

John Larner

Life member of the Organ Society of Western Australia John Larner, renowned organ builder and maintainer, died on Monday 23rd October 2017.

His funeral was held at St Mary's Cathedral, Perth on Wednesday 1st November 2017.

Permission has been granted by both John's daughter Jennifer and Tony Clough to reproduce the eulogies given at the funeral service.

The Editor

Family Eulogy

Peter, Jennifer and Matthew

Presented by Jennifer McPherson-Berry
John's daughter

I am honoured to be standing here today, with my brother's Peter and Matthew, to celebrate, remember and reflect on the life of our father John Larner.

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the wonderful people at St Mary's Cathedral, namely Monsignor Keating and Jacinta Jakovcevic the Director of Music, who helped make this service - in this special place possible. It was Dad's wish for his service to be held here and for the cathedral to swell and fill with the beautiful sounds of organ music. Thank you both so much for this.

Boisterous, jovial, passionate and slightly eccentric are words that best

describe Dad. He was a larger than life character, and to be honest, a bit of a larrikin. Always charming and with a ready smile, he had the ability to connect with people from all walks of life and to draw them into his orbit in a way that was both lasting and meaningful. Being here today, and seeing all of you, shows just what Dad meant to so many people and what you meant to him.

Dad was one of the early baby boomers having been born at St Anne's Hospital in Mt Lawley on 10 March 1944 after my grandfather returned from World War II. He was the oldest child of Arthur and Winifred Larner, and big brother to Margaret and Bertha.

His first childhood home was in Zebina Street, East Perth, where he lived with his parents and grandparents. It was there, and in his next (nearly lifelong) home at 89 Guildford Road, Mt Lawley - affectionately known to many as "89" - that Dad developed one of his greatest passions - steam trains. This passion was also his greatest downfall. On many occasion, he was prone to wander off for hours on end to explore the shunting yards at East Perth. This resulted in much worry for my grandmother and a firm speaking to on each occasion for Dad. Surprisingly, this did not deter him from further adventures or misadventures, regardless of the consequence, including severely burning his feet on hot coals while running from a train.

Dad was a cheeky and incorrigible child who would tease his sisters unmercifully, including attempting to chain his little sister to the back of a tanker at the nearby petrol station. When they weren't squabbling, Dad and his sisters would go down to the sweeping driveways at St Anne's Hospital where they would ride their bikes, take out the dingy to fish on the river, and swim in the hospital pool – all the while being chased away by the nuns when discovered.

As teenagers, Friday night was Roxy 'open air' theatre night. I am told that it was not unusual for a Dad to meet one girl at the start of the night, and then sit with another following interval – believing himself to be a very charming and sophisticated young man!

Dad attended Maylands Primary School and Forest High School. According to his sister Margaret, he was a useless student who would 'wag' school a lot! As fate would have it, he was about to be saved from a life of truancy when he met Paul Hufner, a respected Organ Builder, who took Dad on as an apprentice at the age of 14.

This meeting changed Dad's life and formed his lifelong work and legacy of organ building and restoration in Western Australia.

While Dad did not come from a musical background, he would often hang around Forest Park Church where my grandmother sang in the choir. A keen interest in the pipe organ emerged around this time.

Following his apprenticeship, Dad formed his own business, FJ Larner & Co in 1968.

In 1964, Dad met our Mum, Wendy on a blind date. They married in February 1966 in Victoria Park and moved to Morley. Three children followed, two boys and a girl – which would be us – and course we were model children!

There was never a dull moment growing up in the Larner household. Most of this involved Dad's antics, which would exasperate Mum, but delight us.

Some of the fondest memories we have of Dad is sitting next to him as he played the organ at Morley Methodist Church each Sunday. We would sit there proudly as beautiful music filled the church. On occasion, one of us would take it into our head to accompany him mid-hymn, only to be firmly told off in a low and menacing voice.

There are many memories of growing up with Dad - including riding around in the back of his 'ute', sitting on his lap to learn how to tie a bow using the belt of his dressing gown, helping him out by filling up his car with the garden hose, and our one and only family holiday to Jurien Bay where we stayed in a caravan and caught fish.

On occasion he would take us to organ tunings where we would explore the nooks and crannies of wonderful churches and establishments. Sometimes we were behaved,

sometimes we were not – with one occasion involving accidentally setting off a foam fire extinguisher in one of the churches – leading to some creative explanations from Dad as to explain what had happened.

