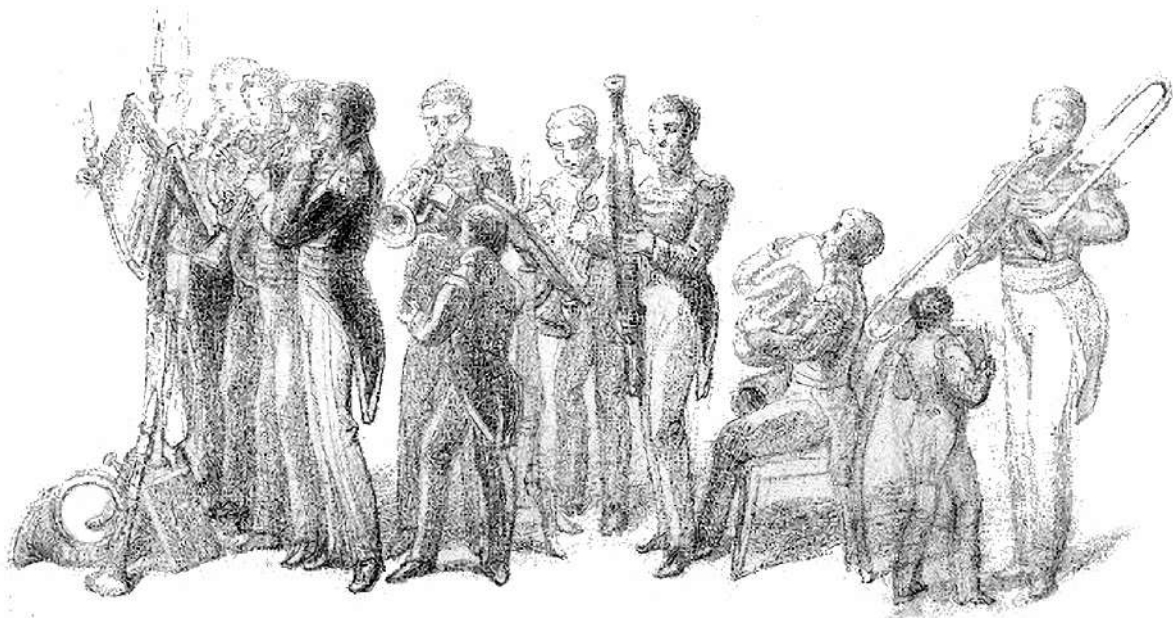


The Roots of Band Contests in Britain

Gavin Holman, 17 February 2023

The first recorded brass band contest in Britain was, for many years, assumed to be that held at Burton Constable on 27 July 1845¹. This was perhaps the first such with a detailed description of the event, but there are several other earlier documented events that are worthy of mention. Enderby Jackson, at the time a youth of 18, attended this contest and, much later, wrote his own account of the Burton Constable proceedings. He used this experience to shape his own ground-breaking brass band contests from 1856 onwards².

As with many such endeavours, identifying the ‘first’ or ‘original’ will probably be an impossible task. Records in the early 19th and the late 18th centuries are few and far between, outside the national and local newspapers, and it is likely that most such events will have had no contemporary record.



*An early band, led by Mr Bean (trombonist),
playing at the Marine Officers' Mess Room at Woolwich, 1826*

The concept of a contest, a musical competition or challenge is certainly well established by the beginning of the 19th century, with vocal and solo instrumental competitions taking place from time to time. We also see the rise of competitions between local ‘bands’ of bell-ringers from the early 1800s.

The definition of a ‘brass band’ is somewhat more diffuse at this time. With the invention of various keyed and, later, valved brass instruments, these became increasingly popular for use both in military and civilian bands. Gradually, over the

¹ Jackson, Enderby - A Memorable Day at Burton Constable - *Musical Opinion and Music Trade Review*, October 1896

² Jackson, Enderby - The origin and promotion of brass band contests - *Musical Opinion*, March 1896 to July 1897

first half of the 19th century the 'all-brass' band became established and the later growth of contesting helped to develop and standardise the instrumentation of these ensembles. Early bands had a mix of brass and woodwind instruments, including cornepeans, keyed bugles, serpents, and ophicleides - most of which would eventually be replaced by members of the Saxhorn family, in the brass band and the mixed woodwind/brass military band.



