The Centenary of the Willis & Son Pipe Organ

THE WESLEY UNITING CHURCH, ARMIDALE

Peter G. Pocock | Published 1980

This country is indeed fortunate to possess such a richly diverse heritage of pipe organs, which have been installed during the past 155 years in many different parts of Australia[1]. One such instrument is the Henry Willis & Sons organ installed in the Wesley Uniting Church, Armidale.

The organ is of the tracker action type with 15 speaking stops and three couplers. As no correspondence concerning this instrument appears in the specification book of Henry Willis and Sons for 1879, it would suggest that it was one of the standard models manufactured in their Breck Road works at Liverpool, England[2].

This instrument was first installed in St. Stephen's Presbyterian Church, Phillip Street, Sydney. Imported from London in 1879 at a cost of 475 Pounds, it was installed in the rear gallery of St. Stephen's in December 1879/January 1880 by Mr. C.J. Jackson, a well-known Sydney organ builder, and dedicated on 24th January that year. Mr Jackson continued to tune and maintain the organ for the princely sum of 12 Pounds per annum.

The organ gave very little trouble during the 50 odd years it rendered service to St. Stephen's Church. The only alteration being made to the instrument during this period was the addition of an electric blower in 1913, at a cost of 60 Pounds, replacing the hand pumps at the side of the organ which required two people to operate.

In 1934, due to the demolition of St. Stephen's Phillip Street, and their subsequent removal to their present location in Macquarie Street, the organ was sold to the Wesley Methodist Church, Armidale for 1,000 Pounds. The only apparent alterations made to the instrument during installation were the changing of the pedal ranks from tracker to pneumatic action. It is believed that the organ was installed here by S. T. Noad & Sons of Sydney, although it has not been possible to verify this.

The *Armidale Express* of 22nd July, 1935, describes the circumstances surrounding the purchase of the organ as follows:

> He (The Rev. A. Morris Yates) said the Waters family had offered 100 Pounds to provide a memorial window to perpetuate the memory of their grandfather, Silas Waters, who was the pioneer of Methodism in Armidale. A similar offer was made by Mrs. Turner, and it was then that he (the Rev. Yates) had a "vision" and asked Mrs. Turner and her sons if they would support, instead, a movement to secure an organ. Mrs. Turner agreed, and then Mr. and Mrs. Bernie Curtis made a generous offer of financial assistance. He and others talked it over, and then they heard about the Organ at St. Stephen's. Mr Gould (the Church organist) was entrusted with the negotiations, and the outcome was that they secured this fine instrument. The people had been most generous and not one person who had been asked to contribute had refused.

On 21st July, 1935, the Organ was dedicated at the 11 am Sunday morning service. The *Armidale Express* describes the dedication as follows:

Dedication of New Organ

A Memorial Service

Supplementary seating had to be provided at Wesley Church yesterday morning to accommodate the very large congregation when a special dedicatory service was held in connection with the installation of the new organ.

The instrument, which has a particularly mellow tone, is a two manual organ of the tracker action type, and was purchased from St. Stephen's Church in Sydney. It is finished in polished cedar and the pipes are gilded, giving it a very handsome appearance.

On account of its size it was resolved to place the organ in the centre of the church at the northern end. This necessitated the removal of the pulpit which is now located in the northwest corner, while the choir stalls occupy the northeast corner.

In recognition of the prominent part played by the Rev. A. Morris Yates in securing the organ for Wesley, it was resolved to request him to conduct the service.

The service was simple but impressive and the dedication commenced with a special prayer by the Rev. A. Morris Yates, after which the minister, the Rev. E.H. Wilson in a brief address, enumerated several instances where music was mentioned in Holy Writ in connection with religious observance.

The 150th Psalm was then read verse by verse alternately by the minister and congregation after which the minister requested the organist, Mr. C.P. Gould, M.A. to dedicate the organ, which was done while the congregation stood. Then followed another prayer after which the Te Deum was sung, the organ being used for the first time.

Mr. Yates appealed to the congregation to free the church of the debt still remaining on the organ, and to back up the efforts of those others who had given generously towards it.

There was another large congregation at the evening service, which was preceded by a short organ recital by Mr. Gould.

In the subsequent 45 years the organ supported the congregation in its worship with very few difficulties for an instrument of its age. However, by 1980 its state of repair was such that it was necessary to launch an appeal for $20,000 to restore it to its original condition.

"The heritage from the past is one that should be preserved"[3]. Part of that heritage is the Willis Organ of the Wesley Uniting Church, Armidale.

References

1. Hastie, K.J., An Outline Account of Pipe Organ Heritage, CHURCH HERITAGE No.1, 1968, p.45.

2. Suggested in correspondence to the writer, dated 22nd April, 1980 from Henry Willis and Sons, Hampshire, England.

3. Hastie, K.J., ibid. p.52.

Historical article by Peter G. Pocock, published in 1980; typeset from the supplied transcription with original historical accounts retained. View a photograph of the organ.