

**THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA**

**report by- STEPHEN SALVI- 2001 CHURCHILL FELLOW.**

**To study manufacturing, marketing, and trends in  
contemporary guitar making in the United States of America.**

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## INTRODUCTION

This fellowship was arranged to give me the best possible information about building guitars. Not just as a custom builder, but as a mass producer of quality instruments in Australia. My application for a Churchill fellowship began after a long and fruitless search for quality instrument building education in Australia. My experiences in Northern California, USA, were exactly what I had been seeking and my education has been greatly enlarged in the short time I was there.

Sincere thanks to The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia for making this study trip possible. Many thanks also to luthiers Charles Fox of CFox, Richard Hoover of the Santa Cruz Guitar Company, Jeff Trougott and Ed Claxton for taking time to introduce a newcomer to their factories and workshops; and to the luthiers at the Guitar Builders Festival.

Thanks also to the Ius family of Healdsburg for their hospitality to a stranger in their country.

## Executive Summary.

### CHURCHILL FELLOW

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Occupation: Guitar sales/ Construction & repair.

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

To learn as much as possible about contemporary guitar manufacture and marketing, with the aim of becoming a manufacturer in Australia.

The entire trip was focused in Northern California, the home of “West Coast” guitar building. The main focus was on the Guitar Builders Festival and the Contemporary guitar building course held by Charles Fox in Healdsburg, Sonoma County.

The highlights of the three day festival were the amazing array of instruments from around the world, the open forums on tooling and marketing, the performances by many well known artists on the displayed instruments, and the overwhelming sense of sharing information and skills.

Although I do not nominate any persons in particular from the festival, the general climate was of giving information and I received much verbal and printed information and contact names.

The course on guitar building ran for 6 full days, and was without a doubt one of the most inspirational experiences I’ve had. The course covered everything from talking about the state of guitars and building at present, to finance.

After the course I spent time in various factories in Northern California taking a look at current methodology. Some people who were particularly valuable in providing information were Charles Fox who ran the guitar building course and in whose factory they were refitting the fixtures and jigs. Richard Hoover, the CEO of The Santa Cruz Guitar Company, Jeff Trougott, and Ed Claxton, both also in Santa Cruz,

The major lessons I learnt were the importance of planning, and that other people can help me avoid the mistakes they made. Networking is very important.

I learnt how to make specialised equipment, and where to get information on making other tools. I learnt about marketing, how to use internet forums to my advantage, and the value of reputation.

I am incorporating my new knowledge in refitting my workshop. I am working with a prominent local builder with the aim to increase output using new technology. We aim to develop a small factory together to produce guitars of international standard and to train new luthiers to this high standard.

I can disseminate my new knowledge best by having the American attitude of being eager to share my knowledge freely. I have already invited local luthiers to inspect the information and photographs which I have brought back. I already give short courses on guitar setups and maintenance for which I have written a short book. I will develop my website to reach a wider audience.

## PROGRAM.

Four weeks in August and September 2001 in Northern California.

Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> - Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> Aug.  
Luthiers Mercantile International open days<sup>1</sup>.

Friday 17<sup>th</sup> - Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> August.  
Guitar Makers Festival.

Monday 20<sup>th</sup> –Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> August.  
Guitar building course with Charles Fox.

Monday 27<sup>th</sup> - Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> August.  
Visits to C Fox factory and Sonoma Museum “Guitars as Art”.

Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> August -Friday 31<sup>st</sup> September.  
Travel to Mendicino County to visit workshops.

Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> –Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> September.  
Labour Day weekend.

Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> September – Friday 7<sup>th</sup> September.  
Travel to Santa Cruz to visit Santa Cruz Guitar Co. and other luthiers.

Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> September.  
Return to Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> NB; Most spare time was spent at the C. Fox Guitars factory in Healdsburg learning as much as possible about larger operations.

## CONTEMPORARY GUITAR MAKING IN THE U.S.A.

A Winston Churchill Fellowship to study manufacturing, marketing, and trends in contemporary guitar making in the United States of America.

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The entire trip was spent in Northern California, the home of “West Coast” guitar building. The main focus was on the three-day Guitar Builders Festival and the Contemporary guitar building course held by Charles Fox in Healdsburg, Sonoma County. The course on guitar building ran for 6 full days, and was without a doubt one of the most inspirational experiences I’ve had. The course covered everything from talking about the state of guitars and building at present, to finance. After the course I spent time in various factories in Northern California taking a look at current methodology.