Not everything he did delighted us though, especially his penchant for playing organ music at maximum volume, laughing rambunctiously in public, and randomly talking to strangers. Something that became more endearing as he, and we, got older.

In 1977, Mum and Dad separated and subsequently divorced. In 1979, Dad met Laurie Sweetman and became part of a large extended family that included Laurie's children Debbie, Jamie, Donna, Michael, Tommy and Jenny.

Dad and Laurie lived in Maylands, before eventually moving back to 89 in the 1980's.

At this time Dad's creative and unconventional gourmet skills and techniques emerged.

Donna tells the story of being Dad's assistant when cooking one of his favourite spaghetti dishes. Dad's way to test that the spaghetti was cooked was to throw a portion of it up to the ceiling. If the spaghetti stuck, it was cooked. Unfortunately, it was not just the spaghetti that made it to the ceiling, but chunks of bacon, onion and peas. This led to much laughter, but again got Dad into trouble.

Dad was also a big fan of the great Australian BBQ – at 89, rain, hail or

shine, he would lovingly marinate the meat for his special shish kebab, or cook up his standard Boxing Day breakfast of ham steaks with pineapple and chilled champagne and orange juice.

Over the years, Dad saw his family grow with the marriages of his children and the birth of his grandchildren and great grandchildren. It was a beautiful moment when he gave me away at my wedding to Greg, played the Bridal March when Matthew and his wife Trish got married at St Andrews, went to Sydney for the wedding of Peter and his wife Denise, and also gave Donna away at her wedding to Nigel.

After many years of organ building, Dad wanted to scale back and lead a simpler life with Laurie. They moved to Yarloop, a small town in the south-west, and home to the Yarloop Steam House Museum.

During this time, Dad continued to commute to Perth to undertake organ maintenance and tuning, but on a much smaller scale. He also channelled his passion for steam engines, by becoming involved in the Yarloop Steam Museum and establishing a pop up miniature concert hall with a restored organ, where he would delight patrons with musical performances.

In 2013, Dad lost Laurie, his loving partner of 34 years. She was his constant companion and partner in crime. While Dad got on with his life, it was never quite the same for him not having Laurie by his side.

While still mourning her loss, Dad was diagnosed with Prostate Cancer. After a series of positive treatments, he was advised that his cancer had gone into partial remission. Sadly, in August of last year, Dad was told that the cancer had returned and had further spread throughout his body.

Before this secondary diagnosis however, and as most of you will know, a devastating bushfire swept through Yarloop. With only 10 minutes to spare, Dad – along with his housemates Dee and Isabella - manage to escape with just his pets and the clothes on his back. In the aftermath of the fire, Dad lost his home and all his worldly possessions.

While understandably upset, he was grateful that he escaped the fire unscathed – although the emotional remnants would remain.

He was grateful and heartened by the tremendous outpouring of support that he received from family, friends and colleagues including a special fundraiser held by the Organ Society of WA.

Following the fire Dad relocated to Bunbury where he hoped to rebuild his life however, the diagnosis of secondary cancer would change his plans again. He approached this set back with stoicism and continued to work as much as he could, and still with a smile on his face

As his illness worsened, Dad moved back to Perth to live with

Matthew and Trish and to be closer to the facilities he needed. Not long after, he was admitted to the Palliative Care unit at Bethesda Hospital where after a brave fight he passed away on 23 October.

During his time in hospital, he was very appreciative and heartened by the love and support given by you all. He never complained and during his final days remained brave, friendly and charming.

