

*Charles Towsey of Henley upon Thames in the County of Oxford Gentleman*

*Mary Harriet Sparks*

*H. B. Moorhouse*

# TOWSEY TALES

**NAME:** Arthur John Towsey

**BIRTH DETAILS:** June 1847 Henley-upon-Thames

**DEATH DETAILS:** 9 June 1931 Cambridge, NZ

**CHART REF:** Towsey Chart B1

**MARRIAGE DETAILS:** 25 July 1871 St.Paul's, Dunedin NZ

**SPOUSE:** Jessy Hawkins Mackay

## PART 3 of 5

In October of 1888, the Towsey family went to Melbourne to see the Great Exhibition, which was centred around a temporary exhibition building, built in the Exhibition Gardens on Exhibition Street, all of which are still there. Whilst there, Arthur played on the organ in the

Exhibition Building.

During my childhood in Melbourne, there was a widely held belief, that due to certain design shortcomings on what was supposed to be a temporary building, if you were to play the lowest notes on the organ, the dome atop the building would collapse.

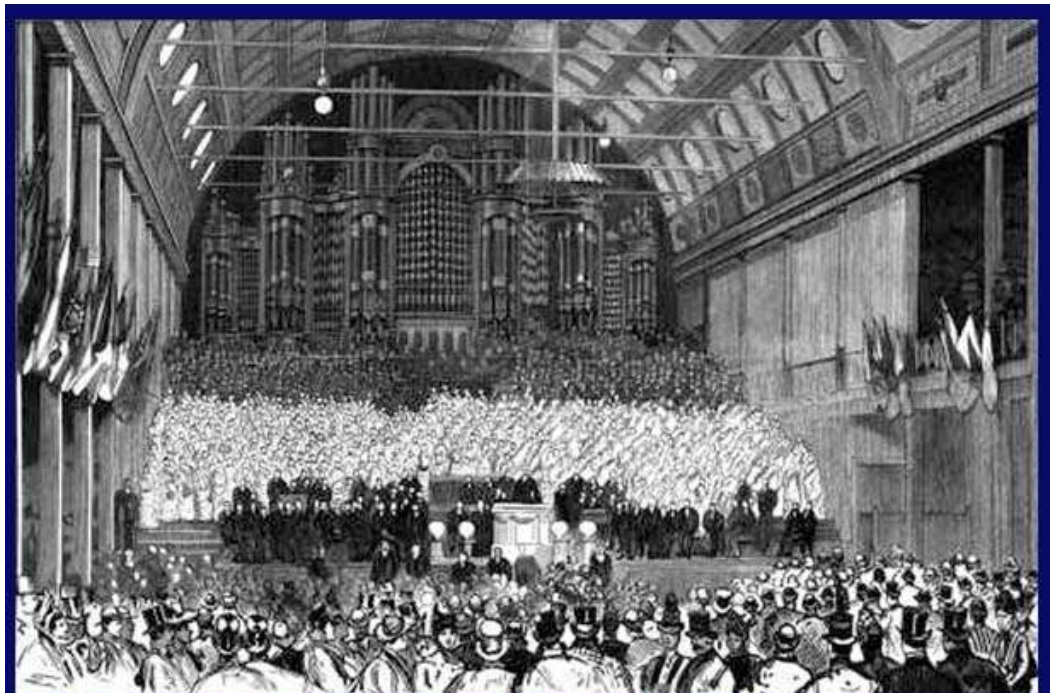
Sounds plausible to me, but it must be wrong because, let's face it; over the past 130 years, someone, sometime would have been tempted to try it.

The family moved back down to Dunedin at the end of 1888.

It is amusing to see the report of the meeting of the Parishioners in Christchurch, after Arthur's departure, where they have appointed two men to take of Arthur's duties, at a considerable saving to the parish.

One cannot help sensing that there had been ongoing murmurs of discontent at how much it had been costing to employ the services of the esteemed Mister Towsey. In this regard we cannot but admire Arthur for ensuring that he did not sink into the financial doldrums that afflicted so many professional musicians at that time.

There may have been several reasons for the move back to Dunedin, including that his old position as organist and choirmaster at St.Paul's Church was coming vacant and, on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1889, Arthur was unanimously elected to this post at a Vestry meeting, from a long list of candidates.



