

Begg's War

By Clare Gleeson, Librarian, Radio New Zealand

Founded in 1861, Charles Begg & Co. Ltd – or Begg's as it was better known – played an important part in New Zealand's social and business history. Synonymous with music, Begg's became not only a retailer but also a manufacturer of instruments, publisher of sheet music, promoter of overseas artists and supporter of music in all its facets. The First World War affected most aspects of New Zealand life, however, and the music trade was no exception. This is the story of Begg's war.

From 5 August 1914, at the outbreak of war, feeling against everything German ran high and the esteem in which German goods had been held evaporated. There were two major music houses in New Zealand: Charles Begg & Co. Ltd ("Begg's") and the Dresden Pianoforte Manufacturing & Agency Co. Ltd ("the Dresden"). Each had head offices in Dunedin with branches and agencies all over the country. Both companies were large importers and retailers of musical instruments and printed music, importing the major percentage of their goods from Britain and the rest of Europe.

German pianos had been extremely popular and Begg's had stocked many German makes. A Charles Begg & Co. account book, held in the Hocken Collections, University of Otago Library,¹ covers sales of pianos and organs in Otago and Southland between April 1914 and October 1919, and lists many German brands. Given that importation of German pianos stopped in August 1914 these must have been either purchased prior to that date or second-hand pianos.

Prior to 1914, Begg's had used Leipzig music printers Oppenheimer Bros and C.G. Roder for many of their sheet music publications for more than 10 years. Leipzig had been the centre of music printing and these publications have beautiful, delicately coloured cover illustrations, far superior to those produced in New Zealand at the time. Begg's had also imported large quantities of music other publishers had printed in Germany.

After August 1914 both Begg's and the Dresden

hastened to disassociate themselves from German goods, but for the Dresden this was difficult. Such was the anti-German feeling that in Waipukurau "Granny Jones, was so ashamed of the brass-inlaid word 'Berlin' on the nameplate of the Kirchner piano she had bought from Dresden's that she attempted to dig it out with a knife".²

Despite its name, the Dresden had no link with Germany other than selling German goods, and in January 1915 it changed its name to the Bristol Piano Company Ltd. Even so, the company's shop windows were smashed in an anti-German riot in Wanganui on 15 May that year.³

For Begg's things were more straightforward and no doubt the anti-Dresden feeling worked in their favour. Begg's advertisements, which had previously advertised German pianos with pride, now emphasised the Britishness of their pianos and the business itself. Begg's described themselves as "the all-British firm"⁴ and the "New Zealand headquarters for British pianos."⁵ Their advertisements stated, "you cannot do better than buy a piano from the All British firm established in NZ 53 years"⁶ as they sold "pianos that display British characteristics".⁷ The *Wanganui Chronicle* visited Begg's Wanganui agent, Mr O'Hara, and after viewing the British pianos supplied by Begg's in O'Hara's Music Warehouse wrote, "it made one wonder why New Zealanders ever went past England for their pianos".⁸

Links to the Empire and the Allies were emphasised. One of Begg's most popular pianos, the Brinsmead, was now advertised as "The Royal Brinsmead" and displayed beneath a coronet with the caption: "The Brinsmead is the King's piano, used in his palace and selected to accompany him when en voyage".⁹ For those who needed even more of a nudge to be patriotic and buy a piano, Begg's agent in Hawera, E. Dixon and Co's advertisement showed not only the flags of Britain, France, Russia and Italy flying high but beneath them three Allied soldiers and the enigmatic caption "There is a reason for the exquisite and melodious beauty of Chas Begg's pianos."¹⁰



Papers Past (<http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>): "The Royal Brinsmead", *Clutha Leader*, 29 June 1915, p. 2

At the outbreak of war Begg's announced that any staff member signing up would be retained on half-pay for six months and guaranteed a job on their return.¹¹ Three of their Wellington staff were members of the advance force and over the course of the war many more staff members enlisted.

Soon after war was declared Begg's Wellington and Dunedin branches each donated £100 to the Belgian Relief Fund.¹² In Dunedin they also donated a set of bagpipes for the Otago Expeditionary Force troops to march to¹³ and a complete set of music stands for the Expeditionary Force band.¹⁴ In Wellington Begg's supplied two pianos for the use of garrisons in local forts.¹⁵

As the war progressed the heady optimism of the early years waned. Casualties mounted and a number of Begg's staff were killed: Budge William Oliver (1915),¹⁶ Jimmie Hamiton (1917)¹⁷ and Kenneth Cole (1918)¹⁸ – all from the Wellington branch – were killed in action; Richard Ibbotson from Dunedin died from wounds received. And there were others.

