

Writing the history of Charles Begg & Co

Begg's pianos arrive at O'Hara's Music Warehouse, the company's Wanganui agent, in this early 20th-century photograph. Note the German pianos on the footpath which date the picture as pre-World War One.

Begg's the story so far ...

BY CLARE GLEESON

Growing up in Wellington in the 1960s and 1970s, I was occasionally asked if I had any connection to the music shop with the same name in Manners Street. I always found the answer a difficult one, knowing that my forebears had established the business, but that my family did not own it.

However, my father did import music and musical instruments — it all seemed very complicated.

By the time I left primary school, the Begg's shops were all owned

individually, Charles Begg and Company Ltd had been broken up and that seemed the end of it (although with the shop retaining the name, the questions still came occasionally).

As I got older and studied history, my interest grew and I began to wonder where exactly Begg's did fit in within the musical life of New Zealand. Finally, about two years ago, I decided not to defer any longer and begin what seemed a somewhat daunting project — to write a history of Charles Begg & Co Ltd and establish its importance to the musical, cultural and social life of New Zealand during the period of its existence, from 1861 to 1970.

I WANTED to know for myself, but I also wanted to provide a record for family, my children and nephew and nieces of exactly where and how Begg's fitted in.

And so my quest began and what a fascinating one it has been. I have haunted the Turnbull and Hocken libraries, made a nuisance of myself to archivists and librarians throughout New Zealand, the UK, Australia and the USA, scoured business directories, newspapers, programmes, correspondence and

countless archives. I have tried to locate every original piece of music Begg's published, to identify the huge variety of instruments and other goods they sold and see as many examples of these as possible.

I have always found old photographs fascinating and have tried to locate photographs of shops, employees, and performers. I have travelled to Scotland to see where it all began, and throughout New Zealand looking at places Begg's had branches or agencies and interviewing past employees.

My initial approach was to gather all the information I could find and then work through it to write up the history chronologically. No business archives, as such, existed for Begg's and so my research had to be more far-reaching, looking at peripheral materials, such as those mentioned above. As I progressed I realised what a huge task this is, particularly for the last 50 years of the company's existence when it was so large and diverse. I am also conscious of the fact that no matter how much information I gather, there will be things I leave out, simply because I am not aware of them.

I do feel, however, that I am



L:eft: Begg's first Auckland shop in Customs Street East c1930s.

Right: Begg's annual cricket match between Invercargill and Dunedin — the Himburg Hastie shield — late 1940s to mid 1950s. I do not have all the names but the ones I have are: Back row, ?, ?, Ken Begg, ?, ?; centre row, Jimmie Himburg, Harry Fiddis, Charlie Wishart; front row, Mark Blackie, ?, ?, ?. I am in contact with an old Invercargill employee and am hoping he can provide more names. Ken Begg, my father, is Charles Begg's great-grandson and Charlie Wishart is Charles Begg's grandson. Photograph supplied by Beverley Romanes whose father, Jock Densem, worked for Begg's in Dunedin.



beginning to form a fairly good idea of Begg's place in the community and what it meant to people. Of course there is endless detail to fill in — I am still researching the period from 1926 onwards in depth — but the story I have discovered so far has been fascinating. There have been heroes and villains, family feuds, strong and weak managers, sound business acumen and the odd failed enterprise, loyalty, commitment, initiative, humour and above all, music.

There are so many interesting personalities and stories that one book could never cover them all and I am very grateful to all the people who have helped and shared their memories with me.

Even though it may seem somewhat obvious, no business can exist without people, and this is what I have found most intriguing — the importance of people to the business, be they family, staff, composers, musicians, customers or the New Zealand public.

Although initially this was to be

a business history, even without the familial link I would have found the personalities involved irresistible and they will become an important part of the story.

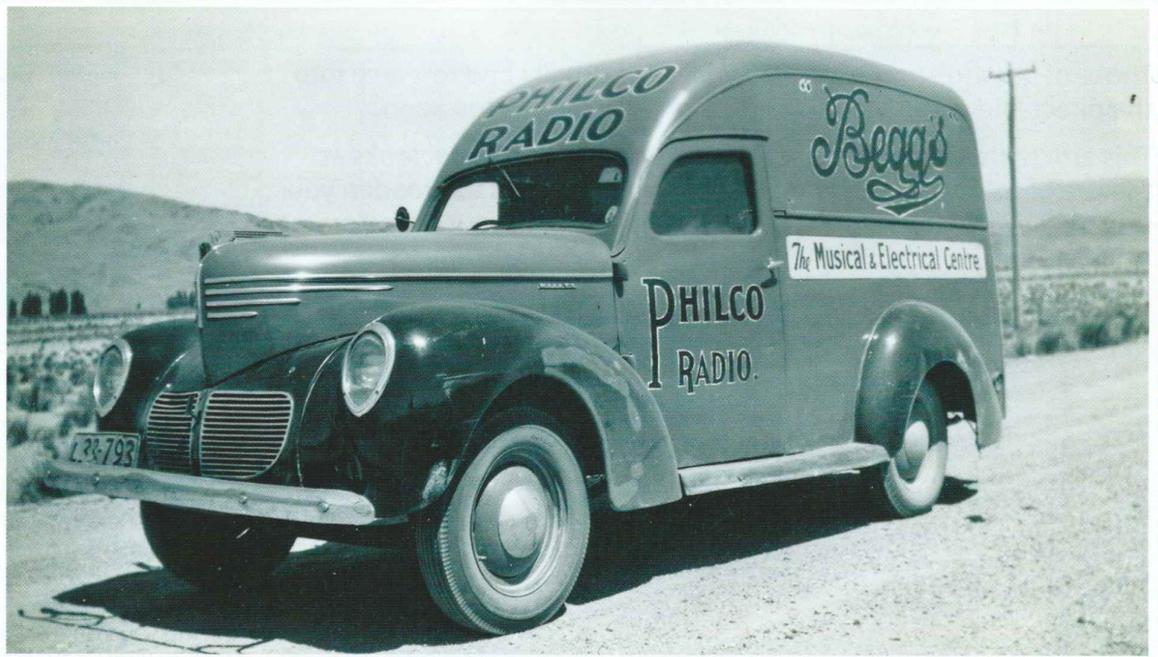
One outstanding example of this is Charles Begg's widow, Jessie. Charles himself died in 1874, only 13 years after arriving in New Zealand. Although the company always retained his name, Jessie Begg is one of the two heroes of Begg's story, the other being her grandson, Eric.

