

# Frank Piaggio and Piaggio & McKinlay,

## watchmakers and jewellers of Perth

Frank Piaggio (1865-1957) was a London-born and trained watchmaker and jeweller who set up his own business in Perth during the 1890s gold rush. After teaming up with Robert McKinlay in 1893, the firm made many presentation and sporting pieces, as well as the 'Coolgardie Brooch'.



### MICHEL REYMOND AND DOROTHY ERICKSON

Francis Augustus Piaggio, known throughout his life as Frank, was born in London in 1865 to Frank Piaggio and his wife Mary née Thompson.<sup>1</sup> His father appears to have followed various occupations such as a sewing machine maker in 1862, a boot and shoe maker in 1874 and china and glass dealer in 1880.<sup>2</sup> During Piaggio's early years the family lived in Lamb's Conduit Street, London WC, and it is likely he learned a great deal from his father's activities.<sup>3</sup>

While living there young Frank received his training in the watch and jewellery trade, referring later in life to his work while in London. Probably in 1887 or early 1888, he sailed to Australia,<sup>4</sup> arriving in Sydney where he pursued one of his lifelong interests, rowing. In May 1888, Frank raced in the first Leichhardt Bay Regatta, 'in the single sculls, in skiffs light, for manual labour amateurs, handicapped'.<sup>5</sup>

His bride, Georgina Beatrice Davage also of Lamb's Conduit Street, arrived

in Sydney on 23 July the same year, and they were married that day at St Paul's Church of England, Redfern (now the Greek Cathedral). He was recorded as a jeweller living at 2 Darling Street, Glebe and she of 'full age' (she was 26, he was about 23) who had just landed that day from the SS *Ormuz*.<sup>6</sup> Both families had lived opposite each other in the same Bloomsbury street, suggesting this was a childhood romance which lasted into their adult life.<sup>7</sup>

The couple apparently stayed in Sydney for a while, later sailed to Melbourne and may have spent time there before they sailed for Adelaide on the SS *Victorian*, where they arrived on 8 May 1890.<sup>8</sup> Here Piaggio worked as a jeweller on, among other things, setting 'the Countess of Kintore's Coronet' and pursuing his other lifelong interests, dancing and playing musical instruments, both of which were popular Victorian pastimes.<sup>9</sup>

From Adelaide, they sailed for Perth, arriving before the middle of 1891.<sup>10</sup> This was a time when payable quantities of gold had just been discovered in the Murchison region of Western

### 1

Frank Piaggio, *gold mining brooch* reputed to have been made from some of the first gold from the Murchison field (proclaimed in 1891) and probably one of Piaggio's earliest pieces. The owner inherited it from her mother whose father had been a builder at Day Dawn, Cue and other places in the Murchison. Private collection, Norway

Australia, sparking the last of the great 19th-century Australian gold rushes, when the rest of Australia was plunging into the 1890s' depression. Western Australian jewellers were soon producing jewellery on goldmining themes, made from the local gold (**plate 1**).

His first newspaper advertisement appeared at the end of June 1891: 'F. Piaggio watchmaker and working jeweller hopes to merit a fair share of public patronage' he announced.<sup>11</sup> And so began an extensive newspaper advertising campaign in the local papers and almanacs in which he actively promoted



himself, saying among other things that 'whilst in London (he) made and set the Prince of Wales' Feathers presented to HRH Prince Albert Victor ...'.<sup>12</sup>

He quickly obtained commissions and was active in supporting local organisations, often presenting medals and other presentation pieces he had made.<sup>13</sup> His premises in 1892 were in busy William Street in Perth.

He appears to have quickly become involved in the Perth Amateur Operatic Society, continuing his interest in 1910 as a solo violinist with the Swan Orchestral Society and as a member of the Guildford Orchestral Society in 1913. He was a member of the Perth Volunteer Infantry Force and probably a Freemason.

In May 1892 Piaggio made a watch chain of Western Australian gold, which was presented to performer William Sydney Perman by Sir Thomas Cockburn-Campbell on behalf of the

Perth Amateur Operatic Society.<sup>14</sup> This was favourably commented upon.

