

The Development of the Brass Band in the 19th Century

Gavin Holman (ed.), 5 August 2020

This article was posted in the IBEW some time in the late 1990's. I have since attempted to discover/trace the author's name, without success.

At the end of the eighteenth century domestic music making was mainly an upper class luxury, consisting of orchestral works and piano music; this piano music was often termed as 'drawing room' music, as the home was the stage and the family the audience. Music for the lower classes was provided by "Waits", musicians employed by the town administrators to signal the passing of time during the day. However these Waits were beginning to die out towards the turn of the century and the musicians involved began to look for, indeed create, alternative outlets for their skills.

The oldest band in Britain is Stalybridge Old Band who claim to have begun in 1814. This is generally accepted to be the case but there are a number of other strong contenders; they are Besses o'th' Barn (1815), New Mills (1812), Coxlodge (1808), and Bolton Volunteers Band (1803). The instruments involved in these bands included clarinets, flutes, piccolos, keyed bugles, serpents, ophicleides, trumpets, horns in F, bugle horns trombones and drums.

In 1818 "Besses" as they are commonly known, were established as Cleggs Reed Band. This name was derived from three brothers John, James and Joseph Clegg, cotton manufacturers from Besses o' th' Barn, a small village now engulfed in Greater Manchester. These brothers provided money for instruments, uniforms and music and also played in the band themselves. The instrumentation of the 1818 band was as follows:

3 clarinets	piccolo
keyed bugle	trumpet
2 French Horns (no valves)	trombone
2 Bass horns (no valves)	drum

J. Foster & Son Black Dyke Mills Band began life in 1816, also as a reed band. It actually began life as the Queenshead Village band, changing to Queensbury, as the Yorkshire village took on a new name. Later the band became "Peter Wharton's Brass and Reed Band" before settling with the name of it's long established sponsor.

We can see from these examples that brass bands as we know them actually evolved from a strange inconsistent *pot pourri* of brass and wind instruments. The keyed bugle was considered a melody instrument at this time, as the woodwind instruments were still slowly developing. (By 1844 the clarinet still only had 13 keys, modern clarinets have 21 keys). The brass family, however, was even further behind as all the brass instruments were still 'natural' instruments (having no valves), the trombone being the only brass instrument capable of playing a chromatic scale.

The most important invention to affect brass instruments was, of course, the valve. This mechanism, used to divert the airflow to additional tubes, revolutionised all

brass instruments; there is even a valved trombone (although it is rarely heard and less frequently seen). The popularity of the valve prompted many instrument makers to lay claim to it but we can be fairly sure that it was invented by either Stolzel or Bluhmel as both men have strong claims to it. After 1815 the newly revamped brass instruments were beginning to supersede the woodwind family. The keyed bugle family gave way to valved instruments within ten years or so, although its largest member, the ophicleide, was still in use in the latter half of the century. (Besses used one in 1860). Morely-Pegge, a musicologist, has done much research into the history of the valve and concludes:

"Which of the two, the Saxon, Heinrich Stolzel, or the Silesian, Friedrich Bluhmel, who took out a joint ten year patent for valves in Berlin in 1818, was actually first in the field will now probably never be known, as even their contemporaries were unable to agree about it."

He sums up by saying that Stolzel, in all probability was the first to plan a valve, whilst Bluhmel may have been first in producing a satisfactory version of it.

The keyed bugle family originated approximately at the turn of the century. In 1801 a keyed trumpet was in use in Vienna and was the instrument used to play Haydn's 'Trumpet Concerto'. By 1810 a five keyed bugle had been made by Joseph Halliday, a Dublin instrument maker; this became known as the 'Kent' bugle as it was used in the military bands of that area. The seminal figure in the development of keyed bugles was John Distin, a member of the famous family of touring musicians, and solo keyed bugle player with the bands of the Grenadier Guards. In 1817 he developed, in conjunction with a French instrument maker, a family of keyed bugles in various sizes. The most important of these was the ophicleide, which took over from the serpent as the bass instrument in most bands.

