimes the bricks would be delivered still warm.

By 1927, Baker had retired and Walter Luney, former manager of Victoria Brick and Tile, took over Baker Brick and Tile. After the war, Evans, Coleman and Evans acquired Baker's. This last surviving brickworks in Victoria was closed in September, 1962, nearly 13 years after the Deeks-McBride plant ceased production at Bazan Bay, near Sidney. Since that time, clay bricks are shipped here as required from the mainland.

Mayfair Shopping Centre was built on the old Baker Brick site, and the more recent additions are near where the old kilns and drying racks were located. The brick house on Balmoral Road is the home of Poor Richard's Books.

Geoffrey Castle is president of the Victoria section of the B.C. Historical Federation.