

# Mack Laing House Report



# 2013

**Mack Laing House Conservation Committee**

Respectfully Submitted to: **Comox Town Council**

By: **Mack Laing House Conservation  
Committee**

Date Due: 30 September 2013



### Acknowledgements

The Mack Laing House Committee wishes to extend particular thanks to the Town of Comox Council which unanimously supported our spontaneous request for a stay of demolition of Baybrook. We particularly wish to thank Councillors Barbara Price and Patti Fletcher for taking the time out to help guide us through Town Council's procedures. As always thanks are owed to Jim Gillis for bringing the Regional District's perspective on this part of the Comox Valley's heritage. Special thanks is also owed to the patience and courtesy of Al Fraser in guiding us through the building inspections and taking out the time to make them accessible to us.

Finally, none of this work would ever have been possible without the support and encouragement of Alice Bullen, Betty Brooks, Norma Morton and Liz Stubbs whose experience reminded us of how little we knew.

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## **1. Executive Summary**

*1. This project began with the intent to use the opportunity to save both Baybrook and Shakesides as heritage buildings in order to implement Mack Laing's explicit will : "**for the development of my home as a natural history museum.**" By far the most important finding is that Shakesides floods, is structurally unsound and cannot be salvaged in the long-term.*

*2. Baybrook, Laing's original home, has heritage value because of its history. It was found to be structurally sound by a professional structural engineer, and salvageable by a professional architect. It is the only one of his two homes that can be salvaged and to which the intent of the will can be applied.*

*3. Baybrook is located on a hillock which is a cross-cultural meeting place. The committee developed a vision for Baybrook as Comox's Heritage Gathering Place. Its location was mapped on route for walking and bicycling structured from the Filberg and around the homes Comox's pioneer ornithologists, to better understand the public accessibility, the natural history, and the cultural and heritage contexts of Baybrook.*

*4. K'omoks First Nations were consulted about the projected use of this part of their territory. Cory Frank, their liaison with Project Watershed, noted that an interpretive centre should include a First Nations storyboard, and indicated his desire to be kept up to date.*

*5. The site was found to present parking and access problems. The floor plan is limited to about 1600 square feet of residential space. In its current state there is no alarm and no security.*

*6. **Given that Shakesides is structurally unsound and floods, the demolition of Baybrook would mean the destruction of the Mack Laing legacy in Comox. Two options and their socio-economic limitations are therefore set out in TABLE 1, page 12.***

**7. Option 1** is a National Parks style post-and-beam viewing cover with signage. The basement is infilled and the footprint re-used. **Cost between \$75K and \$100K.** Social benefits are mainly local and seasonally limited. Economic returns are limited.

**8. Option 2** is a restoration of Baybrook. **Cost between \$150K and \$200K.** This presents a business opportunity to develop Conservation Tourism in the Comox Valley, and use of the site for Conservation Education.

**9.** To make Baybrook a viable business option, the Strathcona Wilderness Institute (SWI) facility (Strathcona Park Wilderness Centre) at the Paradise Meadows trailhead in Strathcona Park, on Mount Washington is used as a business model for volunteer-based nature education and tourism enhancement facility.

**10.** The proposal is to link the SWI facility which only operates 5 months of the year and Baybrook through a paid coordinator organizing a large volunteer base, developing educational programmes and promoting the new and potentially lucrative branch of “Conservation Tourism”

**11.** To implement **Option 2** recommendations are:

a. Reactivate “Comox Cultural and Heritage Committee” (disbanded 2002) to obtain funding from BC Heritage, and dissolve the Mack Laing House Committee.

b. Constitute “The Mack Laing Society” to be accountable for the operations of Baybrook as a Heritage Building and non-profit business.

c. Extend stay of demolition for 8 months to carry out a full market analysis of Conservation Tourism in the Comox Valley and pull together a volunteer workforce and local materials support for construction.

## **2. Mack Laing House Conservation Committee Team**

The Mack Laing House Conservation Committee Team was formed in early June in response to the emergency discovery that the Town of Comox was proposing to demolish Baybrook house. The team consists of environmental, engineering, architectural, heritage conservation, logistics and history professionals, as well as residents of Comox. The response was originally spearheaded by Project Watershed (PW) and Comox Valley Nature (CVN), who have a special stake in the natural history of the Comox Valley and the Comox Estuary. It was subsequently expanded to include a broad range of stakeholders and experts.

Although the Team is informally co-chaired by CVN and PW, work is shared equally by all members. The Team members involved in this assessment are:

### **Dr. Paul Horgen**

Dr. Horgen is Professor Emeritus of biology from the University of Toronto. He is Chairman of the Board of Project Watershed Society and serves on a number of other Vancouver Island boards and commissions. He is a former department chair and director of a research centre and graduate program in biotechnology at the University of Toronto .

### **Dr. Loys Maingon**

Dr. Maingon (RPBio) is President of the Comox Valley Naturalists Society. He is a freshwater biologist, current Chair of the Canadian Advisory Committee on Water Quality Sampling Methods for the ISO and Canadian Standards Council, and involved in various conservation organizations and projects on Vancouver Island.

### **Martin Hagarty**

Mr. Hagarty is a professional architect residing in Comox and practicing in the Comox Valley and other parts of Vancouver Island. His areas of practice range from private residences to large facilities like the Comox Airport.

**Frieda Home**

Mrs. Home is a retired policy analyst and planner, and resident of Comox, who has diverse experience mainly in the health care industry, including governance and hospital construction.

**Tom Knight**

Mr. Knight is a professional city planner, development consultant and educator currently living in the Comox Valley. Tom's experience includes assisting local communities and organizations in their heritage endeavours and practices.

**Dr. Richard Mackie**

Dr. Mackie is a noted historian who has written extensively about the history of logging in the Comox Valley and is the authority on the life and works of Mack Laing. Born on Vancouver Island, he currently resides in Vancouver where he teaches and is the co-editor of *BC Studies*.

**Harold Bates (P.Eng)**

Harold Bates is a resident of Comox and a registered professional structural engineer.



