Chapter 4

Surgeon George Worgan Purchases a Square Piano

There can be little doubt that the domestic life of Dr John Worgan’s family was played out against a less than ordinary setting. The activities of the Worgan household would have been geared primarily towards music. The sounds of music-making, arising from practising, teaching and composing, would have filled the home. Within such a context, and from their earliest days, Dr John Worgan’s children (George Bouchier Worgan among them) would have been surrounded by music; George ‘was taught music, played music, and probably wrote music as soon as he was able’.  

Although there are no extant critiques of George Worgan’s pianistic abilities, it is not surprising that, having been raised in a musically stimulating environment (and being financially self-sufficient as a navy surgeon), he purchased a piano and brought it with him on his voyage to Botany Bay.

When Did George Worgan Purchase His Piano?

It is not known exactly when George Worgan purchased his square piano. Unfortunately, the sales records of Frederick Beck have been lost.

Nor do we know exactly when Worgan’s instrument was completed (the piano’s original nameboard reveals that it was made in 1780 or 1786?). The date of the instrument’s manufacture is a vital element in the formulation of any hypothesis regarding the date Worgan purchased his piano. This is because Worgan’s career path has ramifications in relation to his ability to afford to buy an instrument.

• 1775: George Bouchier joins the British Navy, and serves as a Surgeon’s Mate on the hospital ship *Tiger*.  
• 1778–79: George Bouchier serves as a Surgeon’s Second Mate.  
• 1779: George Bouchier is certified as a Surgeon Fifth Rate.

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2 See Appendix C, Volume 2 of this publication.  
3 See ‘Date’ in Chapter 2, this volume.  
4 See Pole, ‘No. 26. The Examination of Mr. George Bourchier Worgan’, p. 631.  
5 Company of Surgeons, *Examinations Book 1745–1800*, p. 339. I am indebted to Robert Clarke for this information, which comes from his preparatory research for *Working the Forge*. See also Steel, ‘Surgeons’, p. 31.
• 1780–82: George Bouchier serves on board the hospital ship Pilote.6
• 1783–85: George Bouchier is unaccounted for; perhaps he worked as a naval surgeon (‘on the Portsmouth guardship Ganges’),7 or was on some sort of detached list (naval surgeons did not enjoy retirement on half-pay at the time, so if Worgan was not working, his income would have been severely restricted).8
• 1786: George Bouchier serves ‘on the Portsmouth guardship Ganges’.9
• Wednesday, 1 November 1786: George Bouchier is discharged from the Ganges to the Sirius.10
• Sunday, 13 May 1787: George Bouchier departs Portsmouth for Botany Bay on board the Sirius.

If the Instrument Dates from 1780

If Worgan purchased the instrument new, he would have had to part with possibly one-third to one-fifth of his annual income—a not inconsiderable proportion of his earnings.11 Perhaps he celebrated his 1779 certification as a Surgeon Fifth Rate by purchasing a new piano in 1780. From 1780 through to 1783, Worgan’s serving on the moored hospital ship Pilote (rather than working on the high seas) represented a context within which he could visit piano makers in London (in order to select an instrument) with relative ease. The same could be said when, in 1786 (if not also between 1783 and 1785),12 he served ‘on the Portsmouth guardship Ganges’.13 Frederick Beck would have run his business as a typical craftsman’s atelier of the period. He worked with a small team of assistants, doing … [the most important] work on site, and selling almost every instrument directly to an end user. Most clients who were able to get to London came in person to choose an instrument from among the finished examples on display. Those who could not, generally sent a proxy to select one on their behalf.14

Given George Bouchier’s limited financial means, it is possible that he purchased a second-hand piano. At a cost of one-tenth to one-seventeenth of his normal

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7 Gillen, The Founders of Australia, p. 393.
8 I am indebted to Robert Clarke for this information, which comes from his preparatory research for Working the Forge.
10 See ibid., p. 393.
11 See ‘How Much did George Worgan’s Piano Cost?’, below.
12 See Gillen, The Founders of Australia, p. 393.
13 Ibid., p. 393.
14 Cole, Broadwood Square Pianos, pp. 53–4.
annual income, even the price of a second-hand instrument represented a fairly high level of expenditure. If so, he could have purchased the instrument at any time between 1780 and his joining the *Sirius* on Wednesday, 1 November 1786.

Worgan may have purchased a second-hand instrument during the period between his joining the *Sirius* in November 1786 and the departure of the First Fleet in May 1787 (although, because of his work commitments, his location at Portsmouth and the relatively small time frame, this seems unlikely). It seems unlikely that the instrument would have been purchased second-hand if the instrument’s unique frame was made: 1) specifically for the journey to Botany Bay, and 2) at the same time as the piano was made.

**If the Instrument Dates from 1786**

If Worgan purchased the instrument newly made in 1786, he may have acquired it between its completion (at the earliest) in January 1786 and Wednesday, 1 November 1786 (when he joined the *Sirius*).

On the other hand, Worgan may have purchased the instrument second-hand prior to his joining the *Sirius* on 1 November 1786 (if so, the piano’s owner would have had the instrument in his or her possession for only 10 months—or less—before selling it).

It is also possible that Worgan purchased the second-hand piano during the period between his joining the *Sirius* in November 1786 and the departure of the First Fleet in May 1787 (although, because of his work commitments, his location at Portsmouth and the relatively small time frame, this seems unlikely).

**How Much Did George Worgan’s Piano Cost?**

Well into the early nineteenth century, English square pianos remained relatively cheap to buy. In London during the 1780s, ‘a prosperous tradesman's family lived well on £350’ (approximately A$56,000). ‘People with incomes of between £50 [A$8000] and £200 [A$32 000] a year who could afford some of life’s pleasures constituted about a quarter of the population.’