### Open Days and Exhibition

I arrived two days before the festival began and was able to attend the Luthiers Mercantile International open day which featured an excellent lecture presented by Scientific Certification Systems for the Forest Conservation Program. Luthiers are guitar builders.

I also attended the exhibition “Guitars as Art “ at the Sonoma Museum where the instruments were ornamented as works of art. It featured over 250 instruments from major factories such as Gibson and Martin and smaller makers such as Steve Klein and John D’Angelico.

### Festival

The Guitar Makers Festival was held in the picturesque Villa de Chanticleer on Fitch Mountain in Healdsburg California, 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> August 2001, and sponsored by Luthiers Mercantile International Inc, Acoustic Guitar Magazine, and Geysers Peak Winery, with over a hundred displays of builders from around the country. The highlights of the three day Festival were the bewildering array of instruments from around the world, the open forums on tooling and marketing, and the performances by many well known artists on the displayed instruments. It showed a lot of traditional type instruments as well as some cutting edge techniques like the hollow soundboard of Fredrich Holtier of Germany, the carbon fibre sandwich of So& So, the offset heel of Fred Carlson and the intricate mastery of Ervin Somogyi. There were discussions on tooling and Internet marketing, that were very informative. Every day and night there were demonstrations of the guitars, and performances by lots of good players.

I made lots of contacts that I can follow up from Australia. I was most impressed that there was a sense that everyone wanted to talk about what they were doing and how they were doing it. An attribute sorely lacking in Australia at present. I guess that means that one of the very first things I learnt in the US was *sharing*. The overwhelming sense of being in something “together” was so prevalent in the States that it has left me with a sense of well being undiminished some weeks after returning.

### GUITAR BUILDING COURSE

The course took place in the CFox guitar factory, and was exactly what I was looking for in terms of information gathering. Charles has been building for over 30 years, and many of his inventions are in use in major factories throughout the United States. He has taught many of today’s more well known builders and is himself a master builder with a remarkable ability to make tools and jigs for almost any application. My learning curve in the US was steep but the information acquired is very valuable. Milling and cutting, making jigs, setting up factory and workshop, tooling, making parts, assembly, finishing and marketing.

I have made many conclusions since returning, an important one being the value of planning. On the most basic level, all jigs and fixtures should be worked out well in advance. This may sound obvious, but the most common answer to my question, “why don’t you use a vacuum clamp for that” was, “we would, but we started with this and now don’t have the time to re-jig”.

### Methods

Something I found valuable is the use of vacuum. Almost *all* of the processes undertaken can be done using a vacuum clamp, mold or bed somewhere. This saves an amazing amount of time over conventional clamps and fixtures. Computer numeric control (CNC) and power tools were talked about in depth. Many smaller factories in the States have a CNC router for shaping necks and bridges. The cost of these machines in the States is significantly cheaper than in Australia, yet are still beyond the reach of most small builders but there are plenty of companies who are willing to take on jobs and runs for those without their own machines. I have looked around South Australia for companies who will assist in this way, with limited success. Their overheads seem to make the process required prohibitively expensive. I have looked also for used machines for sale and have seen suitable machines for as little as \$25k. It seems to me that a purchase of such a machine for a small- medium sized operation (2-300 units per year) would be a reasonable investment.

### Materials

One of the lectures I attended was devoted to world timber stocks, sustainable forestry and alternative materials for instruments. Although poorly attended I found the information invaluable and will endeavour to incorporate what I learnt into my own manufacturing.

### Marketing

Marketing was talked about in depth and my conclusions are as follows. The guitar buying public are resistant to change. Any innovations made in design are best marketed subtly and with some caution. The use of alternative timbers however, has thankfully been successfully marketed by a few major manufacturers. The Internet has proven fertile ground for many new builders on the scene and I attended an eye opening seminar in Healdsburg on Internet marketing.