**Melbourne Exhibition Organ 1888**

## MUSIC AT THE EXHIBITION.

### ORGAN RECITAL.

In the afternoon of yesterday there was a numerous, but shifting, attendance of the public at the organ recital given at the great organ in the music-room at the Exhibition, under the hands of Mr. Arthur Towsey, from Christchurch, New Zealand. The selections, with one exception, were the same as given at Mr. Towsey's performance on the Town-hall organ on Thursday afternoon, and need no further comment than that the player's method met with general approval.

Melbourne Exhibition, October 1888

## MR ARTHUR TOWSEY

has the honour to announce that, having returned to Dunedin to follow his Profession, he is prepared to RECEIVE PUPILS.

PIANO, SINGING, ORGAN, HARMONY, and  
THOROUGH BASS.

All communications and inquiries for terms please address Box 93, Post Office. Mr TOWSEY returns from the Sounds (first excursion) on SATURDAY, 26th inst., when he will Meet Intending Pupils between 10 a.m and 12 noon at Begg's Music Warehouse.

January 1889

### Christchurch Parish Meeting 26 April 1889

#### ST JOHN'S, LATIMER SQUARE.

The annual meeting of parishioners was held last night at eight o'clock, in the schoolroom. There was a moderate attendance. The incumbent (the Rev H. C. M. Watson) occupied the chair.

The report stated, *inter alia* :—"There have been reductions in receipts from seat rents and offertories, while there has been an increase in the expenditure in repairing and removing the organ; erection of wash-house, to replace that burnt down, and fence, to the amount of nearly £60. Contributions from the envelopes are £20 less this year than last. Since the accounts were made up £13 1s has been received and promised towards the parochial fund. Mr Towsey having resigned his appointment as organist, at the end of July Mr Rowles and Mr E. Brook were appointed choir-master and organist, respectively, at a considerable saving to the parish."



MR. ARTHUR TOWSEY.

It could have been also, that knowing that the position of musical director of the forthcoming New Zealand Exhibition would soon be debated, that he had better be close to the centre of things so as to enhance his chances of receiving the commission.

It might be that Arthur was just a bit too expensive for the limited resources of Christchurch, but there does not seem to have been any animosity attached to Arthur's departure and if there was any controversy, it was indeed kept a lot quieter than that which was then stirred by his appointment as Exhibition Musical Director

All of this though, would have to wait until after Arthur had taken the first of the summer season excursions to the Sounds of the south west coast.

Having enjoyed himself the previous year, being paid to go along again, as musical director, as his brother Edward had done previously, would have been too good an opportunity to miss.

## DUNEDIN NOTES.

(From our own Correspondent.)

The appointment of Mr A. J. Towsey as musical director of the Exhibition is a bitter pill to the grand army of musical professors in this city. Musicians, as a rule, are not a very broad-minded class, and are seldom very tolerant of each others' success. The appointment is said to have been the result of successful button-holing, and of that I have no doubt whatever. There are one or two other men here better qualified for the position; but, in any case, there was sure to be a certain amount of discontent. The curious part of the affair is that Mr West, who is regarded as the most suitable man for the position, offered his services for considerably less than Mr Towsey is to receive. The same thing occurred between the rival architects for the Exhibition building; hence it is that the discarded ones and the public generally are beginning to make unpleasant references to the Executive Committee. It is a strange fact that exhibition committees have always been noted for doing things in such a manner as to encourage comment and give rise to suspicions of jobbery.

Observer 13 April 1889

## A MUSICAL JAR

There is discord among colonial musicians, and the towsy-headed demon who has caused the mischief is some twopenny toy on the Dunedin Exhibition Committee. Everybody knows how the Musical Committee of the Exhibition stirred up all the leading musicians of Melbourne, Sydney, Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, and got them to state the terms upon which they would undertake the duties of Musical Conductor in connection with the Exhibition. At least half-a-dozen of the best New Zealand musicians were encouraged to believe that the appointment was as good as theirs; and now to their disgust the bare announcement is telegraphed that Mr A. J. Towsey, of Dunedin, has been appointed to the post.

