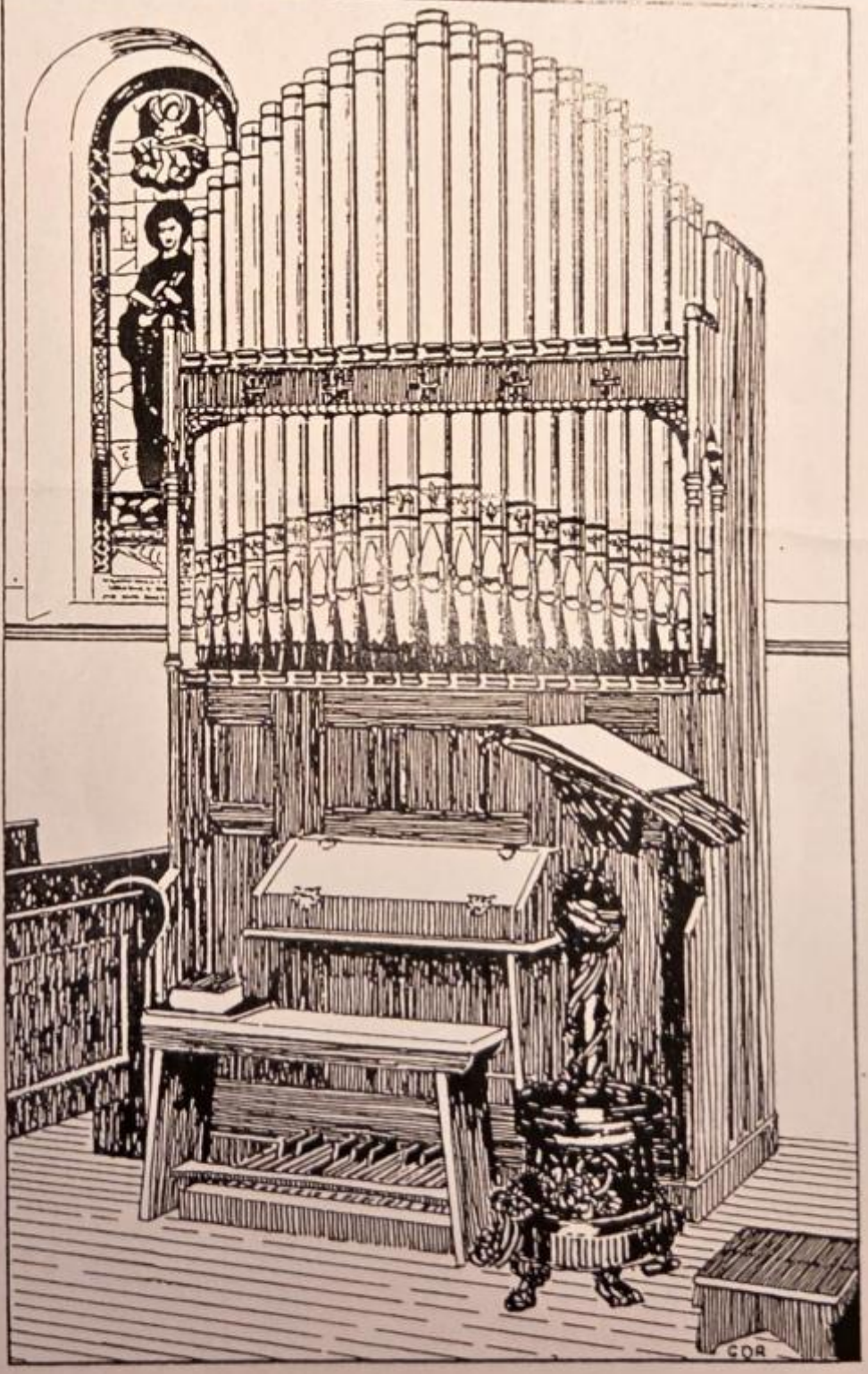

OHTA NEWS

Organ Historical Trust of Australia

Volume 17, No.2 April, 1993

REMARKABLE AMBITION

Alexander North, George Frederick Hopkins

and St John's Church, Launceston

by John Maidment *

[Extract commenced on p.14. P.15 was a reproduction of North's perspective drawing of the intended completed building. P.16 was a photo of the organ front likely taken in the 1990s. PP.17-18 were not included in the photocopied article reproduced here.]

St John's Anglican Church, which we are visiting this afternoon, is an example of remarkable ambition in Australian church-building. Had it been completed to the designs of the local architect Alexander North, it would have been Australia's most impressive Anglican parish church. The organ in the church exhibits comparable qualities and would have been Australia's largest church organ by far had it been completed to the initial plan. Both church and organ, however, remain incomplete and one could never envisage the grand plans of earlier this century reaching fulfilment.