During the late eighteenth century, ‘life was in a material sense incomparably different from life today. But if blessed with decent health, the average … middle class [person] can scarcely be said to have been less happy than his or her counterpart today.’

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15 Goold, *Mr. Langshaw’s Square Piano*, p. 146.
16 Scherer, *Quarter Notes and Bank Notes*, pp. 203–4.
With a usual cost ranging between 15 and 20 guineas\(^{17}\) (approximately A$2200 and $3700), a square piano made in London during the mid-1780s represented approximately one-fifteenth of an annual middle-class income (analogously, the current equivalent of the cost of a good-quality home entertainment system).

The approximate cost of a new Beck square piano can be deduced from the financial records of the illustrious Parisian harpsichord maker Pascal Taskin, who, on 19 April 1777, owed ‘Mr. Beck in London 660 *livres* … Taskin’s debt arose from the purchase of pianos’.\(^{18}\) In 1777, 660 livres was the equivalent of 48 guineas (14 livres equals 1 guinea).

Taskin’s financial records reveal that he bought five pianos from Beck, each piano costing him 14 louis.\(^{19}\) Each instrument therefore cost 336 livres (1 louis equals 24 livres), or 24 guineas. At the time, the usual cost of a plain square piano made in London was between 15 and 20 guineas. Assuming that Beck did not inflate his price for Paris, and that the instruments he sold to Taskin were representative and without elaborate casework,\(^{20}\) his price of 24 guineas per instrument sits above contemporaneous London norms.

A precedent had been set, however, for inflating the price of a newly made English square piano destined for a Parisian buyer. Whilst brokering the sale of a Zumpe piano to the French essayist and philosopher Denis Diderot,\(^{21}\) Charles Burney quoted a price of 28 guineas (at the time, in London, a Zumpe square piano usually cost only 16 guineas). This represents an unscrupulously opportunistic mark-up of 75 per cent.\(^{22}\} \) (‘Before they learn there is a God’, said a contemporaneous German describing the Georgian English, ‘they learn there are Frenchmen to be detested’).\(^{23}\)

Given that the cost of a square piano made in London during the mid-1780s lay between 15 and 20 guineas, and assuming that Frederick Beck charged a premium rate—that is, 20 guineas—to his London buyers,\(^{24}\) Beck’s mark-up on the pianos that he sold to Taskin (24 guineas each) amounts to 20 per cent.


\(^{19}\) Battault, ‘Les premiers pianoforte français’, p. 105, fn. 76.

\(^{20}\) In London, pianos with plain cases constituted the majority of sales. Beck’s price of 24 guineas for the instruments he sold to Taskin would normally have been associated with more decorative, inlaid pianos. See Cole, *Broadwood Square Pianos*, pp. 48–9.

\(^{21}\) See Diderot, *Correspondence*, pp. 197, 213. Reckoned in today’s monetary values, 28 guineas is the equivalent of approximately £1800 (that is, approximately A$3300). Currency conversion using *The National Archives*; Universal Currency Converter.

\(^{22}\) I am indebted to Anne-Maree O’Brien, Manager of The Australian National University School of Music, for her mathematical erudition and assistance in relation to the calculation of this percentage.


If, on the other hand, Beck’s normal London price was the 24 guineas that he had charged Pascal Taskin, how might George Worgan have regarded such an outlay for the purchase of a new square piano?

According to Brockliss et al., Worgan, as a surgeon, would normally have received an annual basic salary of approximately £70–116. This comprised, at the very least:

- Flat salary (3 shillings per day) £54 15s 0d
- Queen Anne’s Free Gift £16 0s 0d
- Total £70 15s 0d

At the most, Worgan’s normal annual basic salary comprised:

- Flat salary (3 shillings per day) £54 15s 0d
- Queen Anne’s Free Gift £62 0s 0d
- Total £116 15s 0d

In addition, Worgan may have received an extra 12s 6d per year, comprising:

- Chatham Chest (that is, 2d per year from each man on board the *Sirius*, assuming a crew of 30) 5s 0d
- Treatment of venereal disease (£5 per year for every 100 men treated, assuming one-quarter of the crew of the *Sirius* was infected—a probable underestimation) 7s 6d
- Total 12s 6d

This brings Worgan’s usual annual earnings to between about £71 7s 6d and £117 7s 6d—that is, between 68 and 112 guineas.

At 24 guineas, the cost of a new square piano by Frederick Beck corresponds with a possible one-third to one-fifth of Worgan’s normal annual income.

During the time Worgan spent on board the *Sirius*, as well as during his stay at Sydney Cove, his annual salary increased to £182 10s—that is, 174 guineas. This figure is specified in a document entitled ‘Staff Establishment for the Settlement at New South Wales’, prepared on Tuesday, 15 August 1786, by Evan Nepean (1752–1822; a senior administrator at the Home Office, London). A new Beck piano, at 24 guineas, represents only about one-seventh of the increased annual earnings that Worgan would have received as a result of his participation in the colonial adventure.

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25 See Brockliss et al., *Nelson’s Surgeon*.
26 See ibid., pp. 15, 24. See also ‘The Life of a Surgeon’ in Chapter 3, this volume.
If Beck charged his London customers an uninflated, yet premium rate of 20 guineas, Worgan would have had to part with a possible one-third to one-sixth of his normal annual income in order to acquire an instrument. Regardless of whether or not Beck charged his London customers a premium (20 guineas) or inflated (24 guineas) price, for George Worgan the purchase of such an instrument would have represented a significant level of expenditure.

