

Whiffin Spit named after Royal Navy clerk

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The narrow promontory of land which almost landlocks Sooke harbour and basin was called Whiffin Spit in honour of a clerk, John George Whiffin, who served aboard HMS Herald when the Royal Navy surveyed Sooke inlet in 1846.

Years earlier, in 1790, the entrance to the harbour had been named Puerto de Revilla Gigedo, for the Viceroy of Mexico, by Spanish Sub-Lieut. Manuel Quimper when he entered the harbour aboard the Princesa Real.

This ship was originally the British vessel Princess Royal, and had been captured by Spain as these countries vied for the trade in sea otter skins and for an entrance they hoped would lead them to the Northwest Passage.

Note the contrast in the 1790 chart which was given us by the Naval Academy in Madrid, with the recent aerial view which shows the alteration done to Whiffin Spit by both the forces of nature and by the intrusions of man.

In the spit's earlier history, legends tell that it was a lookout post for the T'Sou-ke nation before it became an industrial site, with fishtraps pilings from Sooke Harbour Fishing and Packing Company stored annually in crisscrossed stacks for a half-century. In the 1920s the spit also accommodated a fish reduction plant run by the Standfast Bible students.

Near the far end, a small fruit-tree-surrounded cabin housed a retired whaler until the 1940s; traces of the fruit trees may still be seen, in amongst the thickets of wild roses.

While museum records show that reinforcement work has been done on the spit since 1907, an exceptionally large project was undertaken to restore a breach and install a rock breakwater in 1995. It was Bob Clark, regional director of that day and his friend Eric Butler, who took charge of carrying out the major repair. Today dozens of walkers enjoy a stroll along the almost-mile-long Spit every day, in all kinds of weather, and it's considered one of Sooke's special treasures.