

# The Bells of Baddeck

P. Richard Lindo



# The Bells of Baddeck

by P. Richard Lindo



Alexander Graham Bell and his family first visited the Cape Breton town of Baddeck in the summer of 1885. The Bells, *en route* to Newfoundland, made a stop in Cape Breton at the suggestion of Mrs. Bell's father, Gardiner Greene Hubbard, who was acquainted with that part of Nova Scotia because of his interest in the Caledonia coal mines at Glace Bay.

A few years earlier, Bell had read Charles Dudley Warner's book, *Baddeck and that Sort of Thing*. He remembered Warner's description of the charms of Baddeck and decided to see it for himself. He was not disappointed, for Warner had not overdrawn the appeal of the town. A few days later when the steamer for St. John's ran aground near Portugal Cove, the Bells cancelled their Newfoundland trip in favour of a return visit to Baddeck.

The second visit confirmed first impressions. "Baddeck is certainly possessed of a gentle, restful beauty", wrote Mabel Bell, "and I think we would

be content to stay here many weeks just enjoying the lights and shades on all the hills and isles and lakes".

As for Alexander Graham Bell, the Bras d'Or Lakes reminded him of the salt lochs of his beloved Scotland and he felt very much at home not only with the scene but also with the people of Cape Breton, with their Scottish background and names reminiscent of the Highland Clans.

For many years the Bells had been seeking a summer retreat of salt water, mountains and valleys and cool climate, far enough from fashionable centres to allow them to live a simple, free and unconventional life. Baddeck fulfilled all their requirements. The cool climate was particularly appealing to Bell, for he hated the summer heat of his Washington home.

Returning to Baddeck in the summer of 1886 the Bells rented an abandoned four-room cottage on the outskirts of the town. The cottage, which they later bought and enlarged, fronted on Baddeck Bay. Across the bay several farms divided a headland which stretched approximately three kilome-

tres out into the blue lake. The red bluffs at its top gave this jutting peninsula the local name Redhead.

In their exploratory trips about the countryside Bell and Mabel one day climbed to the top of Redhead. From a little clearing at the summit they could see a magnificent panorama of the Bras d'Or Lakes. The view so fascinated them that they determined to own the hill.

It took Bell seven years to acquire all the land he needed. Renaming the headland "Beinn Bhreagh", Gaelic for Beautiful Mountain, he made plans to erect an elaborate house on the property. In the meantime, he and his family were to spend the summers in the "Lodge", a cottage which he and his secretary, Arthur W. McCurdy, designed and had built in 1889.

When the main house, Beinn Bhreagh Hall, was completed in 1893 regional newspapers described it as one of the finest mansions in eastern Canada. In the words of one of Bell's granddaughters, Lilian Grosvenor Jones, "the house was, and is, big and ugly in the flamboyant style of the eighties".



Nevertheless for Bell and his family, the house was to give long and happy service.

By the time Bell had begun to establish his summer home near Baddeck he was already internationally recognized, not only for his invention of the telephone but also for other products of his creative genius. As he achieved financial independence, it became possible for him to devote his time to research in other fields.

For many years Bell had had an interest in flight, or as he preferred to call it, aerial locomotion. At Baddeck he pursued this interest with characteristic energy, and began studying the flight of kites, considering this the best and safest approach to the problem of aviation. By 1901 he was working with a tetrahedrally designed kite, a design based on the triangular pyramid which gave it stability. In the following years, giant kites of this type were built and flown.

Bell's experimental work attracted to his home at Beinn Bhreagh a group of talented young men devoted to aviation. In October, 1907, at the sug-

gestion of Mabel Bell, he entered into an agreement with these men for the joint production of experiments on aerial locomotion. The organization was named the Aerial Experiment Association and its work was financed by Mrs. Bell.

The Association included Bell, Glenn H. Curtiss, a manufacturer of motorcycles and engines from Hammondsport, New York, F. W. (Casey) Baldwin and J. A. D. McCurdy, both engineering graduates from the University of Toronto, and Lieut. Thomas E. Selfridge of the U.S. Army.

In 18 months of activity, at both Hammondsport and Baddeck, the Association made important contributions to the development of aviation. By mutual agreement, each member was charged with the responsibility of designing and supervising the construction of a powered machine. The fourth machine, McCurdy's *Silver Dart*, was built at Hammondsport and taken to Baddeck. On February 23, 1909, McCurdy, in the *Silver Dart*, took off from the ice of Baddeck Bay and flew a distance of 800 m. This was the first airplane flight in Canada and the first by a British subject anywhere in the British Empire.

