

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF PIPE ORGANS AND PIPE ORGANBUILDING IN VICTORIA

by  
John Maidment

© OHTA 2013 (last updated April 2013)

- **The years to 1860 – establishment of the colony and discovery of gold**
- **The 1860s – expansion and church building**
- **The 1870s – further consolidation**
- **The 1880s – grand visions**
- **The 1890s – prosperity and then depression**
- **The new century – major changes**
- **The late-Edwardian years and the First World War**
- **Resurgence in the 1920s**
- **The years of the Second World War and recovery in the 1950s and 1960s**
- **The impact of the organ reform movement**
- **Change and decline**

The earliest European settlement in Victoria, which took place in 1803 at the present site of Sorrento, at the mouth of Port Phillip Bay, was abortive. The wave of settlement began in 1834 and Melbourne followed in 1835, quickly growing to become the largest city in Australia by the end of the 19th century. It was Australia's temporary capital until federal parliament opened in Canberra in 1927.

## **The years to 1860 – establishment of the colony and discovery of gold**

The early years were not propitious times for the installation of pipe organs and up to 1850 not more than a handful existed. What was probably the first arrived in July 1842 for St James' Church, Melbourne and may have been built by Bevington & Sons London. Only two months later, in September 1842, the second organ arrived for Wesley Church and was built by Richard Nicholson, of Rochdale, Lancashire. It is not certain whether it was specially commissioned by the church as it was a three-manual instrument of 25 stops, quite substantial for the time. In 1845, Christ Church, Geelong commissioned a small single-manual organ from Bevington & Sons, London; this survives almost unaltered at **Holy Trinity Cathedral, Wangaratta**. It is likely that there were numerous secular and sacred barrel organs imported at the time too, this being evident in numerous advertisements for the disposal of these instruments in the 1850s and 1860s, these being by such makers as Bryceson, James Davis and Robson. Sadly, none of these are known to survive.

While gold was first discovered in 1851, and this subsequently proved to be a huge incentive to emigration, church building and the commissioning of organs, it took some years for the effect to become evident. St Francis' Church commissioned a large organ from Bevington & Sons, London, opened in November 1853. In the same year, the Philharmonic Society was using a small two-manual organ belonging to J.T. Charlton built by Forster & Andrews, Hull. Probably through the influence of the Lieutenant-Governor Charles La Trobe, the Bristol firm of Smith & Sons exported five organs to Victoria, the larger ones placed in St Paul's and St Peter's Churches and in the Athenaeum Hall. Henry Smith emigrated to Victoria to install these organs, but did not stay for long. George Fincham trained as an organbuilder in Britain with Bevington, arriving in 1852 but did little organbuilding work until he set up his firm at Richmond in the following decade, his first instruments dating from 1865. Jesse Biggs and James Moyle (both English-trained) were also building organs in Melbourne in the 1850s, such as the organ at **St Luke's, Cavendish** attributable to Biggs, and the Moyle instrument now at **St Linus' Church, Merlynston**. Late in this decade, two organs from the notable English firm of Hill & Son arrived, one for Peter Davis (now at **St Peter's, Stawell**) and the other for **Christ Church, St Kilda**, these being the first of a large number of notable exports to Australia from that distinguished London firm.

being the first of a large number of overseas exports to other parts of the world.

In the late 1850s and through the early 1860s, seven organs arrived in Victoria built by John Courcelle, a London organbuilder and former colleague of George Fincham. Only two Courcelle organs are known to survive in Britain. The most intact examples of Courcelle's work in Victoria include the **Uniting Church, Kensington** and the **Church of Christ, Geelong**.

### The 1860s – expansion and church building

In the 1860s further substantial organs arrived from England. Two fine examples, both still extant, are the Frederick W. Nicholson organ of 1862 for the Independent Church, Prahran (now at **St Patrick's Church, Mentone**) and a large J.W. Walker organ of 1865 commissioned by William Philpott for his Toorak home, now at **St Stephen's Church, Richmond**. It was during this decade that the local organbuilding industry became fully established, George Fincham setting up a factory in Richmond in 1862, and building there the first of many dozens of instruments that went to places in four Australian states and New Zealand. William Anderson also established his business in the middle of this decade, building predominantly small instruments to fairly standardized plans, such as the organs at the **Uniting Church, Daylesford** and the **Thomson Presbyterian Church, Terang**.