Drawing of an English village band, 1840s

There are very few detailed descriptions of the instruments within specific bands of this period. Those that have survived show a varied and eclectic range of brass and woodwind instruments. The term 'brass band' is used increasingly from the early 1820s onward, but without any clear or agreed definition of its makeup. Indeed, in these early years it is usually used to describe ensembles of varied instrumentation, from 3 to 30 members, often playing for dances, fetes or processions, where loud music would have been of benefit. Brass bands, brass and reed bands, and reed bands, all co-existed in the 1820s to 1860s and, in most cases their instrumental make up was generally ad hoc.

Similarly, as photography was in its infancy, and bands tended not to be the subject matter of engravings or lithographs in the press or elsewhere, there are very few images of bands of this period. Images of bands shown in this paper are from a decade or so later, and are generally indicative of how the earlier amateur bands may have looked.

The following is a list of known band contests which predate the 1845 Burton Constable competition – further details are given below:

- 1818 Stalybridge Band, at Sheffield
- 1821 Besses' o' th' Barn Band, King George IV coronation celebration procession
- 1828 Bannockburn and Deanston Bands, at Stirling
- 1834 5th Dragoon Guards Band and 83rd Regiment Band, at the Royal Hospital, Chelsea
- 1837 Besses' o' th' Barn Band, Queen Victoria coronation celebration procession at Farnworth
- 1843 Totnes and Modbury Bands, at Newhouse
- 1843 Totnes Brass and Reed Bands, at Diptford
- 1843 Totnes Brass Band, at Newhouse
- 1844 Holt and Winsley Bands, at Holt

In addition to these there are at least two abortive attempts at a contest in this period. I am sure that further research will add to this list and enrich our understanding of these early tests of musical skill.



Haverhill Brass Band, 1857

1818 - Stalybridge Band, at Sheffield

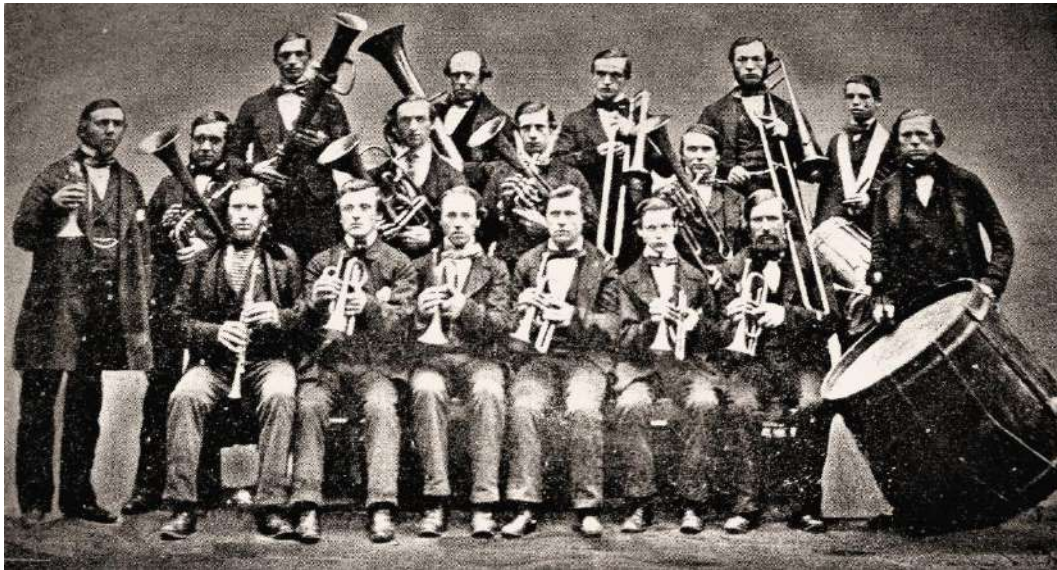
Stalybridge Band was formed in 1814 by Thomas Avison and some of his friends. Originally this was a reed and brass band. William Cottrell recollected that his father, Sam Cottrell, flautist in the band, spoke of a contest attended by the band at Sheffield in 1818.³ Roy Newsome's view was that this was very much in doubt, and no supporting evidence for this contest has found to date.

