

# The 'Port Arthur' Organ: Fact and Legend

by Graeme Rushworth

---

EXTRACT FROM OHTA JOURNAL , OCTOBER 1998, pp 25-34



## Introduction

I first saw this instrument about 1960, on display in the Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Launceston, Tasmania. A label stated it had come from the penal establishment at Port Arthur,[1] and its rude construction and limitations conveyed the impression that it could have been made by a convict. Whether or not this is so, this organ is a fascinating, important and tangible relic of Tasmanian history. Its true provenance deserves to be established as it has been widely accepted, without any demonstrable proof, as The Port Arthur Organ. The study of this instrument has recently been advanced by the discovery of a London organbuilder's trade card within the wind system. [2]

Although I am so far unable to explain its history, I propose to review the known facts and show the gaps that have still to be filled. The main issues to be resolved are:

Was this organ ever at Port Arthur?  
If so, how did it come to be there

and where was it used?

Who made it and when?

Is it the organ brought to Tasmania by Bishop F R Nixon in 1843?

## The organ in Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery - a brief description

This diminutive, one-manual organ of only two ranks of wood pipes (open flute 4' and stopped flute 8', with common stopped bass, c - g0), is 2.3m high, 1.19m wide, and .74m deep (to front of keys). Manual compass is 53 notes, c - e3; sharp keys have rounded fronts, and key cheeks are scrolled. It has side panels, but no case front, or back. The pipes were once enclosed with vertical swell shutters. The bellows is diagonal rise with a single feeder worked by a foot pedal; a tell-tale pulley is on the c# end of the case, out of sight of the player.[3]

The wood pipes are well made, with light nicking, and turned feet. There are two stopknobs, one with label missing, the other with a blank label. The mechanism to connect stop knobs to slides is missing. When the organ came to the Museum it had been fitted-out with someone's idea of an improvement - a row of decorated dummy zinc pipes that stood across the front.[4] It was not until 1974 that the roller board for the manual key action and the two ranks of wood pipes were discovered packed in a Museum storeroom.[5]

The appearance and features of this organ suggests it dates from early or mid-19th century. In recent years it has been examined and reported on by Peter R Dowde (1976) and John E Stiller (for OHTA Documentation, 1979). It was acquired by the Museum c.1930 as part of the Beattie collection of historic relics.[6]

### **Robert Forster - a possible maker**

The maker of this organ has long been the subject of conjecture and the recent discovery of an organbuilder's trade card within the wind system does not of itself provide the answer, as the card could have been placed there by its maker or subsequently by a repairer. Because the card is indistinct, the initial before the name of Forster was incorrectly reported as "F",[7] but it is surely an "R" for Robert Forster, who was born c.1821 and died "formerly an Organbuilder (Master)" at 184 Kennington Road, Lambeth, London, on 31 August 1901.[8] The card therefore reads as follows:

R. FORSTER  
organbuilder  
Union Street  
Lambeth

Forster lived and worked in the Lambeth district of London - extant directories and a census give his addresses as:

1842	12 East Place, Kennington Road, Lambeth
1850	51 Broad Street, Lambeth
1853-73	12 East Place, Lambeth
1874-92	184 Kennington Road, Lambeth
1901	184 Kennington Road, Lambeth [9, 10, 11]

However, at 5 Union Street, Lambeth, we find a succession of organbuilders - Thomas Smith (1839-55), and Frederick Thomas Poole (1861-73). Thomas Smith ("organbuilder and timber merchant") died at 5 Union Street on 27 July 1855 and the informant for the death was Ann Poole. Samuel Poole, organbuilder, is noted in 1858 at 8 Edward Street, Kennington Cross, Lambeth.[12, 13]

Perhaps Robert Forster was an apprentice of Thomas Smith and this might explain Forster using Smith's Union Street address on a (early?) trade card. Virtually nothing is recorded of Forster's organbuilding career, and no instruments are so far attributed to him.[14] It is therefore possible that Forster was only the repairer (bellows re-leathering) of an organ built by someone else, perhaps 20 or 30 years before.

