

The Discoverer of Britannia – Dr A A Forbes

Who was the man who made the momentous discovery one hundred years ago?

Alexander Allen Forbes was a man of many talents. A native of Aberdeen, Scotland, he joined the British Navy at age 13 and lived the life of a sailor for ten years. Moving to Connecticut to join his family in 1873, he trained as a school teacher and chemist before entering medical school at New York University.

This varied background served Dr. Forbes well when he arrived in the bustling town of Vancouver in 1886 with his wife Annie. His interest in chemistry led naturally to prospecting, and the nearby mountains beckoned Forbes with the promise of rich mineral deposits just below the surface.



Dr. A.A. Forbes. This photograph was taken on a visit to Britannia in later years

Forbes soon found a job as medical officer to the Howe Sound First Nations people and built a cabin at Hopkins Landing, where the Y.M.C.A. Camp stands today. The doctor became a familiar sight to the scattered settlers of Howe Sound as he paddled by in his small canoe en route to see his patients.

Forbes' reputation as a keen prospector grew, and one day a 'dog fisherman' named Granger brought him a rock sample stained with copper. For \$400, Granger offered to show the doctor the source of the sample. Forbes agreed to pay only if the mineral deposit looked promising.

Granger and Forbes made their way to Britannia Mountain, but after nearly two days of fruitless exploration, Forbes was becoming discouraged. Then, just before sunset, a buck deer crossed their path. Forbes fired a shot and the deer fell, its flailing hooves exposing mineralized rock below the moss. Quick tests showed a high copper content, and Forbes paid Granger his \$400. Within a few days the fisherman had bought a boat and disappeared to Alaska.

As Dr. Forbes liked to say many years later "...the first discoverer of copper on Britannia was Mr. Granger, the second was Mr. Buck and the third was Dr. Forbes." The doctor worked his prospect on and off for eight years, but never felt the need to stake a claim since no one was interested in anything but gold in those days.

Although he was unable to interest any financial backers in the Britannia find, other prospects eventually paid off for Dr. Forbes. He became part owner of the prosperous smelter on Texada Island and then moved with his laboratory to examine mining claims in Minnesota. A year later, he was back in Vancouver. In 1912, he became doctor for of the Powell River Company and spent many years in the lumber camps of the south coast before retiring to North Vancouver in 1930.

The man who discovered Britannia's famed copper deposits died in 1935, but not before paying a visit to Britannia to see the results of his fateful prospecting expedition in 1888.