

## **The Story of Otaru**

Otaru's people are central to the story of the city and its transformation from a small fishing village to a major shipping hub and today a national leader in heritage preservation. Starting with the fishermen who moved to this northern outpost to make their fortunes from herring in the nineteenth century, Otaru has been driven by a pioneer spirit.

In the late nineteenth century, the Meiji government (1868–1912) resolved to develop and settle the resource-rich northern island of Hokkaido, and Otaru became a pulsing hub of the new frontier. In 1882, Hokkaido's first railway opened to transport coal from inland mines to the port at Otaru, and the coal helped fuel the government's industrialization drive. Major Japanese banks established branches in the city to cater to the growing numbers of traders, merchants, and shipping companies. By the 1920s Otaru was the financial center of Hokkaido.

In the 1960s, the main source for the nation's energy needs shifted from coal to oil. Otaru's financial vigor diminished as a result, and the city lost its status as a coal shipping port. In the same decade, a plan was proposed to reclaim the canal that had fallen into disuse, demolish warehouses, and build new roads. A grassroots citizens' movement arose to protect the canal, and after years of debate the city authorities modified the plan.

Part of the canal was reclaimed in the 1980s, and a promenade was constructed along the remaining section. Otaru gained a new identity as a city that successfully preserved its heritage while repurposing many historical buildings. The citizen-led movement influenced other cities across the country to consider how to balance development and preservation.