### **3. Background: Why Baybrook?**

Baybrook is Mack Laing's first house in Comox. It was built in 1922. He resided in it until 1949. Mack Laing's scientific collecting activities for the Canadian National Museum, and his most important and prolific writing coincide with that period of his life. During this period, Mack Laing was at his creative height as a nature-writer, producing some 22 scientific articles in major ornithological journals, some 1000 articles in major North-American journals and magazines and 14 books, 2 of which were published. This helped Mack Laing establish a large network of colleagues and friends who became associated with Baybrook.

The importance of Baybrook to the cultural history of British Columbia and the Comox Valley gives Baybrook its particular value for Canadian heritage.

Shakesides is the house that he built in 1949, five years after the death of his beloved wife, Ethel in 1944. He resided in this house until his death in 1982. Shakesides and the land associated were then donated to the Town of Comox, with the proviso that his home be used as "a natural history museum": **"for the development of my home as a natural history museum."** (See *Appendix 1: Mack Laing's Will section "I"*).

We therefore understand the intent of Mack Laing's will to be: *that his home be used as an educational and interpretive centre for the Comox Valley.*

After 1944, Mack Laing's productivity declined sharply. He regrettably came to be known locally for his status as an eccentric recluse, rather than for the important literary and ornithological figure he had once been. Shakesides is therefore of lesser value for our cultural heritage than Baybrook, although it is of greater interest as a representative of rural domestic space in the late 1940's and 1950's.

However, Shakesides floods annually and has serious structural problems that handicap the long-term potential to preserve it as a heritage site (see: *Professional Architect's Assessment*).

These facts, and the details of his life and writing are collected in Richard Mackie's authoritative biography of Mack Laing: *Hamilton Mack Laing: Hunter-Naturalist*. (Sono Nis Press, 1985)

#### **4. Baybrook Vision: Comox's Heritage Gathering Place**

The conservation of Baybrook is a truly unique opportunity to preserve Mack Laing's legacy, as entrusted in his will with regards to Shakesides, within a contemporary context.

Baybrook is a true "Heritage Gathering Place". Built on the Great K'omoks midden, and overlooking the Comox estuary, which is being promoted as a National Heritage site, the Baybrook site brings together First Nation's heritage and the pioneering Western heritage that make the Town of Comox what it is today.

Today our modern media-oriented culture takes a more interactive and participatory approach to learning. Museums give way to "interpretive centres" and "learning centres." "Natural history museums" have also adapted to these changes by developing more easily accessible experiential and interactive approaches to their contents.

Baybrook's qualities as a "heritage gathering place" make it an ideal place where residents and visitors can come to experience and learn about the environmental and cultural continuity that Hamilton Laing treasured.

The first approach is to increase accessibility by making Baybrook one stop on a heritage walking and bicycling path that includes both Baybrook where Laing did his major work, and Shakesides, as well as the homes of his contemporaries [Filberg, Brooks] through the natural walkways of the park that bears his name.

The second approach is to secure Baybrook as a covered site for future generations either as an open covered site commemorating Mack Laing, or as a restoration of

the house, to be used as a learning and interpretive centre, in keeping with the intent of Mack Laing's stated wishes for his home.

## **5. K'omoks First Nations' Response**

The land on which Baybrook stands is an important part of the K'omoks First Nation and Puntledge heritage. The site is therefore of cultural importance to the K'omoks, respect for this culture and presence that their input be secured for any project affecting this site. The Committee therefore contacted Cory Frank KFN liaison, through Project Watershed's intermediary, Dan Bowen, who provided Cory Frank's response in an e-mail of August 24 to Paul Horgen:

"The Mack Lang land near a fresh water stream was a seasonal encampment and well used for many years based on the size of the midden.

There have been no formal investigation or AIA done on this property that is now designated a Park?<sup>1</sup>

=====

Cory did note that K'omoks FN would like to acknowledge this culturally noted area and be kept up to date with any thing that transpires.

He did note that if an interpretative centre was being considered that a FN storyboard about this land cultural history be considered."

**1.** It has been pointed out by Norma Morton, Project Watershed Historian, that in the 1960's Katherine Capes carried out an excavation at the Baybrook site, however no documentation for this is in Norma Morton's possession.

## **6. Providing Access: Two Comox Birdmen Walks Associated with Baybrook**

Historically, the Comox estuary has always been known as a mecca for birdwatchers. To this day, this still constitutes a sizeable, if under-advertised portion of the tourism revenue to the Comox Valley. It was the underlying reason for Mack Laing's decision to move to the Valley in 1921.

Comox is fortunate in having been home to three other eminent ornithologists: Allan Brooks, Ronald MacDonald Stewart and Theed Pearse. These four 'birdmen' are an integral part of the community's rich conservation heritage, as documented by Elizabeth Brooks, *The Pioneer Birdmen of Comox* (Private Printing, 2006). To understand that heritage and how it relates to contemporary daily life in Comox, the relevant sites had to be situated within the local topography.

In our discussions with the public, it became clear very early on, that many residents were unaware of the location, let alone importance, of Baybrook. This is a matter of developing a geography of the site which could help the public, both residents and future visitors understand their heritage value.

It was therefore very important to provide a meaningful easy access guide for public education on this heritage by mapping routes. A heritage walk, easily accessible to highlighting the work and historical importance of the four birdmen and including the Baybrook site has been mapped by Paul Horgen and Frieda Home. The route connects Baybrook to the Filberg, and therefore provides a touring opportunity for residents and visitors alike. (**See: Appendix 1: Birdmen Heritage Nature Walk.**)

A developed heritage building at Baybrook could make this a cultural destination showcasing their pictures, writings and other artifacts, several of which are currently being stored for such a purpose.

Mapping the Birdmen Routes brought to our attention the fact that "Baybrook" is more than just the Mack Laing Heritage. It is once again the gathering place for the Valley's natural history and conservation heritage.

## **7. Problems and Limitations**

The restoration of Baybrook, its use and its future development as a self-sustaining building to be accessed by the public face several basic constraints associated with, access, the residential nature of the building and the park designation of the site. These constraints limit the scope and type of business that can be associated with the building for cost-recovery.

### **1. Access and Parking:**

The building site is located in a park. Access is through a narrow road and over a small bridge. This limits access to no more than a pick-up truck.

Furthermore, parking is limited to no more than two vehicles. Additionally, parking on the streets leading into the Baybrook driveway is limited to residents only.

This means that visitors and potential users of the building can only access the building by walking and cycling.