The London firm of Gray & Davison also exported a handful of instruments to Victoria, the largest of which was a very substantial instrument for St Patrick's Church (later Cathedral) in Ballarat with further examples following from Hill & Son.

### The 1870s – further consolidation

The building of a major four-manual organ for **Melbourne Town Hall** by the Hill firm, opened in 1872, brought to Australia an outstanding example of its work and the final instrument designed by its illustrious founder William Hill who died in 1870. Robert Mackenzie arrived to install this organ and remained to build a number of instruments for such places as **The Scot's Church** and **St Patrick's Cathedral**, however few of these were of any constructional excellence. George Fincham continued to build many instruments during this decade including organs placed in exhibitions in 1872 and 1875. Two significant imports from Europe also took place: an organ built by R.A. Randebröck, of Paderborn, Germany, placed in **St Kilian's Church, Bendigo** in 1872, and an organ built by Merklin-Schütze, of Brussels, opened in St John's Church, Toorak in 1873, later at **Cato Uniting Church, Elsternwick**.

During the 1860s and 70s, Melbourne music retailers such as Webster, Wilkie & Allan and Lee & Kaye engaged organbuilders such as Douglas Renton (from Scotland), Robert Mackenzie and James Charles Wilson Nicholson (son of John Nicholson of the English organbuilding dynasty) to build or erect organs on their behalf.

### The 1880s – grand visions

In 1880, George Fincham's *magnum opus* was opened at the **Exhibition Building**. With four manuals, 70 speaking stops and 4,726 pipes, 32 foot façade, flue and reed pipes voiced on 10½ inch wind pressure, and amphitheatrical console, this was said to be the 20th largest organ in the world. Sadly it no longer exists. At the 1880 exhibition, an organ was also exhibited by Alfred Fuller, who had trained in England with G.M. Holdich and arrived in Melbourne some years earlier via America, establishing a factory in Kew. Fuller introduced the romantic-symphonic style of organbuilding to Victoria and his instruments, of superb technical and tonal quality, were notable for their fine sound and elaborate casework and consoles. He built a number of organs, retiring in 1900, such as **St Mark's Church, Fawkner** and **St Brigid's Church, Fitzroy North**.

The Fincham firm began to build other organs of considerable size towards the end of this decade, such as the **Freemasons Hall** instrument and Australia's largest church organ at the **Australian Church**, Flinders Street, Melbourne. The quality of its instruments continued to be enhanced especially with the competition provided by Fuller. Another local organbuilder, William Stone had set up as an organbuilder in St Kilda in the 1870s and built a few instruments of fine quality during the 1880s, such as the instrument now at **The Avenue Church, Blackburn**.

The construction of **St Paul's Cathedral** during the 1880s led to the commissioning of a large four manual organ from the noted London organbuilder T.C. Lewis who had previously sent out a small instrument for **St George's Presbyterian Church, East St Kilda** in 1882. The Lewis organ, opened in incomplete state in January 1891, was lavishly built from first class materials and was installed at the Cathedral by Fincham & Hobday, as the firm had become known, following Arthur Hobday joining George Fincham in partnership in the late 1880s.

### The 1890s – prosperity and then depression

Fincham & Hobday was riding on a peak of prosperity in the early 1890s and built substantial organs for **Wesley Church, Ballarat**, the Methodist Church, Fitzroy, **St Kilda Town Hall** and **St Joseph's, Warrnambool**. However, this was short-lived and with the onset of the 1890s financial depression the firm was struggling to obtain work, looking as far afield as New Zealand to where Arthur Hobday moved in 1897 following a major disagreement with Fincham. Hobday was largely responsible for the firm's sales as well as its administration and was a gifted designer and voicer; his departure was to have long-term repercussions for the firm. George Fincham took his 21-year old son Leslie into partnership in 1900 – sadly Leslie had never had the opportunity to travel and did not have his father's entrepreneurial skills or artistic acumen and was faced with keeping the firm operational during the depression years of the early 1930s and the period of the second World War as well as operating the firm on a continuous overdraft.

### The new century – major changes

The emergence of George Fincham & Son resulted in the firm's former foreman Fred Taylor departing and establishing his own firm in Hawthorn. The retirement of Alfred Fuller and the possible acquisition of his tuning rounds and plant, could have assisted in the process. Taylor went on to build instruments of high quality based upon an orchestral style, with delectable strings, flutes and reeds, and sent two major organs to Sydney. A fine example of his work, somewhat altered, may be found at the **Uniting (formerly Methodist) Church, Armadale**. Only one of Taylor's instruments survive in an intact state at **St John's Church, Port Fairy**.