However, men continued to sign up. In March 1916 Arnold Helliwell, Herbert Grimes and Ken Cole were entertained by their Wellington colleagues before their departure and each presented with a wristlet watch and money belt.¹⁹ In Dunedin later that year Frank Millea left for Gallipoli after being presented with a wristlet watch,²⁰ and George Pope was farewelled for the front in January 1917.²¹ Conscription had been introduced in 1916 but the *Oamaru Mail* was keen to point out that Begg's traveller J. Sinclair, whose name had been drawn out in the ballot, had "offered his services many months ago, and was actually in the camp prior to the publication of the result of the ballot."²²

Returning soldiers were widely feted and when Walter Ibbotson returned to the Dunedin branch in July 1917 – after three years service in France and Gallipoli, a promotion to the rank of lieutenant and the DCM – Begg's staff and management entertained him and presented him with a congratulatory diamond tie pin.²³

Begg's continued to make donations to various war causes but these became focussed on comforts for those returning. In Wellington they donated a cabinet gramophone and 24 records to the Hostel for Returned Soldiers;²⁴ £12 to the Soldiers' Room Fund;²⁵ and nearly £300 to the "Our Day" Red Cross, and Blind Sailors and Soldiers' Appeal Fund.²⁶ In Dunedin a piano was donated to the British and Foreign Sailors' Society²⁷ and £100 to the Military Convalescent Home.²⁸

As well as money and men, Begg's did whatever else it could to support the war effort. In 1915 this involved mounting a huge display in their windows showing photographs of the various departments involved in administering the Overseas Club Tobacco Fund, which raised money and donations to provide cigarettes and tobacco to the fighting men. Photographs of the Fund's head office in London showed staff sorting and arranging the collection lists from all over the Empire, addressing postcards, packing the goods, and a group of 30 typists. In these days of anti-smoking it seems incredible that by December 1915 the Fund had raised £80,000 by shilling donations, and 120 tons of tobacco and 17,000,000 cigarettes had been donated Empire wide.²⁹



Retailers Barrow Parade, Hardy St Nelson. 4 August 1917. ATL Ref. no. ½-025710-G

During the war years Begg's business continued to develop and expand despite the death of the founder's younger son and manager, Charles Begg in July 1916. The company opened a branch at Ashburton in 1916 and in 1917 invested £10,000 in the Liberty War Loan.³⁰ Begg's had opened a London office at Balfour House, Finsbury Pavement in 1904, to represent its interests in Europe, but in June 1918 it was requisitioned by the British Government and they moved to nearby Royal London House.³¹

At the outbreak of war local composers wasted no time putting pen to paper and Begg's published two jingoistic songs in 1914; *Britons All: A Territorial Camp Song* (by Bert Royal and Frank Crowther), and *Our Territorials* (by H.S.B. Ribbands and A.R. Don). These were enthusiastically received: "A rousing song, giving vocal expression to the spirit of the hour. The words are appropriate to New Zealand's grand effort in the despatch of the Expeditionary Force," wrote the Press of *Our Territorials*;³² "The words [of *Britons All*] breathe the spirit of patriotism and Mr Crowther has given them a good marching lilt",³³ enthused the *Otago*

Daily Times, and also said, "Our Territorials is likely to be heard sung with vim on many a weary march on the Continent".³⁴ *Britons All* had its first public airing at a patriotic matinee in the Grand Opera House, Wellington³⁵ and *Our Territorials* was sung by the Maori Contingent at the Avondale Camp, Auckland in November 1914.³⁶

As the war continued the tone of songs published changed from the initial patriotic fervour to a more realistic approach to the war. In July 1915 Begg's published two songs that urge stoicism and renewed effort. The first was Hampton Woods' (H.W. Taman) *Keep on Keepin' On*, a song set to *John Bull's advice to those who cannot go to the front*. The tone of the song seemed to strike a chord with those at home with the *North Otago Times* writing, "Not everyone is able to stand in the fighting line; but the patriotism of those who remain at home is no less real; and can be best shown – as the title of the song suggests – if all will Keep on Keepin' On".³⁷ Begg's donated all proceeds from the song to the War Relief Fund, earning a letter of appreciation from the Prime Minister.³⁸

