

Once upon a time, there was a greener Richmond

by Sabine Eiche

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It's torn and worn, but what a thrill it gave me when I found it. I'm talking about a street map of Richmond, published 1960 by the Board of Trade (present-day Chamber of Commerce).

Inside is a message from the Board of Trade telling us that Richmond "has a population of some 35,000 people, an increase of 6,000 since 1958." A growth of around 20 per cent in two years sounded remarkable. I decided to track down some statistics about Richmond's development.

The earliest record I found is from 1921 – Richmond then had 4,825 residents. There are totals for every decade until 1951, after which they're given every lustrum (Latin for a five-year span). From 1951 to 1956 the number leapt from 19,186 to 25,978. In 1961, just one year after the population had reached 35,000, it vaulted to 43,323 – around 8,000 new residents, in a single year.

Fifty years later, in 2011, Richmond's population had risen to 190,473, but the growth from the previous lustrum (2006, when we were at 174,461) was less than 10 per cent – so the increases in the twentieth century were much more substantial. Why, then, do we now fret about the escalating number of immigrants?

The 1960 street map gives Richmond's area as around 38,000 acres. Today, Richmond's area is 31,950.73 acres (129.3 square kilometres). That's about 6000 acres less than in 1960 – and yet by 2011 Richmond had over 150,000 more residents than in 1960. Maybe we fret because we've realized Richmond's capacity is not infinite, that it can be stretched only so far before everything bursts like an overblown balloon.

What was it like when the population was a manageable size? My parents immigrated in the 1950s, like so many other Europeans after World War II, who came not with money but with

technical skills. These immigrants settled into a Canadian way of life, without relinquishing the traditions of their homeland, all to the enrichment of Canada.

I found an aerial view of our neighbourhood from the early 1960s, showing Leslie Road (foreground), Alexandra Road, Lansdowne Racetrack, and No. 3 Road at right. It's a telling picture – houses on spacious lots, large kitchen gardens in backyards, fields in between residential properties. Richmond may have appeared rural but down No. 3 Road was Brighouse, the commercial district boasting every kind of business.

It occurred to me that the economic situation of post-World War II immigrants may have played a role in generating the sense of community that bonded us. Our lifestyles were totally different from those of today. When we built houses, they harmonized in scale and form with those in the neighbourhood. Our daily routines took us outdoors a lot, and this presented opportunities for engaging with neighbours. We shared values that transcended the personal. If we saw conspicuous consumption, it was in glossy magazines, not our neighbourhoods. Had Richmond been born a town of paved driveways and mega-mansions, its inhabitants invisible or absent, would it have grown to be the vibrant community we're continually told it is? I don't think so.