

OTTO BOETTGER

MANUFACTURING OPTICIAN

FLINDERS STREET, ADELAIDE

Introduction

My research into Otto Boettger commenced when I purchased an unusual tool which I suspect was used for scribing scales (see photos below). Look for it at the next Power of the Past!

Biography

Herr Boettger was born in Germany in 1842 and from the age of 14 was apprenticed to a “skillful instrument-maker”. He served in the Prussian Army, was called up in the Franco-Prussian war and worked as an instrument maker in Germany and Russia before coming to Adelaide in 1876.

The following example of his work is paraphrased from the Express of 20 Aug 1886:

Mr Otto Boettger has just completed some very fine work for the 4 ½ inch equatorial telescope at the Semaphore Observatory. This instrument ... was perfect... except in the verniers and scale circles and also in the want of automatic apparatus for keeping the tube in motion. The old right ascension circle was scaled to a minute of time, and the declination circle to half a minute of arc; but with the new circles, divisions of a second of time and fifteen seconds of arc are available, the telescope thus being rendered of far greater service in astronomical work... The scales are of fine silver let in brass, the readings being on beveled edges...and powerful lenses are attached for the verniers. The whole of the work has been carried out to perfection... the addition is as much a work of art as it is an aid to science. Mr Boettger has also provided the equatorial with clockwork made after his own pattern and fitted with perfect accuracy. The motive power is a weight of 50 lb., which descends a distance of several yards, and there is a fine adjuster for the motion of the telescope to suit the apparent rate of travelling of any particular celestial object... No similar work has ever been made elsewhere in the colonies, and this remark also applies to the verniers.

Newspaper scans of the era shows the firm was busy importing and exporting “packages of instruments”. Advertisements for theodolites, scientific instruments and spectacles were numerous. There is also a warning: “Caution.. Otto Boettger does not use travelling agents...”, which I think is just a way getting the eye of the public!

In 1897 the business was sold to Mr G C Kohler, who had been apprenticed to Mr Boettger, but it continued to trade under the original name. Otto and his wife returned to Germany in 1899 on SS Barbarossa where he died in 1907 aged 65. They did not have any children.

Premises

Otto Boettger’s workshop was established at 88 Flinders Street, Adelaide in 1877. In 1882 the business moved from 88 Flinders Street to 120 Flinders Street to “enlarged workshops etc”. In 1906 (after Otto had left South Australia) “Observatory House” was built by Kohler at 86 Flinders Street. It became the showroom for the business as shown in Figure 1. The buildings still exist and have heritage listing, note the extra floor on No 88. Trevor Kelley bought his first hand lens for examining minerals from Boettgers in 1962. At the time he was an apprenticed electrical fitter just up the road in Flinders Street where Pultney Street now crosses. Dick Turpin also bought microscope accessories there in the 1960’s after a tip from Bob eterson (AHMRC member from Strathalbyn) who used to walk past the shop as a schoolboy and marvel at the contents!



“Observatory House” and Otto Boettger’s shop in 1906

Products

Although Otto Boettger is listed as a manufacturing optician, many of the items labeled as “O BOETTGER ADELAIDE” are thought to be imported. Examples are shown below.



Barometer/thermometer as sold at auction



Camera Obscura labeled Boettger Adelaide



Dumpy Level, note label on instrument and box



Thermometer, note label on instrument



Pocket Compass, name stamped on lid

Equipment owned by AHMRC members



Inscribing Tool, owned by Mark Randell



Inscribing Tool (detail of fine pitched advancing screw)



Microscope Accessory (specimens held in the rings can be turned over) owned by Dick Turpin

Boettger Catalogue of 1896

The National Library of Australia has provided a copy of a book titled “Catalogue of engineering, surveying, optical and scientific instruments manufactured and imported by Otto Boettger, optician and scientific instrument maker to the South Australian and other governments...”

The catalogue lists 590 items including theodolites, sextants, prismatic compasses, clinometers, sundials, barometers, anemometers, drawing instruments, microscopes (Sole Agent for Dr Carl Ziess), assay balances etc etc. There is no mention of my device except for the following intriguing extract:

“The workshop of this establishment, fitted up with the best machinery, Dividing Engines, and other appliances for all kinds of work of precision, is always under the personal supervision of OTTO BOETTGER, who has been connected with the scientific and optical profession since 1857”



Tool to press covers on microscope slides owned by Dick Turpin

Conclusions

Some unanswered questions have been raised in this research: When did the firm of Otto Boettger cease to function? Is there a photograph of Herr Boettger? Do other AHMRC members have memories of the firm? What is the purpose of the tool that I have acquired? Could it be one of Otto's Dividing Engines?

Mark Randell