### **Bishop Nixon's first organ**

Francis Russell Nixon was born in Kent, England, in 1803, and after attending Merchant Taylor's School, London, he took a BA at Oxford in 1827. He was ordained a minister of the Church of England, serving first as chaplain to the British embassy at Naples, and afterwards was at Canterbury Cathedral. He received MA and DD degrees at Oxford 1841-42, and in August 1842 was appointed and consecrated Bishop of Tasmania. With his second wife, Anna Maria, five children, three servants, Archdeacon Marriott and 52 cases of personal effects, Nixon arrived at Hobart Town in *Duke of Roxburgh* in July 1843. The family's first residence was in Upper Davey Street for three years, then Boa Vista, Argyle Street, then in 1850 Nixon bought Cairn Lodge at New Town from Robert Pitcairn. This he named Bishopstowe; it is now known as Runnymede. [15, 16, 17]

Letters written by Anna Maria Nixon to her family in England, and particularly to her father, Charles Woodcock, give us a remarkable insight into their life in Hobart. From these we learn that the Nixons brought out with them a small pipe organ which was used domestically by the Bishop and his wife. Anna Maria first mentions the organ in her letter of 29 September 1843 and says

...our carriages, everything that was packed in them, our organ-case containing a great many books, etc., have been considerably damaged from

having been placed on the ballast, the wet and gravel having actually rotted many things contained in the cases ... [18]

On 1 October 1843 Anna Maria reports that several empty packing cases were converted for furniture (beds for the maids) by the Nixon's land steward, John Richard Baily. This versatile servant, who was evidently a skilful cabinet maker or joiner, had previously been employed at Windsor Castle "fitting up" Queen Victoria's library and other rooms.[19] For the Nixon's organ case, he devised another purpose:

... out of the front of the organ case Bailey [sic] has made a very pretty side board, for, as the former was somewhat damaged, the Bishop is going to have a new case, and on this Bailey [sic] is to be employed as soon as the book shelves are completed, and as this must be made in the Drawing Room, that is still a workshop, and will be, so I fear, for the next three months, after which Bailey [sic] and his tools are to betake themselves to a little one-roomed cottage there is at the bottom of the garden. [20]

It seems that Baily may not have ever had time enough to construct a new front case for the organ, as by November 1843 Anna Maria wrote

The organ we covered (for the case is not yet made) with a spare set of muslin curtains, with festoons of flowers. [21]

As well as her letters, some of Anna Maria's skilful and detailed pencil drawings survive, and one, of c.1845, shows the drawing room at Upper Davey Street, with the organ enclosed in an imaginary Gothic case, as a replacement case had still to be made. T Lane and J Serle suggest that this case "probably reflects the style of the original." [22] A month after this drawing was done, Anna Maria writes "... so that if we ever get an organ-case - of which I almost despair, there are so many necessities required by Bailey's [sic] hands -" [23]

As well as playing the organ in her home, Anna Maria also played for services at St David's Church, Hobart (organ of 1824 by John Gray, London, moved c.1858 to St Matthew's Anglican Church, Rokeby):

I will send you a copy of a sermon preached by our excellent Mr Gell last Wednesday, after which, while I played a slow voluntary ...

Our organ is a great delight to me. I continue to play every Sunday evening at St David's. [24]



The first organ brought to Tasmania by the Nixons in 1843 has previously been confused with a subsequent one.[25] It has also been said of the first organ "that it was probably built by J C Bishop of London",[26] but this cannot be substantiated, nor does it appear in the firm's (incomplete) records, or it would have been identified by Laurence Elvin who wrote extensively on the

Bishop firm.[27] The circumstances relating to Nixon's disposal of the first organ are so far unknown.

Sometime before July 1846, Nixon possibly acquired a second organ. The Hobart Town Choral Society was reported as negotiating to purchase it, " ... the property of the Bishop". This could refer to either Bishop Nixon or to the Roman Catholic Bishop, Robert W Willson. The maker's name of this organ is not recorded, but it had 313 pipes, GG manual compass, "an octave of German pedals for holding bass notes", three combination pedals, and six stops - Open and Stopped Diapasons, Principal, Fifteenth, Dulciana and Hautboy. It was 3.20 m high, 2.21 m wide, and 1.067 m deep. The Choral Society evidently acquired this organ, as it was used in a subsequent concert in the Mechanics' Institute, Melville Street, in February 1847. It was played by Mrs Elliott, organist of St David's Church. The organ had no case and subscriptions were sought "so as to complete the organ before the return of the Lord Bishop to Tasmania". The latter clearly refers to Nixon, so it is fairly certain he was "the Bishop" from who it was purchased.[28] Nothing more is known of it, and it has not been identified as any instrument still extant.

