"Anon." organs - their identification by style recognition and comparison

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From *OHTA News* vol.6 no.1 January 1982
This article was first published in The Sydney Organ Journal xi, no.2(April/May 1981), p. 22-30 and is reproduced by kind permission of the author

Figures

Fig.1 William Hill & Son, London c.1880 (a) Key Cheeks (b) Stop knob (c) Bench	Fig.2 J.W. Walker, London (a) Key cheeks (1874) (b) Stop knob (1864) (c) Bench (1874)
Fig.3 T.C. Lewis, London 1886 (a) Key cheeks (b) Stop knob (c) Bench	Fig.4 (a) Key cheeks, Henry Jones & Sons, London, c.1890 (b) Stop knob, Bevington & Sons, London, 1888 (c) Bench, C. Richardson, Sydney, c.1900

As in other countries of the western world, there are many organs in Australian churches of which the builders and the time of construction are now unknown. They have no builders' plates, the circumstances of their acquisition are long forgotten, and church records may be missing, or make no mention of the organ. Sometimes extensive searching of newspapers can provide a date of installation, with the opening of a new organ described in detail in respect of the program, the dedication service, and those present, but with the name of the organbuilder omitted.

Where have all the builders' plates gone? That many organs have had plates removed is apparent from the screwholes and impressions left in varnish on consoles and cases. Sometimes they have just fallen off and been lost; some have been purloined by visitors or even organists; some have been removed and not replaced when organs were rebuilt; others have been taken by organ tradesmen who had the unfortunate desire to form a collection traditionally affixed to the inside of their toolbox lids -- "scalps", as they were called in the trade. Many organbuilders did not provide a plate at all -- they were either careless of the value of the item or subscribed to the philosophy that the special tonal qualities and physical features inherent in their instruments provided sufficient identification.

To the organ historian, these "anon." instruments present the greatest challenge for research, as well as immense satisfaction when positive determinations of their builders are eventually achieved. Where the possibilities of documentary evidence have been exhausted, a worthwhile alternative is the systematic consideration of an organ's external and internal characteristics. Being hand- crafted, they inevitably display the

ideals, idiosyncrasies, techniques and favoured features of their makers. The qualities discernible in design and construction of organs are analogous with those that enable identification of paintings through study of the styles and techniques of artists. As with paintings, identification of organs can be made by comparing the unknown with the known.

The application of such processes to organs is particularly appropriate to those built before the early years of this century, as from about 1920 organbuilders had largely moved away from hand crafting their instruments and increasingly bought stop knobs, pedal boards, manuals, mouldings, pipes and other components from specialist manufacturers supplying standardised, mass produced items to the trade. The loss of individuality in these parts effectively removed their value as a means of indicating an organ's builder.

The collection of data for identification necessitates the study of as many examples as possible of organs of which the makers are positively known. The modern, single-lens reflex camera and fast films have largely removed problems which used to be associated with organ photography, and a great deal of material is best recorded by the camera. This must necessarily be supplemented by sketches, tracings, notes and measurements. The data collected should be stored in a way which allows rapid retrieval to facilitate its usefulness and analysis.

Information can be derived from the study of the interior and exterior of instruments. The former entails measuring pipe scales and wind pressures; study of pipe construction, markings, and nicking; action design and arrangement; windchest construction; examination of any writing inside faceboards and elsewhere; markings on bellows weights, and perhaps even the colour of paint on the building frame. Old labels, invoices, etc. may be found affixed inside organs, and names and other clues are often chalked on the inside of case panels.

Externally data can be derived from such items as style and details of the case; pipe decoration; construction of dummy pipes; profiles of mouldings at impost; wood carving and stop chamfering* of case panels; features of console and pedalboard; shape of composition pedals; and most particularly, the profile of keycheeks**, the profile and engraving of stopknobs, and the design of the organ bench/stool.

*Stop chamfering is the finish often imparted to external corners of woodwork and terminating (stopping) short of the end
**Key cheeks are the visible portions of the two thick rails of a manual key frame, set on edge, which forms its sides.

The foregoing will convey some idea of features to be recorded and later used for comparison. It will be evident that collection of data from the interior of an organ can be time consuming, difficult, and often dangerous, and this is best left to an experienced specialist. The exterior items mentioned are readily accessible for study, and often provide quite sufficient information about an organ's maker.

Until the 20th century, organbuilders adopted their own, often highly individual styles of accessories such as key cheeks, stop knobs and benches, often adhering to standardised designs for many years. Templates or drawings were probably made to facilitate setting-out and it was in this way that uniformity was maintained. Exclusivity of a particular design could not be assured, and lesser builders tended to imitate the features used by the more prestigious firms.

William Hill & Son used the same distinctive, classical key cheek profile for most of their organs until at least 1910; this is shown in Fig. 1. This profile was much favoured by many makers prior to 1860 and even later, and comparison of examples by the English makers William Hill & Son, J.W. Walker, T.C. Bates, Nicholson & Co., Samuel Parsons, and from the New South Wales builders W.J, Johnson and J. Kinloch, all show differences in detail which enable each to be identifiable from the others.

Other examples of distinctive 19th century key cheek shapes of J.W. Walker, T.C. Lewis, and Henry Jones & Sons are shown in the accompanying drawings. The recording of key cheek profiles is easily accomplished by inserting a piece of stiff paper or card alongside and tracing the outline with a sharp pencil. Afterwards this may be traced in ink on a piece of thin A4 writing or tracing paper and kept in a loose-leaf folder. Sheets can be removed and placed over one another for comparison of outline.

The study of drawstop knobs, by measurement and photography, also reveals characteristic designs used by each organbuilder and often with their own consistent peculiarities of engraving and nomenclature. Some examples are shown in Figs. 1-4.

A magnifying lens (3X) is a useful addition to an SLR camera for photographing stop knobs in profile and face; measurements can be taken with vernier callipers and noted on a sketch of the outline.

Benches/stools are another, though less reliable, aid to organ identification. As with other items, builders tended to settle on one design. Imported organs often came with a bench supplied by the builder, but others did not, and benches were then made by local carpenters or organbuilders. Benches are also subject to replacement with those from organs of other makers that have been rebuilt or broken up. Nevertheless, benches of shapes characteristic of many builders can be identified, and some examples are shown in Figs. 1-4.

In this article it has only been possible to present a brief outline of the techniques and possibilities of using style comparison as a means of identifying the builders of anon. organs. It will be observed that its usefulness is directly proportional to the quantity of data collected and available for reference. Since September 1978 the author has recorded key cheek profiles, stop knob details and bench shapes from some seventy organs, but this is regarded as only a minimal archive for reference. Ideally, many hundreds of examples are required, representing as many builders as possible. Perhaps when others become interested in this subject, tracings and data may be exchanged and published,

The program of organ documentation now being undertaken by John Stiller on behalf of OHTA and other instrumentalities, is also recording this type of information, including very complete internal data.