During the 1780s in London, an ordinary second-hand square piano cost approximately £7—that is, 6 guineas.28 On Monday, 15 March 1779, The Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser announced the sale of a second-hand Frederick Beck piano. At approximately £10, the asking price for the instrument lay on the high side of the London average for preloved square pianos: ‘Henry Thorowgood, No. 6, North Piazza, Royal Exchange. Where may be had an excellent second hand Forte Piano by Beck, price ten guineas [that is, approximately £10].’29

At a little less than half the price of a new Beck piano, this instrument may have been regarded as good value (especially given the consistent high quality of Beck’s pianos). On the other hand, given the average cost of second-hand square pianos in London (£7—that is, 6 guineas), the asking price may have been seen as opportunistic.

At the very least, a price range of £7–10 represents a possible one-tenth to one-seventeenth of George Worgan’s normal annual income (even the average price of a second-hand instrument represented a fairly high level of spending); however, the cost of a square piano made by Frederick Beck (either new or second-hand) lay within Worgan’s purchasing power.

In 1782, David Steel published the pay scale for navy surgeons.30 Steel’s figures differ from those detailed by Brockliss et al.31 In 1779, Worgan was certified as a Surgeon Fifth Rate.32 According to Steel, the flat annual salary of a Surgeon Fifth Rate was, at £5 per month, £60.33

This brings Worgan’s early 1780s annual earnings (at the very least) to:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flat salary £60 0s 0d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Queen Anne’s Free Gift £25 19s 6d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total £85 19s 6d</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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30 Steel, ‘Surgeons’, p. 32. See Appendix F, Volume 2 of this publication.
31 Brockliss et al., *Nelson’s Surgeon*, pp. 15, 24.
32 Company of Surgeons, *Examinations Book 1745–1800*, p. 339. I am indebted to Robert Clarke for this information, which comes from his preparatory research for *Working the Forge*.
33 See Appendix F, Volume 2 of this publication.
Assuming that George Worgan’s piano was made in 1780, that he purchased the instrument in 1780 new rather than second-hand, and that he was able to save during the years prior to 1780, a new Beck piano would have cost him approximately one-quarter of his annual salary. It appears that, with thrift, George Worgan managed to afford what would have been (for him) the considerable expense associated with the purchase of a new Beck square piano.

If Worgan’s instrument was made in 1786, he may have been encouraged to buy the piano knowing that his impending ‘all-expenses-paid’ trip to Sydney Cove would provide a context within which he would be forced (by circumstance) to save his increased colonial salary, easily recouping his outlay as time passed. After all, at the new colony the possibilities for spending were limited, and, as Elizabeth Macarthur remarked (writing from Parramatta in 1798 to her friend Bridget Kingdom in London), ‘shops there are none’.34

Despite the intricate decorative casework found on Worgan’s piano,35 the calligraphic style of the instrument’s nameboard inscription (Plate 17a) is not particularly fine-lined. The nameboard inscription of a square piano by John(?) Simpson (fl. 1767–95) represents an example of what was possible in relation to the most extreme degree of calligraphic intricacy and elaborative decoration (Plate 17c).

When compared with Beck pianos dated 1778 (Plate 20e), 1783 (Plate 20g), 1786 (Plate 20a) and ca 1790 (estimate) (Plates 20j and 43q), the nameboard of Worgan’s piano lacks the intricate decorative infills and fine penwork scrolls and dots found on the 1778 (Plate 20e) and ca 1790 (estimate) (Plate 20j) instruments; it also lacks the exquisite handpainted swags on either side of and around the inscription cartouche of the 1783 instrument (Plates 20g, 43o and 43p), and the handpainted sprays of flowers on either side of the inscription of the ca 1790 (estimate) instrument (Plates 20j and 43q). Furthermore, it lacks the extravagantly decorated upper-case letters of the 1783 (Plate 20g) and 1786 (Plate 20a) instruments.

Ornamental elaboration ‘was the chief visual reminder of the quality that owners had paid for’.36 The relatively modest style of the nameboard inscription on Worgan’s piano is in keeping with the type of instrument that may have been not only commissioned by, but also found in the possession of, a person with fairly limited financial means—a person such as George Bouchier Worgan.

Following Zumpe’s invention of the square piano, innovations in piano design and piano playing represented a significant and influential part of London’s music culture. By the 1780s, several makers in London had become ‘key figures

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34 Quoted in Clarke and Spender, Life Lines, p. xvii.
35 See ‘Inlay’, in Chapter 2, this volume.
in the further development of the English square piano, and, to judge from the qualities of the surviving instruments, their craftsmanship was generally of a higher standard than that of [Zumpe'].

During the 1780s there were at least 31 piano makers in London from whom George Worgan may have purchased a square piano.

1. George Astor (fl. 1785–1810)
2. James Ball (fl. ca 1787–1819)
3. Frederick Beck (fl. 1756–98)
4. Adam Beyer (fl. 1768–1801)
5. Lorence Beyer (d. 1789)
6. Thomas Bradford (fl. 1784–89)
7. John Broadwood (fl. 1771–1812)
8. Gabriel Buntebart (fl. 1768–95)
9. Thomas Culliford (fl. 1777–98)
10. Sébastien Érard (1786)
11. George Fröschle (fl. 1776–1800)
12. Christopher Ganer (fl. 1774–1809)
13. Thomas Garbutt (fl. ca 1770–80s)
14. George Garcka (fl. ca 1778–92)
15. John Geib (fl. ca 1777–97)
16. John Goldsworth (fl. 1784–93)
17. John Crang Hancock (fl. 1779–94)
18. Henry Holland (fl. 1783–98)
19. Jacob Kirckman (fl. ca 1772–92)
20. William Le Blond (fl. 1780–92)
21. James Longman and Francis Broderip (fl. 1773–95)