New brass instruments were being continually developed with the advent of the valve. The cornet was formed from an earlier French version of a treble melody instrument. The cornopean and the cornet à piston (also called cornet à poste) each had two valves and in 1834 were brought to Britain by George MacFarlane. MacFarlane was later to fit a clapper key, on a principle similar to the keyed bugle, for whole tone shakes (trills). The cornet itself first appeared in Paris in 1830, originally formed with Stolzel valves which were later exchanged for Perinet valves. It was at first fitted with a shank for the mouthpiece which could be replaced with one of a different size to allow the instrument to play in different keys. The usual B flat shank was about 7.5 cm long; often a longer 'A' shank was needed. This practice of 'crook' shanks (adopted from an earlier practice with the French horn) died out in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

All cornets except for the brass bands B flat and E flat (soprano) are now obsolete. (Cerveney's B flat piccolo of 1862 is also redundant). Early exponents of the cornet were mostly horn players, they included Hermann Koënic (the 'demon cornet player'), Arban (famous for his tutor book), Levey and Bellstedt. Great interest in this instrument led to unusual variations being made, for example the pocket cornet which could *"...be carried over the shoulder in a neat leather case like an opera glass."* and also the muted cornet which, by means of an extra valve routed all the air to an additional bell which had a permanent mute attached to it. This muted cornet led composers and arrangers to create pieces especially for it, for example "Alpine

Echoes" which uses repetitions of melodies first played open and then muted to give the distant mountain echo effect.

Adolphe Sax was the son of a Belgian instrument maker. In 1842 he moved to Paris to continue his own musical instrument business. Many Parisian manufacturers were outraged by him and filed legal suits claiming that he had in fact stolen ideas from them. In 1856, and again in 1873, he was declared bankrupt through paying fines and fees from the cases he initiated to defend himself. The year 1845 saw him patent his family of Saxhorn instruments, which he had developed during the previous three years.

These instruments were intended primarily for military use and Sax managed to secure a monopoly with the Belgian army. They were pitched mainly in A flat which caused some confusion when B flat and E flat later became standard band keys. All of the family were made with upward pointing bells, even the equivalent of the cornet. Five sizes of Saxhorn were made, they were:

E flat soprano, B flat alto, E flat tenor, B flat baritone, B flat bass (about the size of a modern euphonium).

This range of instruments was first produced with 'Berliner pumpen' valves but these too were changed to 'Perinet', some existing examples even show signs of a type of rotary valve (as used on modern French horns) which is still quite common on the continent. The saxhorns were not, however, Sax's own idea. They originated from a French collection known as 'Clavicons'. Sax took this family of instruments and, recalculating their dimensions, gave them a greater degree of consistency, hence bringing their relationship closer. From 1845 saxhorns began appearing in English working men's' bands. It is worth noting that Mossley Temperance Band won the first Belle Vue contest, in 1853, playing a set of saxhorns.

Another set of instruments patented by Sax was the Saxtrombas. The main objective of these instruments was to provide the 'tools' for the military cavalry bands of Europe. The saxtrombas were conical, but narrower than the saxhorns. They were pitched alternatively in B flat and E flat, with an alternative 'F' version to attempt to replace the French horn. The saxtrombas proved less popular than the saxhorns and consequently had become obsolete by 1867.

The Distin family probably had a greater influence on the brass band movement than any other in the nineteenth century. It comprised John Distin, his wife (who played piano), his four sons: George, Henry, William and Theodore, and his daughter (who was a singer). They toured extensively around Great Britain and Europe with a slide trumpet, a trombone and three hand stopped horns. In 1844 they chanced to meet Adolphe Sax in Paris and, from this meeting, they decided to purchase a set of his new saxhorns.

Instrument purchase proved to be the biggest obstacle for would-be bandsmen. Often bands formed committees to buy instruments through the subscriptions of both bandsmen and local beneficiaries. Players would contribute as much as they could afford with the option of buying the instrument from the band, alternatively the band would retain the instrument and the player would be repaid the monies he had paid in. Prices were very high in relation to earnings: in 1838 the Modbury Band,

from Devon, were quoted this price list from Thomas Stockham, their local dealer.

Serpent	£5 10s
Trombone	£3 5s
F horn	£3 0s
Bass horn	£2 2s
Clarinet	£1 15s

The growth of more and more brass bands led, indirectly, to contests being set up, for as long as there have been bands there has also been a competitive spirit. Contests were in existence at the beginning of the nineteenth century but were small in nature. Stalybridge Old Band entered a competition in Sheffield in 1818 and Besses are recorded as winning one in 1821 and one in 1834. In the periodical "Musical World" of 1837 it was suggested that; "...annual prizes for competition should be given by towns adjacent (as in France)..."

The most noted contest of the first half of the nineteenth century was held at Burton Constable in 1845. The contest itself was not significant(it was only a small part of a large country fair) but what is important is the presence eighteen-year-old Enderby Jackson. Jackson was a flautist in the orchestra providing the evening's entertainment and spent the day listening to the bands in the contest. At the "Great Exhibition" of 1851 Jackson met with James Melling and Tallis Trimmell. It was from this meeting at Crystal Palace that the notion for the contests at Belle Vue arose. It is uncertain, however, who put the theory into practise. In 1852 John Jennison, proprietor of the Belle Vue Zoological Gardens, organised an experimental fife and drum contest which was a huge success. In 1853 Jennison announced that the fife and drum contest would be repeated and further; "...organised competitions for amateur brass bands..." would be held. For the occasion special excursion trains were organised, very importantly, at cheap rates by Thomas Cook.