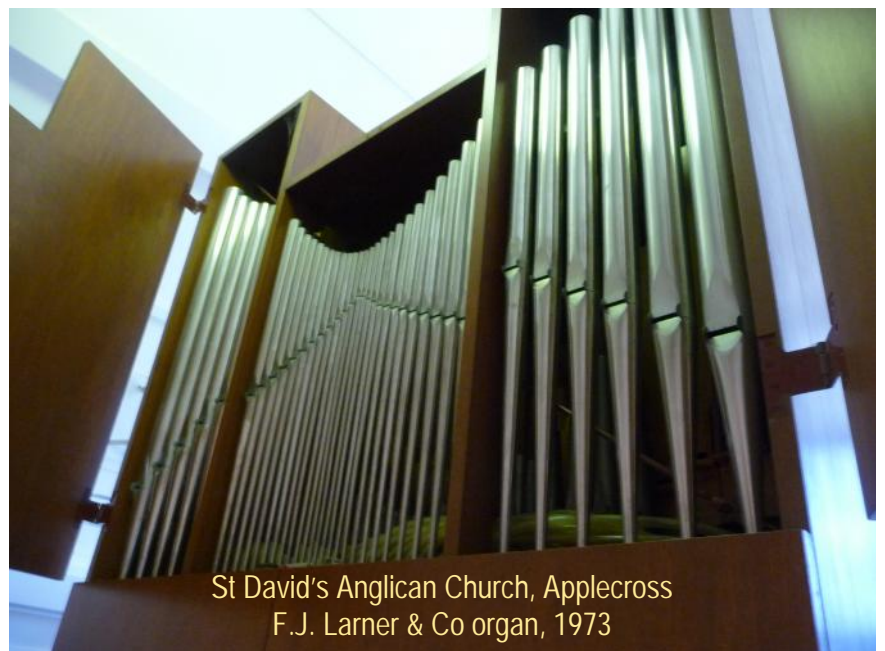
At the very end, he was still the cheeky boy who explored the rail yards, the young charmer at the Roxy Theatre, and the man with a loud laugh who would speak to anyone.

His last words to Matthew just before he passed, which perfectly summed up the essence of Dad's life, was "I'm all good".

We will miss you Dad, Poppy, John – you have left your mark on us all.

God bless you Dad. The melody may have ended, but the music lingers on.

Jennifer McPherson-Berry



A Friend's Eulogy

Tony Clough

Presented by Tony Clough
John's colleague and friend

I owe John a huge debt of gratitude. It was thanks to him that I came to Western Australia in 1970 which was certainly – well, I was going to say it was the best thing I have ever done, but as my wife is sitting just down there, I'd better say it was the second best thing I have ever done.

But I want to go back earlier than that. John's original intention was to be a printer but somehow he got bitten by the organ bug quite early on and, as many of you here will know, once you're bitten, you're infected for life. And so it was with John. He left school at 14 in 1958 and was apprenticed to Paul Hufner whose workshop was in Bayswater and who had built a number of organs in WA in the 1950s and 60s.

Paul was good teacher and John a quick learner and, after the customary seven years' apprenticeship, he was a qualified organ builder. He also had a very enquiring mind and was an avid reader of anything to do with organs. Over time, he collected quite a large library which was, sadly, all destroyed in the Yarloop fire nearly two years ago.

John worked with Paul for a year or two, then, having got married in 1966, felt confident enough to branch out on his own. John and Wendy's first house was in Lovegrove Way in Morley but it

wasn't long before they had moved to nearby Charnwood Street, where John's workshop was an overgrown garden shed in the backyard. Unlined and uninsulated, it was bitterly cold in winter and boiling hot in summer. Despite that, he managed to build a couple of organs there, for St Augustine's Anglican Church in Bayswater and for Hale School Chapel. In 1969 John decided he needed more experience. Reading was one thing but he needed to see and hear different schools of organs and organ building. At that time, I was working for JW Walker and Sons, then the largest firm of organ builders in Europe with just over 200 people on the payroll. I was one of about 15 on the management side.

In June that year, a letter arrived with an Australian stamp on it. The writer said he was an organ builder in Perth, Western Australia, and that he was planning to visit England very soon; could he come and see us? It was signed John Larner. There was absolutely no other information about himself at all. But we were interested. In 1959 Walkers had completed a major rebuild of the organ in St George's Cathedral, and in 1964 had built the organ in Winthrop Hall. As well, there were Walker organs in St Margaret's, Nedlands, and St Michael and All Angels, Cannington. We had been hearing that the tuning and maintenance of these instruments was not up to the standard we liked, so if there was new organ builder in Perth,

we certainly wanted to see him.

The job of meeting this Mr Larner and looking after him for the two weeks he would be in England was given to me. On the appointed day, I went to Heathrow Airport, not far from Walker's factory in Ruislip, with no idea what to expect. I waited at the Arrivals Gate, holding up a piece of cardboard with the name John Larner on it in large letters. Eventually someone came up and said g'day. He looked a bit dishevelled after 24 hours in the back end of a QANTAS 707, but I was pleased to see he appeared to be about my age. In fact, as I was to discover, John was just four weeks older than me, so for four weeks each year I got to call him 'old man'!