While experimenting with airplanes, Bell and his associates sought to apply the principles of powered flight to boats. Baldwin was particularly interested in this line of experiments. Over a number of years, he and Bell developed a system of hydrofoils which saw practical application in the highly successful HD-4, the large cigar-shaped hydrofoil craft which, in 1919, achieved a record water speed of 114.04 km/h. In the 1950's the Canadian Navy adopted the Bell-Baldwin system of hydrofoils for

use in its prototype ship, the H.M.C.S. *Bras d'Or*.

Until virtually the last days of his life Bell remained a man of driving energy and insatiable scientific curiosity. A single project was never enough to preoccupy him. While experimenting with flying machines or hydrofoil craft, he also busied himself attempting to develop a flock of twin-bearing sheep, a research project which he enthusiastically maintained for almost 30 years. He also turned his attention to life-saving devices, experimenting with methods of recapturing water from human breath, and with a type of solar still which could provide drinking water aboard small boats adrift at sea.

Of all his interests, however, the one that Bell himself identified as being closest to his heart, and certainly the one that ran through all his adult life, was his interest in improving the teaching of the deaf.

Alexander Graham Bell wanted the deaf to be taught speech and lip reading, not a sign language that set them apart from normal persons. Helen Keller, whose education he helped direct, and his own wife Mabel, who had been deaf since the age of five as a result of an attack of scarlet fever, showed what could be done.

Bell conducted extensive research on the heredity of deafness, published numerous articles on the subject and gave financial assistance to individuals and organizations devoted to the education of the deaf. His own organization, the Volta Bureau, which he formed with funds he received as his share from the sale of graphophone patents, continues its good work today in Washington, D.C., under the name Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf.

For the people of Baddeck it was a matter of considerable civic pride to have such a famous resident among them. They admired and respected Bell and, despite his tendency to be somewhat aloof at times, felt comfortable in his presence. As for Mabel Bell, the feeling for her was one of genuine affection. Today, those among the residents of Baddeck who knew her, speak of Mrs. Bell as a "very remarkable lady" who was in no way overshadowed by the greatness of her husband.

Through her efforts the Baddeck Public Library was established, a Home and School Association was organized and the services of a V.O.N. nurse were



obtained. A pet project of hers, the Cape Breton Home Industries, provided opportunities for many women in that area to develop skills in sewing, knitting and lace-making.

The fine craftsmanship which is very much in evidence in Cape Breton today is probably due in part to the work of her organization. But Mabel is perhaps best remembered for her Young Ladies' Club of Baddeck, a club which she founded in 1891 to "stimulate the acquisition of general knowledge and to promote sociability among the young people of Baddeck". The club, with its name changed to the Alexander

Graham Bell Club, continues to function today with a full and active program.

In 1954 the daughters of Bell, Mrs. Gilbert Grosvenor and Mrs. David Fairchild, generously donated to the people of Canada a priceless collection of artifacts, relics of experimental work conducted at Beinn Breagh, which reflect the extraordinary versatile mind of Bell.

The Canadian Government agreed, in return, to construct and maintain a suitable building for the extensive collection. The Alexander Graham Bell Museum, opened to the public in 1956, is one of the most popular National



Historic Parks operated by Parks Canada.

Over the years the Bell family and the National Geographic Society have supplemented the original donation with artifacts relating to Bell's Washington Volta Bureau years, replicas of early telephone models, hundreds of historic photographs and the remains of the HD-4 hydrofoil craft.

Recognizing the need for additional space to adequately display the collection, Parks Canada began an ambitious expansion program at the Alexander Graham Bell Complex in 1975. The new facilities will open to the public in May 1978.