“One has to doubt the ability of Stalybridge band to make the journey across the Pennines to south Yorkshire at this time. I have made extensive inquiries, but have been unable to establish the existence of a through route from Stalybridge to Sheffield, and therefore the 1818 contest in Sheffield is probably either a myth or someone's mistake. There was, incidentally, a contest in Sheffield in 1858, and it is possible that this was the cause of the confusion.”⁴

³ *Stalybridge Old Band: A Record of a Hundred Years 1814-1914* - George Whittaker and Sons, Stalybridge, 1914

⁴ Newsome, Roy - *The 19th Century Brass Band in Northern England: Musical and Social Factors in the Development of a Major Amateur Musical Medium* - Thesis, University of Salford, 1999

- 1821 - Besses' o' th' Barn Band, King George IV coronation celebration procession**
1837 - Besses' o' th' Barn Band, Queen Victoria coronation celebration procession at Farnworth



Besses o' th' Barn Band, 1860

Two early contests involving the Besses o' th' Barn Band are recounted by Joseph Hampson in his book:

“On the 19th day of July, 1821, being engaged to play along with numerous other bands (the names of which I am not familiar) in the procession celebrating the Coronation of George the Fourth, Mr. William Johnson, a very prominent leader of bands at that time, in order to while away the time during the marshalling of the people, drew the various bands together and made a subscription to form a prize for the band that should play best a piece of its own selection. At the close of the contest the prize, amidst the general acclamation of the public, was awarded to Besses o' th' Barn, who for their test piece played “*God save the King.*” This stands as the first introduction to a long list of remarkable successes.

The next time they are brought before our notice is on the 21st June, 1837, Coronation Day. That day they scored a victory, which, as previously remarked, along with that of 1821, ought to be remembered with pride as long as the band holds together; for on that day Victoria received the crown she had inherited from her ancestors, and on that day Besses o' th' Barn Band were presented with a crown, which they very cleverly won in a musical contest. Being engaged to play in the procession of Oddfellows at Dixon Green, Farnworth (celebrating the coronation of Queen Victoria), at the close of the proceedings, a grand prize, in the shape of a crown, had to be contested for by all the bands, four or five in number, each band to choose its own selection. Besses having to play last, according to draw, selected for their piece “*Hail! smiling morn,*” and on the judge (Mr. John Prestwich, a very distinguished vocalist of Farnworth) making known his awards, they were ultimately declared the winners.”⁵

⁵ Hampson, Joseph N. - *Origin, History & Achievements of the Besses o' th' Barn Band* - Jos Rogers, Northampton, 1892

Besses o' th' Barn Band in 1837 consisted of the following instruments: Four clarinets, one piccolo, one keyed bugle, two French horns, one serpent, two bass trombones, and one drummer. It converted to all-brass after 1853.

1828 - Bannockburn Band and Deanston Band, at Stirling, Tuesday 1st January

A further contest, in 1828, is reported in the local press in Scotland:

“A competition took place in Stirling on the 1st current, between the Bannockburn and Deanston bands of music. We have not been able to ascertain which carried off the palm of victory. Both bands seemed highly respectable, and played several fine airs in excellent style.”⁶