### FACTORIES

After the course, I travelled to Santa Cruz, where I met Richard Hoover, the CEO of The Santa Cruz Guitar Company. Richard was also very helpful and graciously took time out of his schedule over 2 days to show me his factory and to talk about his version of building and marketing. I then went to the workshop of Jeff Trougott, also in Santa Cruz, a very well known luthier who ships to many parts of the world. He was also very helpful and generous with his time and information and introduced me to Ed Claxton, another well known luthier who happened to work a couple of doors down. I also spent time in the Charles Fox factory where they were refitting the fixtures and jigs.

### MAJOR LESSONS AND INFORMATION LEARNT.

One of the very first things I learnt in the US was the value of sharing knowledge and expertise, and that successful craftsmen are willing to share with those learning. Communicating both with other luthiers and musicians is essential for marketing as well. The Internet can contribute very much in this.

I learnt guitar manufacturing techniques and in particular, tool making - a universal fret scale for making templates for any instrument, a universal bending machine for shaping the sides of any instrument, various jigs for making curves, and vacuum jigs and clamps for a multitude of applications. I learnt ways of

keeping the workshop air clean with motorised air cleaners. I was also introduced to various schools of thought in design principles, and the uses of carbon fibre and epoxy resins. I learnt of timber selection, timber variety and quality, and its storage and sources of supply.

Outsourcing can be important. It also seems to be something that almost everyone I met in California did as a regular part of their process. Everything from getting necks and bridges rough cut, to rosettes and linings can be bought elsewhere or made to one's own specifications at specialty workshops to free up time used for putting instruments together.

I also learnt that there is a large market for handmade instruments, and that these quality instruments can be produced in small factories.

Marketing needs to be consistent for a niche market. Different luthiers can specialise differently, and should not try to be everything to everybody.

### Using the Information

I am also currently working casually with a world renowned builder here in the Adelaide hills, with the aim to build and jig a new workshop and re-jig his old workshop with the aim to take production up 30%, using the technology learnt in America. I have also begun re-jigging my own workshop; this will take time but I am confident of a good and productive result in the long term. I have also begun serious discussion with the afore mentioned builder in regard to building a factory here in Adelaide to produce quality but affordable instruments for sale locally and internationally. This will also take some time to realise, but it was the motivation for my application and will hopefully become a reality.

## CONCLUSIONS

I learnt that there is a large market for quality handmade instruments, and that these instruments are being produced in small factories in the USA. I believe that Australia can tap this market, and produce a unique Australian guitar.

Quality is very important, both in materials used and in the building of the instrument to be beautiful in appearance and sound.

Sharing knowledge of materials and methods is very important to develop the industry. This appears to be working well in the USA but is not developed in Australia..

The skills and knowledge that I have learnt will enable me to develop my current workshop to be more efficient and will help me develop a fulltime commercial facility.

Marketing needs to be consistent for a niche market. Different luthiers can specialise differently and should not try to be everything to everybody.

Outsourcing can be important - getting necks and bridges rough cut, fittings can be bought elsewhere or made to one's own specifications at specialty workshops to enable the luthier to concentrate on building the instrument. This outsourcing could be a cooperative venture among the different Australian luthiers.

Communicating both with other luthiers and musicians is essential for marketing. The Internet can contribute very much in this.

## INFORMATION

Dissemination of information on guitar building is currently by word of mouth in Australia.

I have invited the builders that I know to view my extensive photographic archive of the course and the visits to well known workshops. I have also paid visits to some builders for the same purpose.

I have written a short book on guitar maintenance and set-ups that is used as a reference for a short course that I run on the subject.

I am planning to develop my webpage as a means of communication.

There is a Guild of American Luthery. A similar association in Australia would be an asset.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS.**

I believe that there is plenty of room on the sales floors of Australian guitar shops for a quality Australian-made line of instruments. I also feel that on the international scene, there is a desire to see more come out of Australia. A niche market that will absorb “handmade factory” instruments exists and is awaiting exploitation.

I shall develop my workshop into a factory with the best methods as an example of what can be accomplished in this niche market. On site training with a system of mentors and / or apprentices will develop individual’s skills.

I am planning to develop my webpage as a means of communication, and also as a tool for export sales.

I will do all I can to open the lines of communication in South Australia and to educate people in the value of pooled resources and information. Sharing knowledge of materials and methods is very important to develop the industry. This appears to be working well in the USA but is not developed in Australia..

There is a Guild of American Luthery. A similar association in Australia would be an asset to all Australian guitar makers.

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