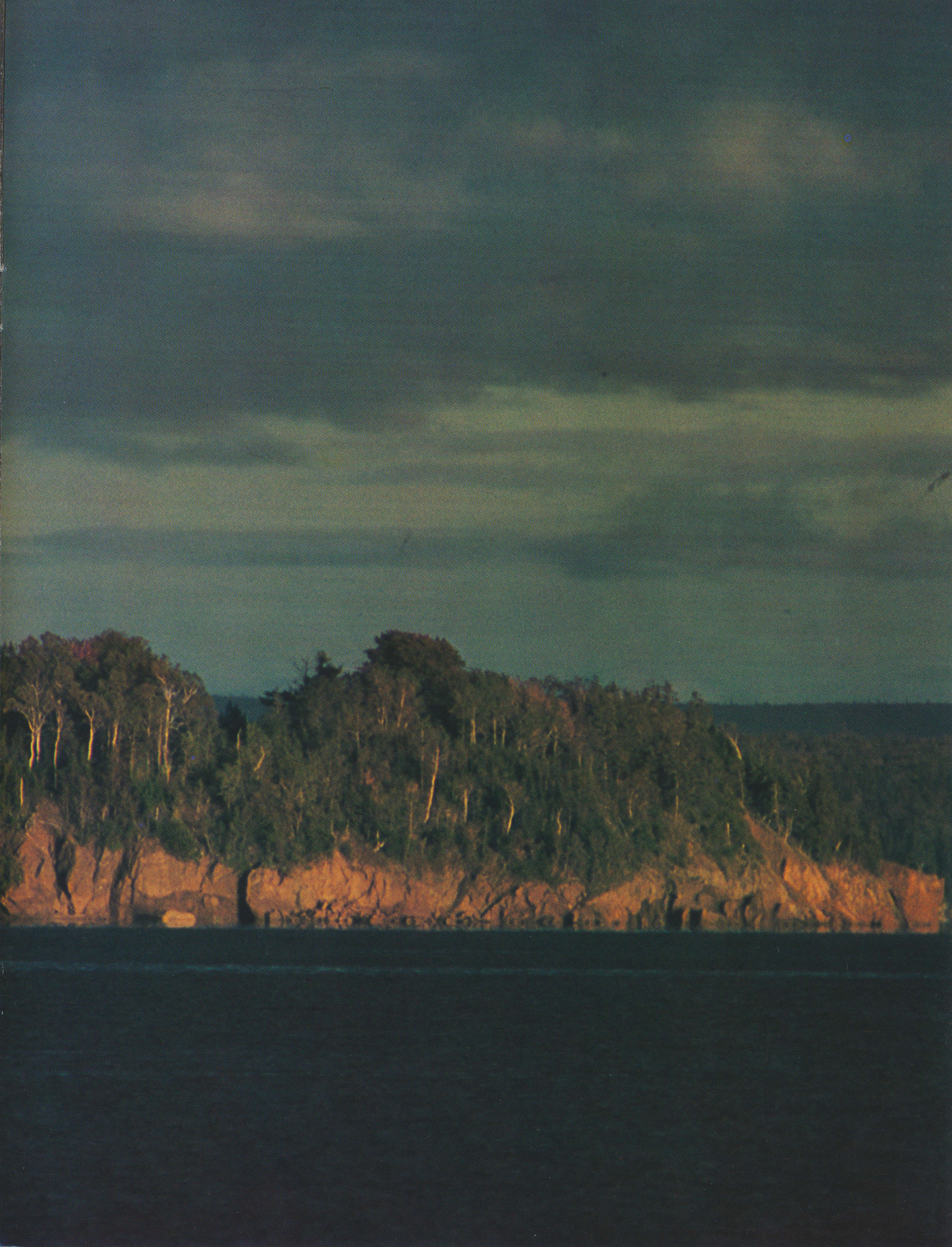
Most of the space in the new display will contain exhibits relating to Bell's Baddeck years – his sheep breeding experiments, his work on aerial locomotion, his marine experiments and his experiments for children. There will also be special displays on Mabel Bell and on Bell's lifelong interest in the education of deaf-mutes.

The last hall in the expanded Complex will be devoted to hydrofoil craft, in particular to the HD-4, and Baldwin's work on hydrofoils after Bell's death in 1922. Highlights of this hall will be the exhibit of the remains of the original HD-4 and a full-scale reconstruction of the craft.

As a teacher, scientist and inventor, Alexander Graham Bell dedicated his life to the benefit of mankind with unusual success. This is the underlying theme of the Alexander Graham Bell Complex at Baddeck, Nova Scotia.

Beinn Bhreagh Hall remains the private property of the Bell family and Parks Canada wishes to express its appreciation to the family for permission to photograph the grounds and house.





This publication is a reprint from  
*Conservation Canada* (1978),  
Environment Canada, Parks and is  
sold exclusively by the Telephone  
Pioneer Society sales outlet,  
Alexander Graham Bell National  
Historic Park.

P. Richard Lindo is Director,  
Interpretation Branch National  
Historic Parks & Sites Directorate  
Environment Canada—Parks,  
Ottawa.

The expanded museum facility was  
opened to the public in 1978.

ISBN 0-9691853-2-4