1915 also saw another song from Ribbands and Don: the stirring *We Shall Get There in Time*. The cover urged the buyer, “Post a Copy to your Soldier Friend. It will cheer him in Camp and on the March,” although some of the phrases such as “get a move on”, “it’s time to get to Berlin” and “go to catch the Kaiser” may have appeared a little peremptory. The cover shows an idealised image of troops in pristine uniforms crawling over a grassy hill with the Union Jack fluttering in the background.

The quality of the printed music was less sophisticated than that printed in pre-war Germany, with fewer colours and simpler illustrations. When the *Boys Come Home* (by G.A. Wycherley and G.B. Laidlaw), a song of welcome published in 1916, shows a photograph of soldiers walking down the gangplank of a ship to greet their loved ones below. The theme of the song reflects the changing attitude towards the war and wistfully anticipates its conclusion.

“Have you a brother or sweetheart in the firing line? Then the new song *Don’t Wear Your Heart Away* will please you,” wrote the *Wanganui Chronicle* in October 1916 of Begg’s *Don’t Wear Your Heart Away: A Goodbye March Song*. The *Chronicle* was promoting local man Earl Melville’s (Melville Earl Hankins) composition which had been published by Begg’s Wellington branch.³⁹

William and Mary Dunlop’s marching song *The Red Triangle*, was published in 1917. The red triangle referred to was the international symbol for the YMCA – an important organisation at the time and very involved in the war effort. The song was advertised in the *Otago Daily Times* as “A good song to send to the boys in the trenches and for singing in the homes of those who are represented at the front”.⁴⁰

Rather different to Begg’s other wartime compositions was *The Long White Cloud* published in early 1917. Although it was dedicated to the 22nd Reinforcements, New Zealand Expeditionary Force, instead of extolling the virtues of fighting for King and Empire its focus was on New Zealand, and it was advertised as appealing to soldier and civilian. The *Otago Daily Times* advertised it as “a patriotic song of the Dominion by New Zealand

writers ... If you have a friend at the front send him a copy.”⁴¹ Its first edition of 2000 copies had all been sold by March 1917.⁴²

There’s Only One Way Home Boys, it’s Through Berlin (by Barrie Marschel and Frank E. Crowther) was Begg’s final wartime publication, published in 1918. The jingoistic approach of 1914 has gone and there is a feeling of war weariness and desperation for it to be over. The cover shows a wounded, or perhaps dead, soldier with two downhearted comrades. On the back cover of the music there is a poem *Kidd from Timaru* about a Timaru boy killed in Turkey.

It was during the First World War that Begg’s began publishing *God Defend New Zealand*. No doubt looking for a New Zealand anthem to fuel the patriotic frenzy, on 4 September 1914 Begg’s wrote to the composer John Woods (who also owned the copyright to Bracken’s words at this time) seeking his permission to publish the anthem. Woods agreed and Begg’s began to publish various arrangements of *God Defend New Zealand* although there was no formal assignment of copyright until October 1925.⁴³

Of course the music published by Begg’s was a tiny drop in the huge ocean of music they sold at that time – a time when most homes had a piano, and popular songs were widely sung and played. Very early on in the war it was reported that Begg’s had already sold 1,000 copies of *It’s a Long Way to Tipperary* and throughout the war other popular overseas numbers were sold in huge quantities. Many of the songs reflected the importance of different aspects of the war. The knitting of hats, socks and gloves for the soldiers was a big part of the effort at home and there were many knitting songs. In October 1915 Begg’s promoted one of these songs, *Knitting* (by Baron Aliotti and Muriel Bruce), which they advertised as a patriotic song that would appeal to women.⁴⁴ Leave in England was very important to New Zealand as well as British soldiers, and *There’s a Ship That’s Bound for Blighty* (1916) (by Worton David and Lilian Shirley) was advertised as one “our soldiers sang as well as the British”.⁴⁵ Similarly described – the “rousing refrain breathes the resolution that will carry the Empire to victory” – was *Don’t Be Downhearted, There’s a Lot of Sunshine Coming Soon*.⁴⁶

There were hundreds of others, some relating to the war and others just catchy tunes to cheer you up – *When Sammy Sang the Marsellaise; There's a Long, Long Trail; My Little Dream Girl; Soldier Boy; When the Joy Bells Ring; Peg 'o My Heart; Somewhere a Voice Is Calling* – the list goes on and on. Some were available in more than one key, some were orchestrated for groups of instruments, some were also available as recordings for the gramophone, and others were heard one week and forgotten the next.