The next organ known to have been owned by Nixon was built by J C Bishop, London (one manual, 12 stops, eight ranks), in 1847.[29] In July 1846 Bishop Nixon left Hobart on the ship *Arequipa* for Sydney where he stayed for a month before sailing to England on *Margaret*,[30] and probably ordered the organ from J C Bishop in April 1847. It had flute pipes made from Huon pine provided by Nixon, and was ordered and supplied " ... without case to cover the whole," and this instrument is now at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Campbell Town.[31] According to B A Clark and J M S Johnson, John Baily was deployed to make the case for this organ. It is masterfully executed from Tasmania blackwood and incorporates Bishop Nixon's crest.[32]

Nixon left Hobart for England in February 1862, expecting to return the following year. However, ill-health caused him to tender his resignation in April 1863 and the sale by auction of his "Beautiful Property at New Town known as Bishopstowe" and its contents took place on 21 November 1863. The sideboard made by Baily from the organ case front is not specifically mentioned in the very detailed advertisement, but may have been included in "dining room furniture of mahogany". The J C Bishop organ, which was described in full in the same advertisement, was bought by Dr Adam Turnbull for "the Scottish Church at Campbell Town". [33]

Nixon spent several years (1863-64) at Bolton Percy, Yorkshire, before the inclement weather caused him and Anna Maria to move to Italy.[34] While at Bolton Percy Nixon ordered yet another organ for his own use, and had the case designed by John Francis Bentley, the architect for Westminster Cathedral. From 1864 Bentley is known to have prepared drawings for more than forty organ cases, particularly for instruments built by T C Lewis of London.[35]

The trade card of organbuilder Robert Forster found in the organ in the Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery may only be a curious coincidence with the Nixons having given the name Forster to one of their sons. Furthermore, the Nixon family evidently had friends or relatives in England named Forster. Bishop Nixon's chaplain, who visited England from Hobart in 1847-48 and returned with him to Hobart on the brig *Himalaya*, was Revd Thomas Hay Forster, who Anna Maria Nixon refers to as "Henry"..[36] So far, a connection from any of these associations to the organbuilder Robert Forster has not been established, but this possibility cannot be overlooked and could explain how Nixon acquired an organ built or repaired by him.

## **Port Arthur**

The penal colony at Port Arthur, approximately 50km south-east of Hobart, Tasmania, was established in 1830. Stone and brick were the main materials of construction. The buildings were well designed and often with fanciful and elaborate detailing.[37] The foundation stone of the substantial church of cruciform plan, 32m x 19m, was laid on 25 April 1836.[38] It is thought to have been completed in 1837, as were most of the buildings excepting the convict hospital (1842) and the four-storey Penitentiary (1848). Other buildings included cottages for the prison governor, doctors, hospital supervisor, and other officials; a powder magazine and administration offices (1835); lunatic asylum; the cruciform Separate Treatment (Model) Prison with three of its wings containing cells and the fourth a chapel.[39] The church was not consecrated to any particular denomination, but at first was used by all. Later a place of worship was created for Roman Catholic prisoners in a room in the former Granary which had been converted to a Penitentiary in 1857.[40]

Transportation of prisoners from England to Tasmania ceased in 1853 and the number of convicts at Port Arthur gradually reduced until the settlement was abandoned as a gaol in September 1877.[41] It was officially renamed Carnarvon, possibly after the Colonial Secretary, Lord ("Twitters") Carnarvon.[42] The first sale of Crown land on the site was made on 28 December 1877. An attempt was made on 12 March 1889 to auction buildings and land; the Model Prison and Superintendent's cottage were bought by Revd J B W Woolnough.[43] The tourist potential of the former gaol was soon recognised and today it remains as preserved ruins.

David Burn, who visited Port Arthur in 1842 described the church:

The Church at Port Arthur is a beautiful, spacious, hewn-stone edifice, cruciform in shape with pinnacled tower and gables. Internally it is simple but neatly fitted... There is no organ, but a choir has been selected from among the convicts, who chant psalms with considerable effect.[44]

On 29 February 1884 sparks from a nearby fire ignited the church roof and left only the walls standing. A bushfire on 28 January 1895 gutted the Hospital, the Model Prison and smaller buildings.[45]

A floor plan of the church, designed to seat 1140 persons (including 14 convict choristers) shows no nominated position for an organ.[46] It has been stated that the two-stop organ in the Queen Victoria Museum "would be hopelessly inadequate to support congregational singing in a large church",[47] but this argument is spurious as an organ even so small would surely be preferable to no organ at all. It has also been suggested that it might have been used "in the chapel of the Model Prison or in the home of an official at the settlement".[48] A photograph (c.1870s?)[49] of the interior of the chapel shows no organ, but the likelihood of a small organ being placed in one of the administrators' cottages is a possibility.