Both architect and organ builder were seeking to produce a building and organ of outstanding excellence, of impressive grandeur on a scale unparalleled elsewhere in the country. Both were English emigrants who were well-acquainted with the work of the great Victorian architects and Organ builders in the mother country, and well attuned to contemporary practices overseas. North's design is a major example of arts and crafts Gothic architecture (of international importance), while the design of the organ, as envisaged, combined the best features of the Victorian classical and later symphonic styles. Contemporary descriptions of both church and organ emphasise their uniqueness in the southern hemisphere.

Alexander North was born in Huddersfield in 1858. He was articled in Kendal, Westmorland and later was an art student in London. In 1876, he worked on the drawings of the Union Chapel, Islington, designed by James Cubitt, which houses one of Father Willis's most renowned organs. In 1883 he won a gold medal in the National Competition of Schools of Art, London, for his designs for a cathedral and in the same year migrated to Tasmania, where shortly he joined L.G. Corrie in partnership as Corrie & North. North shortly became known as the leading architect in northern Tasmania. His work became increasingly well known when he moved to Melbourne in 1913, where he was in partnership with Louis Williams, being predominantly involved in church work. He moved back to Tasmania about 1920 and died in 1945.

** A paper presented to the XVth annual conference of the Organ Historical Trust of Australia, Launceston, 26 September 1992.*

[Pages 17-18 were missing from document received – continuing from p.19]

To look first at the building, which was undoubtedly the ultimate source of inspiration for the organ which we can see and hear today.

The genesis of the building lies in the original Georgian Gothic nave and west tower of 1825 which are still evident externally. The original broad nave incorporated a galleried interior, with the earlier organs placed at the rear, in front of the tower. A small Gothic chancel was added in 1866.

In the 1890s, plans were produced by Alexander North, of the local firm of Corrie and North, to build a new brick church on the present site. This proposal included a large aisled nave and transepts, spacious chancel and dominating north-west tower and spire. These plans were not proceeded with owing to the depression of the 1890s.

In 1901 work began, but to a totally new plan. The present chancel and transepts were erected between that year and 1910 using day labour, which was the most economical way of carrying out the work. The width of the crossing was based upon the width of the original Georgian Gothic nave, and is thus very wide. However, the width of the crossing from east to west is somewhat reduced by comparison, an effect heightened by the smaller arches flanking the main transept arches. The whole

of the new section was vaulted in reinforced concrete, this being almost revolutionary at the time and without any local precedent. The use of a flat Byzantine dome over the Gothic crossing may have been inspired by J.F. Bentley's contemporary Westminster Cathedral. Drawings show that the dome was to be decorated with mosaics depicting the heavenly host.

The present incomplete nave was opened in 1938 and is built above and around the nucleus of the original nave. The original walls were heightened and encased in new brickwork, a new roof supplied and external aisles added. North intended one further western bay to the nave, flanking towers at the west end and an immense crossing tower, the stump of which looms in ungainly fashion to this day. The carvings within the church, largely by Hugh Cunningham and Gordon Cumming, are of particular interest, incorporating native flora and fauna in their details. The building indeed displays remarkable ambition in church building and with a grandeur rare in this country.

The 1911 Historical Record of the Parish of St John, Launceston proudly stated:
"Attention may be drawn to the massive thickness of the walls, affording the strongest and most pleasing contrasts of light and shade; to the beauty and grace of arch and window openings; to the stately columns and piers and buttresses; to the solidity and grandeur of the stone roofs and central dome, which between them cover the whole building; to the large and ample floor space and vast proportions generally; to the fair and noble carving which graces arch and pediment and capital; to the dignity imparted to the whole by the stately dome which rises high above the crossing. The lines of the whole building are indeed throughout graceful and pleasing in the extreme ... Much remains to be done ... a dignified and noble tower is to rise high above the central dome, whilst within mosaic, of bold lines and rich but soft shades, is designed to fill the roof and wall spaces and clothe the dome itself with chastened splendour ... When ... a vast and glorious nave on similar lines is added, nothing will be wanting to make this building famous throughout the Southern Hemisphere".

This, then, was the building, consecrated on 3 December 1911, which Hopkins found upon his arrival from overseas three months later.