Now, there is no harm in the 'canny' people of the South 'keeping their fish-guts for their own sea-mews'; but the outsiders have had a distinct slight placed upon them by the manner in which they have been treated. Mr Towsey is doubtless a very good musician, but so are the others; and even though it were explained that Mr Towsey was preferred because he was a cheaper man, or on purely local grounds, the outside musicians have good cause for growling. The committee might have known that a Dunedin man could be got much cheaper than a Sydney or an Auckland one, and ought never to have troubled distant competitors who had no show of getting the appointment. Perhaps, however, they wished to beat down the local musician's price, and so resolved to frighten him with outside competition. In any case, their action is not conspicuous for its courtesy or generosity towards the 'crotchetty' fraternity.

## EXHIBITION NOTES

A rehearsal of the Exhibition Choir was held last evening in the Garrison Hall, it being deemed advisable to test the capabilities of the choir in a larger hall than that of St. Matthew's Church, in which the practices have been hitherto held. The result was not entirely satisfactory, for the galleries of the Garrison Hall had the effect of muffling the body of the sound proceeding from the vocalists, who were in the body of the building. Those persons who had been fortunate enough to secure tickets admitting them to the gallery during the practice—and invitations were eagerly sought after—did not, therefore, hear the choir to the best advantage; but at the same time the rehearsal served to clearly show them that Mr Arthur Towsey, the con-

ductor, has now got his choristers under admirable control. The choir was about 380 strong, and the number, it may be taken, will be about the average attendance. The items that were selected for practice were the principal choruses from "The Creation" and "Elijah." In the selections from the former oratorio the choir appeared to be at greater ease than in those from "Elijah," the choruses being sung on the whole in excellent tone and with fine effect. In the case of the "Elijah" numbers, the vocalists occasionally dragged and got out of tune, but the conductor promptly came down upon the offending section of the choir. With the opportunities of further rehearsal, there seems little reason to doubt that by the time the exhibition is opened the Music Committee will be in a position to produce a carefully-trained and well-equipped choir, such as will be a credit to the colony.