### **2. Building Size and Designation.**

The building is a residential house of about 1600 square feet. Usage is therefore can be no more than one would expect in a residential home business. This limits the number of people using the building at any one time.

### **3. Security**

The building is isolated and has no overnight resident or watchmen. In the current circumstances, potential security is therefore limited to a security alarm system and night patrol. This suggests that if the building is left vacant overnight, exhibits need to be limited in value (reproductions), and electronic equipment cannot be left unattended.

These problems also affect any potential restoration of Shakesides for heritage designation that might be, or have been, contemplated.

## **8. Two Conservation Options for Baybrook Building**

The structural assessment of Shakesides revealed that it is unlikely to be preserved in the future in its present location or, if at all. Therefore, the demolition of Baybrook would be tantamount to the eradication of Mack Laing's legacy as entrusted to the Town of Comox. Demolition is therefore really no option, given the Town of Comox's relation to the Mack Laing Will and Testament.

The potential preservation of any heritage building depends to a large extent on the ability of interested proponents to make that building viable for the recovery of the costs associated with maintaining it. There are two options that can meet this criteria. These two options and their potential uses for cost-recovery are outlined in Table 1 below.

<b><u>Option 1: Viewing Cover</u></b>	<b><u>Option 2: Building Restoration</u></b>
<i>Estimate: \$100K</i>	<i>Estimate: \$200K</i>
<b>Removal and Footprint Roof Cover</b>	<b>First floor building usage</b>
Viewing site of the estuary	Viewing site of the estuary
Year-round outdoor use	Year-round outdoor use
Stop on walks	Year-round indoor use
Signage commemorating First Nations	Stop on walks
Signage commemorating Mack Laing	Signage commemorating First Nations
Passive interpretive gathering place	Signage commemorating Mack Laing
Limited Eco-tourism	Active volunteer-supported interpretive and gathering place
Limited education potential	Naturalist education centre
	Full Eco-tourism
	Conservation Tourism Coordination Centre
	Full Adult and Youth Education
	Volunteer-supported conservation Tourism
	Potential residence for Researchers
	Conservation Education
	Year-round Art Education Facility
	Year-round Strathcona Wilderness Institute Model
	Potential links with local institutions (NIC)

**Table 1: Potential diversity of two possible heritage building options for Baybrook.**

### **Option 1: Post-and-Beam Cover**

The first option is based on the National Park's practice of using the footprint of buildings of historical importance that it cannot adequately maintain to commemorate a site and its residents. The building is replaced by an open post and beam structure outlining the shape of the original building, conforming with the original footprint. The heritage value is indicated by signage.

This would involve the removal of the building frame, and infilling of the basement to create a floor space for a large open outdoor gathering site. Signage would then be incorporated to reflect the First Nation and Mack Laing heritage. In keeping with Mack Laing's explicit will that his home be used as a natural history museum, interpretive natural history signage and a First Nations storyboard could then be incorporated within the footprint of the post and beam cover.

This would create a passive interactive nature interpretive site accessible by bike and foot by the general public via a "Heritage Birdmen Walk." A covered site also provides a short-term gathering and viewing platform for educational purposes throughout most of the year.

The cost of this project is estimated to be between \$75,000. And \$100,000, assuming that labour is not volunteered or materials donated.

### **Limitations of Option 1**

It is, however, important to understand that while it would appear to meet the basic minimal requirements of Mack Laing's will, an open cover also limits the economic opportunities inherent in the growing eco-tourism market. It does not suffice to assume that an accessible and appealing natural history site and a designated shelter within a park providing recreational opportunities to residents will also meet the requirements of a larger and more complex eco-tourism.

Eco-tourism is a market opportunity that grows as fast as the increasing rate of retirements of the baby-boomer generation, and which is quickly diversifying with

the growth of “work vacations”, such as WWOOFies (World wide opportunities on organic farms) and Conservation Tourism.

### **Important practical target market constraint: Bird Migration Time and Phenology**

While the Baybrook site is always interesting as a general viewing site for the estuary, it is important to understand that for naturalists, the greatest interest in the estuary has always historically been, and continues to be the Fall/Winter/Spring. The Comox estuary is an important Bird Migratory staging and migratory ground. *Waterfowl are abundant in fall, winter and spring*, numbers and species decline in the summer.

Mack Laing acquired this property because of the large numbers of birds and bird species that come through the estuary in the fall, winter and spring. In his active life in the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's, he was mostly absent throughout the summer. The interests of modern birders are no different.

Similarly for most naturalists, the most productive periods are in spring, early to mid-summer and fall. These are the times of blossom when plants are most identifiable and when fungi fruit.

Just as in nature the synchronic timing of reproductive events, or “phenology”, is the time-thread by which every ecological phenomenon hangs, modern eco-tourism is structured around the timing of natural ecological events. Successful ecotourism depends on being able to cater to the market at the right time of year when ecological events of interest attract people to the valley. (i.e People come in winter-weather to see Trumpeter Swans or Long-tailed ducks. They do not come for this in fair summer weather).

Simply understanding the importance of our cool wet climate for our rich unique flora and fauna, gives us a market advantage and opportunity. Given the importance of the winter period to the “naturalist” market, and calendar, providing a weather-tight gathering and viewing site throughout the year is therefore an important investment in the ecotourism and conservation tourism market.



## **Option 2: Heritage Building Restoration**

The second option involves restoring and upgrading the existing building. (See: section 12: *Professional Architect's Assessment*.) The restored building would provide a year-round use for information, viewing and educational purposes. This would expand the reach of the building beyond local recreational needs to the full eco-tourism and educational opportunities that the post and beam cover only suggests are possible.

While the building would lose contemporary additions that detract from its integrity and are a source of problems, as well as use of the upstairs loft, the 1600 square foot remainder presents opportunities.. The floor space includes 2 large display rooms, 1 office-size room, a bedroom with ensuite, a kitchenette and a bathroom.

*Restoration costs are estimated to be between \$150,000. And \$200,000, assuming that labour is not volunteered or materials donated.*

The question of how to make this a viable option lies in understanding how this space can work within the constraints listed in section 7 (*Problems and Limitations*), meet the intent of the Mack Laing Will, and pay for itself.

The answer appears to lie principally in two areas: education, which is currently a substantial tax burden, and conservation tourism, which is an untapped revenue opportunity.

