

# **A short account of organs and organbuilding in Western Australia**

by J.R. Elms

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Organbuilding in Western Australia got off to a slow start. It was nearly 50 years after the first settlement of the State that the first organ was installed in a church. In 1875 two were built in quick succession. A Bishop and Son instrument of two manuals and pedal with 15 speaking stops was installed in Wesley Church in Hay Street in June 1875. This was followed in December 1875 by the installation of an organ of two manuals and pedals and 15 speaking stops in St George's Church, the forerunner of the present St George's Cathedral. This instrument was by Hill and Son, of London.

The next four organs to be built in Western Australia were all built by Robert Cecil Clifton, who was at the time a clerk in the Lands Department of the colony. He states that he became inspired to try his hand at building an organ through watching the installation of the Wesley Church instrument. He found a magazine which gave instructions for the building of a small organ, and set to work. His first instrument was completed in 1878 and was rented by the vestry of St John's Church, Fremantle until replaced by a larger instrument in 1884, also built by Clifton.

Clifton's second organ was built for Johnston Memorial Congregational Church, Fremantle in 1880. This also was a small organ of two manuals and a dozen stops. It was followed in 1884 by Clifton's largest instrument, that which he built for St John's Church, Fremantle to replace the small organ installed as a temporary measure in 1878. The new instrument was large by the standards of the colony with 17 speaking stops; the smaller instrument it replaced was sold to St Matthew's Anglican Church, Guildford where it remained for about 26 years.

Clifton built two more organs, one of six ranks in 1886 for an exhibition of work in Perth, and a second for the music room in his home in Adelaide Terrace, Perth. The latter was completed in 1902. Of the five organs built by Robert Cecil Clifton four remain. The 1878 instrument is in use in St Aidan's Uniting Church, Claremont; that of 1880 which served for some years in Bunbury has been demolished; the 1884 organ in St Johns Church, Fremantle is still in that church, and has all of its original pipework intact, although fitted with new chests and electric action about 30 years ago. In 1993 this instrument was again rebuilt with the original pipework returned to the great and pedal chests but with the swell additions of the first rebuild retained, part being used to provide a third manual (choir organ). The organs built in 1886 and in 1902 are still substantially in their original condition and are in use at the Old Cathedral of St John the Baptist in Kalgoorlie, and St Alban's Anglican Church in Highgate respectively.

In the period from 1890 to 1900 a number of organs were imported from the United Kingdom. The imported instruments organs consisted mainly of small English instruments by Hill, Monk, Atterton, Bishop, Kirkland and others, with two larger instruments, a Bishop and Son for St Patrick's RC Church, Fremantle, and a fine Norman and Beard of 16 speaking stops for Trinity Congregational Church in Perth. The only contribution from an

Australian builder during this period, apart from Clifton's opus V, was Alfred Fuller's small instrument for Scots Church Fremantle. It was not until 1908 that any volume of organs from the eastern states of Australia entered the Western Australian market. During the period from 1900 to 1923 a number came from J.E. Dodd of Adelaide. Most of these consisted of two manuals and pedal with less than a dozen stops. Two notable exceptions were the 1908 Dodd instrument for Wesley Church, Perth, and that of 1910 for St Mary's Catholic Cathedral. These were sister organs, well-endowed two manual instruments of close to 30 speaking stops. Later, in the 1920s, some good quality instruments came from Adelaide builder Roberts Ltd, instruments of about the same size as Dodd's. Early in the century one Fincham organ was imported by Mowbray Bunbury for his home in Balingup; this was Fincham's only contribution to this State. There was no local organ builder of any significance during the 50 year period from 1902 to the 1950s.

The firm of J.E. Dodd & Sons Gunstar Organ Works, based in Adelaide, carried out much work in Western Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. This firm built some new organs and rebuilt a number of others, notably the very successful instrument at St Mary's Cathedral, which was enlarged from two manuals to three manuals and 65 speaking stops.

The local builder Paul Hufner commenced operations in 1951. The work of this man has been of inestimable importance in the history of organbuilding in Western Australia, since through his work pipe organs were installed in many churches which would have put in electronic instruments had it not been for his efforts in promoting the effective small pipe organs he built at a very low price. In all, Hufner has contributed more than 30 instruments, a few of which were rebuilds of older instruments. Most of his organs were small, of one or two manuals, with one to four extended ranks, and of good workmanship. A few were larger: of five or six extended ranks. All of Hufner's organs were manufactured completely in his factory, including keyboards, stop switches and wooden pipe ranks. Only the hard-to-make items of hardware such as magnets and metal pipe ranks were imported. The organs were bold toned and had resources and variety far beyond what might be expected from an extension instrument. On the eve of his retirement Paul Hufner completed in 1990 his largest organ, a three-manual instrument of 57 speaking stops for his parish church, St John's Lutheran Church in Perth. Again, even in an instrument of this size, Hufner makes a good deal of use of extension.

