

From the Archives – Celebrating 150 Years of Kelvin Grove and State Education



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Celebrating 150 Years of State Education

Kelvin Grove State College Memories - TOSAQ and the Christie Theatre Organ

Around the late 1960's the Theatre Organ enjoyed a resurgence of interest prompted by a rapidly growing electronic organ market that drove a rekindled interest in Theatre Organ.

Members would host organ parties at their private homes to show off their latest acquisition and growing keyboard skills. This highly social activity became the nucleus of TOSAQ (Theatre Organ Society of Australia, Queensland Division).

In 1963, Hoyts Theatres, the owners of the Brisbane Regent Theatre, felt the need to sell their Wurlitzer pipe organ from the theatre to a private owner in the Blue Mountains, West of Sydney.

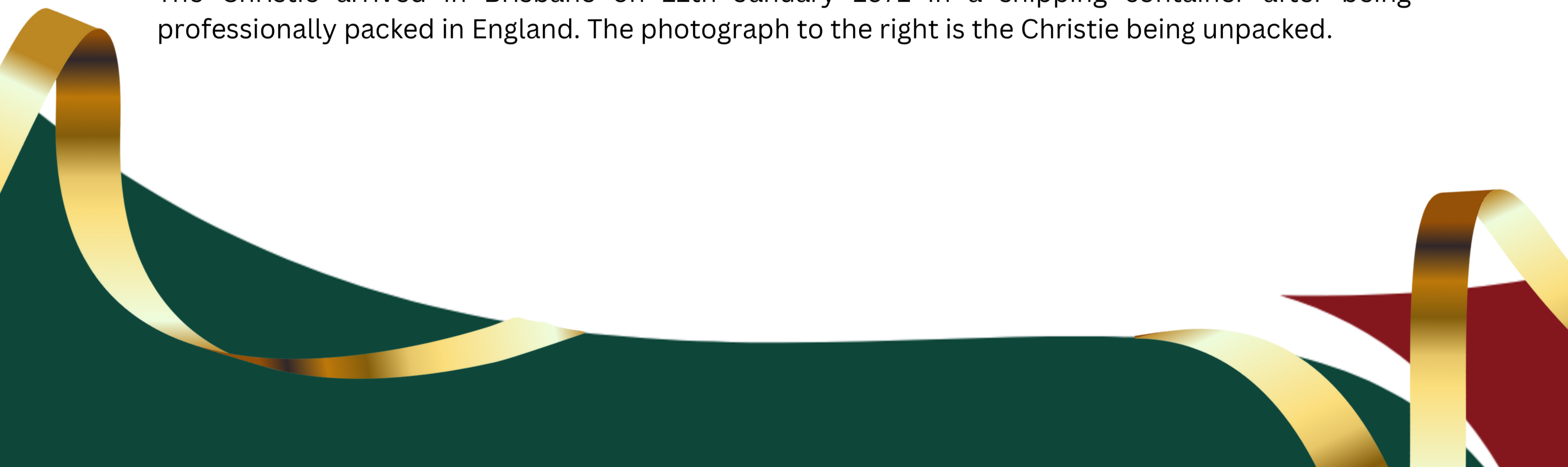
Having “lost” Brisbane’s only instrument, there was a growing interest among a group of visionaries to purchase an instrument for TOSAQ to ‘fill the void’.

In a simpler and more innocent age Brisbane had the Warana Festival, a great annual Spring extravaganza which began in 1962 and included a 2-hour parade through the city streets featuring decorated floats, marching girls, entertainers, and bands, under the blue Brisbane skies. Warana, which is an Aboriginal word for “blue skies”, endured until the early 1990s and was eventually transformed into the more sophisticated Brisbane Festival of today. (John Oxley Library)

TOSAQ was involved in the Warana Festival as early as 1969 and entered a float featuring electronic organs. As part of the festival, TOSAQ organised an annual organ festival in the Brisbane City Hall which contributed greatly to earning the money to purchase TOSAQ’s own instrument. The Brisbane organ dealers were more than happy to supply instruments to help raise funds. Money was also earned through the home organ parties. Don Clark noted “TOSAQ took part in the Warana parade in 1969. That was also the year of the first Organ Spectacular at the City Hall. A member, who was the props man with the ABC studios, built the float.”