Although there is no mention of a pipe organ in official records, in December 1844 tenders were invited for the repair of a seraphine (reed organ). This had been brought from Norfolk Island in February 1844 by Captain Alexander Maconochie with other musical instruments and was handed over to the convict department. It was sent to Port Arthur for use in the church, "at which 800 convicts attend". It was recorded that

The Committee being of opinion that church music is very desirable in these penitentiary chapels, recommend the expense of 10 being gone to for the repair of the seraphine and that the other musical instruments be sold on account of the public.[50]

A photograph (c.1859-1870) of the Revd George Eastman and his family in the Port Arthur church, shows his wife Louisa seated before a small reed organ, probably the seraphine referred to above.[51] Eastman was chaplain at Port Arthur from 1857 and died there in 1870. [52]

### **J W Beattie and A J Ridge**

John Watt Beattie, born in Scotland in 1859, migrated to Tasmania with his parents in 1878. He became a notable photographer, antiquarian and author. Beattie established a museum of art and local history in Hobart late last century. One of his special interests was Port Arthur, which he photographed from the 1890s and wrote of extensively. In 1927 the Launceston Corporation bought most of his collection which is located at the Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery. This included the organ allegedly from Port Arthur. After his death in 1930, other items of his collection were acquired by the Tasmanian Museum, Hobart.[53]

The first known press report that refers to a "Port Arthur" organ in any context is in April 1939 when publicity was given to the reassembly of the organ in the Museum. The newspaper story was accompanied by a photograph showing the dummy front pipes being placed in position. This work was supervised by the Launceston City Organist, Mr A R Gee.[54] The report resulted in a letter to the paper from Albert John Ridge, who stated:

It is over 20 years ago since I bought the organ, and disposed of it to Mr Beattie ... This organ was built in a recess in the old church at Port Arthur and never had pipes while in use there. Dummy pipes were attached after it left the church ... [55]

Ridge's latter remarks require interpretation as they make no sense if taken literally. My view is that Ridge, in saying "built" actually meant "located", and in commenting on the dummy pipes, was trying to explain that the organ originally had no metal display or speaking pipes in its front. Ridge was born at Launceston in 1863, and is listed in directories of c.1905 as a furniture dealer, at 54 George Street, Launceston. [56]

## Conclusions

Ridge evidently bought the "Port Arthur" organ c.1919, and sold it to Beattie. This was long after the Port Arthur gaol closed and we are left with no knowledge as to where it might have been from c.1877, or even earlier (c.1845?) if it is indeed the instrument formerly owned by Bishop Nixon. It has been suggested that Nixon "gave his first organ to some application at Port Arthur", [57] but there is so far no evidence to support this, or that there was ever a pipe organ there.

There is compelling circumstantial evidence to cautiously allow that the so-called "Port Arthur" organ at Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery is probably that owned by Nixon - its age, absence of case front, and proportions similar to Anna Maria's drawing. However, to accept it as a relic of Port Arthur may only be wishful thinking, but possibly a study of the collections of Beattie's papers and photographs, or even a so far undiscovered newspaper report or advertisement might eventually resolve this historical enigma. To paraphrase another author, "Port Arthur dreams on and keeps its secrets well." [58]

I wish to acknowledge the generous assistance of Bill Chapman in research for this article, and also thank the following people and institutions for provision of source material and information:

Archives Office of Tasmania, Hobart  
Dr K Cable  
Mr B Clark  
Mr K Fahy  
Mr J Maidment, Chairman, Organ Historical Trust of Australia  
Mr P Mercer, Senior Curator (History), Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery, Hobart  
Ms J Nuske, Curator, Port Arthur Historic Site  
Mr J Stiller, former Research Officer, Organ Historical Trust of Australia  
Mr G Stilwell, former Curator of the Allport Library & Museum of Fine Arts in the State Library of Tasmania  
Ms E Wishart, Curator of History, Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Launceston

## References

- 1 J Maidment transcribed this label, c.1970, which read: 'Church Organ from Port Arthur - The organ was not installed until sometime after the building of the Church. Before being acquired by the Museum as part of the Beattie collection, the instrument was altered by the addition of the dummy pipes in front. Restorations are confined to a few minor repairs.'
- 2 *OHTA News*, v.21, no.4 (Oct 1997), p.10
- 3 Stiller J E, "Documentation of the finger organ in the Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Launceston, Tasmania", for OHTA, 1979, unpub. ms.
- 4 *ibid*
- 5 Dowde P R, "A report on the 'Port Arthur' organ", unpub. ms, 29 Mar 1976
- 6 *Mercury*, 1 April 1939 and *Examiner*, 1 Apr 1939 (cuttings)
- 7 *OHTA News*, op. cit.
- 8 Details from death certificate for Robert Forster
- 9 *The Freeman-Edmonds Directory of British Organbuilders*, British Institute of Organ Studies (BIOS), n.d. (c.1996)
- 10 London directories, 1861, 1862, 1873, 1874, 1880, 1892 and census, 1881
- 11 Death certificate, R Forster, op. cit.
- 12 London directories, op. cit.
- 13 Details from death certificate for Thomas Smith
- 14 *Directory of British Organbuilders*, op. cit.
- 15 Barrett W R, "Nixon, Francis Russell", in *ADB* vol.2, pp. 285-8
- 16 Lane T and Serle J, *Australians at home*, OUP, Melb., 1990, p.69
- 17 Stilwell G, pers. comm., 4 Sept 1998
- 18 Nixon A M, in Nixon N, *The Pioneer Bishop in Van Diemen's Land 1843-1863*, Hobart 1954, letter 29 Sept 1843, p.12