The work of Hufner led directly to that of F.J. Larner, who commenced work as an apprentice in the Hufner firm in the late 1950s, but later branched out on his own. Larner's first instruments were also extension instruments with electric action along the lines of those built by Paul Hufner. However, these were the years of the neo-classical reform movement, and Larner became interested in building classical organs with mechanical action. A number of these came from his workshop with the most significant that in Guildford Grammar School Chapel. Others have followed in the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Geraldton and in other churches. Larner's work continues. In all Paul Hufner and John Larner have between them, or together, built or rebuilt more than half of all the organs presently in Western Australian churches, more than 50 instruments: a remarkable achievement in a little over 30 years.

In 1975, Melbourne organbuilder, Geoffrey Revell, trading as Bellsham Pipe Organs, moved to Western Australia. Until 1982 the firm continued to build new organs for Victoria and Western Australia as well as renovating and restoring some older organs. The two most significant renovations are the unique Moser organ in the Pro-Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in New Norcia, and the Randebrock organ in St Kilian's Church in Bendigo, Victoria. At the start of 1982, Bellsham Pipe Organs became incorporated, the new Company being registered in both Western Australia and Victoria as Bellsham Pipe Organs (Australia) Pty. Ltd.

Bellshams have contributed a significant number of new instruments, mostly of two widely divergent types. First, there have been some very small chamber organs of one or two manuals, with pedals, and with five to 12 classically voiced ranks and a light mechanical action. These are to be found at the University of Western Australia, in the Monks' Chapel at the Abbey at New Norcia, and in a number of other churches and private homes. Second, there are several of the largest organs in the State: these are the three-manual instruments in the First Church of Christ Scientist in Perth (electric action: 38 speaking stops - a complete redesign and rebuild of an existing Whitehouse instrument of 1953), and in Wesley College Chapel (mechanical action: 42 speaking stops - of classical voicing). Bellsham's largest and most recent work is the four-manual organ in The Basilica of St Patrick, Fremantle (a magnificent building of cathedral-like proportions and fine acoustics). This latter instrument, which has electric action to slider soundboards, is the largest organ in Western Australia and one of the largest in the Commonwealth. Unfortunately this organ suffered from some serious problems and was never completed because of the liquidation of the company. In 1997-98 it was rebuilt and enlarged by South Island Organ Company Ltd, of New Zealand. It now consists of eight divisions, including a two manual transept organ. The completed organ would be arguably the largest church organ in Australia and one of the largest organs in the country. The two organs can be played from either a two manual console in the transept, or a four manual console in the gallery.

A history of West Australian organbuilders would not be complete without mention of the work of University of Western Australia mechanical engineering lecturer, Lynn Kirkham, who has built one completed organ (in Trinity College Chapel), and one still-to-be-finished organ in the home of notable Western Australian organist Annette Goerke. The Trinity College organ, built on the lines of the Dutch 17th century school, has been widely acclaimed as an instrument of high quality. That in the Goerke residence is of French classical design.

During the period from 1950-1993 three large organs have been imported. The first from overseas (Winthrop Hall: J.W. Walker & Sons Ltd.); the second from Sydney (Perth Concert Hall: Ronald Sharp); and the third from Healesville, Victoria (St George's Cathedral: Knud Smenge). The Walker firm was also responsible for the rebuilding of the former St George's Cathedral organ in 1959 which was replaced by the Smenge instrument in 1993.

The State of Western Australia has still a deficiency of concert organs available for recital. The organs most favoured by recitalists are the three-manual Smenge organ in St George's Anglican Cathedral, Perth and the four-manual organ in St Patrick's Basilica, Fremantle. The Perth Concert Hall organ, a three-manual classically-voiced instrument by Ronald Sharp, is little

used: the cost of using the instrument is prohibitive for most organizations, and, in addition, it appears to be too lightly voiced for use with an orchestra or large choir. There are, of course, few buildings in the City at present except for the churches where a concert organ could be accommodated. This will continue to be a problem for some years to come.

There are few organs remaining in West Australia of historical importance; most which had a claim have been altered beyond recognition. Unfortunately there is no protection for organs which form part of our heritage in this State. The oldest organ in original condition is the 1891 Hill & Son instrument in St John's Church, Albany. Two others have a unique significance historically. One, by English builder Albert Pease (in Holy Trinity Anglican Church, York), is in original condition, having been restored recently without alteration. This organ, according to English organbuilder N.P. Mander, is the only remaining unaltered example of its builder's work and one of only two Pease organs still in existence. The other is the Albert Moser organ in the Benedictine Abbey Pro-Cathedral in New Norcia. This large two-manual organ has a most unusual specification, together with a number of unusual features; it also has survived unaltered stylistically apart from the electrification of the console. There are a few others: an original Fuller in Scots Church, Fremantle; a Monk in Wesley Church, York; and a Hill & Son in St Luke's Church, Mosman Park. In addition, there are the two largely unaltered Clifton organs: one in St John's, Kalgoorlie and the other at St Alban's, Highgate, both of which are of great significance. Little else remains. The oldest organ without doubt is an English organ in an 18th century case imported for St Mary in the Valley, Kelmscott some years ago. This instrument was originally thought by some to be by one of the early English builders such as Father Smith or Snetzler, but later opinion is that it is of early 19th century origin built into an 18th century English case. Whatever its origin it has been altered, albeit probably more than 100 years ago.