An Organ Sub-Committee was formed and after intensive investigation in England, Ralph Bartlett and Bill Ravenall in England recommended a small Christie from the Granada Theatre, Maidstone, Kent, England which had been removed following a devastating flood in the theatre. The organ chambers were high up on the proscenium wall and were completely unaffected by the water, the console, however was not so lucky and was submerged for two weeks, rendering it unsalvageable. TOSAQ committee member Don Clark was able to obtain a replacement console originally from the Empire Theatre, Dunedin, N.Z.

The Christie arrived in Brisbane on 11th January 1971 in a shipping container after being professionally packed in England. The photograph to the right is the Christie being unpacked.



Following negotiations with the school principal of Kelvin Grove State High School, who were constructing an assembly hall, the TOSAQ committee were able to arrange for two pipe chambers to be included beside the stage and a pit area for the console lift.

In March 1973, the State Government Machinery inspector required considerable modifications to the console hoist to meet safety requirements and resulted in a more satisfactory installation. The hoist came from Trikels Wholesale Warehouse. It was an old redundant manual forklift. The forks/carrier was turned upside-down and the platform was built on top.

By May 1974, the Christie installation was nearing completion. In June 1974, at the beginning of a concert, the Christie console was presented at the top of its hoist to the members and lowered to reveal Wilbur Kentwell's instrument which was used for the concert. Following retrieval in October 1974, the Christie was raised and the members heard the first sounds from the chambers. The official opening of the Christie took place on the 12th September 1975. Don reported, "The organ opened in 1975 on its original Pneumatic relay console and stop setter board. Arthur Midgley and crew installed the Z-tronics relay sometime before 1990. Z-tronics didn't have a capture action at that time."

By 1995, the console was showing signs of wear and in need of refurbishment. Don Clark built a new console finished in polished wood. "I installed the John Andrews capture at the end of the console/organ rebuild around 2002." The opening of the 'new' organ was at the Easter convention 13 - 16th April 2001. The featured organists for that convention were Neil Jensen and John Giacchi. Glenda Kubler played the 'first notes' after completion of registration for the convention.

Don Clark recounted, "The new organ rebuild started at a small meeting on 10/10/95." The main workers were Kevin Clark, Elizabeth Cowell, Don Bland, Ivan Cocks, Rex Bower, Russell and British organist and enthusiast, Len Rawle.

TOSAQ were, sort of, only discussing adding a Clarinet stop, when Don even quietly suggested "you know a Solo String would be nice" and so it was done! The organ rebuild started in 1995 and finished with the Oboe (make unknown), and Solo String (Kimball). The Oboe came in 2001, Solo String in 2002-3. It came from a very generous donation from Robert Gliddon in Sydney and was added to the organ in 2002-3. Its maker is OSI, Organ Supply Industries. The pipes were sourced and voiced by George Stephens of Melbourne.

John Atwell designed the new Organ specification with added Stops in the horseshoe layout for the extra Ranks.

Christie Theatre Organ



Since 1975, the Christie has entertained audiences with many great international and local artists. Ongoing maintenance and upgrading have brought the Christie to world standard concert condition and in recent years, our Patron, David Gray, Royal Academy of Music, described our Christie as “the best working example of a Christie in the world”. Our organ is internationally known as a “versatile” instrument and international organists are thrilled to be invited to play it.

The school frequently uses the Christie to accompany the school song at special events. On these occasions, the school students are tutored and encouraged to play the Christie. It is a moving experience when nine hundred students in the hall erupt in joyous celebration and with phone cameras capturing the spectacle as fellow students ascend from the pit and playing the Christie.