37 See ibid., p. 70.
38 The following list is substantially based on that found in James, Early Keyboard Instruments, pp. 63–80. James lists keyboard instrument makers (excluding the organ) working and/or selling in England up to the year 1820. James does not claim that his list is complete. See Appendix E, Volume 2 of this publication.
39 In 1775, Christopher Ganer insured his stock and utensils for £400. See Barnett, The Structure of Industry in London 1775–1825, p. 236.
22. George Pether (fl. 1775–94)
23. Johannes Pohlmann (fl. 1767–93)
24. John Preston (probably only a dealer)
25. William Rolfe (fl. ca 1785 – ca 1808)
26. Frederick and Christian Schoene (fl. 1780s)
27. John Henry Schrader (fl. ca 1768–1802)
28. John and James Simpson (fl. ca 1767–95)\footnote{In 1769, John and James Simpson insured their stock and utensils for £1000. See Barnett, The Structure of Industry in London 1775–1825, p. 236.}
29. William Southwell (1736/37?–1825)\footnote{See Bozarth and Debenham, ‘Piano Wars’, p. 45, fn 2, 95.}
30. Robert Stodart (fl. ca 1770–96)

These makers ‘were solely concerned with manufacturing pianos. In earlier decades no [craftsman] … had ever earned his living in this way.’\footnote{Cole, The Pianoforte in the Classical Era, p. v.}

Although the English square piano developed in complexity during the late eighteenth century, it consistently remained compact and portable. By the 1790s the piano had grown in popularity to such an extent that at least 45 piano makers were flourishing in London. (‘At this time London was a vibrant city, reaping the early advantages of the Industrial Revolution … piano makers’ were commercially engaged with ‘a market that must have seemed limitless’.)\footnote{Bozarth and Debenham, ‘Piano Wars’, p. 54.} Some of these made grand pianos as well as square pianos. The demand for square pianos was so great that in 1798, for example, the piano maker James Shudi Broadwood ‘had to write apologetically to an irate customer’ in relation to the delivery of a new instrument that had been ‘delayed: “Would to God we could make them like muffins … many others have been waiting as long, or longer than you have”’.\footnote{Goold, Mr. Langshaw’s Square Piano, p. 208. In Vienna between 1791 and 1815, ‘there were … at least 135 … keyboard instrument builders’. ‘The Directory of the Development of the American Piano Chronological Summary 1775–2007’, in Bluebook of Pianos (2011).}

Why did George Worgan select Frederick Beck from among the myriad expert piano makers in London? We may never know.

If the instrument was made in 1780, Worgan may have bought his square piano (newly made) in that year; if it was bought second-hand, Worgan may subsequently have had modifications made to the instrument’s stand.
If the instrument was made in 1786, perhaps it was Beck’s willingness to provide
the instrument with a unique stand—either in response to Worgan’s specific
request or as Beck’s response to knowledge of the instrument’s imminent
shipboard journey—for a certain price.

It may have been the quality and attractiveness of the inlaid casework of Beck’s
pianos (a suitable beauty befitting Worgan’s naval and social status). It must, at
the very least, have been the fine musical qualities of Beck’s instruments.

When was George Worgan’s Piano First Brought on
Board the *Sirius*?

It is not known precisely when Worgan brought his piano on board the *Sirius*. It is
reasonable to assume that he had his piano with him on Wednesday, 1 November
1786, when he joined the *Sirius* (perhaps he already had the instrument with
him during his period of service that same year on the *Ganges*).46 Three weeks
later, news came from the town of Portsmouth that ‘apartments are fitting up
for the reception of some of the principal officers who are going to Botany Bay,
they being expected in a fortnight to arrive here, to see that all things they are
to take over with them are safely put on board’.47 By the time *The Hampshire
Chronicle* had published this observation, Worgan may already have placed his
piano safely on board the *Sirius*.

Why Did George Worgan Purchase a Piano to Bring
with Him to Botany Bay?

Broadwood company records show that on Thursday, 10 April 1783, a ‘Mr
Worgan’ purchased one of their square pianos.48 Was this George Bouchier
Worgan? Unfortunately, no information substantiates the notion.49 If George
Bouchier purchased the Broadwood square piano on 10 April 1783, was this
instrument the one that he took with him on board the *Sirius* four years later,
bound for Botany Bay? Attractive as an affirmative answer to this question may
be, no evidence exists that unequivocally proves this to be the case.50

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First Fleet 1786–1787’, in *The Portsmouth Papers*, No. 50 (April) (Portsmouth, UK: Portsmouth City Council,
48 See John Broadwood’s workbook for the period 1771–85, held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, Call No.
Ms. Eng. misc b 107, Journal 1771–1785. This book is bound in white vellum, and has ‘Journal 1771–1785’
marked on the spine. See Mould, ‘The Broadwood Books’, p. 1. See also Clarke, ‘Australian Colonial Dance:
Australia’s First Piano’; Goold, *Mr. Langshaw’s Square Piano*, p. 190.
49 See Appendix C, Volume 2 of this publication.
50 See ibid.
George Worgan’s decision to purchase a square piano may have been influenced by factors such as price, the square piano’s compact dimensions (ideal for the cramped conditions on board ship) and the contemporaneous rage for square pianos.

