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# WILLIS PIPE ORGAN



Willis organ\_Wesley Uniting  
Church\_Box Hill\_16 Jan 2008



Wesley Uniting Church\_Box  
Hill\_16 Jan 08

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## Location

WESLEY UNITING CHURCH, 515 STATION STREET BOX HILL, WHITEHORSE CITY

## Municipality

WHITEHORSE CITY

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2156

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO77

## VHR Registration

May 8, 2008

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

### What is significant?

This pipe organ was built in 1877 by the notable London organbuilder Henry 'Father' Willis (1821-1901) for the Hon. Henry Miller, a parliamentarian and one of Victoria's wealthiest men at that time. Willis was one of Europe's leading nineteenth century organ builders, and was called 'Father' Willis both to distinguish him from his organbuilder descendants and because of his contribution to the art and science of organ building. This organ was the only one exported by Father Willis to Victoria and was a prestigious example of his work. The organ was installed at the end of the large ballroom at Findon, Miller's house at Kew, where it was depicted in an illustration in *Victoria and its Metropolis* (1888). No expense was spared in the construction of the organ, with superlative materials and lavish finishes being freely employed. After 1908 it was moved to the ballroom of Whernside in Toorak, owned by Albert Miller and later Edward Miller, sons of Henry Miller, and the central pipe on the organ facade may then have been slightly cut down for a reduced ceiling height. Whernside was sold in 1928 and in 1930 the organ was installed in the Methodist Church at Box Hill, where it survives today with little alteration from the original. It was subject to maintenance and restoration in 1969 and 1983.

The Willis organ is an impressive instrument with a fine quality oak console, ornately decorated pipes, turned solid ivory and rosewood drawstops, thick ivory keys and immaculately finished internal components. It has two manuals, seventeen speaking stops, three couplers and has a mechanical action. The place and date of manufacture are recorded on one of the bellows ribs and the instrument has a brass plate above the keyboard bearing the builder's name, probably added after its arrival in Victoria. The fine Willis sound has been preserved and the casework is unaltered except for the addition of the lower left- and right-hand panels.

### How is it significant?

The Henry Willis organ in the Wesley Uniting Church is of historical significance to the state of Victoria.

### Why is it significant?

The Willis organ is historically significant as an outstanding and intact example of English organ building of the nineteenth century. It is a fine example of the work of Henry 'Father' Willis, one of Europe's leading nineteenth century organ builders, and is the only example of a nineteenth century Willis organ in Victoria. The instrument is notable for its superlative workmanship and materials, together with its excellent sound. It demonstrates the wealth and domestic aspirations of Henry, nicknamed 'Money', Miller, a notable resident of Boom-period Melbourne.

## Permit Exemptions

General Conditions: 1. All exempted alterations are to be planned and carried out in a manner which prevents damage to the fabric of the registered place or object. General Conditions: 2. Should it become apparent during further inspection or the carrying out of works that original or previously hidden or inaccessible details of the place or object are revealed which relate to the significance of the place or object, then the exemption covering such works shall cease and Heritage Victoria shall be notified as soon as possible. General Conditions: 3. If there is a conservation policy and plan endorsed by the Executive Director, all works shall be in accordance with it. Note: The existence of a Conservation Management Plan or a Heritage Action Plan endorsed by the Executive Director, Heritage Victoria provides guidance for the management of the heritage values associated with the site. It may not be necessary to obtain a heritage permit for certain works specified in the management plan. General Conditions: 4. Nothing in this determination prevents the Executive Director from amending or rescinding all or any of the permit exemptions.

Routine maintenance: Pipe Organs require regular servicing particularly tuning and attendance to action problems. Such procedures usually take place monthly, quarterly, half yearly or annually. Such activities would not impact in any way on the heritage status of the instrument provided they are carried out by appropriate firms, and would not require a permit.

