



# Bell Piano Newsletter<sup>®</sup>

Special Edition

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In this special edition of the Bell Piano Newsletter (BPN) we are passing along Bell Company information that has been learned since the BPN was first published in June 2005. Although the Bell Company stopped manufacturing instruments in Guelph in 1930. Their products still linger on.

The Bell company made pianos, pianettes (small pianos), player pianos, melodeons, organs, benches, stools, and phonographs.

With the head office in Guelph the Bell Company grew into one of the largest companies in the British Empire with locations in Canada, England, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. There are no figures as to how big the company got as employee records have been lost over time.

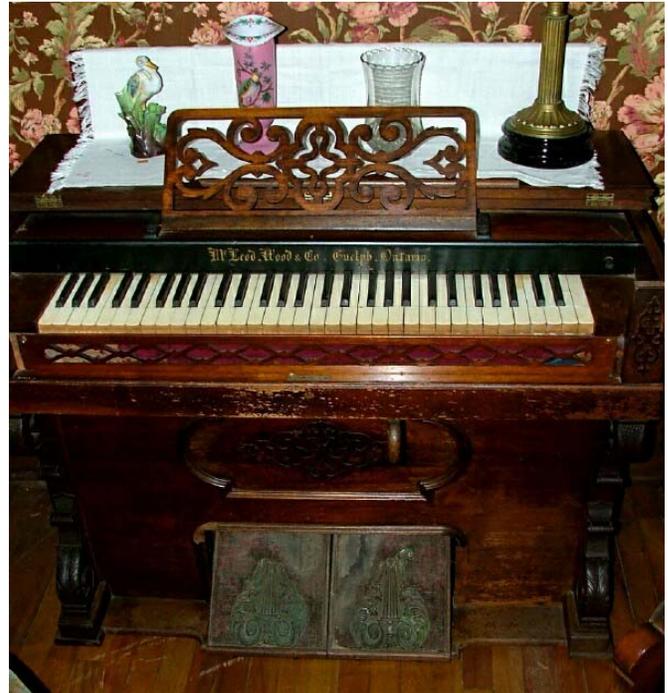
Another Guelph business, the McLeod Piano Company, made melodeons and was bought by Bell adding the McLeod melodeons to the Bell product line. The Bell Company product lines of piano and organs extended from small suitcase size pianos to nine-foot high organs. They eventually produced 50 products and that were sold in 30 countries.

Kelly Pianos was a Guelph music store that had Bell put the Kelly name on Bell made pianos. Brand advertising is nothing new but it shows just how well some piano dealers liked the Bell products.

The Bell Company made games booklets. These booklets contained musical games such as London Bridges and sometimes include a brief description of the accompanying game. Bell made instructional manuals piano playing. These included basic lessons on music theory, exercises, and sheet music. Overall the Bell Company produced everything a player needed for learning and playing a piano or organ.

In 1928 the Bell Company factories and assets were sold to John Dowling of Brantford. The Guelph business directory lists the Bell Piano and Organ Company until the 1931 issue.

In 1934 the assets were sold to Lesage Piano of Ste-Therese, Quebec. Bell was kept as a brand name until 1975. In 1986 Lesage closed but its Rösch continued on until 1991 and when it closed.



Above is a McLeod small organ that was also made in Guelph. The Bell company bought McLeod 1867 making their organs and melodeons part of the Bell product line.



This Bell factory one near downtown Guelph with a clock tower. This is from the Guelph Public Library collection.

### **William Bell Sr.**

William Bell was one of the early Guelph business giants. Along with George Sleeman, (brewer and mayor) and James Goldie (miller) they developed the towns broad industrial base which exists today.

Bell was born in Dumfries in the southern county of Dumfries-shire, Scotland on September 5, 1833. His parents William and Mary Bell along with brothers Joseph and Robert later moved to Canada.

Young William learned the carpentry trade in Scotland and later became a contractor. He moved to Toronto in 1853 and then to the United States either New York City or Minnesota. He came back to Guelph in 1860 to marry Isabella Christie. They moved to Minnesota in 1861 following his carpentry trade.

In 1865 the couple returned with son William J and daughter Edith L. He joined his brother Robert to develop the Bell Organ Company.

William's sales and business knowledge allowed the business to develop new products, acquire rivals, and establish export markets. His carpentry expertise stressed quality produced products.

By 1883 the two factories with 400 men occupied a downtown block. A lumber yard with drying kilns and stables with 200 men was across the street on the other side of the railway tracks.

In 1884 the company was sold to a British syndicate that controlled the factory and business development. This control continued until 1928 when the company was sold to John Dowling of Brantford.

When the organ and piano businesses were well established William turned to other ventures. He was co-founder and president of the Guelph Board of Trade, Guelph Junction Railway (still exists today), Globe Building and Loan, Traders Bank of Canada, and VP of Manufacturers Life Insurance. He also served on the local school board.

William retired from Bell in October 1897. Nothing else is heard from him until his untimely death by a railway train on September 26, 1912. He was 79.



### **Dowling Buys Bell Piano Company**

On Friday April 20, 1928 John S. Dowling of Brantford, Ontario headed a group that took control of the Bell Piano and Organ Company in Guelph. This brought the ownership back into Canadian hands from British shareholders who had it since 1884.

Dowling stated at that time the thirty-five current employees would remain as there were no plans to move the operation to Brantford. Funds would be invested in the Bell Company to increase production to 1000 units per year and increasing the work force back to 400 workers. No financial help was requested from the city but a request was made to have the taxes assessed at \$10,000 for ten years. There was also a plan to produce grand pianos again.

