

The Historical Streetscapes of Sakaimachi and Ironai

A large number of merchant houses, warehouses, and banks from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been preserved on Sakaimachi and Ironai Streets, making them popular destinations for shopping and sightseeing. Rickshaws carry visitors around the area as they did over a century ago at the peak of Otaru's prosperity.

On the waterfront

Otaru's rise to financial power began with herring fishing. Herring was made into a valuable fertilizer that was shipped to southwestern Honshu for use in cotton and indigo fields. In the late nineteenth century, the annual herring catch was close to 90,000 tons, and Otaru expanded rapidly as the "herring gold rush" brought wealth and an influx of new businesses.

Although Otaru had a deep harbor suitable for shipping, the city's mountainous terrain meant there was very little flat land suitable for building the necessary infrastructure. Land reclamation efforts created additional areas along the coast to accommodate the needs of the expanding port. The new districts of Sakaimachi, Ironai, Kitahama, and Minamihama were established on reclaimed land in 1889, forming the city's commercial center. At the time, Sakaimachi Street was right on the waterfront.

Before work began on Otaru Canal in 1914, merchants built their stores and warehouses along Sakaimachi Street for access to the water. Barges ferrying goods from ships in the harbor could moor directly in front of the warehouses. Wholesalers opened, dealing in sugar, cotton, rice, and other commodities.

A prosperous, modern city

Sakaimachi Street developed as a wholesale and shopping district. Photographs of Otaru from the early twentieth century show a mix of bankers and retail staff wearing suits and customers in kimonos, along with horse carts, rickshaws, and the occasional automobile. A brass band was employed to perform on the balcony of the Iwanaga Clock Store to

attract customers, adding to the street's lively atmosphere.

To the north of the Myoken River, Sakaimachi Street becomes Ironai Street. Banks and trading companies opened along Ironai Street, and it became the city's banking district. The number of banks increased rapidly, from three in 1887 to sixteen in 1907. The Bank of Japan Otaru Branch opened in 1912, cementing Otaru's position as Hokkaido's economic center.

Challenging times

By the mid-twentieth century, Otaru's economy was in decline. Other ports on Hokkaido's east coast offered more convenient shipping routes to Tokyo, and the main source for the nation's energy needs switched from coal, once shipped from Otaru, to oil. Many banks moved to Sapporo, which was established as the administrative capital of Hokkaido in 1886, and shoppers took advantage of improved rail connections to visit the large department stores in the capital. The crowds that once thronged Sakaimachi Street dwindled, and by the 1960s, many warehouses, stores, and banks stood empty.

Saving Otaru's history and reviving the city's fortunes

In the 1960s, the local government proposed to fill in Otaru Canal to build a new six-lane roadway. The proposal led to community efforts to save the canal, and these marked the beginning of a preservation movement to revitalize Otaru's historical downtown. In the 1980s, the two sides reached a compromise, and part of the canal was saved. It was revived as an attractive strolling area with paved walkways, streetlamps, and decorative bridges. The large Kimura Warehouse was renovated in 1983 by Kitaichi Glass as a retail store and restaurant, drawing visitors. This success inspired other businesses to move into the warehouses along Sakaimachi Street and around Otaru Canal, creating an attractive shopping area. Today, the Arata Trading Company shipping offices and the Takahashi Warehouse, which once stored adzuki beans, are part of Otaru Art Base, five historical buildings that are open to the public as museums and art galleries. The grand two-story brick offices of the Kyosei Company, once one of Hokkaido's leading rice mills and grain merchants, have been restored as a music box emporium.

The old Etchuya Hotel, built on Ironai Street in 1931 as a hotel for international traders, has been restored and reopened as the Unwind Hotel, and the nearby Chamber of Commerce Building is now an annex of the OMO5 Hotel. Several former banks are open to the public as museums. Some are part of Otaru Art Base. The historical appeal of these once-empty buildings has played a large part in the city's economic revival.