A short time later there was another announcement:

We have been requested to state that the handsome jewel which the brethren of the Masonic Lodge Emulation, No. 2,281 recently presented to the I.P.M. Bro. A. B. Wright, is now on view in the window of Mr. Piaggio, the well-known jeweller, of Hay-street. This jewel was manufactured out of Western Australian gold, while the engraving thereupon, together with its other embellishments, were all done in the colony. The work generally is finished in a manner highly creditable to Mr. Piaggio and his talented staff of operatives, and should be inspected by all who are capable of appreciating high class local manufacture.<sup>15</sup>

**2**  
Piaggio & McKinlay, *gold mining brooch labelled Coolgardie*. WA patent Reg. no 9, 1895. Gold had been discovered at Coolgardie in 1892. Private collection, Sydney, photo Andrew Simpson

**3**  
Piaggio & McKinlay, *gold mining brooch labelled Coolgardie*, stamped 'PIAGGIO & CO' and 'PERTH'. c 1895. Private collection, Sydney, photo Andrew Simpson



**4**

Piaggio & McKinlay, *gold mining brooch labelled Hannan's*. WA patent Reg. no 9, c. 1894. Collection, Dorothy Erickson, subsequently stolen. Patrick Hannan (1840–1925) had found gold at Hannan's, later Kalgoorlie, in June 1893.

**5**

Unknown photographer, *Annie Campbell Loton née Forrest*, niece of Lord Forrest, wearing a Piaggio & McKinlay Hannan's gold brooch



**Piaggio & McKinlay**

The business grew and became successful so that in about August–September 1893, Robert George McKinlay joined and it became known as Piaggio & McKinlay, with the business being carried on from central Hay Street, Perth.<sup>16</sup> Beginning in May 1895, in a series of advertisements, they warned

others not to copy their new Coolgardie brooch design (plates 2-3). This advertisement appeared over 300 times in the *West Australian* and *Western Mail* between 1895 and 1900:

**NOTICE TO JEWELLERS AND OTHERS. THE COOLGARDIE BROOCH.**

Notice is hereby given that legal proceedings will be taken against any person making, selling, or having in his possession any infringement of the “Coolgardie Brooch,” as manufactured and registered in this colony by us on the 25th of March, 1895.

PIAGGIO & MCKINLAY, Perth<sup>17</sup>

At the wedding of Charles Moran MLA to Lizzie Healy in August 1895, the groom gave the two bridesmaids Coolgardie brooches, which they wore on their pink frocks. Frank Piaggio gave the couple a brooch as a wedding present.<sup>18</sup>

In 1899, Piaggio & McKinlay changed tactics and supplemented the warning notices with a series of advertisements in the *West Australian* and *Western Mail* for their “Coolgardie Brooch (regd)” for sale at £2 5 shillings. These ads ran from 1899 to 1900.<sup>19</sup>

They had previously designed other gold-mining brooches labelled “Hannans” after the town (subsequently Kalgoorlie) named after Paddy Hannan, who discovered gold there in 1893 (plates 4-6).



In 1897 the firm was chosen to supply a silver cradle, the gift of the Perth City Council to their Mayor Henry Saunders MLC on the birth of his son (**plate 7**),<sup>20</sup> and an engraved gold medal presented to the town clerk of York.<sup>21</sup>

In 1898 they advertised that they offered 'Beautifully manufactured Kalgoorlie quartz brooches, links and charms, in all shapes and styles, are made from specially chosen stones, and veins of gold running through, and are mounted in gold'.<sup>22</sup> Other gold specimens came from mines at Peak Hill, Day Dawn, Lake Austin, The Island, Tuckanarra, Gabanwintha, Lawler, Lakeway and Horseshoe, mostly in the Murchison.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately no jewels set with quartz by this firm have yet been sighted.

