

Doors Open 2014: Doors Open at Hillary House



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Set back from the hustle and bustle of Yonge Street sits a building, often described as a hidden gem.

And there has never been an institution more deserving of that term than Hillary House National Historic Site. Where else can visitors take in stunning gothic revival architecture, while examining 100-year-old doctors' kits full of well-worn tools?

Guests of all ages are sure to find something within the walls of Hillary House to delight and amaze them.

Visitors are welcome to explore Hillary House as we once again take part in Doors Open Aurora. On August 16, museum goers will be treated to free tours of the building and collection. Younger history buffs can take part in our Discovery Days for kids program and learn something firsthand about Aurora's history.



Built in 1862, Hillary House has since been home to four doctors and their families. It was first inhabited by Dr. Geikie in 1862, and then by Dr. Strange in 1869. Both men had short careers in Aurora and after only a few years moved to Toronto to advance their medical practices. In 1876 Dr. Robert William Hillary, for whom the house is named, set up shop with his family.

Hillary's son, Dr. Robert Michael Hillary continued to serve the medical community of Aurora, and his descendants occupied the house until 1993 when Nora Hillary, Hillary House's then resident curator passed away. But, with the family's ephemera still occupying every room, it's as though they never left.

Through the generosity of the Hillary family and Dr. Murray Koffler, the Aurora Historical Society (AHS) purchased the house and surrounding grounds in 1981 in the interest of preserving this keystone of Aurora's history.

Hillary House now serves as the home base for AHS where staff and volunteers work hard to create events and programming that celebrate Aurora's rich and diverse heritage.

Our permanent collection is on display to give visitors a window into another time. Upon first crossing the threshold, guests can explore the dispensary and consulting room to learn more about medical practices from the turn of the century.

Old tools, such as the bloodletting kit and tonsil remover on display, speak to how far medicine has advanced since the time of the Hillarys. But amidst the amputation kits and syringes, the warm glow of family life shines through. Pencil marks on the door frame of the consulting room chart the growth of the Hillary children, showing that while this building might have been a backdrop to grisly surgeries, it was also a warm and inviting space once full of children's love and laughter.

Other rooms shed light on a softer side of Hillary House's past, with a focus on our domestic collection. In the master bedroom. Victorian children's games are laid out in the study. A brass covered message pad sits patiently beside an old rotary phone in the hallway showing how technology in Hillary House has changed and evolved with the times.

As well as the permanent collection, Hillary House is host to two new temporary exhibits for the summer season. In the grand ballroom, guests are treated to stunning works of contemporary photography in this year's ?Art at the Manor.?

Our other new exhibit, ?Many Happy Returns, My Dear Boy? highlights pieces from our archival collection that have never been put on exhibit before. Photographs from WWI show a glimpse of the military life Dr. Robert Michael Hillary, and his son Robert Stuart, experienced.

Handwritten diaries from the 20's and 30's are also featured in the exhibit. Written in a characteristic doctor's scrawl, visitors are invited to try and decipher some passages on their own, while others have been transcribed by AHS members.

Beyond the deeply personal, this exhibit also tells the story of the photographic medium. Examples of Daguerreotypes are a testament to photography's early and transient forms, while the WWI panoramas show how this technology evolved in leaps and bounds over just a few short decades.

From our sprawling gardens, to the carefully collected pieces of fine china, Hillary House truly has something for everyone. Guests are invited to come for a free tour as part of Door's Open Aurora on August 16.

To help plan your route, be sure to check out www.doorsopenontario.on.ca to see a full list of participating sites for the Doors Open Aurora events.