WIDOWED at 42, Jessie was left with seven children, the youngest only 1, and a business that was not particularly robust, but which was their only means of livelihood. Over the next 40 years, she raised and educated her children, for a time ran a boardinghouse (presumably to augment their income) and all this while she managed and expanded the company.

Her sons took over the management

in 1896, but Jessie remained on the board until her death in 1914, by which time the company had branches in Dunedin, Timaru, Wellington, Invercargill, Oamaru and Nelson and an office in London. This amazing woman can be seen in a photograph of a staff picnic c1911, surrounded by members of Begg's Dunedin staff and their families.

A group of people I have found particularly fascinating are the agents who acted for Begg's. I have discovered branches and agencies for Begg's literally everywhere in New Zealand from 1875 onwards. The branches are interesting microcosms of the company but the agencies, particularly in the latter part of the 19th and early 20th centuries are a fascinating insight into the life of small communities. Agents came and went; some, like Mr F. G. JOHNSTONE in Milton, were agents for many years, while in Ashburton the agency changed every couple of years or so.



Begg's Willys service van in Central Otago in the late 1940s..

THE AGENTS themselves are intriguing. One of my favourites is that of S. P. BURR, "The Cash Grocer" in Foxton, who in his 1900 advertisement boasts "Agent for Begg & Co. pianos" and underneath "Poultry and Eggs bought". Agents were cabinetmakers, watchmakers, newspaper agencies, drapers, jewellers, music teachers — virtually any type of business that Begg's thought would represent them well. Music was such an integral part of every community that it was unthinkable that you might not be able to buy the latest sheet music locally, or purchase a piano or other musical instrument as you desired.

Of course, the staff were a vital part of Begg's success. Many people served their entire working lives with Begg's and I think I can confidently say that no-one served longer than Jimmie HIMBURG. He joined the company in 1891 at the tender age of 11 and was still working there when he died 67 years later. His name was synonymous with music and Begg's in Dunedin. There were lots of others as well and I hesitate to list them, as I know there will be omissions, but for those who worked in Wellington, who could not have heard of Pinkie MEARS, secretary to the managers there and "loved by everyone", as I have often been told. Walter SINTON was Begg's Dunedin for many people and quite literally everyone I have spoken to in Dunedin about Begg's has said to me "you must speak to the GARDINERS" (Joan and Margaret), which of course I have done.

The composers of the original compositions that Begg's published could justify a book in themselves.

Initially, of course, they were immigrants and many of these were already highly successful musicians, and sometimes composers, overseas before coming to New Zealand, often only spending a few years here before moving on again. They eagerly embraced their new home and such compositions as *Dunedin Polka*, *Zealandia March* and *Mataura Waltz* were early forerunners to the *Nikau Waltz* and *Haera Ra* of later years.

These, often larger-than-life, personalities were of all nationalities — German, American, French, Australian, Italian as well as British. Later there were New Zealand-born composers such as Alf PETTITT, Ruru KARAITIANA and many, many more.

And where would Begg's have been without musicians — professional and amateur, young and old, eager and reluctant — they all contributed to the success that the business enjoyed. Most of the staff were musicians themselves — the "girls" selling sheet music had to be able to play a piece for a customer to see if they liked it and those selling instruments were usually involved in musical groups after working hours. Begg's was a meeting place for a town's musicians — the phrase "meet me at Begg's" has cropped up often in the interviews I have conducted.

As for the customers — those eager for the latest tunes in sheet music, keen to hear Caruso singing on the new invention, the phonograph; those needing a reed for their clarinet or string for their violin. There were many characters among them — in Auckland the gentleman who used to come in and pretend he was a virtuoso pianist on one of the grand pianos, sweeping the staid

Begg's accountant into a waltz when he asked him to desist; in Wellington the composer who was the only one who ever bought a copy of his own composition, but bought one regularly; in Dunedin the opinionated music teacher who literally became wedged upside down between two pianos while examining the back of one of them and in the process displayed her red undergarments.

All these I have heard about from past employees and I am so grateful to them for their memories. They make Begg's the business come alive and after all that is what it was — a living and vital part of New Zealand society.

To the many people who have responded to my request for memories and information through this journal, thank you. I am so grateful for the contacts made, photographs sent and memories told. I still have a lot to cover and would welcome any more information any reader has — it all adds to the fabric and colour of the patchwork that was Begg's.

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