Piaggio & McKinlay made a silver pick with which Miss Sylvia Forrest, daughter of the Mayor Alexander Forrest, used to turn the first sod of the Perth Electric Tramway on 31 January 1899. The pick was

A beautifully finished article ... on one side of the solid silver head was engraved the city coat of arms and on the other an electric tramcar. Around the centre of the wooden handle were six shields, two large and four small, the small ones surmounted by raised silver swans. On one shield was the inscription: "Presented to Miss Sylvia Forrest by the Perth Electric Tramway Company Limited at the ceremony of the commencing of construction at Hay and Bay streets, January 31,

1899"; another carried Miss Forrest's initials – S.F.; a third the letters P.E.T., and on a fourth, Perth, W.A. The bottom of the handle was tipped with silver and on the crescent-shaped top was a silver swan.<sup>24</sup>

They had obviously made their mark as the firm was chosen to make the gift from the 'State school children of Western Australia' to the children of the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York (later George V and Queen Mary) to commemorate their parents' visit in 1900. The present was a group of silver models of Australian animals: an emu for Prince Edward (Edward VIII, later Duke of Windsor), a kangaroo for Prince Albert (later George VI), a swan for Princess Victoria (the Princess Royal) and a dingo for Prince Henry (later Duke of Gloucester).<sup>25</sup> In 1901, HRH the Duke of Cornwall and York laid the foundation stone of a new wing of the Art Gallery and Museum with a trowel, square and mallet made by Piaggio (**plate 8**).<sup>26</sup>

On 10 July 1903, Piaggio retired from the firm<sup>27</sup> and it continued under McKinlay alone until about 1920. In 1921-22 the firm is listed in the Post Office Directories as 'McKinlay & Russell'. In the 1930s McKinlay was reputed to work for the Levinson family who had opened a large new building with a front inlaid with bronze and lapis lazuli and employed over 100 staff.<sup>28</sup>

Frank and Georgina Piaggio lived on a riverside location at West Guildford

(now Bassendean), now a northern Perth suburb, which she had purchased about 1900. Here they built a house<sup>29</sup> and established orchards, vegetable and flower gardens. Apart from being an orchardist, he showed moving pictures in Claremont in 1915, becoming the owner of the Majestic Picture Company in Guildford in the 1920s.

He and his wife were regular exhibitors and winners in the local agricultural shows, he with vegetables and fruit and poultry and she with flowers from their garden. They also made time to pursue his sailing, dancing and musical hobbies.<sup>30</sup>

Later, Robert McKinlay and his wife Janet purchased adjoining land and moved from their house in William Street, Perth to be next to their friends the Piaggios.<sup>31</sup> Their properties were respectively called 'Royston' and 'White Wings'; White Wings was a well-known Western Australian yacht. Robert McKinlay died at Bassendean on 5 July 1939.<sup>32</sup> Piaggio's wife Georgina died in 1941 aged 79, and Piaggio died in his 92nd year on 17 June 1957, leaving no descendants.<sup>33</sup> In the 1960s, Piaggio Street in nearby Bayswater was named in his honour.

## Marks

Known examples of his work show impressed marks of either PIAGGIO or PIAGGIO & CO or PIAGGIO PERTH. These marks occur on dated or known registered patent examples between 1894 and 1898, suggesting they could have been in



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Piaggio & McKinlay, *silver cradle* made for Perth City councillors to present to Henry Saunders, mayor of the city in 1896.

Collection: Perth City Council, on 'permanent loan' by the grandson of the recipient

use from the time Piaggio himself first commenced business in 1891 and were subsequently used under Piaggio & McKinlay.

Several versions are in private collections: two 'Coolgardie' brooches were known to have been in Sydney collections and two surmounted by 'Hannans' in Perth (**plates 2-5**). These are stamped with "PIAGGIO & CO PERTH" (**plate 3**) or "PIAGGIO" "PERTH", on the round wire of the handle. On the underside of the shovel a standing swan is impressed and underneath the bucket the "RD. No9." A distinctive triple rhomboid cartouche carrying the 15-carat quality mark is applied to the bucket. "WA" is engraved on the front of the bucket. A somewhat similar brooch is in a family collection in Norway (**plate 1**).

This firm's jewellery reflects the style of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods; it shows a certain sophistication in the design and use of materials perhaps reflecting the London training which Piaggio received before he came to Australia. This can be seen in the examples of their jewellery illustrated in Cavill, Cocks & Grace, *Australian Jewellers Gold and Silversmiths Makers and Marks*, and in Anne Schofield & Kevin Fahy, *Australian Jewellery 19th and Early 20th Century*.<sup>32</sup> Work from this firm can also be seen in Dorothy Erickson, *Gold and Silversmithing in Western Australia: A History*.<sup>33</sup> Illustrated in these publications is the firm's most identified goldfields piece, the Coolgardie Brooch, a patent for which was registered in Western Australia in 1894 as WA Reg. no 9.