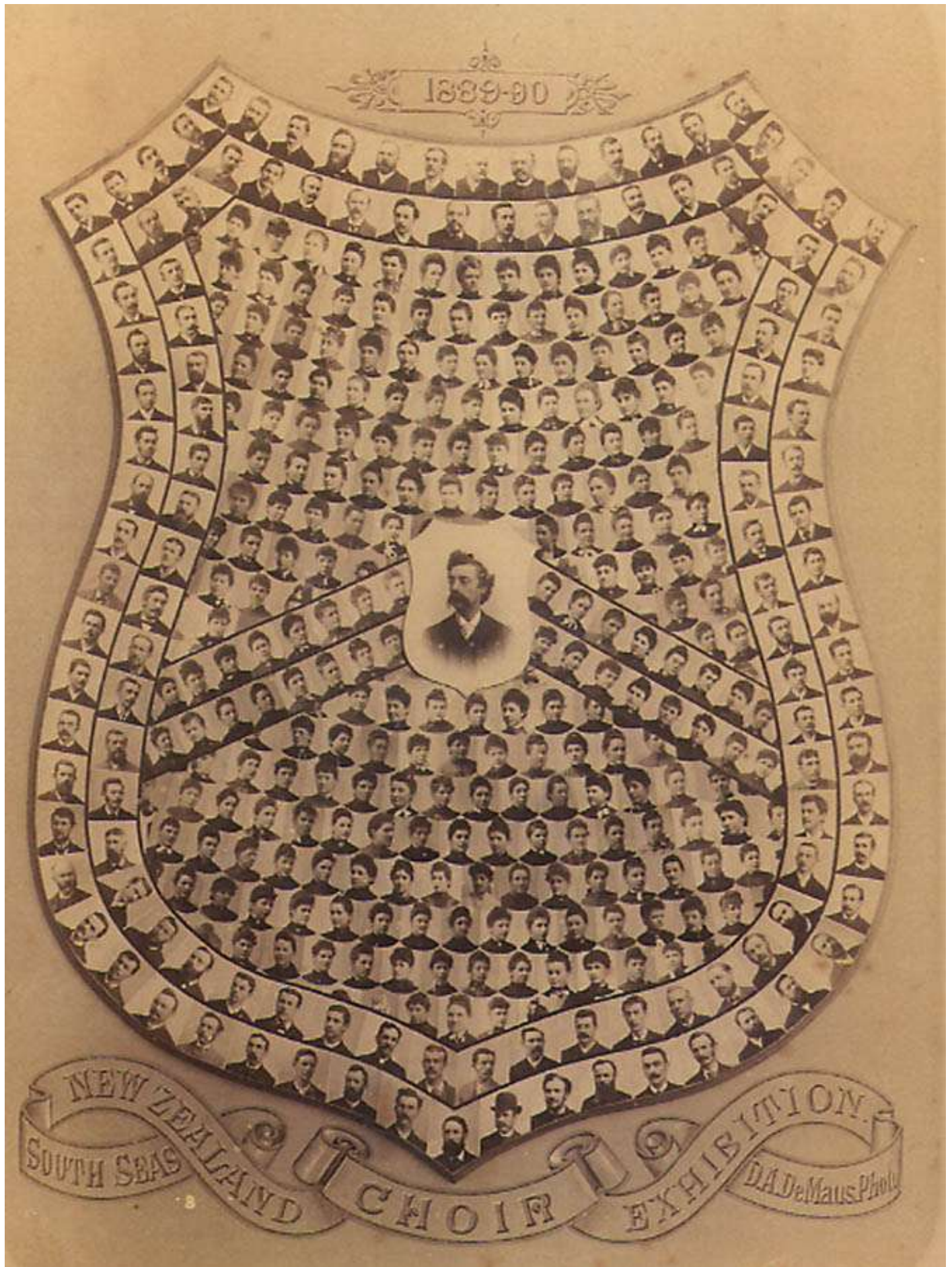
August 1889



A.J. Towsey rehearsing the Exhibition Orchestra

It did not take long for the ruffled feathers of the musical fraternity to smooth down again as everyone focussed on preparing for the Exhibition.

The original of the choir collage, below, is at the Public Records office in Dunedin. It is worth remembering that somebody sat there gluing each of these individual photos onto this shield, with Arthur John Towsey in the centre. It seems though, that the children who were involved in the choir were not included.






1889, Arthur John Towsey rehearsing the New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition Orchestra and Choir

The Frederic Maccabe referred to in the 'Case of Mistaken Identity', was an English ventriloquist and impersonator who was popular all over the world for several decades from the 1860s. He was considered at the time to be the world's best ventriloquist, mainly throwing his voice whilst performing social and political satirical sketches.

We are reminded by the size of the exhibition orchestra, that even an exhibition that aspired to showcase the grand achievements of the Antipodean colonies, could not escape the restrictions imposed by a lack of suitably talented musicians,

In 1890 it was still an ongoing struggle to reach anything like the cultural standards that would be expected back "Home".



**A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY.**

Otago Witness, Issue 1979, 16 January 1890

A correspondent writes:—"On Saturday last the energetic and indefatigable Mr Joubert was accosted by a gentleman whom he had been expecting. After the usual greetings, 'Now,' said the gentleman, 'I want to see your hall where you give the concerts.' 'Ah!' said Joubert, 'you have heard of its splendid qualities, then?' 'Mais non, au contraire,' said the gentleman, 'I have heard it described as bad for sound.' 'What?' said Mr Joubert, 'do you talk with fools?' 'No, no,' said his visitor, 'I do not talk with fools; behold the proof—I am talking with you.' 'Eh bien!' said Mr Joubert, 'come and judge for yourself; the concert is just over.' Mr Towsey was on the platform, and as Mr Joubert and his visitor walked towards him he beamed with delighted surprise. 'Do you know this gentleman?' said Mr Joubert. 'Rather,' said Towsey. 'Sir Charles, I heard you were coming to the colonies, but I did not anticipate the honour of being the first to welcome you.' 'Well, honour and pleasure must wait until business is over. This gentleman desires to test the acoustic qualities of the hall.' Whereupon the hall was tested and pronounced perfect, Mr Towsey all the time addressing the visitor as 'Sir Charles.' By-and-bye another gentleman came up, and Mr Joubert shook his hand and said, 'Why, when did you arrive?' 'I have just arrived from Paris, where I have been reveling in the marvels of the greatest exhibition the world has ever seen.' Perceiving the stranger, who was stamping, knocking, and examining the hall, 'Ha!' said he, 'M. Eiffel, I saw you in Paris, and am glad to welcome you to New Zealand.' 'M. Eiffel!' said Mr Towsey; 'this is not Eiffel; it is Sir Charles Halle, the great pianist.' 'No,' said Mr Joubert, 'you are both wrong; this is Maccabe, who certainly bears a striking resemblance to both the famous men for whom you have mistaken him. He declares this hall perfect for acoustics, and he will prove it on Monday night.'"