Given the nature of Worgan’s upbringing, it is reasonable to assume that music was a prominent part of his life. That George brought his piano with him to Botany Bay strongly suggests that he valued music. (He may even have been, at heart, a musician.) In his journal (the extant version\(^{51}\) of which takes the form of a letter to his younger brother Richard\(^{52}\) in England), he states: ‘Oh, now I think of it, you are a musician so Volti Subito.’\(^{53}\) Richard (who was a professional musician) had been raised in the same musically oriented home environment as George. George’s remark suggests that camaraderie existed between he and his younger brother, arising perhaps, not only from brotherly affection, but also from the fact that both had enjoyed a lifelong experience of, and felt a love for, music.

Perhaps Worgan thought that because he was travelling to ‘a land barely touched by European civilisation, there was an urgent need to assert European [aesthetic] values’, especially through the musical riches of ‘European culture’\(^{54}\) —a high-minded purpose indeed.

Perhaps Worgan also regarded his piano, as well as its presence on board the ship, as a source of comfort (both in a material and a musical sense). The fact that he took such a valuable personal item with him on the long and dangerous journey to an alien land reveals his confidence in the officers and sailors with whom he worked to get the First Fleet (including his piano) safely to its destination.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century in England, instrumental music underwent a ‘revaluation … which reversed the long-standing hierarchy that figured vocal music, both in sacred genres and in opera, as superior to instrumental’.\(^{55}\) Worgan’s association with the piano, both as an owner and as a player, connects him with this ‘revaluation’, and may help to explain why, after having been provided with what must have been a consistent (if not also rigorous) musical training by his father, he chose to bring his piano to Botany Bay.

Worgan would doubtless have felt the atmosphere of nationalistic and cultural confidence that attended the notion of Britain establishing a colony in New South Wales. After all, ‘the settling of eastern Australia was a startlingly costly

\(^{51}\) In his journal, ‘Worgan makes references to a fuller journal which he is keeping and also to his ‘rough’ journal from which … entries have been copied out but these have not been located’. ‘George Bouchier Worgan (1757–1838)’, in *Discover Collections* (Sydney: State Library of New South Wales, n.d.).

\(^{52}\) Richard Worgan was born when George was two years old.

\(^{53}\) Worgan, *Journal of a First Fleet Surgeon by George B. Worgan*, p. 27.

\(^{54}\) Crisp, ‘The Piano in Australia, 1770 to 1900’, p. 25.

solution to the [problem of] crowded British prisons’. The cost of ‘the New South Wales colony between October 1786 and the end of 1789’ was in excess of ‘£200,000 … the raw cost per convict per year was £82, or between 2.5 and 4.5 times the cost of keeping them at home’. Major Robert Ross (1740?–94) caustically commented that ‘it would have been cheaper to have fed the convicts on turtle and venison at the London Tavern’.58

‘Why the First Fleet was sent when it was and not before, and why convicts were used … [were matters] intimately related to … issues of imperial and home policy bearing on the continuing security of the eastern empire of trade and commerce based in India.’ Rather than functioning purely as a dumping ground for England’s convicts, ‘a port so capacious and secure as Port Jackson’ created distinct advantages. First, according to European notions of international law prevailing at the time, by transferring some of their population and at least a portion of their laws to New South Wales, the British made actual the preliminary right to possess this territory that they had acquired as a consequence of [Captain James] Cook’s having been its first discoverer, and of his having claimed it on behalf of the King. Second, the British Government also wanted the southern whalers and the Nookta Sound fur traders to be able to … operate anywhere in the Pacific Ocean east of the latitude of Canton (113ºE)—that is, to be able to trade not only among the Pacific Islands and to Korea and Japan, but also to the Philippines, among the Molucca Islands, and along the coasts of New Guinea and New Holland.63

57 Frost, The First Fleet, p. 194.
58 Ibid., p. 194.
61 If the Dutch mariner Jacob Le Maire (ca 1585–1616), who circumnavigated the globe between Sunday, 14 June 1615 and Friday, 28 October 1616, ‘had kept a westerly course after rounding Cape Horn in 1616, the Dutch would have had a chance of discovering Australia 150 years before James Cook’. Derek McDonnell, director of antique booksellers Hordern House, Sydney. In D. McDonnell, ‘Nautical Treasures’, in Ocean (Pyrmont, NSW: Ocean Media, 2011), No. 38 (July–August), p. 48.
63 Ibid., p. 196.
Such trade was prohibited not only by the East India Company’s monopoly (the British East India Company ‘ran much of South Asia as a private fiefdom’), but also by the *Navigation Acts* that prevented British colonies from trading with foreign ships. Britain stood to benefit from a colony at Port Jackson. The harbour lay near one of only three viable routes into the Pacific Ocean. This advantage provided the justification for spending huge amounts of money on establishing the colony.

The voyage was therefore carefully prepared, and at an enormous cost. Worgan was probably aware of these facts, and may, as a result, have felt that the piano would remain safe during its journey to Botany Bay. That Worgan brought his piano with him on the voyage reflects, at the very least, a substantial optimism.

## The *Sirius*

In relation to Australia’s musical and cultural heritage, the inherent importance of George Worgan’s piano far exceeds the quality of its mode of transport from Portsmouth to Sydney Cove aboard the *Sirius*.

The *Sirius* was built in 1780, at Whitby, by Christopher Watson & Co. of Rutherhithe. Whitby—a late eighteenth-century centre for the whaling industry—is on the north-east coast of England, at the mouth of the River Esk.

The navy bought the ship, which was originally known as the *Berwick*, in 1781.

## The *Berwick*

The *Berwick* ‘had been sent once to America as a storeship during’ the American War of Independence, and ‘once after the peace’ to the West Indies.