We believe these two considerations present a business opportunity that would benefit the Town of Comox and meet the intent, if not the letter, of the Mack Laing will. As noted above that intent appears to be: *that his home be used as an educational and interpretive centre for the Comox Valley*. Given that Shakesides is not salvageable, and that Baybrook is now in possession of the Town of Comox, we take this to be the appropriate use of the original and only salvageable home of Mack Laing which is Baybrook.

## **9. Business Plan and Requirements for Option 2**

The seed and outline for the business model for this is the Strathcona Wilderness Institute facility on Mount Washington. This is a volunteer-based and volunteer-run facility, supported by BCParks. It plays a vital role in educating and guiding the public, and enhancing tourism from all across the world in and to Strathcona Park. SWI runs a number of volunteer educational programmes through the summer and early fall at the facility. This is entirely grant-driven and supported.

What we are proposing is an expansion of the kind of work that SWI has done, through an agreement in principle and coordination with SWI to promote environmental education and environmental tourism, year-round, throughout the valley. These activities would be coordinated between the two facilities at the SWI Mt. Washington and Baybrook, providing for sea-to-sky tourism and educational opportunities according to seasonal – or “phenological” priorities. This would vastly increase the market-capture, by catering simultaneously to people interested in the lowland valleys and alpine regions.

For the Mack Laing Baybrook site this would mean using the facility for a coordinator and educator in the “office space” with a volunteer staff managing displays, greeting visitors and generally assisting in education and coordination on a daily basis for all twelve months of the year. Just as at Strathcona Park, this would project Baybrook and the Comox estuary in the eye of international tourism. Linking the SWI facility and Baybrook as regional coordination and educational centres would promote year-round information and interest in the vast recreational potential of the Comox Valley.

## Conservation Tourism

Linked to this is the need to develop and cultivate “Conservation tourism”. This growing branch of eco-tourism appears to be currently only accessible through an outlet in Victoria. Conservation tourism attracts people who are looking for a “working and learning” vacations – such as helping to monitor whale or bird migrations, or helping in conservation restoration projects. Conservation tourists pay for the opportunity to contribute in volunteer environmental projects with an educational component. A local example of this is the “park wardenship” which BC Parks very successfully operates on Mittlenatch Island, participants pay to do hard restoration and monitoring work on Mittlenatch and stay for a week in a hut which has serious rodent problems.

The opportunities are present, but access to them is hit and miss, because they are not coordinated and well-publicized. Currently the Comox Valley has many volunteer environmental projects in stream restoration, Garry Oak restoration, invasive plant control, eel grass planting, monitoring, Vancouver Island marmot research etc., but there is no coordination with environmental groups to attract this tourism opportunity. All these projects are currently handicapped by a lack of manpower.

Within this context, the bedroom with ensuite at Baybrook could be rented to conservation tourists from around the world, as they engage in volunteer local environmental projects. This would also have the advantage of providing overnight occupancy and overnight security, which is an ongoing concern.

A variation on the use of Baybrook for Conservation Tourism is its potential use to house scientific environmental researchers who come to the valley. This option is basically what the *Capes House* which is operated by the Courtenay Museum does for paleontological and geological researchers.

Research links can also be developed with various entities involved in environmental research in the Valley, such as NIC and VIU.

## **Youth Education**

Comox Valley Nature receives frequent requests to do guided nature field trips with small school groups. As Mack Laing himself observed, there is a vacuum in schools for environmental and natural history education. This vacuum is a large cost in the education budget, which is reflected in the expensive practice of organizing field trips out of the valley to meet a need which we could address locally, if the facility existed. Having a space that could provide basic youth, as well as adult, nature and cultural heritage education, would be a tax saving for local taxpayers and a potential revenue for the Town of Comox.

Children who can be dropped off by bus, are one group that immediately overcome a key limitation of Baybrook's location. The Baybrook space could easily accommodate 12-20 children or youth, at any one time, without requiring parking. As school districts are willing to pay for these opportunities, this would be a further source of revenue which can be developed to complement conservation tourism.

## **Additional Opportunities.**

As an interpretive centre located in what is recognized to be a beautiful garden site overlooking the estuary and facing the Comox Glacier, the facility would also presents opportunities for art and photography education events. This would be in keeping with Mack Laing's own interest in these two disciplines.

## **10. Implementation Needs**

To bring about the heritage preservation of Baybrook either as Option 1 (Post and Beam Cover), or as Option 2 (Heritage Building) a number of organizational steps must be taken to secure funding, provide accountability, and improve public communication and fundraising.

The Mack Laing House Committee was formed as an emergency response to clarify questions surrounding the potential heritage status and importance of Baybrook, and answer questions surrounding its structural condition.

Within the first week of the Mack Laing House Committee Paul Horgen contacted BC Heritage and discovered that this agency would willingly support and fund an application to secure Baybrook's status, particularly if we elicited the support of "BC's best heritage planner, Thomas Knight." However, although we met that criterion, it was pointed out that funding would only be available if the application came from the Town of Comox's "Cultural and Heritage Advisory Committee." This committee was disbanded April 30<sup>th</sup> 2002.

*In order to begin applying for funding and implementing the heritage status of Baybrook, it is necessary that the Mack Laing House Committee be dissolved and that it or a parallel committee be constituted by the Town of Comox as its "Cultural and Heritage Advisory Committee."*

The Mack Laing House Committee is currently overseen by the Chair of Project Watershed and the President of Comox Valley Nature. While both environmental societies have an interest in Mack Laing's contribution to local environmental history, this is not the focal concern of either society. This poses a potential long-term problem of accountability. A separate non-profit society dedicated to the oversight of matters associated with the Mack Laing House and the Mack Laing estate therefore needs to be constituted, to act independently from Project Watershed and Comox Valley Nature.

*This society, The Mack Laing Society, would be accountable to the Town of Comox for the operation of Baybrook House if restored as proposed under Option 2. The*

*Mack Laing Society, would also be responsible for annual fundraising, an annual Mack Laing lecture, the digitalization of Mack Laing's works and the maintenance of a website associated with Baybrook House.*

Comox Valley Nature and Strathcona Wilderness Institute are affinity groups and share extensively in their interests and memberships. Notwithstanding these affinities, we are separate entities with a separate focus. Therefore, we would still need to enter in negotiations to work out co-ordination strategies, grant application sharing and how to share data efficiently.