George Frederick Hopkins was the son of John Hopkins (1822-1900), organist of Rochester Cathedral from 1856-1900 and a nephew of Edward John Hopkins (1819-1901), the renowned organist of London's Temple Church, and joint author of the famous tome on Victorian organ building known as Hopkins & Rimbault. George Frederick trained as an organ builder on leaving the Rochester choir in 1883. In his recent book on the organs of Rochester Cathedral, Paul Hale suggests that G.F. was apprenticed to Henry Booth, of Wakefield; Booth was invited to tender for improvements to the Rochester organ and the choice of this northern provincial builder for work well away from his domain might be explained, states Hale, through a connection with Hopkins. In 1892 G.F. was employed by his father to maintain and improve the organ at Rochester Cathedral and in 1895 added additional couplers to the instrument on pneumatic action.

Hopkins arrived in Launceston in March 1912 to take up the position of organist at St John's. Strangely enough, his uncle, E.J. Hopkins, had examined the Brindley organ at St John's before its departure from England and pronounced it to be "perfect in every respect". By 1912, the Brindley organ was stated to be in an unhealthy state. A later report commented that "in 1914 the organ was found to be in a state of collapse ... it required a pressure of from 1-1/2lb. to 2lb. to depress each note, whilst the stops needed force of from 18lb. to 26lb. to draw them and push them in." The instrument had been moved from the west gallery to the chancel loft by J.E. Dodd in 1911 (probably when he was working on the organ at Pilgrim Church), who also tendered for a substantial new three-manual organ in the church.

Shortly later, Hopkins began to build a new organ incorporating the majority of the excellent fluework from the Brindley instrument (whose design was strongly influenced by the German builder Edmund Schulze and apparently an instrument of great power suitable for a for larger building). Hopkins in 1915 subcontracted to the Adelaide organ builder William Leopold Roberts the building of immense new slider windchests for the great and swell which were divided with central passage-boards and with the chorus reeds placed on separate windchests on heavy pressure wind. New wooden ranks for

the pedal were constructed including a highly effective 32ft Contra Bourdon. Hopkins imported numerous metal ranks from Alfred Palmer & Sons in England.

In September 1921, Hopkins wrote to the English journal Musical Opinion outlining the scheme for the St John's organ which would have been by far the largest organ in any church building this side of the world!

A contemporary description of the instrument, almost certainly written by Hopkins, from an unidentified source, possibly *The Examiner*, stated: *"With four rows of keys and pedals, 71 speaking stops, with 4580 pipes, and 20 couplers, ... [it] will probably be the finest church organ in the Southern Hemisphere, not only from a point of size, but by reason of the almost endless variety of musical tone which it will be capable of producing. Up to the present time it has been the practice to insert one or two stops of string tone on each manual, but in the case of the St. John's organ, the scheme is entirely different. On the second and third manuals a complete build-up of organ tone, topped with fine chorus reeds, has been the ideal. On the first manual, eleven of the thirteen stops will be voiced to reproduce the tones of the orchestral strings - violencello [sic], viol d' Amour, etc., whilst on the fourth manual the stops will be voiced in imitation of the wood wind of the orchestra - Clarinet, Hautboy, Cor Anglais, Saxaphone, Musette, Bassoon, Tuba, and a Vox Humana, made on the French model, in which it is possible to produce a satisfactory illusion in accordance with the name. A pedal organ with 15 stops, in which this organ will eclipse any church organ of today, will complete the scheme ... "*

The design is fascinating. It includes ample mixture work (two mixtures each on the great and swell), an amazing choir organ with chorus of strings in the idiom of Audsley, a rich selection of chorus and imitative reeds, and even an extraordinary pedal two-rank Sesquialtera (10-2/3 & 6-2/5) in the 32ft harmonic series.

Hopkins was obviously inspired by the grandeur of North's architectural conception and evolved detailed working drawings (preserved in the church archives) to show how this colossus could be accommodated within the architect's capacious vaulted chamber. It certainly would have been the largest organ in any church in Australasia, the nearest contenders being the 1890 Fincham & Hobday four-manual organ in The Australian Church, Melbourne (53 stops), and the 1890 T.C. Lewis four-manual organ in St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne (50 stops).

Only the great and swell of the scheme were partially complete when Hopkins departed Launceston in 1929. The article quoted above stated that at the time of writing, the instrument had two manuals, 32 speaking stops with 2202 pipes, of which number 968 pipes are from the old organ, and six couplers. In 1934 George Fincham & Sons provided a new tubular-pneumatic action, detached console and facade pipes (the arrangement to the chancel based upon Hopkins's drawing of 1930). Hopkins is believed to have moved from Launceston to Sydney where he was working on a new organ for the Sydney Church of England Girls Grammar School chapel in Darlinghurst in 1931, later completed by T.C. Edwards. Hopkins died on 9 June 1934.