1889 Exhibition Music Committee

One newspaper critic also pointed out, that although the quality of the music was as good as might be expected, it was a pity that the pieces chosen for performance often tended to lean too far towards the popular; "at many a fine French or German restaurant you can dine to the same sort of thing. Better than this is wanted and most assuredly will have to be provided, if the Exhibition Orchestra is to continue to draw".

A newspaper report from February 1890, in the middle of the exhibition, states that; "Mr. Barth, organist at Dunedin Exhibition, has resigned owing to a dispute with the musical director, Mr. Towsey. It seems that Mr. Towsey assisted with the accompaniment to a song, The Lost Chord, sung recently at a concert by Miss Knight, and Mr. Barth resented this interference with his duties. The attempt made by the musical committee to bring things to an amicable issue was unsuccessful".

One week later; "At the close of the afternoon orchestral concert yesterday, Mr. Arthur Towsey was presented with a substantial souvenir in the shape of an elegant clock, which has been selected for that purpose from the stall of one of the exhibitors in the foreign courts. This chaste timepiece – presented as it was spontaneously by the ladies and gentlemen whom Mr. Towsey has so successfully conducted through the various and intricate oratorios and concerts that have been given during the currency of the exhibition – is a graceful compliment paid to his untiring energy and courtesy in his onerous task. Mr. Towsey was quite taken by surprise and could hardly find words to express his thanks for the handsome present".

By the end of the Exhibition, there were inevitable comparisons drawn between the quality of the Dunedin orchestra with that at the Melbourne Exhibition. The critic at The Otago Times noted that the Dunedin orchestra never reached the standards of that in Melbourne, but that; "in particular instances it has been very fine and on one or two occasions, splendid. The training and conducting powers of Mr. Towsey, a musician almost great, as we estimate musicians, have been in every way triumphant".

During a speech at the end of the Exhibition, the president of the Exhibition Commissioners stated that; "It is particularly gratifying to know that we have a conductor under whom the choir have acquitted themselves so excellently well as Mr. Towsey, to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for his services as conductor and choirmaster; as also to the

**M U S I C.**

Mr ARTHUR TOWSEY resumes TEACHING  
at his house, View street.

At home every day this week between the hours  
of 12.30 and 2.30 p.m. to arrange with intending  
pupils.

**29th April 1890**

orchestra, who, like him, have, I may say, far outshone our expectations. Mr. Towsey's reputation which was already high before he undertook this work, will, I venture to think, be even infinitely greater than it was before he undertook the conductorship of the Exhibition choir and orchestra – (applause). To Mr. Barth we are also indebted for his honorary service as organist during the short time that he acted in that capacity (applause)..."

By the way, the animosity between Mr. Towsey and Mr. Barth seems to have blown over, as they performed a duet together in a concert a year later.

**24th April 1890**

**NEW ZEALAND AND SOUTH SEAS  
EXHIBITION.**

**CONCERT HALL.**

**COMPLIMENTARY BENEFIT CONCERT**  
(Under the auspices of the Music Committee)  
Tendered to  
**MR ARTHUR TOWSEY.**

**MONDAY EVENING, APRIL 28.**

The Exhibition Choir has kindly promised to assist.

**TICKETS:**  
Reserved Seats, 2s; Back Seats and Gallery, 1s.

Front seats can be reserved at the Dresden Piano-forte Warehouse.