Fincham & Son employed English-trained Herbert Palmer in 1909-10 but he fell out with Leslie Fincham was dismissed, went to work for Taylor and was then curator of the **Melbourne Town Hall** organ. This instrument had been rebuilt and enlarged 1904-06 by the English firm of Ingram & Company, advised by Edwin Lemare, with electro-pneumatic action and a detached five-manual stopkey console. It was destroyed by fire in 1925. Its electric action was rarely emulated by local builders, only by Fincham & Son for the Echo Organ sited at the rear of **The Scots' Church** and by Meadway & Slatterie at **St Paul's Cathedral**, as a temporary fix for the slowness of Lewis's pneumatic action.

Further significant imports took place before the first World War. First, a large four-manual instrument from Bishop & Son, for **Sacred Heart Catholic Cathedral, Bendigo** from Bishop & Son opened in 1906; two organs from Norman & Beard, Norwich for **St Peter's Church, Eastern Hill** and **Melbourne Grammar School** (1912 and 1913 respectively) and from Hill & Son a large organ for a private residence at Noorat (1909 – now at **Geelong Grammar School**) and **St John's Church, Toorak** (1913).

## The late-Edwardian years and the First World War

By 1910 George Fincham had passed away, so that George Fincham & Son and Frederick Taylor were the two principal organbuilding firms in Melbourne. Meadway & Slatterie established themselves after Edward Meadway had emigrated to install the two Norman & Beard organs mentioned above; he was a former employee of this firm and joined with J.W. (Jack Slatterie) who had worked in London with Hill & Son. In spite of the first World War, local organbuilders were kept busy and by 1916 and 1917 the Adelaide organbuilder J.E. Dodd had sent over large organs for two churches in **Malvern**, probably through his association with Melbourne organist A.E.H. Nickson. Dodd was to build many others, including those for Queens and Trinity Colleges at the University of Melbourne. Another Adelaide-based organbuilder, W.L. Roberts, received commissions for a number of organs in Victoria including very substantial instruments for Anglican churches in **Brighton, Hawthorn** and **East St Kilda**. While these were all generously planned with an excellent concept of tonal design, and using metal pipework from Alfred Palmer & Sons, they used inferior timbers and were of lesser constructional merit.

## Resurgence in the 1920s

Imports continued during the 1920s. A number of large instruments came from the Wurlitzer company in the United States and were placed in prominent city theatres, with the Dodd firm responsible for their installation. The Aeolian Company exported a number of player organs to Victoria for residences where their delectable sounds were relished by wealthy private clients. T.W. Magahy, of Cork, Ireland, exported a large organ for the **Church of Our Lady of Victories, Camberwell** in 1920 and Henry Willis & Sons sent out from London an instrument for the **First Church of Christ Scientist, Melbourne** in 1927.

During the inter-war period, several other individuals made contributions to organbuilding in Victoria. Keith M. Lavers pioneered the use of electric actions and rebuilt organs at St John's La Trobe Street, Melbourne and St Paul's Church, Geelong as well as building new ones for St Aloysius' Church, Caulfield and St Paul's Church, Frankston. Clarence William Andrewartha (died December 1950) was a gifted cabinet maker who built a number of new instruments using tubular—pneumatic action and constructing wooden pipework and casework of some excellence. None of these, sadly, survive unaltered.

With the destruction of the **Melbourne Town Hall** organ by fire, tenders were invited internationally for the building of a colossal new organ. The London firm of William Hill & Son and Norman & Beard Ltd was selected and it agreed to set up a factory in Melbourne at the same time. This firm continued until 1974 and built organs for all Australian states (except Queensland) and New Zealand, and also rebuilt many others. It also took over Frederick Taylor's firm after his death in 1938.

## The years of the Second World War and recovery in the 1950s and 1960s

The second World War resulted in the cessation of all organbuilding activity and only maintenance was possible. Shortage of materials made organbuilding very difficult in the late 1940s but both George Fincham & Sons and Hill, Norman & Beard by then had full order books and a long waiting list. Finchams used parts of the 1880 organ in the Exhibition Building as raw materials after their removal in 1948.