Introductions over, John announced he was hungry and thirsty. We went off to find a pub close to the airport where I got him a pie and a pint. Of course, all this was going on expenses, as was every mile I covered with him in my car. Walkers weren't best pleased when I presented my log book showing we had covered getting on for three thousand miles! Well, you should have heard the complaints; the pie was cold, the beer was warm. It was, of course, a good English pork pie, and the beer was best bitter at cellar temperature. Despite the grizzles, he finished both and even downed a second pint. Not bad, I thought, for a lad who, I was later to find out, had been brought up as a good non-drinking Methodist.

Next stop was John's hotel. He'd

booked into somewhere in Bayswater, then a slightly downmarket part of London just north of Kensington Palace Gardens. The hotel itself looked decidedly seedy, as if it were the sort of grubby place that rented its rooms by the hour. I left John to sort himself out and catch up on some sleep and said I'd meet him again later for a meal.

As it happened, I lived just down the road in the much trendier district of Notting Hill Gate where I shared a house with four other lads, one of whom was away on holiday. And when one of us was away, it was nice to find a temporary resident to fill in and pay the absentee's share of the rent. When the other three chaps had all got back from work, I said, I've got this Aussie just down the road in a grim hotel; how about we let him have Mark's room for a fortnight? They all agreed Mark would be delighted to have his rent paid, and I went back to the hotel to get John.

He was thrilled at the offer of the spare room and was quick to repack and check out. The hotel didn't seem to be at all worried that John had been there for about three hours and not the fortnight he had booked in for. Then he moved in with us where he fitted in very well. His share of the rent for two weeks was probably about what one night would have cost in the hotel so immediately he had more spending money, much of which was turned into liquid assets.

As we got to know each other better, we discovered we had quite a lot in

common – not just organs but also steam engines (we were both railway nerds) and printing. This was several years before the digital age and printing was still done on letter presses and typeset on linotype machines. All of these pieces of machinery fascinated both of us.

The next morning we went off to Walkers where John met everyone and had a slow tour of every department in the workshops. It was quite obvious to us all that he knew what he was talking about. But could he tune? That's what we really needed to know. An organ in a church not too far away was due its regular tuning visit: would John like to do it? Well, he didn't really have much choice, but he passed that test with flying colours. Walkers was happy to appoint him as their agent in Western Australia.

For the rest of his time in England we had a lot of fun, visiting numerous organs we could get to and from in a day's run. For anything in London itself, we went by Tube which John loved. Oxford was a popular destination as there were many interesting organs there in the college chapels, as well as a new Walker organ in Phil and Jim, the nickname we had all given, somewhat irreverently, to the Church of St Philip and St James. And Bristol too could be got to and from in a day if we didn't spend too long over lunch. There was a new Walker tracker action organ in All Saints, Clifton.

Before John left Perth, the local branch

of the Theatre Organ Society had asked him if he could find them a suitable theatre organ. In the 1960s, many cinemas in the UK were closing and being turned into bingo halls or knocked down for redevelopment, so there were many organs to be had at a reasonable price. And there was one in the Plaza Cinema in Worthing on England's south coast. We went down to have a look; it was a three manual ten rank Compton, built in 1933 and still in very good nick.

John reported back to the Theatre Organ Society here and in due course they bought the organ, Walkers dismantled it and packed it up and it was shipped out here, where it is giving good service in the John Leckie Pavilion in Nedlands.

I must mention one recital John and I went to, because he remembered it well and we both had a good chuckle about it just a couple of weeks ago. It was in St Alban's Abbey as part of the 1969 Organ Festival there and I think it was Peter Hurford who was playing. Peter was Abbey organist then and also the founder of the Organ Festival. John and I were sitting together and in the pew in front of us was Bert Collop, Walker's Managing Director and my boss. Next to him was his old friend and rival, Cuthbert Harrison, owner of the famous Durham firm of organ builders, Harrison and Harrison.