**Dr Dorothy Erickson** is a Perth-based historian and practising jeweller, who has brought the work of many Western Australian artists and craftspeople to our attention. She is a frequent contributor to *Australiana*, and the author of several books on Western Australian crafts and craftspeople.

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#### NOTES

- 1 ancestrylibrary.com – England & Wales Birth, Death, Marriage Index.
- 2 England Census 1862, 1874 and 1880 under Piaggio, see ancestrylibrary.com
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 His exact date of arrival has not been traced.
- 5 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 Feb 1888 p 3.
- 6 Marriages, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 July 1888 p 1 and marriage certificate reg. no. 1102.
- 7 *Op cit* note 2 and London street directories for the period.
- 8 *Sands' Sydney Directory*, 1889, records 'Piaggi [sic] boarding house, 289 Castlereagh Street' and *The Advertiser*, Adelaide, shipping arrivals, 9 May 1890.
- 9 *Advertiser*, Adelaide, 24 June 1890, 24 July 1890, 26 July 1890 and *West Australian* 28 July 1891.
- 10 His first advertisement is in *The West Australian* 30 June 1891. His arrival date has not been traced.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid* and 28 July 1891.
- 13 E.g. *West Australian*, 25 May 1892 (watch chain), 30 Nov 1892, 17 Aug 1893 (silver medal), 30 Nov 1893 (gold medals Piaggio & McKinlay) and 7 Jan 1895 (bracelet).
- 14 *West Australian* 25 May 1892 p.3
- 15 *Inquirer & General News*, Perth, 3 Sept 1892 p 2; *West Australian* 3 Sept 1892 p 2.
- 16 *Op cit* note 13; the first reference to Piaggio & McKinlay appears on 30 Nov 1893.
- 17 *West Australian* 13 May 1895 p 3 and later. This may have been directed against rival jewellery makers Donovan & Overalnd, Lindell or Larard who produced similar brooches, see illustrations in Dorothy Erickson, *Gold and Silversmithing in Western Australia: A History*, UWAP, 2010, p 76.
- 18 *Western Mail* 6 Sept 1895 p 31.
- 19 *Western Mail* 28 Apr 1899 p 53
- 20 *West Australian* 10 Nov 1896 p 4; *City of Perth News* 10.57, Apr-May 1990.
- 21 *West Australian* 29 Sept 1897 p 4



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Piaggio & McKinlay (makers), F M Williams (designer), *silver trowel*, used by HRH the Duke of Cornwall & York to lay the foundation stone of a new wing of the Art Gallery of WA, 1901. The inscription is framed by a design of stylised kangaroo paw. Photo Art Gallery of WA

- 22 *Western Mail Christmas Issue 1898* p 54.
- 23 *Inquirer & General News*, Perth, 8 Apr 1898 p 11
- 24 *Western Mail* 22 Sept 1949 p 23.
- 25 *Western Mail* 27 July 1900 pp 30, 32.
- 26 *Western Mail* 27 July 1901 pp 26.
- 27 Notices, *West Australian* 15 July 1903.
- 28 Pers. comm. to Dorothy Erickson 1980s by elderly jeweller Boxhorn.
- 29 Jennie Carter, *Bassendean A Social History 1829-1979*, 1986.
- 30 Probate records, Supreme Court of WA, Perth. His will is dated 27 Jan 1955.
- 31 *Op cit* note 17.
- 32 *West Australian* 7 July 1939 p 1.
- 33 *Op cit* note 16.

- 34 Cavill, Cocks & Grace, *Australian Jewellers Gold and Silversmiths Makers and Marks*, 1992, Roseville, CGC Gold p 189 and in Anne Schofield & Kevin Fahy, *Australian Jewellery 19th and Early 20th Century*, 1990, David Ell Press, Sydney p 231, and the Scotch College Medal dated 1898. See also *West Australian* 25 May 1892 p 2 and 3 Sep 1892 p 2.
- 35 Dorothy Erickson, *Gold and Silversmithing in Western Australia: A History*, UWAP, 2010 pp 84-87, and *Aspects of Stylistic and Social Influences on the Practice of Gold and Silversmithing in Western Australia 1829-1965*, PhD thesis, University of Western Australia 1992.