Unfortunately the organisation was not as good as it could have been; many trains were late, delaying such a proportion of both bands and public that the 'draw' for order of play had to be postponed. However, when all were in attendance one reporter quotes an audience of 16,000. Mossley Temperance Band arrived too late to play in their allocated space but were allowed to play later on. The contest was won by Mossley, performing on their new set of saxhorns (as explained earlier), purchased from Mr. Henry Distin, by this time Sax's agent in London. In 1855 each band had to perform one piece of their own choice and a new overture called "Orynthia" by Mr. James Melling of Manchester. This was a very important development as it was the first compulsory test piece. (It is unclear whether "Orynthia" was an original piece or a transcription of an orchestral work. As it is described as an overture it is probably an arrangement.)

1856 saw the first disqualification of a band from a major contest. Harden Mills band from Yorkshire was disqualified for:

- a) not having practised the test piece for a required four months
- b) having members of other bands amongst their ranks

The first contest to be held at the Crystal Palace, then located in Hyde Park (a

reminder of the Great Exhibition of 1851), was the brainchild of Enderby Jackson, the flautist from Burton Constable. It was actually held over two days due to a mammoth entry of 170 bands, surely a sign of a healthy movement developing. On July 10th. 1860, the main contest was held, whilst on the 11th. only bands that had not won a prize of over £20 the previous year or a first or a second prize the day before, were allowed to enter.

Jackson's great organising skill was shown not only by the fact that spectators travelled at reduced rates but that the bandsmen themselves travelled free on trains to the event. The idea for this contest came out of a handbell ringing contest held in 1859; this was not a huge success but the Crystal Palace management was suitably impressed to allow a brass band contest the following year. Each band played only one piece, an important factor as it had been common for bands to perform two at previous competitions. The main reason for this change was most likely the huge number of entrants and the subsequent time limit, but one test piece has now become the norm. At some point during the proceedings Jackson conducted a massed band of 1390 players, one witness claimed... *"we could not hear the music for the sound."*

For early bands arranging music was just one responsibility fulfilled by the leader. He also had to conduct, teach members of the band and generally organise the administration of the band. However, towards the second half of the nineteenth century many publishers began to trade in band music. The most influential of these was Richard Smith from Hull. In 1857 Smith started his "Champion Brass Band Journal", which has contributed a great deal of important music to the brass band movement as well as countless other lesser pieces. Smith, himself a musician and conductor of the Leeds Railway Foundry Band, later moved to London to continue his increasingly successful business from premises in the Strand. Another important early brass band publishing company was that of "Wright & Round", which began trading in Gloucester in 1875.

Three men have become legendary within the brass band movement, gaining the title "The Triumvirate." John Gladney, Alexander Owen and Edwin Swift were each responsible for developing different aspects of British banding.

John Gladney (1839-1911), was born in Belfast and was a successful orchestral clarinettist; from 1860 he played for the 'Halle" orchestra in Manchester (until 1890). He took over Meltham Mills Band in 1873 and immediately adopted a revised instrumentation. Around 1900 he wrote to the "Brass Band News" describing the transition; he told of the new found success of Meltham Mills and how other bands were following their example. Gladney recalls how the greatest obstacle was in persuading other bands to omit the valve trombone from their line up in favour of the slide trombone. The "new found success" led the band to first place at Belle Vue in 1876-7-8, the first band to perform the hat trick. The instrumentation Gladney came up with has become, with one or two minor alterations, standard contest formation:

1 Eb soprano cornet
3 Bb solo cornets
2 Bb repieno cornets
1 Bb 2nd cornet

1 Bb 3rd cornet
 2 Bb Flugel horns
 3 Eb horns 1st. 2nd. 3rd.
 2 Bb baritones, 1st & 2nd
 2 Bb euphoniums, solo & 2nd
 2 Bb trombones, 1st & 2nd
 1 G bass trombone
 2 Eb bombardons 1st & 2nd
 1 Bb bass (medium size)
 1 Bb bass (monster)
 drums (ad libitum)
 (drums were not allowed at major contests)

Gladney became known as "the Father of the Brass Band" due principally to his work standardising the instrumentation. In 1878 Meltham Mills took delivery of a brand new set of "Besson" instruments, including the first BB flat bass of the range. By 1891 Gladney was conducting Black Dyke Mills, when they won at Belle Vue.