The last piece was one of those very loud, horribly discordant jangly noises that barely deserve to be called music. I

have no idea who wrote it, but fingers didn't seem necessary for playing it; it was more a case of elbows and forearms and flat feet playing as many pedal notes as possible. It was a cruel test of the organ's wind system. As the last cacophonous discords died away, Bert turned to Cuthbert and said in a stage whisper that was clearly meant to be heard in the organ loft, "You know, Cuthbert, I sometimes wonder why we bother to build the bloody things."

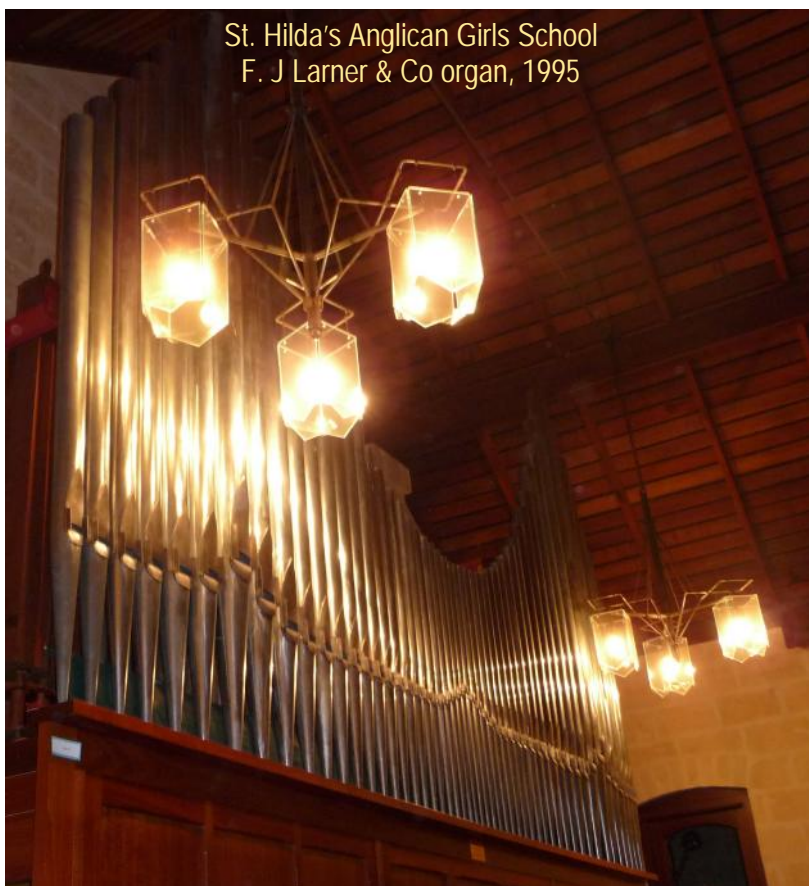
The time came for John to move on to the next part of his journey, to Holland where he would meet the suppliers of organ parts as well as pipemakers - and of course see and hear some completely different organs. As I took him to the airport, he said to me, "Why don't you come and work with me in Perth? You'd be very welcome." I thought about his offer and in the end decided to accept. Six months later I came to Perth and John and I formed the partnership of FJ Larner & Co. I was the & Co part. Our notepaper proudly proclaimed "Agents for JW Walker & Sons Ltd, London."

At that time John was just moving his workshop from the garden shed to an old disused Methodist church in West Swan Road, Caversham. It was a weatherboard building with a pronounced lean to it but it served as our workshop most nobly for a few years. And the rent was peanuts. When I arrived, John was halfway through building a new organ for the Chapel at Christ

Church Grammar School. Ironic, really. Walkers had put in a tender for the job but it was John who got the contract.

Once that was complete, we built an organ for Scots Church in Albany and for St Augustine's Uniting Church in Bunbury. Then followed John's first tracker action organ, a two manual one for Guildford Grammar School's fine Chapel. Mechanical action was a new venture for us and I have to say it caused a few teething problems, although in the end it worked out well. That organ has since been rebuilt.

It was after this that I realised organ building in WA wasn't going to support two families and I joined the ABC. However, I was still the & Co part of the business, and when my shift work and family life permitted, I would give John a hand and manage the paperwork side of things.



By now, the old workshop in Caversham was past its use-by date. It had developed even more of a lean and looked to be in serious danger of toppling right over. A new home was essential and we found a unit in Bayswater, quite coincidentally right next door to Paul Hufner's workshop. He was still active in those days and was always a friendly and pleasant neighbour. That unit became FJ Larner & Co's base for a number of years and is now home to Graham Devenish's firm, Pipe Organs WA.

