

About St. Mary's Cathedral and the Létourneau Organ

The new three manual organ with 46 stops and 59 ranks built by Orgues Létourneau Ltée was commissioned in 1997 and dedicated in December 1999. This instrument sits in a newly erected gallery in the transept and its main purpose is to meet the needs of the varied liturgical and musical functions of the Cathedral. The Létourneau organ and the 1942 Whitehouse organ in the rear (South) gallery may both be played from a new four manual mobile console located on the floor of the nave. Eric Wisden from the New South Wales Department of Public Works designed the organ case.

The wide tonal and dynamic range available on the Létourneau organ meets the role of accompanying the Cathedral Choir. The 1959 Sharp organ in the triforium above the chancel was woefully inadequate in this role with only one very soft 16-foot pedal stop and two 8-foot manual stops. In contrast, the Létourneau organ has a 32-foot *Contra Bourdon*, three 16-foot pedal stops and fifteen 8-foot manual stops. This provides greater support when accompanying the Cathedral Choir, cantors and congregation. It has string stops and principal choruses on each manual, a wide range of flutes at different pitches and English reeds including a solo Tuba stop on high wind pressure.

The key action is dual; mechanical in the gallery and electrical from the mobile console. The combinations of stops are controlled by a modern programmable solid state system with 256 memories at each console.

Peter Kneeshaw, the Principal Organist of the Cathedral, was the consultant and worked tirelessly on the project. This involved him in playing and assessing hundreds of new organs throughout the world and visiting many organbuilders before calling tenders. He wrote the specification and contract which he administered on behalf of the Church. Considerable effort was given to details of the tonal and console design. Care was taken to ensure that the stop list, wind pressures, pipe scaling and voicing was suitable for the requirements of the Cathedral.

Orgues Létourneau who won the contract worked very closely with the consultant and the Church. They took considerable pride in delivering the instrument on time despite a number of unforeseen difficulties and delays. It has been greatly admired by organists, choristers, members of the congregation and visitors for its warm tonal quality, clarity, wide dynamic range and high standard of workmanship.

After years of hard work and effort the project came to fruition when the organ was dedicated by Cardinal Edward Bede Clancy on 19 December 1999 at the annual Carol Service.

Excerpts from the 2005 *OHTA Conference Handbook* written by Pastor de Lasala:

St Mary's Cathedral is the mother church of Catholicism in Australia. Its foundation during the early days of the Colony was not without a great deal of difficulty. Practising the Catholic faith was initially outlawed by the then government, thus causing Catholics to worship in secret. Fr John Therry, a pioneer priest in the Colony, had requested land on the foreshore in what is now referred to as the Rocks area in Sydney. Governor Lachlan Macquarie refused this and allocated the land where the current cathedral now stands. At that time this site was little more than an undesirable dumping ground. By a twist of irony, a great Neo-Gothic cathedral rose from this ignominious "dump" to become the fine landmark it is today.

The foundation stone of the first St Mary's Church was laid on 29 October 1820 by Governor Macquarie, but the first Mass was not celebrated until 5 December 1833 owing to severe difficulties in raising funds for the enterprise. The dedication had to wait until 29 June 1836, by which stage the building, 110ft long and 45ft wide in the nave, was decorated and furnished. By this time, St Mary's was elevated to the status of Cathedral with the arrival of Australia's first Bishop, John Bede Polding OSB. It had been the intention of establishing a Benedictine monastery which never came to be.

On 25 August 1851 the foundation stone for extensions to St Mary's was laid, these in the Decorated Gothic style to the design of the celebrated English architect A.W.N. Pugin and consisting of an additional 51ft to the nave, flanked by a chapel and the base of a large tower which was to rise to 200ft. On 29 June 1865 the entire building was destroyed by fire. Only a slender octagonal pillar from the north-east side of the old sanctuary remains, and this can be seen outside on the southern side of the east transept. (The location of the original cathedral was perpendicular to the current nave and ran along the axis of the current baptistery.)

Construction of the present cathedral began in 1866 to the design of William Wilkinson Wardell (1823–1899), one of the leading Catholic architects of the 19th century, who had emigrated to Melbourne in 1858. The dedication of the first section of the building took place on 8 September 1882 while by 1900 the eastern limb of the building, transepts, central tower and first two bays of the nave were complete with a total length at that stage of 200ft; the dedication took place in September. The remaining six bays of the nave and the two towers together with the crypt were constructed in the 1920s and opened in 1928. Built in stone in the Decorated Gothic style, the building is 350ft in length (the longest ecclesiastical building in Australia) and the height of the nave from the floor is 90ft.

The exterior is notable for the square termination of the east end, resembling Lincoln Cathedral, the clerestory windows placed under gables, flying buttresses, the three towers and the rose windows which crown three of the façades. Internally, the nave, transepts and sanctuary have groined ceilings in timber while those of the aisles are in stone. There is a spacious triforium placed above the aisle roofs. The high altar, in marble and Oamaru limestone, is a focal point of the interior while the subsidiary altars were designed by the noted English architect J.F. Bentley and executed by Farmer & Brindley, of London. The stained glass is by John Hardman & Sons of Birmingham. The spires were added in 1998–2000 and were constructed in accordance with Wardell's design.

The cathedral currently possesses four independent organs: Whitehouse 1942, Sharp 1960, Bellsham 1985, and Létourneau 1999. The southern gallery organ, built by Whitehouse Bros., of Red Hill in Brisbane, was installed in 1942 and is the only example of a substantial instrument built in Australia during World War II, it being of further significance as one of the few organs of more than 20 stops from the 1930–50 period to survive basically unaltered anywhere in the country today. Likewise the triforium organ, commenced in 1960 by Ronald Sharp, is of great significance as the builder's first organ and one of the earliest *Orgelbewegung* instruments in the country, albeit one with electric action. The crypt organ was originally built by Bellsham Pipe Organs of Perth for the residence of Steve and Louise Blatchford in Pymble, but was sold to St Mary's in 1993. The Létourneau instrument has finally provided the cathedral with a comprehensive choir organ which is also suitable for small-audience organ recitals and teaching.

Until the arrival of the Létourneau organ, the Whitehouse and Sharp organs were played simultaneously by two organists using headphones and a two-way microphone system. Needless to say, this was merely a stop-gap measure and highly inadequate for the liturgy. The new nave console (a classical Cavallé-Coll 'console en amphithéâtre'), controls two organs. The stops on the right are for the Létourneau—in effect a large choir organ voiced in an English style—in the Western Gallery, whilst those on the left currently act upon Whitehouse organ in the Southern Gallery. A very large, French style four manual instrument has been envisaged eventually to replace the Whitehouse

For more information about the Cathedral organs, please visit:

<http://www.geocities.com/domad>

and

<http://www.ohata.org.au/confs/Sydney/STMARYSCATHEDRAL.html>