Negotiations had been going on since February when Sid Saunders, a Bell agent in Hamilton, contacted Mr. Dowling and will become a director in the new Dowling business. Mr. H. Grimadick who was the court appointed trustee and General Manager since 1916 would not be staying.

Charles Peacock of the Williams Piano Company in Oshawa, Ontario takes over as the new Bell General manager. Donald Bruce and Louis Gassard both of the Nordheimer Piano Company took over the respective positions of Secretary Treasurer and Designer Builder.

Mr. Dowling began the John S. Dowling Insurance in Brantford in 1902. This firm also does real estate, mortgages, and customs brokering. Dowling along with fellow Brantford businessmen invested in other local businesses turning unprofitable industries into profitable ones.

(This information came from the Guelph Evening Mercury dated Saturday April 21, 1928)

Unfortunately the Great Depression began nineteen months later and the expected rebirth of the Bell Company never materialized. Little else is known about John Dowling.

### Bell Piano Serial Numbers with Related Events

Year	Number		Year	Number
1864		← Year business started	1930	
1885	1	← First piano made	1931	
1886		No longer listed in business directory	1932	
1887			1933	
1888		Lesage takes over	1934	<b>Lesage</b>
1889		← Bellolian developed	1935	
1890		← Estimated to have 600 workers in Guelph 400 more worldwide	1936	
1891			1937	
1892		WWII starts	1938	
1893			1939	
1894	4916	← First recorded piano serial number	1940	26501
1895	5665		1941	27110
1896	7044		1942	
1897	8236		1943	27181
1898			1944	27712
1899	8615		1945	
1900	8854		1946	28728
1901		← Queen Victoria dies at 82	1947	29512
1902	11195	← First Canadian Piano union at Bell	1948	
1903	12444		1949	
1904	12657		1950	
1905	13737		1951	
1906	16535		1952	
1907	18315		1953	
1908	19171		1954	
1909	20321		1955	32841
1910	21887		1956	
1911	23243		1957	
1912	24182	← Wm. Bell Sr. killed by train	1958	
1913	24760		1959	
1914		← WWI begins.	1960	
1915		← Women work in factory for the first time.	1961	
1916			1962	
1917	29285		1963	
1918	30099	← Use steel frame piano back support	1964	
1919	30947		1965	
1920		← Begin making player pianos	1966	
1921	32810		1967	45655
1922			1968	
1923	33377		1969	
1924	33924		1970	
1925		← Wm. Bell Jr. dies suddenly in London	1971	
1926			1972	52948
1927		← 36 Guelph workers	1973	53173
1928		← Purchased by John Dowling, Brantford	1974	
1929		← Great Depression starts	1975	57056

Click on the following link then choose Canadian Piano Numbers. [www.mbi-communications.com/html/piano\\_information.html](http://www.mbi-communications.com/html/piano_information.html).  
 Note: All the piano numbers listed are Copyrighted by MBI Communications Ltd.

Second fire at Guelph Plant 1. No more pianos made

### The Bell Company's First Piano

The newspaper accounts of 1885 report that The Bell Company would be producing pianos. Sitting in the garage of Bob and Debbie Norton in Picton, Ontario (south of Belleville) is Bell piano number 0083 (small oval in right upper picture). This piano is 121 years old. Considering the piano's age and travels it is in great condition.

The hammers, bridal straps, damper felts and key tops have been replaced. The strings are still original as they are rusty. The outer finish is marked and faded but overall is well maintained.

In 1884 Bell was taken over by a British syndicate becoming the Bell Organ and Piano Company Ltd. yet this piano does not indicate the corporate name change. Underneath the strings in the bass section it says "Wm. Bell & Co. Guelph, Canada" (large oval in upper right picture). This is still the old name used since 1870.



### Homeward Bound

The Royal Retirement Residence on Gordon Street in Guelph was pleased to accept this 1885 piano that was made in Guelph 121 years ago. This piano is not only a playable piece of history but is The Royals newest and oldest resident (right picture).



Photo By: Darren Calabrese, Guelph Mercury (09/21/06)

Brigid Dekker, the Activity Coordinator, of the Royal was contacted by David Briant of MBI Communications to see if they would be interested in having this Bell piano (both are pictured below at Bell 0083). Mrs. Dekker was enthusiastic and delighted to have the piano added to the Royal. It was on display at the Royals Grand Opening on September 21, 2006.

On Monday August 28th 2006 Bell piano 0083 was delivered to The Royal with many smiles from the residents and staff. Mr. Briant tuned the piano in preparation for its debut.

After leaving Guelph in 1885 Bell 0083 travelled to Montreal and remained there for many years. Later it was sold to a piano store in Sydney, Nova Scotia. It was purchased by a woman who many years later gave it to her grand daughter in Dartmouth, N.S. There it sat unplayed for a few more years until the girl's great uncle Bob Norton moved it to Picton, Ontario in 2004.

Sales and give away attempts by Mr. Norton were not successful. Until an interested person in nearby Belleville contacted Mr. Briant about its history. This person did not take the piano but did give Mr. Norton's name to Mr. Briant in October of 2005. Now Bell 0083 is back in Guelph and will once again bring musical enjoyment to all.

Professional pianist Tim Louis, who performed at the Royals opening, looked at and played Bell 0083. He commented at how light and bright the play was considering its age and condition. "Even though it was off by half a note in the bass section it was not noticeable and played well." said Mr. Louis. The bass bridge had cracked and shifted thus giving the bass notes that lower tone.

Everyone is pleased that this piece of Guelph history is alive and well as a playable piece of Canadian piano history. Finds like this are rare and are appreciated when they are found.

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