The Story of the Williams Organ

By Flora Spurdle

Sisters Maxine Edney and Hazel Fletcher nee Choat with the organ at the Whanganui Regional Museum

(First published in NZ Founders Society Whanganui Branch Newsletter No. 1 March 1958)

Amongst the myriad treasures in the Alexander Museum at Whanganui, is an ancient organ, the first to come to this country. The Bay of Islands was a wild, unruly place when it arrived about 1826, for it was a whaling headquarters and Kororareka was full of grog shops. But across the bay, at beautiful Paihea, William Williams had established a little mission. The small community had built a raupo church and had sent money to the Old Country for an organ. One can imagine the excitement when a sailing ship actually brought one and how pakeha and Maori alike worked to bring the heavy instrument up from the beach. The music it produced must have been a huge surprise to the Maori's who regarded it as a "Makutu" box – something bewitched.

I must tell you what the organ looks like and how it works. It is made of oak and stands some 10 ft high. There is no keyboard and to play it one inserts a cylinder which is covered with little hooks. These engage the inside mechanism and let the wind into the wanted pipes. The stops are pulled out, pedal and handle fitted and then, pedaling and turning the handle, the bellows fill and the music comes. Many of the gears, wheels and moving parts are made of wood, and the pipes, for it is a true pipe organ – are made of wood and lead, while the bellows which are in a remarkable state of preservation, are made of vellum. It has three cylinders and each has ten tunes on it. Of the tunes, only some of those on one roll are known today – it is imagined that this roll was made much later than the other two. Some of the tunes

are “Lead Kindly Light”, “Come Thou Everlasting Spirit”, “Oh, For a Heart to Praise my God”, and “God Save the King”. This last melody is slightly different from today’s version, in fact it is in the form used in 1745. Another interesting survival shown by the rolls is the early 19th century practice of breaking the tunes with long trills or shakes. On this mechanical organ these are not always arranged to come at the end of verses or lines and singers must wait, sometimes in the middle of a word, for the accompaniment to finish its embellishments.

The organ played its tuneful part in the life of the little Paihea settlement and echoes come back even to this day. There was once a wedding service to be held. The whole township had arrived and then the bridegroom asked to be excused – he had forgotten the wedding ring! That day the organ used its full repertoire, for the young man had to row right across the Bay to Russell. Two great grand-daughters of that couple came one day to the museum; they wished to hear the organ that had been played for that wedding of long ago. They wept a little – they weren’t quite sure why.

In the mean while the Rev. Henry Williams had arrived in Paihea and soon came a second organ. This was a puzzle until a letter was received from the Rev. E G Marsh of England, which advised that he had dispatched an organ as a gift to his nephews. There had been some doubt as to which was the older organ, the gift or the subscription instrument, but quite recently Canon W G Williams made a thorough search of his family’s records and found a letter which made it quite certain that the gift organ, ultimately given by the Rev. A O Williams to the Whanganui Museum, was the one to arrive first.

When Henry Williams built a Church on his own private property at Pakaraka the first organ found a new home. In 1867 it was willed to his son, Edward, who moved it from the Church to his home at Puketina[sic](see note). Years later he went to live in Auckland and his house was occupied by strangers. After his death, the organ passed to his son, the Rev. A C Williams, who decided to give it to Whanganui. In 1898 he and Mr S H Drew, FLS, Curator of the Museum, journeyed North, and, on reaching the old house, were shocked to find a child riding on one of the cylinders. In a letter Mr Drew remarked, “the organ boards lay near and I have no doubt had been used for a see-saw”.

Well, the two men put the organ together as well as they could and loaded it onto a waggon[sic]. It was freighted from Waitangi Falls to Russell by Captain Neuman, shipped by the S S “Clansman” to Auckland and finally arrived in Whanganui. In Mr Drew’s writing is a detailed description of the damage he found when he came to repair it. He tells of the broken and bent brass notes but he started mending the asthmatic bellows first. The mice had been at them. Amongst troubles caused by damp, he found eight wooden pipes split at the glued joints and these had to be voiced as they wouldn’t sound at all. He remarked that “the lead pipes are very, very

drunk". Mr Drew persevered, and says he, "I got the dear old thing together and was able to play a tune on it on Good Friday night".

That was in 1899. He was strangely moved as he played it there in the silence of the Museum and this experience came to us many years later for we too played it on a Good Friday night after a long, long silence ----- but I have gone a little ahead of my story. Directly it was repaired, Mr Drew and a well-known bandmaster, the late James Crichton, gave a recital on the much-talked-of organ to a crowded house at the Museum and through the years it was often played. However, in the old Museum it was difficult to watch all the exhibits and small boys discovered that bits of the lead pipes made good sinkers, so once more the poor organ lost its voice. Although it was made safe from further interference, it remained in this condition for some 37 years and then an English organist, Mr Raynor White, living in Whanganui, was deputed by an historical society to investigate the details of the old instrument. He was so intrigued with it that he and our late curator, Mr George Shepherd, decided to get it going again. This time the restoration was easier and again on a Good Friday night, the sweet notes rang through the Museum.

For many years, when Mr James Grant and I were at the Museum the organ was played on Good Friday afternoon and on five occasions it was accompanied by a singer. The first singer was Mrs Russell Scoular, whose people were among the earliest arrivals in New Zealand.

Although Raynor White and George Shepherd made a wonderful job of restoration, neither of them were organ construction experts so it was left to a visitor who specialized in old instruments, to discover another secret of the organ. "You have a new pipe put in since the instrument came to New Zealand", he said to me, when he emerged hot and dusty from its interior. "How do you know?" said I. "Well, one pipe has an ear and that is a French invention of only some seventy years ago".

This gentleman promised to find out something of the organ's English history when he returned home, but London was being bombed by then and we didn't hear from him – I expect he had more urgent things to think about.

Note : - Puketona was owned by several generations of the Williams family until it was sold in 1921. However the last Williams, Edward Marsh Williams, left there in 1881 and there was a series of farm managers in the house from then on. In 1887 James and Beatrice Choat became caretakers of the property and remained in the house until James purchased it in 1921.

In 1898 when the organ was uplifted the Choat children in the house would have been Gertie aged 11, Laura aged 8, Henry aged 5, and Sid aged 2. Choat descendants are still living in the house today.

This article is submitted by Lynley Fowler, daughter of Ron Fowler and Iris Choat.