

21 YEARS OF OHTA

by John Maidment

A paper delivered at Armidale, NSW on Wednesday 30 September 1998 as part of the OHTA 21st Annual Conference "From Mountains to Coast".

PAST: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

During the 1950s and 1960s in Melbourne in my childhood and youth, I frequently visited the Exhibition Building for events and trade exhibitions. I revelled in the sight of George Fincham's magnum opus and believed that one day I would hear awesome sounds from this veritable colossus but was ultimately disappointed: a door at the side of the organ revealed an empty shell behind that extraordinary façade. Even earlier, around 1955, while at preparatory school, we travelled by tram to St Kilda Town Hall. Here, the sights of the twin cases and façade pipes in green, gold and red, bathed in early morning sunshine, formed an indelible impression. Later, I discovered in a vast ecclesiastical barn in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy a marvellous three-manual Fincham tracker of 1890 covered in dust and suffering from chronic neglect. By 1970, all these sights if not sounds had gone.

In that year I was dismayed that the 1855 Smith & Company organ at St Paul's Church, Kyneton could be electrified, its splendid console with script-engraved knobs in single file on either side discarded in favour of a detached stopkey console! This brand of activity was *de rigeur* in the 50s and 60s and fortunately this represented the last major loss of its type at least in Victoria, although the transmogrification of the William Davidson organs in St James', King Street and St Thomas', North Sydney (by a now-defunct firm) followed in the early 1970s.

The Society of Organists (Victoria) had talked about having an organ preservation committee and some preliminary work had been done. The National Trust of Australia was unable to come to grips with movable heritage and any assistance it might have been able to give to organ conservation would have lost focus through its wider image.

OHTA: THE CONCEPTION & EARLY YEARS

By the mid-1970s it was time for action. John Henwood and myself discussed at length the setting up of a specialist organization for the preservation of pipe organs. It is interesting to note that exactly at the same time, the British Institute of Organ Studies held its inaugural meeting in Cambridge in 1976.

Our first OHTA meeting was held in the chapter house of St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne during the 1977 organ and harpsichord festival and by 1978 the organisation was fully incorporated with its own memorandum and articles of association. The first issue of *OHTA News* was printed in mid-1977. Our first conference was held in Melbourne in 1978.

Soon afterwards, with funding from The Myer Foundation and later from other charitable trusts and the Heritage Council of NSW, John Stiller began a mammoth project to document historical and technical details of significant pipe organs in Australia and New Zealand. By the time this project had concluded, 341 instruments had been surveyed. This surely represents one of our greatest achievements and is possibly unparalleled anywhere, at least in English speaking countries.

ONGOING ACTIVITIES

Our conferences continued on an annual basis. From Melbourne we moved to Sydney and then Adelaide, the Hunter Valley, Melbourne again, Tasmania, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney, Brisbane, Western NSW and the upper Hunter Valley, Tasmania, Western Australia, the Western District of Victoria, Sydney, New Zealand, Melbourne and now Southern Queensland and northern New South Wales. The conferences have been popular events, often attracting participants from as far afield as continental Europe, Britain, the United States and New Zealand. Booklets have been issued for each conference and the papers have been a rich source of information for *OHTA News*.

We have now published a total of 90 issues of our quarterly journal, representing again a mammoth effort in writing, editing, printing and despatch - one must never forget the work that goes into posting the magazine! The journal has contained countless articles and the cover graced from the early years onwards by one of Graeme Rushworth's inimitable drawings. Some of the 'best' of the articles have been mounted on the OHTA Internet page, of which more anon.

Membership has progressively grown over the years. From an initial membership of around 70, mainly concentrated in Melbourne and Sydney, we now have close to 250 members in all Australian states, New Zealand, England, France, Italy, Switzerland and the United States. Maintaining our membership levels has required much hard work and we have been well-served by membership secretaries over the years. We are grateful for the support which has come from so many loyal members: quite a number of our original members are still on our books.

From the outset, OHTA has enjoyed cordial relationships with public heritage bodies at government and private level. By 1978, the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) was classifying notable pipe organs and OHTA was instrumental in setting up the process of classification and a specialist committee. A classification scheme for pipe

organs in Australia was developed, but it is a disappointment that other state branches of the National Trust have not taken up the challenge of classification with any degree of enthusiasm. A number of highly significant organs in Victoria have been restored under the aegis of a National Trust sponsored restoration appeal, thus offering much-needed tax-deductibility for donors. The c1855 James Moyle chamber organ was the first such restoration and other high watermarks have included St Paul's Cathedral, St Mary's, West Melbourne and St John's, Toorak.

Conversely, it has been in New South Wales where OHTA has enjoyed the longest and most fruitful association with government heritage bodies. In the late 1970s, after much lobbying and negotiation on OHTA's part, the Heritage Council set up a Pipe Organ Advisory Committee charged with the task of allocating grants for organ restoration work. It is no exaggeration to say that the work supervised by this committee for many years possibly represents the most significant body of organ restoration activity to be found in any country outside mainland Europe. Bravo! This has also enabled local organbuilding firms to develop a high standard of expertise as a result of continuing patronage. Our 1995 conference focussed on restoration techniques and we were most fortunate that papers were delivered by a number of organbuilders recording their approach to this ticklish subject.