The aim would be to apply jointly for funding for a coordinator under a Mountain Equipment Capacity Building Grant, to ensure permanent staffing at Baybrook.

Conservation Tourism is a new field. In order to understand the revenue potential and what marketing and communications strategies need to be developed a thorough market analysis needs to be carried out. Similarly, revenues from School budgets need to be assessed. This would require about six to eight months work depending on available funding for a market researcher.

A complete business plan would then need to be developed to ensure that the operation of a restored Baybrook would be, at the very least, revenue neutral. If we are to proceed with either Options 1 or 2 we need to ascertain how much of the labour and material costs will be provided “in kind” locally on a volunteer basis, and how much financial support will be accessible locally, before making application to potential large donors, such as The Vancouver Foundation and The Bateman Foundation.

## **11. Recommendations**

- a. Given the perceivable long-term economic benefits of restoring Baybrook, it is recommended that an 8-month extension be granted to carry out a market analysis of the potential for Conservation Tourism and Youth Education to support the operations of Baybrook, and to ascertain what volunteer workforce and donated materials would be available for Option 2.*
- b. That the Mack Laing House Committee be dissolved and that the Town of Comox re-activate the “Cultural and Heritage Advisory Committee.”*
- c. Given structural problems associated with the long-term potential to maintain Shakesides, and the impossibility to implement either the letter or the spirit of Mack Laing’s will at Shakesides, that discussions be opened to implement the spirit of that will at Mack Laing’s first home, Baybrook, between the Town of Comox and Cultural and Heritage Advisory Committee and/or The Mack Laing Society.*

## **12. Professional Architect's Assessment**

Martin Hagarty Architect Ltd

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Comox, BC, V9M 2R2

September 23, 2013

To: Town of Comox

### **Architectural Assessment of Mack Laing Houses in Comox**

Prepared for the Mack Laing House Conservation Committee

#### **Introduction**

In Mack Laing Park there are two waterfront houses, *Shakesides* and *Baybrook*, built by the famous naturalist, Hamilton Mack Laing. I understand that he built *Baybrook* first in 1922 where he lived until 1949 when he sold the house, and then built *Shakesides*, using a modified plan of the *Baybrook* house, where he lived until he died in 1982.

I was asked by a group led by Dr. Loys Maingon, president of the Comox Valley Nature Naturalists Society, to evaluate their proposal to conserve these houses for use as eco-tourism facilities. To provide this service, I attended their meetings, reviewed the background material, toured the two houses, and prepared this report. I have prepared this report *pro bono* as a community service and will not provide any future architectural services except in that capacity.

#### **Baybrook**

##### **Description**

On August 7th, 2013 I toured *Baybrook* with Al Fraser, Parks Director, and Dr Loys Maingon and reviewed and photographed the interior and exterior of the house. The house is currently unoccupied.

The house is built on a concrete foundation on a small knoll of high ground with beautiful views of Comox Harbour and the Beaufort Range. The original house was a modest one storey wood frame bungalow with a porch on the south [ocean side] and typical, local exterior finishes of the period: narrow cedar drop siding, double sash wood windows, cedar shingles on the roof, and brick chimneys. The original house had no distinctive stylistic or unique architectural quality. However, if in original condition today, with the same finishes and materials, the house would attract the interest of architectural historians and merit consideration as a possibly unique example of an early Comox pioneer home built from a kit of parts.



Unfortunately the original house is now sandwiched between three unsympathetic additions of varying quality; one on the east side, another to the north, and a third on the west side.

Furthermore, all the interior and exterior finishes and the interior layout of the original house have been changed over the years and they lack architectural merit and quality. The only interesting feature is the exterior fish pond; however, it is in poor condition.

The condition of the existing building has been addressed in a Building Condition prepared by RDH consultants which I have reviewed. I agree that the building envelope and exterior assembly [insulation, cladding, windows] are in poor condition and would require extensive rehabilitation.

The building foundation of the original house and the east wing appear to be stable and in good condition. I understand from the structural engineer some minor upgrades to support the floor framing of those sections are required.

The building has access from Baybrook Drive via a narrow roadway down a steep hill and over a narrow bridge.

I understand that the building is fully serviced with Hydro, sanitary sewer, municipal water, and storm drainage to the ocean.

#### **Preliminary Recommendations - *Baybrook***

Re-use of this building requires that Town Council, the Parks Department and the Conservation group [identified in Loys report as the future Mack Laing Society] agree in advance to the same goals, purposes and actions for the building/site before its rehabilitation. I believe that, as a minimum, the following agreements and actions are necessary:

- A public/Society building within the park is included in the master plan for the Park;
- The proposed use[s] for the building are included in the master plan for the Park;
- Public benefit would be extensive and broadly inclusive;
- Parking is limited to a few places;
- Access would be mostly on foot and by bicycle;
- The extent the building is accessible, if at all;
- The Fire Department confirms that they could adequately respond to a fire at the building;
- A more detailed building assessment is completed;

- Detailed design plans are done, adequate to determine costs;
- A project budget is established;
- Funding for the project is identified and confirmed;
- A comparison is made to the cost of a new building/structure on the same foundation confirming upgrade is more cost effective than replacement;
- The services to the building are adequate for the intended re-use;
- The Society would be responsible for operation of the building [e.g. like Filberg Lodge], and
- The Society and the Town would share the cost of its restoration and operation.

Subject to those agreements, I make the following recommendations and comments:

- Only the original footprint and the east wing are reused;
- The north addition and the west addition are demolished;
- There is no public access to the attic and the stairs are removed;
- The front porch deck of the east addition is removed and rebuilt below the adjacent floor;
- The building insulation/vapour barrier, cladding, windows, and roofing are upgraded as per the RDH report;
- The interior and exterior are upgraded to a standard appropriate for public use/Town building;
- One washroom at least is provided if the Building is repurposed for public/Society use;
- The building systems are upgraded to provide adequate plumbing, heating and ventilation, and
- The upgrades, at a minimum, meet the requirements of the BC Building Code.