When one steps back to assess the impact of music firms such as Charles Begg & Co. Ltd on New Zealand's war, it should be for their contribution to morale on the home front that they be remembered. Their donations to wartime causes and encouragement and support of staff who

enlisted were typical of many businesses during the First World War. The promotion of British products was widespread and commercially wise.

It was Begg's provision of music and instruments, however, intended for everyday use by ordinary New Zealanders to boost morale and help "keep the home fires burning" that distinguishes their war effort. Begg's enabled those at home to sing along with the songs that were being sung all over the Empire: for mothers, sisters and wives to know that they were hearing and singing the same tunes as their men in the trenches were humming, for Sunday strollers to listen as brass bands belted out *God Defend New Zealand*, and for crowds to hear the pipes swirl as processions marched. This was Begg's contribution. This was Begg's war.

Clare Gleeson, an historian, has recently written the book Meet me at Begg's (published by Ngaio Press, 2012), which was the development of her Masters thesis, completed at University of Otago. Clare is the great-great-grand-daughter of the firm's founder, Charles Begg.

End-notes

- 1 MS-226/011, Walter Sinton papers (ARC-0426), Hocken Collections
- 2 McGibbon, John. *Piano in the parlour: when the piano was New Zealand's home entertainment centre*. Wellington : Ngaio Press, 2007, 72
- 3 *Wanganui Chronicle*, 17 May 1915
- 4 *Dominion*, 28 May 1915
- 5 *Otago Daily Times*, 9 December 1915
- 6 *Dominion*, 27 March 1915
- 7 *Lake Wakatip Mail*, 13 April 1915
- 8 Business Notes, *Wanganui Chronicle*, 27 March 1915
- 9 *Clutha Leader*, 29 June 1915
- 10 *Hawera and Normanby Star*, 15 February 1916
- 11 *Evening Post*, 14 August 1914
- 12 *Mataura Ensign*, 22 August 1914
- 13 *Otago Daily Times*, 16 September 1914
- 14 *Otago Daily Times*, 2 September 1914
- 15 *Evening Post*, 14 August 1914
- 16 *Evening Post*, 14 September 1915
- 17 *Evening Post*, 3 November 1917
- 18 *Evening Post*, 3 April 1918
- 19 *Evening Post*, 30 March 1916
- 20 *Otago Daily Times*, 15 November 1915

- 21 *Otago Daily Times*, 2 January 1917
- 22 *Oamaru Mail*, 15 March 1917
- 23 *Otago Daily Times*, 27 July 1917
- 24 *Dominion*, 25 February 1916
- 25 *Evening Post*, 3 June 1916
- 26 *Dominion*, 28 September 1917
- 27 *Otago Daily Times*, 2 March 1917
- 28 *Otago Daily Times*, 2 July 1918
- 29 *Otago Daily Times*, 31 December 1915
- 30 *Otago Daily Times*, 4 September 1917
- 31 *Otago Daily Times*, 20 June 1918
- 32 *Press*, 12 November 1914
- 33 *Otago Daily Times*, 3 September 1914
- 34 *Otago Daily Times*, 11 September 1914
- 35 *Evening Post*, 28 August 1914
- 36 *King Country Chronicle*, 23 December 1914
- 37 *North Otago Times*, 10 July 1915
- 38 Gleeson, Clare. *Meet me at Begg's: a history of Charles Begg & Co Ltd 1861-1970*. Wellington : Ngaio Press, 2012, 192
- 39 *Wanganui Chronicle*, 14 October 1916
- 40 *Otago Daily Times*, 24 October 1917
- 41 *Otago Daily Times*, 27 February 1917
- 42 *Evening Post*, March 1917
- 43 Gleeson, 191
- 44 *Otago Daily Times*, 29 October 1915
- 45 *Evening Post*, 5 May 1917
- 46 *Evening Post*, 1 August 1917

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