**Box Office open THIS DAY.**

**PROGRAMME IN SATURDAY'S ISSUE. 24ap**

**BENEFIT CONCERT TO MR  
TOWSEY.**

The concert hall at the exhibition was utilized once again last evening, when a complimentary benefit was tendered to Mr Arthur Towsey, who has acted as conductor of the orchestra and choir during the exhibition season. That the programme set forth was an attractive one, and that it is recognised that Mr Towsey was well entitled to a benefit was shown by the numerous attendance in the hall. Encores came thick and fast during the evening, and the concert was consequently extended considerably beyond the programme. The choir, who were in attendance, contributed three part songs in an able and highly satisfactory manner, eliciting warm applause, and in the case of the singing of an arrangement of "Flowers of the forest" by Lambeth a most emphatic redemand was made. Mr A. L. N. Maclean's violin playing was admirable, his treatment of a large by Vieuxtemps and a Polish dance

finding the greatest favour with the audience, who insisted on a repetition. Herr Winkelmann's cello solo was likewise a highly appreciated item. "At Vespera" (Tosti) and Braga's "La serenata" found an able exponent in Miss Godfrey, the latter, with violin obligato by Mr Maclean, being an particularly fine piece of vocalisation, and well deserving of the applause bestowed for its rendition. Mr W. Densen fairly fetched the audience with his singing of "Father O'Flynn," a ditty of the comic order, and was even more successful in his encore song, "The Frenchman," which was, however, certainly out of place at such a concert, and is not by any means devoid of vulgarity. Mr H. Smith rendered "To Anthea" in a satisfactory manner, and also lent assistance in a duet with Mr Densen and a trio with Mrs Israel and Mr Bleckinsopp, which latter item did not, however, go so smoothly and correctly as could have been desired. Mr F. L. Jones was also to have sung, but owing to indisposition was absent. The *beneficiare* acted as accompanist in an efficient manner during the evening.

The long-looked-for Exhibition ball took place on Monday night. It could not properly be called a success, for a good deal of disagreement among the powers that be had preceded its advent, and the old proverb, "A house divided against itself cannot stand," proved itself true in this case. It was a very effective ball what there was of it, and those present—about two hundred—enjoyed themselves immensely, with the exception of at supper time, and after the sumptuous repasts of the last six months it was poor in comparison. The hall was decorated with flags, and Robertshaw's band supplied the music, which was perfect, and there being plenty of room in the large hall the dancers thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Some of the dresses were not handsome, while others were remarkably so, among the gentlemen

Mr Day (as Cardinal Wolsey) looked splendid. A cardinal's dress is always effective with the two colours scarlet and white, Mr Justice Williams, court dress; Mrs Williams, Elsie Maynard in the "Yeomen of the Guard"; Miss Williams, Sister of Mercy; Mr Twopeny, Turk; Mrs Twopeny, Turkish lady; Mr A. Towsey, conductor; Mrs Towsey, French peasant; Miss Towsey, Spanish gipsy; Mr Shultz, jockey; Mr H. R. Simon, Garibaldi; Mr J. C. Penrice, sergeant 3rd Dragoons; Mr A. S. Nicholls, yachtsman; Miss Muriel Nicholls made a pretty little Bo Peep; Miss Violet Nicholls, Dora; Mrs Nichols, lady of the Georgian period; Mr A. M'Donald, lieutenant's uniform; Mr F. N. Meadows, The Traitor; Miss Muir, Swiss peasant; Miss Mutch, Oriental princess; Mrs Goring,

Queen Marie Antoinette; Captain Mangin Espinasse, evening dress; Mrs Espinasse, a becoming dress as Florence Nightingale; Mr L. W. Cox, a handsome dress as Hans the Boatman; Mr E. C. Reynolds, Indian evening dress; Mr Colchichi, Eavart soldier; Mr A. F. Cutten, Sir Galahad; Miss Chapman, lady graduate; Mrs C. R. Chapman, Lady Teazle; Miss Bransgrove, Incroyable (fashionable dress of the sixteenth century); ~~Miss Muir, Winter; Miss Alexander, Jane~~ Dorothy; Miss Anderson, Red Riding Hood. The avenues were lighted, and a solitary promenader here and there made the contrast of the closing night very marked. Their footsteps echoed through the silence in anything but a cheering fashion, and half-dismantled bays added to the desolateness. The programme was a long one, but I do not think many stayed till the finish (3 o'clock).

*1st May 1890*

After the Exhibition had finished, there was a closing ball on 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1890. The report of the ball again alludes to discords that had lingered throughout the exhibition. Perhaps it was to be expected, that in a comparatively small place like Dunedin in 1890, that the chance to play a role in such a showcase of the colony's talents and achievements, would inevitably see many egos grating against each other.