### **Shakesides**

#### **Description**

On August 14th, 2013 I toured ***Shakesides*** with Al Fraser, Parks Director, and Dr Loys Maingon and reviewed and photographed the interior and exterior of the house.

Shakesides is a small house, on a full concrete basement, located at the seaward end of Brooklyn Creek. The house is currently rented and the renter assists with maintenance.

Based on my review I make the following observations:

- The interior of the house has a simple layout with many of the original finishes extant but in poor condition;
- The fitout of the building is not adequate for public use or reuse without complete renovation;
- The building systems are worn out and obsolete;
- In general the exterior of the house is in poor condition;
- The floor framing is inadequate to support the Building Code design loads, and
- This building is located within the floodplain of the Creek, is subject to flooding, and the basement has flooded in the past.

#### **Preliminary Recommendations- Shakesides**

I do not recommend this building for re-use because of its floodplain location and general condition.

#### **Summary**

These building by themselves do not warrant heritage status based on any architectural quality but could earn that status based on the significance of Mack Laing to the community. The designation of Heritage status requires agreement between the Town and the Society that Hamilton Mack Laing is a person of local, regional and national importance.

For example, a shack by the railway tracks is just a shack until a future prime minister is born there; then it is no longer just a shack.

Trusting this report is adequate for your purposes at this time.

Sincerely,



Martin Hagarty Architect, AIBC

## **14. Professional Engineer's Report**

### **Bates Engineering – Consulting Structural Engineering**

5726 CORAL RD, COURTENAY, B.C. V9J 1W9 - Ph (250) 334-9227 - Fax (250) 334-9220

September 25, 2013

Our File: 13-30-01

To: Town of Comox

Preliminary Structural Assessment "Baybrook" House

Prepared for Mack Laing House Conservation Committee

Bates Engineering was asked, by the Mack Laing House Conservation Committee, to complete a visual structural inspection of the above noted house. No material testing or exposing structural elements obscured from view is included in the scope of work. Building envelope and moisture ingress are specifically excluded from the scope of work and were completed by others.

We inspected the residence on August 07, 2013 accompanied by Mr. Martin Hagarty, Mr. Al Fraser and Dr. Loys Maingon. The original building is reported to be 87 years old and there have been a number of additions since the original construction. The north and west additions are proposed for demolition and are not included in this review.

No drawings were available for the original construction or the east addition. The building is wood frame construction with a partial basement and loft. The east addition is located over a crawl space.

The roofs consist of asphalt shingles on plywood, over 1x8 shiplap strapping and wood rafters. The original residence has 2x6 rafters at 24" on center with 2x4 ceiling joists at 16" on center. The addition has 2x4 rafter and ceiling joists at 16" on center. There is a sag in the roof rafters which is common for a building of this age. Some rot should be expected around the eave of the roofs; although this may be localized to the fascia boards and ends of the rafters. Some of the rafter spans could be reinforced by installing webs with plywood gussets.

The floor of the original home consists of diagonal shiplap on 2x8 floor joists at 24" on center and 3 ply 2x8 beams at approximately 8 feet on center. The 3 ply 2x8 beams are supported on log columns. There was some minor decay in the floor framing under the kitchen and the bases of the log columns are deteriorated. The floor of the addition consists of diagonal shiplap on 2x10 joists at 16" on center. The floor has x-bracing and the span of the floor is roughly 16 feet.

The walls are likely shiplap on 2x4 studs at 24" on center. The walls generally appear straight and do not show signs of failure or decay. Some decay is likely due to the age of the building. The east wall of the addition appears to have some decay in the sheathing at the base of the wall. Some decay should also be expected adjacent to window and door openings.

The basement appeared dry at the time of our inspection. There does not appear to be a vapor barrier in the crawl space and may not be present below the concrete slab in the basement. The sill plates on the concrete walls in the crawl space appear rotten.

Both foundations appear to consist of a 6" to 8" concrete foundation wall. The footing was not visible and it is likely that the walls sit directly on the ground. The foundation around the original

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residence and the east addition appear to be stable. There is a significant crack in the foundation adjacent to the chimney. This may be a result of some settlement and rusting metal embedded in the concrete at this location. The bearing pressure likely exceeds the allowable capacity of the observed soils but this has not resulted in excessive settlement.

The porch deck and roof appear in poorer condition and will need to be upgraded or repaired.

Although the structure is not built to present building code standards there are no major signs of structural distress or fatigue. Provided the building envelope is repaired, moderate structural repairs completed and the loads on the building are un-changed, the building structure will continue to perform adequately in the future.

If the use of the building is changed, the occupant load on the building will need to be reviewed with the building department. If the floor load is increased further structural upgrades will be required.

I trust the foregoing meets your present requirements and if you have any questions or concerns please contact the undersigned.

Yours truly,

**BATES ENGINEERING**

H. Harold Bates, P.Eng.

*Bates Engineering – Consulting Structural Engineering*

5726 CORAL RD, COURTENAY, B.C. V9J 1W9 - Ph (250) 334-9227 - Fax (250) 334-9220

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## **15. Appendix 1: Birdmen Heritage Nature Walk**

This walk includes the homes, or home site, as in the case of Stewart, of four naturalists, Hamilton Mack Laing, Major Allan Brooks, Ronald MacDonald Stewart, and Theed Pearse) who from 1920 to 1980 photographed, painted, preserved or simply enjoyed the beauty of the woods and estuary of the Comox Valley.

The walk starts at the information kiosk at the corner of Comox Avenue and Port Augusta streets, winds past the home of Pearse and the home site of Stewart, continues through the Filberg Lodge and Park, on through Laing's first home and property, along the shore path to his second and last residence and through the woods to the Brooks home. It returns to Filberg Park along the shore path and through it back to the SW corner of the Comox Mall where it began.