In their book *Sirius Past and Present*, Graeme Henderson and Myra Stanbury prove that frequently occurring descriptions of the *Berwick* as an ‘East Indiaman’ are the result of a misunderstanding. The ship’s construction reveals that it was

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67 See ibid.
originally built for the ‘Eastern’—that is, Baltic—trade. This is because ‘it had a spar deck, so that mast timber might be rolled on board. It is reasonable to speculate that [the Berwick] … was chosen [for the First Fleet] because of the service it was to perform at Norfolk Island.’ This service was inspired by the pronouncements of Captain James Cook (1728–79), who, having named the island in honour of the Duchess of Norfolk, had placed

The native flax could not be processed and the pine was hollow.’ It was assumed that ‘the recent problems of the Royal Navy in acquiring masts and canvas from the Baltic, and under the French blockade of the American colonies during the recent revolution in America, might be solved by Norfolk Island’. This plan conformed with the British Government’s overall initiative to exploit or encourage the exploitation of the resources of the Pacific region generally … the government, for pressing reasons of commercial and naval strategy, could not afford to see the island occupied by or left available for the use of a foreign power (especially France). Although it was some one thousand miles by sea from Port Jackson, it was adjacent to the sailing route to Canton from that port, as well as being strategically situated in relation to New Zealand.

Alan Frost identifies the source of the erroneous and oft-repeated notion that the Berwick plied East Indian waters. He states: ‘This characterization was evidently first made by M. Barnard Eldershaw (the nom-de-plume of Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw) in Philip of Australia in 1938. It was thereafter frequently repeated.’

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72 Frost, The First Fleet, p. 4.
73 Ibid., p. 84.
74 D. Collins, An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales: From its First Settlement in January 1788 to August 1801: With Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, etc. of the Native Inhabitants of that Country, to which are Added, Some Particulars of New Zealand; Compiled, by Permission, from the Mss. of Lieutenant-Governor King; And an Account of the Voyage Performed by Captain Flinders and Mr. Bass (London: A. Strahan for T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1804), Vol. 1, p. 63; Hoskins, Sydney Harbour, p. 59.
75 Macintyre, A Concise History of Australia, p. 30.
76 Keneally, A Commonwealth of Thieves, p. 118.
77 Swan, To Botany Bay, p. 165.
79 Frost, The First Fleet, p. 4.
Lieutenant Philip Gidley King (1758–1808), second lieutenant of the *Sirius*, reports that a catastrophic fire burnt the ship down ‘to her wales’. One can only wonder how the ‘ambitious and energetic King’ came to this conclusion, because the Deptford dockyard officers who inspected the ship before purchase by the navy in 1781 ‘found it to be “building” in Mr Watson’s yard, and made no mention of any fire-damage’.

The *Berwick* was a ‘full, round build’ and ‘all together a very capacious and convenient vessel’. ‘In order to address the wear and tear resulting from 5 years of service, the *Berwick* underwent repairs and alterations in 1786–87 which put it in excellent condition.’ The *Berwick* cost the Navy Board almost £6000 to restore.

Immediately following these repairs, further alterations were made (at the request of the Navy Board) to fit the ship out ‘for a voyage to remote parts’. Among the repairs and alterations, ‘major interior work was undertaken including enlarging storerooms, and fitting them with bins, shelves and lockers as well as building a sailroom and two more storerooms on the lower deck’. The Admiralty ordered that the ship be ‘supplied with a camp forge and copper oven, and to have their coppers fitted with Mr Irving’s apparatus for rendering salty water fresh, and to furnish them with Lieutenant Orsbridge’s machine for rendering stinking water sweet’. ‘Twenty guns were … hoisted aboard to give her the appurtenances and force of a warship.’

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80 A portrait of Philip Gidley King by an unknown artist, dated ca 1800–05, on ivory (in an oval-shaped gold frame with a glass front and a loop at the centre top for hanging), is housed at the State Library of New South Wales, Sydney (Call No. Min 62; Digital Order No. a830002).
81 King, *The Journal of Philip Gidley King*, p. 19. The ‘wale’ or ‘gunwale’ is the strengthening band added to the upper edge of the side of a ship.
82 Groom, *First Fleet Artist*, p. 10.
83 Frost, *The First Fleet*, p. 4.
87 Admiralty instructions quoted in ibid., p. 86.
After Refurbishment

Following its refurbishment, the ship was renamed by the navy (with an uncharacteristically poetic flair) *Sirius*, ‘so called from the bright star in ye Southern constellation of the Great Dog’.91

At first sight, the *Sirius* would have appeared new. The *Sirius* had three masts, and ‘was painted bright yellow with a broad black band near the waterline’.92 Lieutenant King, however, was not impressed with the ship. He described the *Sirius* as ‘the refuse of the yard’,93 and recorded in his journal entry for Friday, 28 September 1787: ‘on inspection we found that not only the top Timbers were rotten, but also that many of the futtocks [the lower part of the ribs in the frame of the ship] were in the same condition.’94 Since the futtocks are the ribs, and the keel is the spine, it is not surprising that Lieutenant King was concerned. Some of the rotten timbers were below the waterline; potentially, the *Sirius* could fall apart.