Fincham & Sons (by then under the direction of George Bowring Fincham) and Hill, Norman & Beard (directed by William Auld Fergusson Brodie) had little competition up to the late 1950s when Stephen James (Steve) Laurie established his firm, later to become Laurie Pipe Organs and then S.J. Laurie. All firms were using electro-pneumatic action as standard, although with differing qualities of materials and execution. While instruments on the extension principle were being constructed in the 1920s and 1930s, these were produced in considerable numbers by the 1950s and on into the 1960s. They could be produced inexpensively and quickly. Laurie worked with Finchams for some time and helped to upgrade the firm's work, based upon his earlier experiences with the John Compton Organ Company in London. Laurie's own instruments showed considerable ingenuity, were well-voiced and were visually appealing. His magnum opus was opened in **St Andrew's Church, Brighton** in 1964. Fincham & Sons also completed a large organ for **St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne** in the same year, using some materials from the previous organ.

Many organs were rebuilt and tonally altered in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Mechanical and tubular-pneumatic actions were regarded as obsolete, so where these existed, the action was changed to electro-pneumatic and new consoles (often detached and with stopkeys) were installed. Pipework was often discarded and upperwork installed, with extension units padding out scarce tonal resources in many instances. Wind systems were discarded and replaced by regulators. A large number of organs were effectively destroyed as part of this process, before more rigorous procedures for conservation became widely adopted from the 1970s onwards with the foundation of the Organ Historical Trust of Australia.

## **The impact of the organ reform movement**

The organ reform movement also began to make its mark from the start of the 1970s. The first major organ with mechanical key and stop actions, and fully enclosed with casework, was built by Sydney organbuilder Roger Pogson for **Christ Church, Brunswick** in 1972. George Fincham & Sons took up the challenge and built a number of mechanical action instruments for clients in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. Major imports were made from the German firm of Jürgen Ahrend for the **Robert Blackwood Hall, Monash University** in 1980, from English builder Peter Collins for **Toorak Uniting Church**, also in 1980, and for the then **Melbourne Concert Hall**, from the Canadian firm of Casavant Frères, opened in 1982. At the end of the 1990s the Irish builder Kenneth Jones & Associates made new organs for **Trinity College, University of Melbourne** and **Christ Church, South Yarra** with substantial new instruments also by the Austrian builder Rieger for **The Scots Church** and by Casavant for **St Francis' Church, Lonsdale Street**.

In 1979, Knud Smenge (born 1937) arrived to work as head voicer for George Fincham & Sons but by 1981 had established his own firm, building close to 50 new organs for clients in every Australian state and as far afield as Hong Kong, such as **St John's Lutheran Church, Southgate**. Trained with the Marcussen firm in Denmark and later head voicer for Bruno Christensen in that country, he brought to Australia the disciplines of fine organbuilding, using top quality materials and benefitting from outstanding design and voicing skills. He built cathedral organs in Brisbane and Perth and a concert organ in Newcastle and was promoted by prominent organists such as Robert Boughen and Michael Dudman. His business closed at the end of the 1990s.

## **Change and decline**

With the closure both of the Laurie and Smenge firms and soon afterwards George Fincham & Sons, organbuilding has continued in Victoria by Australian Pipe Organs Pty Ltd (established earlier in the 1980s) and Wakeley Pipe Organs Pty Ltd (established at the end of the 1990s). Their work has predominantly consisted of restorations, overhauls and rebuilds. Tuning, maintenance and restoration work has been carried out by Vernon Cresswell, Stewart Organs (Ken Falconer) and Hargraves Pipe Organs Pty Ltd.

While a number of pipe organs have been restored or moved in the years from 2000 onwards, there has been virtually no new organs constructed locally. With many churches being sold, redundant pipe organs have mostly been moved to Catholic churches where there is a new appreciation of their value. Many instruments are in poor condition and there seems little hope of their being restored. Some are rarely, if ever, used owing to changes in liturgy, and several of the mainstream churches are in a position of contraction and buildings being sold. Sadly, the majority of young people would never have experienced the sound of a pipe organ and hardly any learn the organ at the time of writing. While there are still many instruments which have been expertly restored or rebuilt, and are in excellent condition, if they are not skillfully used, they will deteriorate, and it is hoped that they will not be destroyed, and this wonderful heritage lost to posterity.

