

## **Former Shimonoseki British Consulate Building**

### *A Thriving International Center*

Shimonoseki, despite being far from the political center of Tokyo, was hugely important for international trade. Eight Western powers ultimately established consular offices there, including the United States, Germany, and the Netherlands. The United Kingdom was the first to open a consulate, and it is the only consular building that remains today.

### *The First of Many*

British diplomat Sir Ernest Satow (1843–1929) proposed the establishment of a consular office in Shimonoseki or Moji to handle confidential documents and monitor trade shipments. The first Shimonoseki British Consulate opened in 1901 in a rented space. The current building, completed in 1906, was designed by William Cowan (dates unknown), then head of the Shanghai branch of the British Office of Works.

This two-story brick Queen Anne–style building has a stepped gable above the entrance, columns lining the verandas, and arches decorated with white stone. The bricks were from Kishiwada, one of Japan’s three largest producers, as shown by X-shaped insignias that were stamped into them.

The ornate interior has high ceilings, worked molding around the doors and windows, and mantelpieces with tiled fireplaces in each room. The particularly intricate work in the consul’s office contrasts with the plainer style of the shipping offices.

### *Information Security in the Age of Steam*

The consulate served as a point of contact for British citizens abroad, and all sorts of information was exchanged there. Many consular guests would have been members of competing trading companies, so measures were taken to ensure that business could be conducted privately. The thick, heavy doors and walls prevented eavesdropping, and hanging covers on the keyholes prevented anyone from peeking into adjoining rooms. The building even has two separate sitting rooms, each with its own entrance and exit, to preserve the privacy of its visitors. These design features reflect a sensitivity to information security and international diplomacy.

The outbreak of World War II (1939–1945) soured relations between Britain and Japan, and consular services were closed in 1941. The British government sold the building to

the city of Shimonoseki in 1954, and police were stationed there from 1958 to 1968. During that time, a section of the outer wall facing the intersection was removed to improve access to the street. This section was later restored, but the alteration is visible in the differing tones of the brick. The building was used in various ways over the subsequent decades, including a 16-year period as an archaeological museum.

The consulate building was nationally designated an Important Cultural Property in 1999, and it underwent major restoration work in 2008. Groundbreaking technology was employed to reinforce the building for the future: the masonry joints were reinforced by a supportive lattice made with bundles of Kevlar fibers that were threaded between the bricks.

The first floor now has an exhibit space dedicated to Shimonoseki's history and the consular work done here, with a British-themed tearoom on the second floor.