

The Pipes Come Home

By Bruce Duncanⁱ

The original Methodist Church in York Western Australia was built in 1852 at the cost of £317-12-4ⁱⁱ under the direction of the first minister, Rev. John Smithies, who came to York to establish the church and a native missionⁱⁱⁱ. It is now used as the church hall. The railway line reached York in 1885 (officially opened on 8th August)^{iv}, and was extended south to Beverley the following year and then to Albany. It was during this period of development and optimism that construction of a new Wesley church came under consideration. The current building foundation was laid on the 25th April 1888 by Mr J. H. Monger of Faversham House. It was built at a cost of £945-0-0 which was raised by donations. The beautiful stone used in the building was donated and carted by some of the adherents. The opening took place on the 22nd August 1888^v.



The 1852 chapel at right and the current church building (1888)
Photograph by Bruce Duncan

Development in York was given a further boost in the early 1890s with the discovery of gold. As a town at the eastern end of the railway, York became a terminal for prospectors heading for Southern Cross, Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie and a supply point for mail, food and water. York, one of the oldest country towns in Western Australia, rode on this temporary prosperity and is fortunate to have two very good 19th Century English pipe organs. The older of the two organs is the 1895 organ built by Alfred Monk of London which is found in the Wesley Church. There are nineteen 19th century organs in WA, six of these being sited in country towns, but this is one of a few that remains in the original location. It has been regarded as the best of the 19th century pipe organs in Western Australia and one of the finest in Australia. It is registered accordingly with the Organ Historical Trust of Australia.

Miss Florence Monger, daughter of the late J. H. Monger and also of Faversham House, York, offered to secure subscriptions for the purpose of erecting a pipe organ in the church in June 1895^{vi}. The organ was subsequently ordered and was delivered and erected in the church on 17th and 18th August 1895, following which special services were held where the organ was used for the first time. It is thought the organ may have already been in Perth at the time the church ordered it, because the period of time from when subscriptions were commenced to the installation date is extremely short, impossible for an organ to have been built in England and shipped to Australia within that time. There are no other records known of this period, so further explanation cannot be provided.

Alfred Monk (born 1848) was an organ builder of repute during the period 1862 to 1926. He lived in Islington, London, at the time of building the York organ^{vii}. He built 67 pipe organs for Great Britain and a number of others exported elsewhere. Mostly his exported organs went to Europe; some also went to Africa and Asia. There are no other organs by Monk in Australia, although there are some components built by him in the 1800's and later used in the large organ at Randwick Uniting

(Presbyterian) Church, Sydney, when the organ was built circa 1902 by the Adelaide-born organ builder Walter George Rendall^{viii}.

William Henry Monk is a likely relative of Stephen Monk, father of Alfred Monk who built the York pipe organ. All lived in the same part of London (Regents Park / Islington / Highgate) at the same time. Probably better known in his day as an organist, church musician, and music editor, William Henry Monk composed a fair number of popular hymn tunes, including one of the most famous from nineteenth century England, *Eventide*, used for the hymn "Abide With Me". In 1857 his talents as composer, arranger, and editor were recognized when he was appointed the musical editor for *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, a volume first published in 1861 containing hundreds of hymns that would become, after supplements were added, one of the best-selling hymn books ever produced (sold 60 million copies).

So it is from this rich English background of church music that the York organ was brought into existence. It has a strong yet warm and rich tone that makes it very capable of supporting congregational singing and filling the sanctuary with sound. The organ is comparable in tone to the broad-scale organs of Hill & Son (Alfred Monk was at one time an apprentice to Arthur Hill). This organ has two manuals and pedal, all mechanical action. There are seven ranks of pipes (354 pipes in the original configuration) and the stop action is mechanical. The mechanism employs a floating backfall, making it extremely suitable for the extremes of heat and cold experienced in York.

The original stop list was:

GREAT (Manual 1) C-ggg, 56 notes.	SWELL (Manual 2) C-ggg, 56 notes.	PEDAL C-f, 30 notes.
Diapason 8' metal, open	Gedact 8' wood, stopped	Bourdon 16' wood, stopped
Clarabel 8' metal/wood, stopped	Violin Diapason TC 8' metal, open	SWELL to GREAT coupler
Harmonic Flute 4' metal, open	Principal 4' metal, open	GREAT to PEDAL coupler (also couples Swell to Pedal when Swell to Great coupler drawn)
	Hitch down swell lever	

There was a raised platform at the front of the new church. Central on the platform was a finely detailed pulpit of heavy timber. Immediately behind the pulpit the organ was erected where it stood against the front wall in the centre of the church under a set of three tall windows.

The casework and frame is made from Pitch Pine and is quite typical of the period, allowing three flats of the Open Diapason pipes to present as the main display. The keyboards have ivory covered naturals and ebony sharps and the concave straight pedalboard is boxwood. Chests are slider type and all actions are mechanical using timber trackers and rods. The console is integrated into the casework and drawstops are arrayed flat with the Swell and Pedal divisions on the left and Great on the right of the manuals. The stops have ivory caps on turned wooden spindles.

The organ was originally hand blown by the young men of the church, a somewhat arduous physical task but one that allowed some retribution to the organist. It seems that on occasions the organ inexplicably ran out of wind at crucial moments during the service if, during the week before, there had been some cross words or other events that irked the organ blowers. The names of the blowers are still scratched in the back of the organ case as a reminder of their earlier contributions.

