

Statement of Significance for Shakesides
District Lot 87 Lot 2, Comox District Plan 3387



Description of Historic Place

Shakesides is a mid-century vernacular bungalow constructed circa 1950 by noted naturalist, ornithologist, collector and writer Hamilton Mack Laing. The house is situated on the edge of the Comox Estuary in Mack Laing Nature Park, near the western boundary of the Town of Comox in the Comox Valley Regional District.

The house, built and named by Laing, is associated with the later half of his career, a productive period of writing, study and mentoring.

Heritage Values of Historic Place

Shakesides is valued for its long association with Hamilton Mack Laing who built the house in 1950 to replace his original 1922 home, Baybrook; for its awareness of its natural and historical context; for its design and placement on the property; for its construction from locally-sourced materials, and for its role in the later half of Laing's work and study.

Shakesides is valued for being built and named by internationally prominent and respected teacher, author, ornithologist, naturalist, collector and illustrator of flora and fauna, photographer, farmer, sportsman and artist, Hamilton Mack Laing (1883-1982). Laing's presence here attracted a resident community of ornithologists and naturalists to Comox starting in the 1920s, which put Comox on the map as a centre for bird watching to this day. Apart from ornithology, Laing's participation in 10 major expeditions for the National Museum of Canada laid some of the important groundwork for today's environmental science. His early concern for the local environment and the health of the Georgia Strait was reflected in one of the earliest studies on the impact of oil spills in the Strait. Laing's continued importance lies in the strength of the friendships and professional connections made over his long life, in his collections of birds, mammals, and plants housed in Canadian and American museums and universities, and in his influential nature stories published in newspapers and outdoor magazines.

The building's intentional and sensitive placement illustrates the builder's awareness of the property's natural environment and historical land uses. The building coexists with and enhances its natural surroundings - remnants of a typical coastland second-growth forest of high biological diversity which till this day remains an ideal habitat for native medicinal and edible shrubs and plants, as well as for shellfish, waterfowl and other migratory and resident birds. It was designed for its shoreline location turned

broadside to the bay, to accommodate the rare instances of flooding, and to provide views to Mt. Arrowsmith and the Comox Glacier aka Queneesh (Kwénis).

The building is situated away from but sits near an extant and visible portion of the Great Comox Midden, an ancient archeological site of buried strata of discarded sea shells linked directly to the ancestors of the Pentlatch and K'ómoks First Nations. Midden artifacts found on the property by Mack Laing are held in the Comox Archives & Museum. The remnants of the 5-acre configuration of the property as purchased by Mack Laing in 1922 reflects the early 1920s transformation of Comox from an area of mass farmland parcels to a village centred on a more diversified economy entailing the subdivision of farmlands into smaller lots.

Shakesides illustrates a hand-built, side-gabled vernacular cottage from locally sourced materials. It is clad in part with cedar shakes that were hand-split on the property. Elements of the house were specifically designed for its challenging location on the shoreline in an area prone to occasional flooding (high concrete foundation, dyke wall). The interior reflects Laing's quirky lifestyle and life's work.

Shakesides is valued for its important role as Laing's purpose built residence and workplace for his later half career, during which the recently widowed naturalist sold off his original residence, Baybrook, and the nut farm off which he and his wife had previously lived, and dedicated the majority of his time to writing at Shakesides. Laing was very productive here - he wrote four books, hundreds of articles and letters, was consulted by colleagues, mentored students, and visited by friends and fans from around North America.

This residence is further valued as an integral component of the Mack Laing Nature Park, a vision Laing developed for this property in his later years resulting in his gifting of Shakesides and its land to the Town of Comox in 1973.

Character Defining Elements

House

- location in a small clearing in the forest on the edge of the Comox Estuary at the south end of the original property
- position on property for specific views of the Comox Estuary, bay and mountains
- high concrete foundation and dyke wall on three sides of the house
- locally sourced construction materials including:
 - timber frame
 - logs used as support posts in basement

- hand split shakes for first floor siding and roof
- board and batten siding for the upper floor
- side-gabled roof with centrally placed pair of dormers on the south face
- south facing porch and stairs
- original window assemblies and hardware
 - picture window flanked by casement windows with horizontal muntins on porch
 - paired casement windows with horizontal muntins on south face
 - sash windows with horizontal muntins on east, west, and north faces
 - casement windows in the dormers
 - horizontal divided four light windows, hinged at the top, in the walls of the basement
- original front door
- roofed basement entrance on the north side of the house
- interior elements include wide width cedar panelling with vertical detail in two rooms on the first floor
- the Shakesides name

Property

- covered well at the northwest corner of the rear of the house site
- self-seeded nut trees from the former Baybrook farm
- apple tree with graft at front of the house
- grape vine at front of the house

Maps



Shakesides location in Mack Laing Nature Park, Comox Valley Zoning Map and Apple Maps Aerial

Research Findings

Civic Address: 1431 Comox Avenue

Legal Address: District Lot 87 Lot 2, Comox District Plan 3387

Date of construction: 1950

- source: *Hamilton Mack Laing - Hunter Naturalist*, Richard Mackie, 1985

Builder: Hamilton Mack Laing

Original Occupant: Hamilton Mack Laing

Research Sources

Royal BC Museum, British Columbia Archives, Hamilton Mack Laing Papers Series MS 1900

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Photographs



Shakesides photographed in August 2016 showing porch and stairs, dormers on the roof, grape vine and apple tree



Shakesides in an undated photograph, showing the dyke surrounding three sides of the house *Photo courtesy of the Comox Archives & Museum*



The house from the footpath and boardwalk



East side of the house showing the shingles and board and batten siding and original window positions.



East or 'weather' side of the house showing the deterioration of the original shingles



West side of the house showing the original window pattern, shingles and board and batten siding including the new material in the gable to match the existing siding pattern



Rear of the house showing the shingles and original window pattern. The roofed entrance to the basement is on the west side of the rear. From this position the high basement foundation is most prominent



Top: View of the rear of the house Bottom left: the verge boards, shingles and soffit Centre: the high foundation
Top right: under the front porch Bottom right: front window and porch



View of the house with grape vine and apple tree behind the dike



Covered well in the north east corner at the rear of the house



Above: The basement features logs as posts supporting the main floor of the house



Left: Wide panelling with vertical decorative detail is found in two rooms of the house