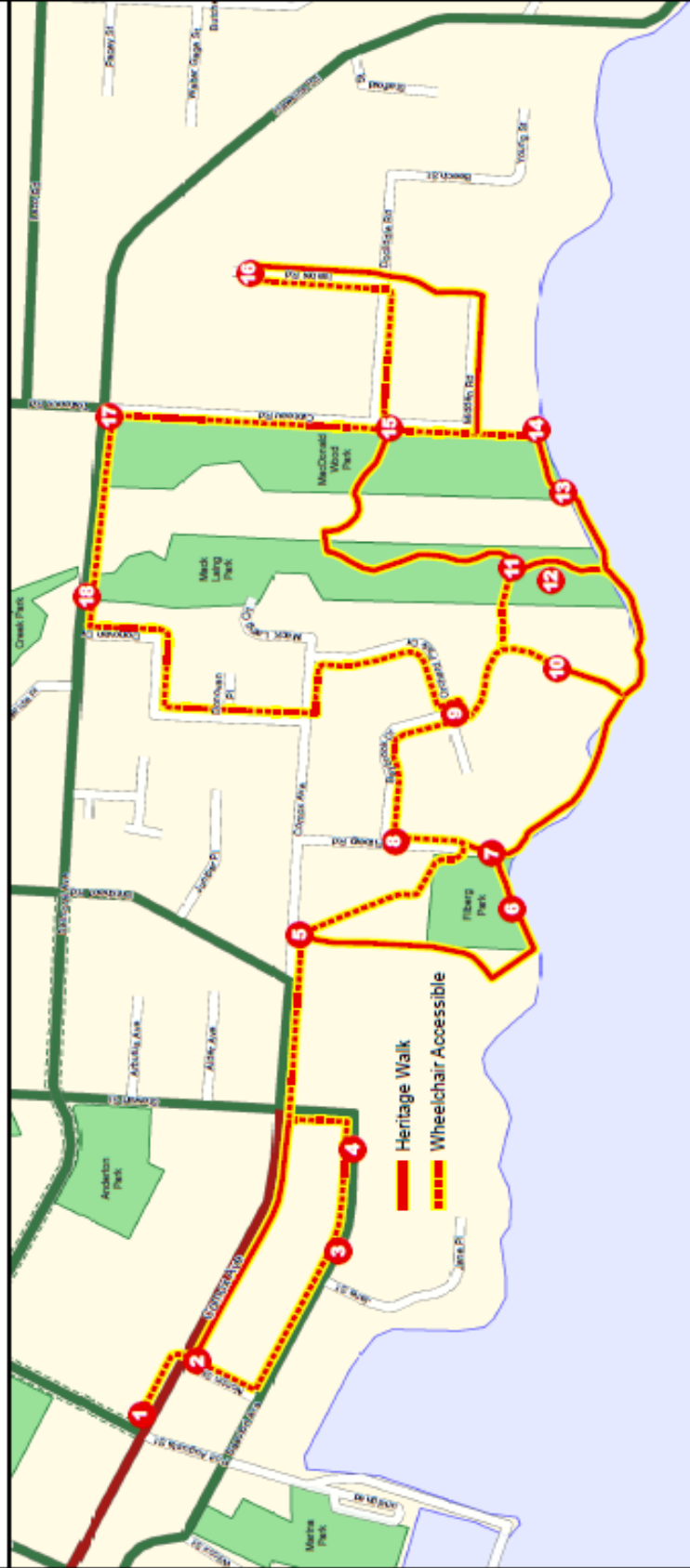
Bicycles can be used on this walk and there are designated areas that are wheelchair accessible. The following is a description of the wheelchair walk” This walk includes the homes, or home sites of: Laing, Brooks, Stewart and Pearse.

The walk starts at the information kiosk at the corner of Comox Avenue and Port Augusta streets, winds past the home of Pearse and the home site of Stewart. It then continues through a trail in the Filberg Lodge and Park, down a small country road leading to Laing's property, back along streets to the entrance to Macdonald Wood through a path in the woods, and across a small bridge back to street. It ends at the end of a short trail at the foot of Croteau Road. Here there is an accessible shaded boardwalk that overlooks the water and Goose Spit.

The wheelchair walk is about an hour in duration. The return route to the starting point at the Comox Mall, back up Croteau Road to Balmoral Avenue, is somewhat shorter. On a warm day, an alternative might be for a companion to walk through the woods to Comox Avenue to retrieve a vehicle parked at the start of the walk while the person in the wheelchair waits on the boardwalk at the end for about 20 - 25 minutes.



# Birdmen Heritage Nature Walk, Comox BC



- 1** Start / Finish - South West corner of Comox Mall corner of Comox Avenue and Port Augusta at billboard showing history and map of area.
- 2** Comox Museum and Archives - Has considerable information about the bird men
- 3** Theed Pearce House - Some additions and renovations. Original exit to the left of the house.
- 4** Ronald Stewart's House site - The original home of which nothing remains was built around 1910 and at one time likely was a boarding house for doctors. Stewart's wife, Ellen Holmes, was the daughter of the owner of the general store. Stewart Street was named for Ronald Stewart.
- 5** Park Entrance - North west entrance to Fibberg Park.
- 6** Lodge Entrance - SE (Main) entrance to Fibberg Lodge. More info at <http://fibberg.com/>. The location includes a gift shop (seasonal) and a tea house (seasonal). Tours are available through the home which includes original furnishings. The home and gift shop are non wheelchair accessible. The views from the Lodge and Tea House are impressive.
- 7** Park Entrance - Pedestrian and vehicles for handicapped only.
- 8** Park Entrance - Fibberg Park
- 9** Baybrook Drive - Entrance to driveway to Mack Lang's houses. Once the site has been developed, there will be parking for disabled persons near the first home. This beautiful site could be an alternate starting point for the tour.
- 10** Baybrook House - Hamilton (Mack) Lang's first home built in 1922/23 and sold in 1949.
- 11** Commemorative Cairn
- 12** Shakesides House - Mack Lang's home from 1949 to 1982. Here there is a connection to 2 trails (one on each side of Brooklyn Creek, a salmon spawning creek) that connect to a trail to Macdonald Wood in one direction and Comox Avenue in the other direction. If one continues along Brooklyn Creek the trail continues across Salmon Street to Robb Street.
- 13** Plaque - Describing how Macdonald Wood was saved from development through the efforts of local residents lobbying government and contributing toward the purchase of the site. Tide permitting, walk along the waterside path under the remains of a dock.
- 14** Eugene Crotesse's House site - Crotesse was a contemporary, and like Doc Liddle, was a veterinarian. Like Doc Liddle too, he had a street named for him. Crotesse, a French Canadian, had a tourist camp on Hidden Plateau Road and ran wagon tours up the mountainside.
- 15** Bridge - Bridge across a water run-off channel. On the right is a trail that connects back to Comox Avenue, a short-cut for an able-bodied person, wearing appropriate walking shoes. On the left is Doodie Road which leads toward the 4th property.
- 16** Cedarbrook House - Renovated (1956) home of Allan Brooks. Originally on 10 acres and address was on Hawkins Road. The home was rented during the second world war to service men. Allan Brooks, ornithologist, naturalist, and artist, was the best known internationally of the 4 bird men.
- 17** Park Entrance - Macdonald Wood Park
- 18** Viewpoint

The data on this map is of varying age and accuracy and although attempts to ensure all information portrayed is up-to-date, The Mapping Centre disclaims all responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of the information. The intent of this map is to provide information for educational purposes and not for legal purposes.