The *Sirius* was clearly affected by dry rot … Ships left unused for a period of time, such as the *Berwick* and other navy storeships, were susceptible to dry rot, and the quality of dockyard inspections in the late eighteenth century was not sufficient to ensure detection of dry rot … It was a routine maintenance matter on all ships for accessible areas of rot to be attended to by the carpenter.95

Rotten timbers, however, were not enough to hinder the *Sirius*’s voyage to Botany Bay. Unfortunately for the First Fleet, however, in ‘favourable conditions, the *Sirius*’s best speed was about 10 knots’.96 The ship always held the First Fleet back. For example, ‘where the north-east trades blew, ships were capable of making good time … the *Friendship* logged a refreshing 174 nautical miles to the *Sirius*’s 163 … on a bad day … [the] *Friendship* made 29 nautical miles to *Sirius*’s 25’.97 On board the *Sirius*, the American sailor Jacob Nagle (1761–1841) observed that during the voyage to Botany Bay the ship was ‘so deep with stores’, and had such ‘large buttocks, we could scarcely steer her until we got better acquainted with her’.98

94 Ibid.
The Wreck of the *Sirius*

As fate would have it, the *Sirius* did not survive any longer than two years after the establishment of the colony at Sydney Cove. In February 1790, Phillip had only five months’ supplies left to feed the settlement at Sydney Cove.99 The *Sirius* was ordered to undertake a critical voyage ‘to China to purchase … supplies’. On the way to China, the *Sirius* took convicts to Norfolk Island (1676 kilometres north-east of Sydney Cove) ‘in an endeavour to reduce the strain on the dwindling supplies in Sydney’.100

Even convicts knew that Norfolk Island presented difficulties in relation to anchorage. An anonymous First Fleet female convict who was employed in sewing wrote on 24 July 1790: ‘Norfolk Island [is] … very bad for shipping; there is no place to land but in fine weather.’101

‘Norfolk Island has no natural harbour and it is necessary for sailing ships to dodge the wind, using either Cascade Bay on the north side or Sydney Bay on the south.’102

Cascade Bay was selected as the safest place to anchor; the wind blew south-westerly. Landing the marines and convicts involved rowing them to a projecting rock and (when the waves allowed) having them jump on to it.103 After 270 people had been landed,104 the subsequent offloading of supplies was thwarted by a change in wind direction (to an easterly). For four days the *Sirius* (and the *Supply*) sailed back and forth waiting for winds that favoured a landing. On Friday, 19 March 1790, the wind changed to the south-east. This made a landing in Sydney Bay (on the opposite side of the island) possible.105

Sydney Bay is a trap for sailors who lack local knowledge—its two rocky arms coax ships towards scattered reefs that lie parallel to the shore. The … *Sirius* anchored in the bay … The crew … began unloading provisions into boats. At first, all seemed well …

The danger came, however, not from wind or wave but from an unnoticed current.106

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99 Groom, *First Fleet Artist*, p. 31.
100 C. Dunn and M. McCreadie, ‘The Founders of a Nation: Australia’s First Fleet—1788’, in *The First Fleet* (n.d.).
102 Groom, *First Fleet Artist*, p. 31.
103 See ibid., p. 32.
105 See Groom, *First Fleet Artist*, pp. 32–3.
Captain John Hunter and the *Sirius* had never been to Norfolk Island before, and ... despite [his] best efforts, and a complicated series of manoeuvres with sails and helm, *Sirius* was blown stern-first howling and creaking onto the reef, where the surf began to batter her to pieces.\(^{107}\) Sailors began cutting away the masts and rigging and throwing them over the side in the hope that the loss of weight might refloat her.\(^{108}\)

In his journal, marine officer First Lieutenant Ralph Clark (1755?–94) reveals his despair at seeing the *Sirius* run aground upon the reef:

> [G]racious god what will become of us all, the whole of our provisions in the ship now a wreck before us. I hope in god that we will be able to save some if not all, but why doe I flatter myself with (s)uch hopes ... There is at present no prospect of it except that of starving ... what will become of the people that are on board for no boat can goe along side for the sea ... I who has nothing more than what I stand in and not the smales hope of my getting any thing out of the ship for every body expects that she will goe to pices when the tide comes in ... Saterday 20 [March 1790:] have been up all night as has every body in the place soon after the ship went on shore trunks, boxes bed &c what was nearest at hand was thrown over board in hopes it would float on shore a great dele has come on shore but as yet nothing of mine.\(^{109}\)

Two convicts volunteered to swim out to recover the livestock, but once on board, they broke open the spirits, got hopelessly drunk and set fire to the ship.\(^{110}\)

The fire ‘burnt thro’ ye gun deck but was happily Extinguished by the Man that went aboard to send them out ... everything that remained on board the Wreck & the provisions ... [were] not ... damaged as every thing [was] ... on the Gun, & upper decks’.\(^{111}\)

The *Sirius* took many days to break up on the reef at Norfolk Island; this not only shows its basic strength,\(^ {112}\) but also puts pay to any notion that the ship had left Portsmouth as a renovated decrepit wreck.

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107 An ink and watercolour drawing entitled *The Melancholy Loss of HMS Sirius off Norfolk Island, 19 March 1790*, by George Raper (1768?–97), is housed at the National Library of Australia, Canberra (Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an21511971).


112 See Frost, *The First Fleet*, p. 94.
Four days after news of the loss of the *Sirius* reached Sydney Cove, a desperate colonist wrote:

> In all the Crusoe-like adventures I ever read or heard of, I do not recollect anything like it … if you was to see with what ardent expectations some of the poor wretches watch an opportunity of looking out to sea, or the tears that are often shed upon the infants at the breast, you must have feelings that otherwise you never could have any experience of.\(^{113}\)

**Housing George Worgan’s Piano on the *Sirius***

On Sunday, 13 May 1787, when the *Sirius* departed from Portsmouth for Botany Bay, the ship carried 160 people (including 22 marines), and had a crew of around 30. Most of the crew were in their twenties or thirties, reflecting the fact that the navy was (generally) a young man’s occupation.

Conditions on board the *Sirius* were both crowded and cramped, and it is something of a miracle that surgeon Worgan managed to find space enough to safely and conveniently house his piano.