The Adelaide organ builder J .E. Dodd did some restoration work on the organ in 1904. Dodd had quite a busy period in Perth and surrounding districts in those years, but unfortunately there is no record of the nature of his "restoration" of the Wesley Church organ. It is likely that his work included the relocation of the organ from front choir gallery to floor of church when the platform was removed, although there is no record of when that transition took place. In any case, the organ does now stand on the main floor of the church, a position it has occupied for a long time.

A refurbishment in 1929 was carried out by Cousans Limited, Perth, with an electric blower installed to replace the hand blowing mechanism. There was also the installation of a pneumatically operated tremulant on the Swell organ. The total cost of the job was £118-0-0.

It is not recorded when the organ case was stained dark brown or black and the pipes were painted over with silver, hiding the original stencilled designs on the display pipes, but it is thought to have been in the early 1960's. This would have been consistent with the kind of "modernisations" that occurred in that era.

In 1982 there were tonal adjustments and refurbishment carried out on the organ by F.J. Larner & Co. Somewhere around this time the casework and panels were stripped back to remove the dark over painting and to restore the lovely honey-coloured pitch pine in its natural glory. The display pipes remained over painted in silver.

A further tonal alteration in 1990 by F.J. Larner & Co. saw a Gemshorn substituted for the Swell Violin Diapason. It would seem that the original rank was "too loud", so a more delicate stop was put in place^{ix}. Unfortunately the Swell chest was considerably altered in the process (the ranks being of different scaling and also the Gemshorn being the full 56 notes). Interestingly, at the same time there was discussion with the organ builder about the possibility of incorporating a Swell Super-octave coupler to add brilliance to the organ. In hindsight it would appear that the two matters were in contradiction. The Violin Diapason pipes were removed from the church as part of the contract. The count of pipes in the organ now was 366.

The organ was in excellent condition for its age and, on this basis, F J Larner and G A Devenish (organ builders) were commissioned in June 2001 to conduct a study on restoration of the organ to its original condition. Even though the organ was fully taken apart, extensive restoration was not needed, and the work involved mainly a thorough cleaning of all pipework, replacing felt bushes, leather buttons, pallet leathers, Gedact stopper re-leathering and coupler regulation.

In addition to refurbishing the internal workings of the instrument, the display pipes were stripped of the silver paint in 2001 by Pipe Organs WA and were beautifully diapered in line with the original patterning. The exquisite design, drawing colours from the stained glass windows, greatly enhances the visual impact of the instrument and is based on the traces of an original pattern found under the paint and similar patterns found in organs of that era.



The organ prior to the 2001 restoration
Photographer unknown



The organ after the 2001 restoration
Photograph by Bruce Duncan

Probably the original wind trunking was wood, but this was subsequently altered in 1929 when an electric blower was fitted to the organ. At some stage flexible spiral tubing was in place to provide wind to the single double-rise reservoir. In 2003 Pipe Organs WA were commissioned to replace the

non-original tubing with new wooden trunking. This small change allowed the organ to breathe easier and significantly changed the blower noise to a level where it no longer intruded on the congregation. The Pedal roller board was re-bushed in 2005 by Pipe Organs WA.

The original Violin Diapason TC 8 ft rank (44 metal pipes, open slotted) removed from the Swell organ in 1990 is one of only four known slotted ranks in Western Australian organs^x. The others are at The Holy Trinity Anglican Church, York, St. Augustine's Uniting Church, Bunbury (named a Viola d Gamba), and St John's Anglican Church, Kalgoorlie (at 2 ft pitch). It had been of concern that although a thorough restoration of the organ was now completed that the organ was still not authentically complete because of the missing original pipes.

With a search of the organs in WA and with the kind help of John Lerner, it was possible to locate all of the Violin Diapason pipes. Some of them had been damaged and a few had lost their tuning slides, but they were found in storage and re-purchased in 2009. Pipe Organs WA were commissioned to bring the pipes back to a fairly good appearance and to make up a display mounting for them. It was not intended to try and restore the rank into the organ because:

- a) the Gemshorn is an effective stop; and
- b) the work required in either removing the Gemshorn and restoring the chest to accept the Violin Diapason or extending the chest to take a new stop (the Violin Diapason) would have been too great to be worthwhile.

Instead, the Violin Diapason has been mounted high on the wall behind the Swell division as a display and to provide the historical integrity of the instrument. The organ now has 410 pipes (not all playable!). The pipes have indeed come home again.



The Violin Diapason rank (in the workshop)
Photograph by Bruce Duncan

So the overall result of the restoration has been to revitalize the sound of the instrument, improve the responsiveness of the action, make the organ look elegant, and to establish the historical integrity of the instrument. This church is the steward of a fine and noble instrument, continually in use for services and often used in concerts and other events. This organ is in good voice, and ready now for another hundred years of service. It is the great privilege of the Wesley Church, York, to continue a very proud and long history of the use of the pipe organ in Christian worship.



The Violin Diapason rank is mounted below the windows
behind the Swell box (not visible in this photo)
Photograph by Bruce Duncan

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ⁱⁱ *York Chronicle*, 4 September 1952.

ⁱⁱⁱ *A Century of Methodism in Western Australia: 1830-1930*, Rev C. A. Jenkins

^{iv} Western Australian Government Railways, Annual Report, 1886, p. 8

^v *Eastern Districts Chronicle*, 25 August 1888, pp. 4-5.

^{vi} Wesley Uniting Church, York, records

^{vii} The British Institute of Organ Studies database

^{viii} *Historic Organs of New South Wales*, Graeme D. Rushworth

^{ix} Wesley Uniting Church, York, records, and the organ building records, F J Larner & Co.

^x Information from John Larner, F J Larner & Co, Organbuilder.