Alexander Owen (1851-1920), is said to have been brought up in an orphanage in Swinton, Manchester, where he was apprenticed to a cavalry bandmaster. At the age of 16 he became solo cornet player with Stalybridge Old Band, Britain's oldest band. Later he moved to Meltham Mills, under Gladney's direction and simultaneously began to train bands of his own, notably Boarshurst (1877) and Black Dyke (1879). With Dyke he went on to achieve their hat trick,(1877-8-9) although he conducted only the last of the three contests. From 1884 he conducted Besses until his death in 1920. Owen turned his hand to arranging with much contemporary success, although his works have since gone out of fashion.

Edwin Swift (1834-1904) was the third member of the 'Triumvirate'. He was born in Linthwaite, near Huddersfield, where he stayed for most of his life. He played with Linthwaite band later going on to become bandmaster and then assistant conductor; in 1869 the band became the "3rd. West Yorkshire Rifle Volunteers". In 1875, at the age of thirty-two he left his job as a weaver and concentrated full time on arranging, composing, judging and conducting. He was very much more an amateur than Gladney or Owen but brass banding was, and still is, a predominantly amateur pastime.

There are basically six reasons for the development of the all-brass band in Britain, as listed below:

1. The main areas for brass band development were the industrial regions where the players were working men who found greater ease in manipulating the valves of brass instruments than the much smaller, and consequently more cumbersome, keys and pads of the woodwind family.
2. Much of the early use of brass was required for outdoor use: stringed and woodwind instruments are less effective than brass under these conditions.
3. Contests, once begun in earnest, were a valuable source of encouragement. Not only did they provide entertainment for the bandsmen and their families but they were readily accessible to everyone as a major decision had been made to keep these contests as cheap as possible for the lower classes. The idea of reduced travel

rates was the brainchild of Mr. Thomas Cook. In the 1840s he had organised excursions to major events, and his scheme was put to a full test with the Great Exhibition of 1851.

4. Local public houses were also an important stimulus to the movement. Often landlords would offer bands use of a room for rehearsal purposes, in the hope of increasing bar profits. This arrangement obviously paid off, as it is still common practice today.
5. Social reforms of the nineteenth century. e.g. shorter working hours, the increased leisure time of working men. Bandsmen were encouraged to develop their playing skills and men who had not previously taken part were drawn to it. (Initially , perhaps, because there was little else to do.)
6. Once established, the movement was aided by the similarity of the instruments. All (except the trombones) were played using the same method of valve combinations with different size mouthpieces. Also, with the exception of only the bass trombone, all instruments had their music written in treble clef. Both of these factors enabled gaps in the band to be filled by players of other instruments. (Euphonium players could take over baritone or bass parts; cornet players could swap to horn or flugelhorn parts).

Many bands would certainly have disappeared if patronage had not been rife throughout the nineteenth century. Often sponsorship could be found in the form of the bandsmen's employer (n.b. 'employer' singular as the bandsmen would work for their sponsor.) This was the most common form of paternalism, but by no means the only one. Bands were also financially assisted by churches, Temperance organisations, Colliery welfare organisations and possibly, although rarely, by town councils. Naturally all prize monies and subscriptions would go towards the running of the band.

Any work on the development of brass bands would be incomplete without mention of the Salvation Army. The first 'army' band was the Consett Corps from County Durham, founded in 1879. There were earlier bands but these were not 'official' army bands. General Booth was a great lover of band music and, in 1880, urged all of his 'officers' and 'soldiers' to learn to play an instrument. All surplus instruments were to be sent to his headquarters to be redistributed. The 'army's' bands have become some of the best known, and have achieved very high standards. e.g. The International Staff Band and The New York Citadel Band.

The Salvation Army has not had a wide reaching effect upon the brass band itself, but has become influential in spreading the band movement throughout the world. It has taken the British style band around the globe and helped to spread the appeal to many that would not otherwise have heard a band. Army bands do not enter contests or play music other than that intending a spiritual message; it is considered more important to be a dedicated Salvationist first, a musician second.

Many drastic changes took place during the nineteenth century. The development of instruments, contests, conductors, composers and, above all, bandsmen left us with bands in 1899 which were only obscure relations of those from 1800. The rate of

change has certainly eased off now and the medium of the all brass band has stabilised; the bands of the 1990s are not very different to the bands of 1900, but have developed in areas such as presentation and deportment and have become much more 'professional' whilst still retaining their amateur status. The top performers in the movement earn their living mainly by teaching and occasionally augmenting orchestral brass sections when the need arises. e.g. cornets in Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantastique" or euphoniums in Janacek's "Sinfonietta" but the spirit of brass banding has always been an amateur pastime and the dedication of the early bandsmen has continued, perhaps being the greatest legacy they gave us.