Although our partnership was dissolved in the 1980s, John and I always remained in touch with each other and stayed good friends. And I still continued to hold keys for him, especially at the busy times of Christmas and Easter.

In the more than half century John was at work in Perth, he built or rebuilt a comprehensive list of organs, as well as tuning and maintaining at some time just about every organ in WA.

I'm not going to list everything he worked on as it would take far too long and I really don't want to send you to sleep, if I haven't done so already.

But it is worth mentioning the movable organ he built for the ABC studios which is now in Edith Cowan University; St Cecilia's Catholic Church, Floreat Park and St Hilda's Girls' School Chapel. These were new organs. Major rebuilds include the Sisters of Mercy Convent Chapel, just over the road from here; St Andrew's Uniting Church

in St George's Terrace, an organ now in store as the church has had to be demolished; and Holy Trinity Anglican Church in York.

And of course, the organ he built in the Yarloop workshops out of bits and pieces. The front pipes were some of the original front pipes from the first St George's Cathedral organ built by Hill in 1875. There were many happy and fun organ days there but, sadly, that too was all destroyed in the fire.

But the organ of which he was probably most proud was that in St Francis Xavier's Cathedral in Geraldton. Completed in 1981, it was a two manual, 17 stop tracker organ with a reversed console. Now almost 40 years later, that organ is being enlarged and moved to the west end gallery. It was too big a job for John to do and he was pleased that Graham's firm is carrying out the work.

That, and the many other organs John built will remain a long lasting legacy to him. As indeed will his three children, Peter, Jenny and Matthew. John, I know, was very proud of all of you.

It is said that in heaven, the angels listen to Mozart but God listens to Bach. If that is so, then there must be an organ in heaven. John is probably tuning it right now; who knows, maybe Bach himself is holding the keys for him.

May you rest in pain-free peace, old mate. You will be missed.

Tony Clough

**Organs built or restored by John Larner
(alphabetical order)**

Compiled from records held by the Organ Society of Western Australia

Aldersgate Uniting Church	Nedlands
Australian Broadcasting Commission Basil Kirke Studio	Perth City
Baptist Church	Perth City
Christ Church Anglican Church	Claremont
Christ Church Grammar School	Claremont
Congregational Church	North Perth
Edith Cowan University Academy of Performing Arts	Mount Lawley
First Church of Christ Scientist	Perth City
Forum Uniting Church	Floreat
Free Reformed Church	Albany
Guildford Grammar School, Assembly Hall	Guildford
Guildford Grammar School, Chapel of St Mary and St George	Guildford
Hale School Assembly Hall	Wembley Downs
Hale School Chapel	Wembley Downs
Holy Rosary Catholic Church	Doubleview
Holy Trinity Anglican Church	York
Methodist Church	North Perth
Morley Uniting Church	Morley
Our Lady Queen of Apostles Catholic Church	Riverton
Our Lady Queen of Peace Catholic Church	Willagee
Our Lady's Assumption Catholic Church	Dianella
Perth College	Mount Lawley