- Information collected by Fibberg Home
- Approximate duration 1hr
- The paths along the water may be covered at high tide and can be wet

# 16. Appendix 2: Mack Laing's Will



PR 306/82

FORM A

In the Supreme Court of British Columbia

IN PROBATE

COURTENAY

Registry

Be it known that on the First day  
of March, in the year of our Lord one thousand nine  
hundred and eighty-two, the last Will and Testament (a copy  
whereof is hereunto annexed) of HAMILTON MACK LAING

late of Comox, in the Province of British Columbia

deceased, who died at

Comox, in the Province of British Columbia

on or about the 15th day of February, 1982  
was exhibited, read, and proved before a Judge of the Supreme Court of British Columbia, and  
administration of all the estate which by law devolves to and vests in the personal representative of

the said deceased was granted to JAMES DILLON CURTIS, of Comox, in the  
Province of British Columbia, one of

the Executors in the said Will named, Mack Tripney Laing,  
the other Executor named therein, having renounced his  
right to probate.

Given under the Seal of the said Court, this Second day  
of March, A.D. 1982

Rolph Krayenhoff, District Registrar.

Extracted by Gordon & Morris  
Courtenay, B.C.

Solicitor.

\* 0

SUPREME COURT  
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

MAR 2 '82

COURTENAY



THIS IS THE LAST WILL of me, HAMILTON MACK LAING, Retired Naturalist, of Comox, in the Province of British Columbia, made this 16th day of May, in the year one thousand nine hundred and eighty-one:

I HEREBY REVOKE all former wills, codicils and other testamentary dispositions at any time heretofore made by me, and declare this only to be and contain my true last will.

I NOMINATE, CONSTITUTE AND APPOINT my nephew, MACK TRIPNEY LAING, of 831 Leslie Drive, Victoria, and my friend, JAMES DILLON CURTIS, of Nob Hill, Comox, both in the Province of British Columbia (hereinafter referred to as "my Trustee"), and the survivor of them, to be the Executors and Trustees of this my will; AND I GIVE, DEVISE AND BEQUEATH all the estate both real and personal, whatsoever and wheresoever of which I die possessed or entitled to unto my Trustee upon the trusts following, that is to say:

(a) To deliver my collection of original Allan Brooks paintings and drawings to the Town of Comox, it being my wish that they be hung in the Town Library, Town Hall, or other suitable buildings in Comox, as the Town Council shall decide;

(b) To deliver my own collection of original nature drawings and paintings to the Town of Comox, it being my wish that the same be retained by the Town, and used if possible in the natural history museum on my former home property, now a nature park and bird sanctuary as envisaged by the document of conveyance to the Town of the same, made the 19th day of September, 1973;

(c) As to my collection of photographic negatives and prints, and my collection of photographic natural history clippings comprising a "morgue" for illustration purposes, and my scientific books, I request that my Trustee make the same available to the Provincial Museums at Winnipeg, Manitoba and at Victoria, British Columbia, for division amongst themselves as they shall agree, or failing agreement as my Trustee shall decide, following representations to my Trustee by the said two beneficiaries;

(d) To deliver to Courtonay & District Historical Society any of my remaining Indian artifacts;

(e) To deliver to the Provincial Museum at Victoria, B.C., my nature diaries and field notes;

(f) To deliver to the Comox Branch of Vancouver Island Regional Library all my remaining books;

(g) To deliver to the Town of Comox all the remaining items of household, personal and domestic use or ornament owned by me at the date of my death, my wishes in respect of the same being hereinafter

(h) To convert my residuary estate into cash as and when my Trustee shall decide;

(i) To pay all my just debts, funeral and testamentary expenses, including any estate taxes, succession duties or the like wherever payable, which become payable as the result of my death;

(j) To pay to my said nephew, Mack Tripney Laing a legacy of Two Thousand (\$2,000.00) Dollars, or if he shall have predeceased me, to pay the same to his wife, Mary Florence Laing; and if she shall also have predeceased me, to pay the said legacy to their daughter, Maureen Janet Elizabeth Pengelly, of Victoria aforesaid;

(k) To pay to my friend, NEVILLE MAYERS, of 569 Shannon Crescent, North Vancouver, B.C., the sum of Four Thousand (\$4,000.00) Dollars;

(l) To pay or deliver over all the rest and residue of my estate to the Town of Comox, upon trust, so that the funds so bequeathed will be used for the improvement and development of my home as a natural history museum, twenty-five (25%) per cent of the cash realized to be used for capital improvements to the dwelling house, and the remaining seventy-five (75%) per cent to be invested by the Town, the income earned thereupon to be applied towards the annual operating expenses of a natural history museum, it being my desire, as I have indicated to Alderman Alice Bullen, that my home remain on the said property, in my belief that the upstairs could be renovated to provide accommodation for a resident caretaker for the park, that the present living area could be developed for use as a natural history museum, and the basement adapted as a museum storage area, craft shop or meeting place. Having these objectives in mind, I am hopeful that the said Town may be agreeable to retaining such of my art works and chattels as will contribute towards the development of my home along such lines, the sale moneys realized from any items not so retained to be used towards adaption of the building as suggested aforesaid, or in the development of the nature park; and I particularly request that the Town confer with the said Alice Bullen in dealing with my dwelling and chattels to attain these objectives.

As to delivery charges on items I have bequeathed to Museums in Winnipeg and Victoria, I direct that my estate shall be responsible for paying the same.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF I have hereunto set my hand at

*W. M. K.*

*W. M. K.*  
*W. M. K.*

COURTESY