**The Great Cabin**

In accordance with navy regulations, specific areas of the ship were designated for the occupancy of officers. Whilst on board ship, the captain lived in the Great Cabin, located at the stern. The windows of the Great Cabin formed part of the ornate structure seen from the outside at the stern of the ship … The Great Cabin was strictly the domain of the Captain. He used the area as his day cabin, his office and his meeting room. It was a space that no one entered without the Captain’s permission. A marine guard posted at the door 24 hours a day saw that this rule was enforced. The Captain of a ship often had to perform diplomatic functions, and the Great Cabin became the meeting room and dining room for these occasions. It was not uncommon for a Captain to invite his officers to dine with him, though he was under no obligation to do so.\(^{114}\)

The Great Cabin was on the same level as the gun deck. The captain was the only officer who lived on this level.

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Other commissioned officers (lieutenants) ‘and warrant officers of wardroom rank (surgeon, sailing master, purser) lived in the Ward Room on the berthing deck directly below the Great Cabin’. The Ward Room functioned as a recreation room, and ‘consisted of a series of small cabins along the sides of the ship with a long dining table in the middle’.

During the 1780s, naval surgeons were ranked as ‘un-uniformed warrant officers’, and as a consequence ‘could not eat and drink in the wardroom by right’, but rather by invitation. Rarely was a naval surgeon excluded from the Ward Room. George Worgan was very well regarded, and there can be little doubt that he was consistently welcomed into the Ward Room as a valued member of the officers’ company.

The Ward Room

Typically, a cabin adjacent to the Ward Room was 1.5 by 2 metres ‘and large enough only for [one or] two bunks and a little storage space’. If surgeon Worgan managed to make room for a piano in his cabin—the case of the 1780/86 Beck square piano is a little more than 1455 millimetres long, a little less than 505 millimetres wide and 191 millimetres high—he probably kept the instrument unassembled both for space-related and for protective reasons. The portable nature of the piano, however, would have enabled it to be moved into the Ward Room where it may have functioned as a side table (one of the advantages of the square piano’s design). It seems unlikely, however, that the piano was permanently placed on its legs in the Ward Room on board the rolling ship; rather, the instrument was probably assembled (when needed) when conditions were comparatively calm.

George Worgan’s Square Piano Heard in the Ward Room of the Sirius

Square pianos are not loud instruments (at least when compared with the flatulent stridency of that overrated thing, the modern piano). They were ‘not intended to produce the stentorian tones of an orator, haranguing the public in an open

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115 Ibid.
116 Brockliss et al., Nelson’s Surgeon, p. 15.
117 Arthur Bowes Smyth, surgeon on the First Fleet’s women’s convict ship the Lady Penrhyn, remarked that George Worgan was ‘a very agreeable good kind of Man’. Smyth, ‘Journal of Arthur Bowes Smyth’, Part 42. See also ‘George Bouchier Worgan’s Character and Personality’ in Chapter 12, this volume.
118 Hill, 1788, p. 76.
119 When standing on its legs, the 1780/86 Beck piano's height from the floor to the upper surface of the keyboard’s naturals is 668 millimetres.
space’. Rather, the voice of a square piano ‘was more like the conversation of an intimate friend: learned, charming, flexible and well-modulated’. Square pianos were ‘heard for the most part in domestic recreations’.  

Soft, subtle and sweet-sounding square pianos perfectly suited the domestic context for which they were designed. During the eighteenth century, square pianos were usually placed within a ‘décor and spatial environment that is very different from subsequent epochs’.  

A square piano was most likely to have been placed in a room with dimensions commonly found in houses built in west London during the eighteenth century: no more than approximately 7 metres by 5 metres, with a ceiling approximately 3 metres high. (Double-manual harpsichords were often the instrument of choice for those who had larger rooms in, for example, a grand house or a country mansion; these instruments were designed for such a situation.)  

The acoustics of such rooms would have been somewhat lively, because there were fewer soft, sound-absorbing surfaces than is the norm now. Eighteenth-century domestic spaces were the antithesis of the cramped but comfortable room arrangements seen after 1850:  

Any carpet would cover no more than a small central part of the floor surface. Large sash windows at the front of the house had wooden shutters, not the heavy fabric curtain drapes favoured in the Victorian era. Furnishings were more sparse, arranged with an eye to symmetry, and mostly pushed back against the four walls.  

The Ward Room on board the *Sirius* was certainly no longer or wider than rooms ordinarily found in eighteenth-century west London houses, and it was probably not as acoustically lively. If, however, Worgan played his piano either in his tiny cabin or in the Ward Room, the instrument would have produced a sonorous enough sound to be both clearly and easily heard within the space, even with the piano’s main lid closed (as was the late eighteenth-century norm). The dimensions and acoustics of the environment within which Worgan may have performed on board the *Sirius* would not necessarily have compromised his listeners’ ability to hear the tonal variety of the sounds produced by his square piano. It is unlikely, however, that Worgan played his piano as the *Sirius* sailed on the high seas: ‘the movement of timbers and the chafe of rigging would have created a discordant symphony of sounds—creaks, groans, shrieks, wails and

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121 Ibid., p. 89.  
122 See ibid., p. 88.  
123 See ibid., p. 88.  
124 See ibid., pp. 88–9.  
125 Ibid., pp. 88–9.
vibrations that never ceased.'"126 The sea would have hissed and banged against the hull of the ship,127 and there was always the motion of the ship to consider (the ship’s pitching, rolling and scending would have been hazardous for the physical stability of the instrument).

126 Pembroke, Arthur Phillip, p. 168.