Construction dates	1877,
Heritage Act Categories	Registered object,
Other Names	WESLEY UNITING CHURCH,
Hermes Number	26897
Property Number	

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## History

### CONTEXTUAL HISTORY

(Adapted from the entry in the Organ Historical Trust of Australia website at [www.ohta.org.au](http://www.ohta.org.au))

Pipe organs were brought to Victoria by British settlers throughout the nineteenth century, some commissioned specifically from British firms, and from 1840 they were also made in Australia. By the end of the nineteenth century Australia possessed some of the finest contemporary examples of the organbuilder's craft to be found anywhere in the world. All of the illustrious English organbuilders of the period were represented by instruments in Australia, including J W Walker & Sons (fifty-four instruments) and Hill & Son (thirty-four instruments), together with many regional builders from Birmingham, Bristol, Huddersfield, Hull and Manchester. Principal imports included the town hall organs in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne, all built by Hill & Son. A number of organs also arrived from continental Europe, the largest coming from such firms as Merklin Schütze of Brussels, E F Walcker of Ludwigsburg, R A Randebrock of Paderborn, and Theodore Puget of Toulouse. Many of these surviving instruments are now of international significance.

Many of the old organs have been lost and the significance of others substantially eroded by insensitive rebuilding, particularly the introduction of electric actions and tonal modifications.

Henry Willis (1821-1901), also known as 'Father' Willis

[Entry for Henry Willis from *Wikipedia* at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry\\_Willis\\_&\\_Sons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Willis_&_Sons)]

Henry Willis & Sons is a firm of pipe organ builders founded in 1845 in the UK, examples of whose work can also be found in other countries. Four generations of the Willis family continued the family tradition of organ building until 1997 when Henry Willis IV retired and the first non-family Managing Director (David Wyld) was appointed. On the 28th November 1998 the total shareholding of all of the Willis family members was acquired.

The charismatic founder of the company, the eponymous Henry Willis, was nicknamed "Father Willis" because of his contribution to the art and science of organ building, and to distinguish him from his younger relatives working in the firm.

Willis's are regarded as the leading organ builders of the Victorian era, itself a time when both civic and religious commitment led to the erection of a large number of impressive buildings and other public works. During the Industrial Revolution any town worth its salt would want an imposing Town Hall, preferably with a Willis organ, and a substantial (and similarly equipped) church. Industrialists competed to endow the most lavish halls and instruments.

The result was a convergence of both a very fine and technically proficient organ builder, and a substantial number of commissions for really exceptional instruments. This heritage has, fortunately, lived on.

The most famous 'Father' Willis organs are probably those in the Royal Albert Hall, St Paul's, Salisbury and Truro Cathedrals, but there are many more including the cathedrals in Aberdeen, Calcutta, Canterbury, Durham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Hereford, Lincoln, Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, and the town church of Inverness, the Old High Church. Windsor Castle had a Willis until it was destroyed by a fire in November 1992, as do Blenheim Palace and several town halls (e.g. Reading), the Sheldonian Theatre and the Royal Academy of Music. The famous organ in London's Alexandra Palace, built by Father Willis in 1875-6 and rebuilt by his grandson in 1929

following damage at the end of the First World War, was again damaged in 1944, has only partly been repaired and still awaits final restoration. Although Willis are mostly remembered for organs on the grand scale they also built smaller instruments, including the 1881 'organ on wheels' at St Paul's Cathedral which has been referred to as 'one of the most outstanding small organs of all time' (Clutter 1982, p 90). His workmanship has been described as 'without rival' and that he 'never produced an organ which was not a masterpiece' (ibid, p 91).

Henry Miller (1809-1888)

[From ADB entry]

Henry Miller was born in Ireland, migrated to Sydney in 1823 and to Van Diemen's Land in 1826 with his family, was later educated in Paris and Glasgow, and settled in Melbourne in 1839. He began business as a financier and merchant, established an insurance company and a series of building societies in the 1840s, and acquired many pastoral and city properties. He became a member of Victoria's first Legislative Council and was made Minister for Trade and Customs in 1858, vice-president of the Board of Lands and Works and Commissioner of Railways and Roads in 1866. Miller was an opportunist and a brilliant investor, and dedicated himself to making money, thereby earning the nickname 'Money Miller'. He died at his thirty-acre property Findon at Kew in 1888, leaving an estate in Victoria valued at ?1,456,680.

