

Links to the Gold Rush: Black Glass

Artifacts from the Royal BC Museum Historic Archaeology Collection

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Artifact Numbers DcRu 25:5620, 5583, 5644, 5562, 5633 and 5611

A common artifact found in archaeological sites from BC's gold rush era (mid 19th century) are the remains of heavy, dark olive to black coloured bottles. These artifacts are often crudely made, and are referred to as *black glass*.

A major find of black glass fragments

Recent redevelopment of the old Songhees Village site, across the harbour from present day downtown Victoria, revealed thousands of fragments of these bottles dating from the gold rush era. Among the fragments, only a few were found as whole examples.

The lack of whole bottles could have several explanations, but one of the most intriguing is that people living in the village were actively collecting empties from around town for reuse. Historically there were shortages of bottles and clean drinking water during the gold rush era, so it's possible one of Victoria's first recycling and bottled water businesses was in operation in the village. The massive number of shards could represent discarded rejects that were chipped, cracked or otherwise not reusable.

Historic archaeology attempts to answer such questions where no historical documentation exists.

History of black glass

In *The Parks Canada Glass Glossary*, author Olive Jones defines the term black glass as dark green liquor bottles from the 17th, 18th and 19th century. This type of glass started as a result of switching from wood to coal-fired furnaces in England. The glass had high levels of iron, manganese, carbon and sometimes cobalt which resulted in an exceptionally durable glass for containers. By about the 1870s black glass was being replaced with a wide variety of other glass types and



What can the fragments themselves tell us?

The heel of this bottle shows extensive wear that would be expected if it was rattling in a case for weeks or months, perhaps in the hold of a rocking ship.

Artifact Number DcRu 25:5622



Whole examples of black glass from the Royal BC Museum's Historic Archaeological Collection.

These are some of the very few intact black glass bottles that were recovered from the Old Songhees Village site. They are typically found in pint and quart sizes but the shape and lip styles can vary. Also, around the time of the gold rush, manufacturing methods were improving which can be seen on some of the bottles.

Artifact Number DcRu 25: 212, 211 and 213



Black glass fragments found on a Victoria beach at low tide. Some still have barnacles attached.

colours. In British Columbia, the peak use for this type of glass was during the gold rush era.

A direct link to England

Finding labeled bottles from the gold rush era is extremely rare. During the reconstruction of St Ann's Academy in Victoria during the 1990s, an exciting find was made within a wall that had been sealed since about 1858. Although the label was not complete, it confirmed the bottle's contents and origin. It reads: "E (section missing) HIBBERT BEST INDIA PALE ALE LONDON."



Artifact number DcRu 460:71

This artifact is in the St Ann's Academy National Historic Site collection and the photo was kindly provided by Shelly Myhres Program Coordinator. The Archaeological Society of British Columbia was asked to research the bottles and containers found during the reconstruction of St Ann's. Laura Mason, from the Museum of London, was contacted. Mason provided the following information: "Hibbert, Edward and George, are listed in the post office London Directory for 1850 as wine spirit and porter merchants, of 7 Jewery Street Aldergate."

India pale ales, along with porters, survived long sea voyages better than other types of beer, and were likely the most common types of imported beer for thirsty miners half a world away.

Traces of the gold rush era still remain

Fragments of gold rush era black glass bottles can still be found around Victoria and along the gold rush trail. The most common finds are by beach combers looking for sea washed beach glass. Many people are puzzled by these heavy, black, chunks of glass that bear little resemblance to sea glass from modern bottles.

Tom Bown originally worked for the RBCM before taking on a career in forest research. He maintained his passion for historic archaeology by volunteering with the Archaeological Society of BC and continuing his own research. In May 2015, Tom and marine archaeologist C. Addams published the book: *Glass and Pottery Containers of the Royal Navy and British Military: Historic and Archaeological Finds from the 18th, 19th, and 20th Centuries.*

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