

Former Shimatani Warehouse

The Former Shimatani Warehouse was built in 1892 for storing rice and is now open to the public as a café. The Shimatani family were *kitamaebune* merchant shipowners from Yamaguchi Prefecture, mainly trading rice. They were quick to adapt to changing times, transitioning to steamships in 1895 and transporting goods for other merchants.

The building is one of around 350 timber-framed stone warehouses in Otaru. Timber-framed warehouses could be built more quickly and economically than all-stone buildings, and the style became common in Japanese port towns. Many of the warehouses built in Otaru in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries share the same timber frame and stone construction, using blocks of locally quarried tuff, each around 15 centimeters thick.

The thickness of the stone gives the building structural integrity and protects the contents from cold and fire. Between 1880 and 1910, there were around 16 large fires in Otaru. Over 2,000 houses were damaged in one that broke out a few blocks south of Otaru Station in 1902, but the stone-clad warehouses were relatively unscathed.