## HISTORY OF PLACE

[From OHTA website, entry for 'Wesley Uniting (former Methodist) Church, Box Hill']

The instrument was built in 1877 by the notable London organbuilder Henry Willis for the ballroom of 'Findon', Kew, the residence of The Hon. Henry Miller, a parliamentarian, and one of Victoria's wealthiest men. The place and date are recorded on one of the bellows ribs and the instrument unusually has a large brass plate bearing the builder's name (perhaps added after its arrival in Victoria). This was the only example of an organ exported by 'Father' Willis to Victoria and was a prestigious example of his work with turned solid ivory drawstops, thick ivory keys and immaculately finished internal components. It is likely that it was erected at 'Findon' by Robert Mackenzie as the local organbuilder George Fincham had not succeeded in delivering an earlier instrument ordered by Miller by the due date and it remained in Fincham's factory for some time before going to John Knox Presbyterian Church, Gardenvale.

We have copies of two schemes submitted to the Hon. Henry Miller for the organ at 'Findon', Kew, Victoria. The organ that was built was a conflation of the two schemes. The organ and the mansion Findon was shown in the 1888 work *Victoria and Its Metropolis*.

In 1901 and 1908 the organ was cleaned and later restored by Fincham & Son. After 1908 it was moved to the ballroom of 'Whernside', in Toorak, owned by Albert and later Edward Miller, sons of Henry Miller, where the central pipe on the facade may have been slightly cut down for a reduced ceiling height. The property was sold in 1928 to Sir Colin Fraser and it is likely that the organ was removed at this time. It was installed in 1930 at a cost of £650 in the Methodist Church, Box Hill by W.L. Roberts. It remains unaltered apart from the introduction of electric blowing, tuning slides, a balanced swell pedal and a swell tremulant. Classified by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) as a significant organ, there are currently plans for a careful restoration. Restoration work was carried out by Hill, Norman & Beard in 1966; no essential alterations were made at this time. In 1983 further cleaning and maintenance work was carried out by Parker & Welsh of Burwood.

## Assessment Against Criteria

### a. *The historical importance, association with or relationship to Victoria's history of the place or object*

The Willis organ demonstrates the wealth and domestic aspirations of the wealthy citizens of Boom-period Melbourne, in particular of Henry, nicknamed 'Money', Miller, who had arrived in Melbourne in 1839, began business as a financier and merchant, and became one of Victoria's wealthiest men and a prominent parliamentarian. The organ was commissioned for the ballroom of Findon, Miller's mansion in Kew.

### b. *The importance of a place or object in demonstrating rarity or uniqueness*

The organ is the only example of a nineteenth century Willis organ in Victoria. In England Willis' organs are located in such prestigious places as the Royal Albert Hall, St Paul's Cathedral and many cathedrals, Blenheim Palace, the Alexandra Palace, and formerly in Windsor Castle (now destroyed).

- c. The place or object's potential to educate, illustrate or provide further scientific investigation in relation to Victoria's cultural heritage
- d. The importance of a place or object in exhibiting the principal characteristics or the representative nature of a place or object as part of a class or type of places or objects
- e. The importance of the place or object in exhibiting good design or aesthetic characteristics and/or in exhibiting a richness, diversity or unusual integration of features

The Willis organ is a fine and prestigious example of the work of Henry 'Father' Willis, one of Europe's leading nineteenth century organ builders, and is an outstanding and intact example of English organ building of the nineteenth century. The instrument is notable for its superlative workmanship and materials, together with its excellent sound.

- f. The importance of the place or object in demonstrating or being associated with scientific or technical innovations or achievements
- g. The importance of the place or object in demonstrating social or cultural associations
- h. Any other matter which the Council deems relevant to the determination of cultural heritage significance

## **Plaque Citation**

This outstanding example of English organ building was made in 1877 by Henry 'Father' Willis for Henry 'Money' Miller, one of Victoria's wealthiest men, for the ballroom of Miller's house Findon at Kew.

## **Extent of Registration**

The object described as the Henry Willis Pipe Organ, currently located in the Wesley Uniting Church, 2-6 Oxford Street, Box Hill.

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*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.*

*For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>*