Various additions were made to the St John's organ by Fincham & Sons and Hill, Norman & Beard and in 1960-61 it was rebuilt by J.W. Walker & Sons, of Ruislip, UK. in consultation with the church organist Lindsay O'Neill FRCO, ARCM. A three-manual detached drawstop console was provided and Fincham's pneumatics converted to electro-pneumatic. An enclosed choir organ was provided which incorporated the former Great Double-Stopped Flute, Great Dulciana and Swell Violin Diapason (all extended), together with a new Tierce, Clarinet and Tuba.

Today, there are still seven spare slides on the great and swell soundboards and it would be possible to complete these divisions according to Hopkins's intentions. The reed soundboard on the great at present only houses the Tromba 8ft which is electrically switched across three divisions; the slides for the 16ft Trombone, 4ft Octave Tromba and large Open Diapason (Stentorphone?) remaining vacant.

Both church and organ were conceived on an unparalleled scale in this country. Here we find the fusion of two creative minds each with a vision of creating, in Tasmania, a very special building and

organ worthy to rank with the best to be found anywhere. The assistance of the Launceston Regional Library and Jenny Gill, archivist of St John's Church, is gratefully acknowledged.

G.F. HOPKINS'S SPECIFICATION (1921)

GREAT ORGAN

1. Double Open Diapason	16	
2. Double Stopt Flute	16	
3. Stentorphone	8	(6-3/4" scale)
4. Open Diapason	8	(Schulze type)
5. Open Diapason	8	(Green type)
6. Spire Flute	8	
7. Stopt Flute	8	
8. Dulciana	8	
9. Octave	4	
10. Harmonic Flute	4	
11. Twelfth	2-2/3	
12. Fifteenth	2	
13. Full Mixture	III	
14. Sharp Mixture	IV	
15. Trombone	16	
16. Tromba	8	
17. Octave Tromba	4	

Swell to Great
Choir to Great
Solo to Great
Choir Sub Octave to Great

SWELL ORGAN

18. Double Stopt Flute	16	
19. Open Diapason	8	
20. Violin Diapason	8	
21. Dolcan	8	
22. Clarabella	8	
23. Viole d'Orchestre	8	
24. Voix Celestes BBb II	8	
25. Principal	4	
26. Stopt Flute	4	
27. Harmonic Piccolo	2	
28. Sesquialtera	III	
29. Mixture	IV	
30. Double Trumpet	16	
31. Cornopean	8	
32. Hautboy	8	
33. Harmonic Clarion	4	

Tremulant
Swell Sub Octave
Swell Unison Off
Swell Octave
Solo to Swell

CHOIR ORGAN (enclosed)

34. Contra Gamba	16
35. Violoncello	8
36. Violin	8
37. Viola da Gamba	8
38. Viole d'Amour	8
39. Salicional	8
40. Clarinet Flute	8
41. Oboe Flute	4
42. Octave Violin	4
43. Salicet	4
44. Gamba Mixture	VII-V
45. Clarinet	8

Tremulant
Choir Sub Octave
Choir Octave
Swell to Choir

SOLO ORGAN (enclosed)

46. Doppel Flöte	8
47. Hohl Flöte	8
48. Concert Flute	4
49. Saxophone (labial)	8
50. Cor Anglais	8
51. Orchestral Hautboy	8
52. Musette	8
53. Vox Humana	8

Tremulant

54. Tuba	8

Solo Sub Octave
Solo Octave

PEDAL ORGAN

55. Contra Bourdon	32	
56. Open Diapason wood	16	
57. Open Diapason metal	16	10"
58. Violone wood	16	
59. Viol (choir)	16	
60. Bourdon	16	
61. Echo Bourdon (swell)	16	
62. Stopt Quint & Tenth	10-2/3	& 6-2/5
63. Principal (ext.open metal)	8	
64. Violoncello (ext Violone)	8	
65. Bass Flute	8	
66. Fifteenth	4	
67. Contra Trombone	32	
68. Ophicleide	16	
69. Trumpet	8	

Great to Pedal (right & left hand)
Swell to Pedal
Choir to Pedal
Solo to Pedal

Compass: CC-C Manual
CCC-G Pedal

Wind pressures:
Great flues 3-3/4"
Great reeds & Stentorphone 8"
Swell flues & Hautboy 3-3/4"
Swell reeds 6"
Choir 3-1/4"
Solo 4" except Tuba 15"
Pedal flues 5"
Pedal reeds 8"

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The Examiner, 21 November 1861 (E.J. Hopkins examining organ);, 20 August 1862 ('The organ is of great power, in fact is adapted for an edifice two or three times the size of St John's').

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Letter from G.F. Hopkins to the editor Musical Opinion, September 1921

Unidentified article '*The Organs of St. John's'*, probably from The Examiner circa 1925.

W.L. Roberts list of orders (in custody of OHTA South Australian committee, courtesy of David Shield)