Residence of Jake Maring

Byford

Residence of Mr Kingsley Jones

Kardinya

Residence of Mr John Larner

Mount Lawley

Residence of Mr John Larner

Yarloop

Ross Memorial Uniting Church

West Perth

Scots Presbyterian Church

Fremantle

Scots Uniting Church

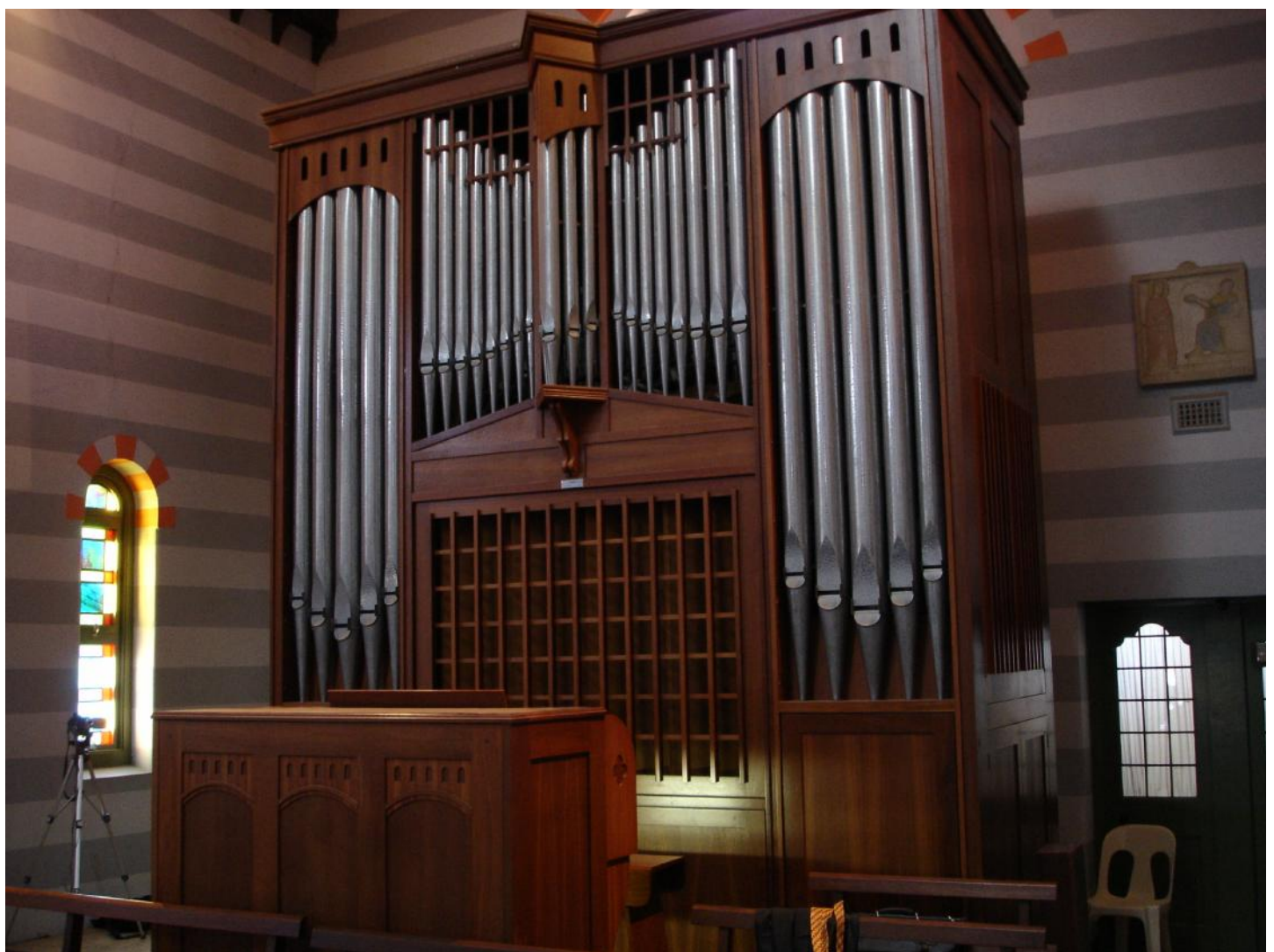
Albany

Convent of the Sisters of Mercy

Perth City

St. Aidan's Uniting Church

Claremont



St Francis Xavier Cathedral
Geraldton
F. J Larner & Co organ, 1981

St. Alban's Anglican Church	Highgate
St. Andrew's Uniting Church	Perth City
St. Augustine's Anglican Church	Bayswater
St. Augustine's Uniting Church	Bunbury
St. Cecilia's Catholic Church	Floreat
St. David's Anglican Church	Applecross
St. Francis Xavier Catholic Cathedral	Geraldton
St. George's Anglican Cathedral	Perth City
St. Hilda's Anglican Girls School	Mosman Park
St. John the Baptist Anglican Church	Kalgoorlie
St. John's Anglican Church	Fremantle
St. Luke's Anglican Church	Mosman Park
St. Matthew's Anglican Church	Guildford
St. Mary the Virgin Anglican Church	West Perth
St. Mary's Cathedral	Perth
St. Patrick's Anglican Church	Mount Lawley
St. Philip's Anglican Church	Cottesloe
Trinity Uniting Church	Perth City
Uniting Church	Morley
University of Western Australia Winthrop Hall	Crawley
Wesley Church	Perth City
Wesley Church	York
Yarloop Steamhouse Workshop	Yarloop