- 19 *The Cyclopaedia of Tasmania*, pp.398-9
- 20 *ibid*, letter 1 Oct 1843, p.13
- 21 *ibid*, letter 31 Oct 1843, p.16
- 22 Lane & Serle, *op. cit.*, p.70
- 23 Nixon A M, *op. cit.*, letter 12 Feb 1845, p.44
- 24 *ibid*, letter 30 Dec 1843, pp.46-7
- 25 Nixon N, *op. cit.*, p.52
- 26 Clark B A and Johnson J M S, *Pipe organs of Tasmania*, 2nd ed., Hobart Guild of Organists, 1981, p.52
- 27 Elvin L, *Bishop & Son, organ builders*, Elvin, Lincoln, 1984, pp.108-9
- 28 *Hobart Town Courier*, 18 July 1846, p.3; 20 Feb 1847, p.2; 6 Mar 1847, p.2
- 29 Elvin, *op. cit.*
- 30 *Hobart Town Courier*, 15 July 1846, p.3; *SMH*, 28 July 1846, p.2 and 24 Aug 1846, p.2
- 31 Elvin, *op. cit.*
- 32 Clark and Johnson, *op. cit.*, p.70
- 33 Nixon N, *op. cit.*, p.54-7; *Mercury*, 21 Nov 1863, p.4
- 34 Nixon N, *op. cit.*, pp.54, 56-7
- 35 De L'Hôpital W, *Westminster Cathedral and its architect*, Hutchinson, London, n.d. (c.1919), vol II, pp.581,619
- 36 Nixon N, *op. cit.*, n.p., list of passengers, *Duke of Roxburgh*; pp. 4, 18 and p.31; other details of Revd T. H. Forster provided by Dr K Cable, from research by W L Chapman, and from G. Stilwell, pers. comm., 4 Sept 1998
- 37 Lewis R A, "Port Arthur, Tasmania", in *Historic Public Buildings of Australia*, Cassell, 1971, pp.78-87
- 38 Brand I, *Port Arthur 1830-1877*, Jason , Tas. 1975, p.45
- 39 Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp.78-87
- 40 Brand, *op. cit.*, pp.46,48
- 41 Lewis, *op. cit.*, p.87
- 42 Weidenhofer M, *Port Arthur a place of misery*, B & M Read, Tas., 2nd ed., 1990, n.p.
- 43 Lewis, *op. cit.*, p.87
- 44 Burn D quoted in Lewis, *op. cit.*, p.84
- 45 *Mercury*, 4 Mar 1884, p.2 and 7 Mar 1884, p.2
- 46 Brand, *op. cit.*, pp.45-7
- 47 Dowde, *op. cit.*, p.2 and Clark and Johnson, *op. cit.*, p.52
- 48 Clark and Johnson, *op. cit.*, p.52
- 49 Lewis, *op. cit.*, p.86 and a floor plan in Brand, *op. cit.*, p.65
- 50 Minutes of Committee of Officers No. 5, 20 Dec 1844, Brand Papers, vol. 16; *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 2, pp.184-6
- 51 Photograph in Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery, Hobart; copy in author's collection.
- 52 Dr K Cable, pers. comm., 1 Aug 1998
- 53 *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol.7, pp.232-3
- 54 *Mercury*, 1 Apr 1939 and *Examiner*, 1 April 1939 (cuttings)
- 55 *Examiner*, 6 or 7 Apr 1939 (cutting)
- 56 Research by W L Chapman from IGI Reg. 33 No.181, and Tasmanian Post Office Directory 1890, 1891, 1903, 1905
- 57 Clark B A, letter 10 Jan 1998 to OHTA
- 58 Bolt F, *Port Arthur a photographic essay*, Waratah, Hobart, 1972, n.p.