More recently, OHTA has established excellent relations with Heritage Victoria and has been consulted frequently in relation to listing and funding. Very recently, three significant instruments have been restored with assistance from Heritage Victoria and it is likely that this trend will continue. One of the impediments to the Victorian Government taking up pipe organs was the inability of such bodies to come to grips with movable cultural heritage. Recent legislation in a number of states has fortunately rectified this anomaly.

In the late 1970s, John Stiller produced a draft version of the *Australian Pipe Organ Preservation Standards*. These were reissued in booklet form by OHTA in 1992 and have just been republished in a revised second edition by the NSW Heritage Office in association with OHTA. It is a matter of great satisfaction that this important document has received an official *imprimatur* (despite the fact that it received some rather negative reviews when it initially came out). It has been cited frequently in restoration quotations and indeed has become an official requirement in some circles that work conform to the principles contained therein.

Moving into the 21st century, an important move was made earlier this year with the establishment of our own Internet pages. Unfortunately, we have a way of preaching to the converted, so it is to be hoped that the OHTA website will serve to make people in the wider community (nationally and internationally) more aware of our activities. The information contained will certainly effectively publicise our activities and achievements and generally create a greater awareness of organ conservation work. Up to the middle of September, the site has been accessed more than 500 times.

There have been a number of preservation battles: some won, some lost. Our earliest was to ensure the intact preservation of the 1891 Hill & Son organ at Christ Church, St Laurence. Unfortunately the organ had several additions made that were

not stylistically successful, alas (these have since been largely rectified). Almost a decade later, after a public hearing, the desires of an enthusiastic rector to alter the largest remaining mechanical action organ built in 19th century Australia were blocked. Acting in spite, the blower was disconnected and the instrument remained unused for many years. It is now a cause for rejoicing that under a new rector and organist the instrument - at St Paul's Church, Burwood, NSW is now being used once again, is greatly appreciated, and a full restoration is likely within the next few years: a story with a happy ending! [this is to begin in 2000 by the firm of Peter D.G. Jewkes Pty Ltd]

There have been numerous examples of organs by Whitehouse, Dodd, Roberts and others that have either been lost or seriously compromised through unsympathetic treatment: many of these instruments are not valued as highly as their 19th century counterparts, although we have seen some excellent examples in the past few days. An area of continuing concern is the fate of organs of the 1900-40 era, while the problem of redundancy is likely to explode in the future with churches closing and changing liturgical requirements.

A final story however, with a happy ending. When the 1889 Merklin organ at Sacré-Coeur, Glen Iris was being restored, an advisor requested that the original Flûte Harmonique and Flûte Octaviante be chopped in half and made into Principals. After much negotiation with a disaffected headmistress, the organbuilders were pleased to accept OHTA's arguments. The end result was highly successful: listen to Ingrid Sykes' excellent CD recording!

It would be difficult to cite more than a fraction of the restorations that have taken place between 1977 and 1998. I'm sure there would be well over 100. Major restorations would include: Sydney Town Hall, St Mary's, West Melbourne, St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne, St John's, Toorak, Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sydney, All Saints', Woollahra, St Andrew's Presbyterian, Newcastle, St Philip's, Church Hill, All Saints', Hunters Hill. There have also been successful examples of the relocation of redundant organs, ranging from the splendid Lewis at Pymble Ladies College to the early John Smith chamber organ at St John's, Bega.

FUTURE GOALS FOR OHTA

More members

An increase in our membership base will give OHTA greater support and influence in the community. It will also offer us a wider financial base which might permit a more extensive publication programme, activities, etc.

Greater public awareness

Enhanced publicity will enable OHTA's goals to be more widely understood. The establishment of the website has certainly contributed to this objective.

Upgraded documentation technology

We should take advantage of the latest electronic technology, such as CDROM, to preserve written records, illustrations and sounds and disseminate this information to interested parties.

Better funding from government and private sector

The cost of restoration is increasing all the time and to enable this to take place, governments should be lobbied to support this activity

Establish OHTA restoration fund

Once OHTA is granted its tax deductibility, it might well establish its own restoration fund. This would be an excellent idea for bequests.

Redundant organs storage and recycling facility

This is becoming a critical issue with churches closing all the time and instruments becoming redundant. Frequently, the time which is available before closure is insufficient to allow instruments to be moved directly to a new location. The cost of setting up and managing such a facility would be very great indeed and it is unlikely it would offer a good commercial return.

More publications

It would be desirable for us to issue special publications from time to time. It would be good to publish some of the more important Stiller documentations and also an album of Graeme Rushworth's drawings. Occasional yearbooks would also be highly valuable.

More person-power for clerical / managerial activities

Lastly, the burden of running our organization falls on all too few shoulders. It would be good if more enthusiastic and able people could provide assistance.

It would be helpful if these goals could be reviewed in a decade's time.