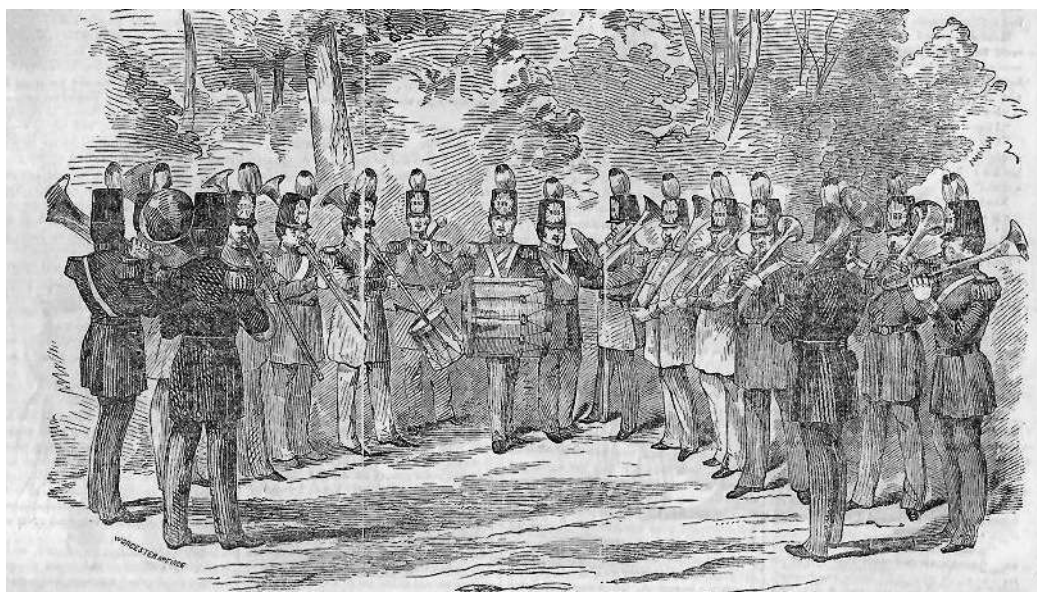


Deanston Brass Band, 1856

1834 - 5th Dragoon Guards Band and 83rd Regiment Band, Royal Hospital, Chelsea, Wednesday/Thursday 9th/10th April

A contest between two military bands took place in London in 1834, when two regimental Colonels placed a wager on which of their bands was the better. It is not known what the victor of the bet would receive, if anything, other than the pleasure of besting his rival. The musical test took place over two days, with the two bands seemingly closely matched, even having to sight-read some music to try and select the winner.

⁶ *Stirling Journal and Advertiser*, 3 January 1828



Boston Brass Band, Massachusetts, 1851

A trial of musical skill arising out of a wager between the Colonels of the 5th Dragoon Guards and the 83rd regiment, Lieutenant-Colonel Sir J.M. Wallace and Colonel the Hon. H. Dundas, as to the merits of the respective bands of their regiments, took place on Wednesday and Thursday, at the Royal Hospital. The judges appointed to decide were, Mr. Pigott and Mr. Logier - Dr. Smith was named as umpire. The place selected for the performance was the ancient and splendid dining hall of the Royal hospital. Certain preliminaries having been arranged, the band of the 5th Dragoon Guards were directed to commence, they played the overture to "*Oberon*", Weber, in splendid style. The band of the 83rd then performed the overture to "*Robert de Diable*," Auber, inimitably well; in fact the performance of each band was so superlatively good that the judges, it was supposed, could not possibly come to a decision as to the relative merits of either. The next performance was a scena from Bellias "*I Capuletti e Montecchi*", by the band of the 5th, and the scene from Rossini's "*Baron De Dolsheim*", "*O Cielo, il mio labro*", by the band of the 83rd regiment - each band performed with the utmost ability and talent. The judges again declared their inability to decide, and it was fixed that on Thursday they should each play one piece of music to be given to them, which they had never played before. Before the assembly retired each band played God Save the King, at the request of the Lieutenant-General Commanding. The piece selected was the grand finale to Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Five o'clock on Thursday it was agreed upon that this should be played. A great number of fashionables were in attendance. The band of the 83rd played it first, in very superior style, greatly to the delight of all present. The band of the 5th Dragoon Guards was outside the hall while their opponents were playing. The 5th Dragoon Guards' band having been admitted, took their stations, and played off the piece in a most scientific manner, the master playing the kettle drums. The adagio movement was really a most splendid performance. The judges wished an overture, or any other piece, should be played at first sight - this challenge the 83rd declined; the band it was said, has not been more than four years formed, while the other has had the advantage of matured experience. Sir Maxwell Wallace sent for the music of the *Overture to Fidelio*, which his band had never seen; the several parts were placed upon the music stand, and they played it off at first sight in a style which reflected great credit upon the leader and master - it would require the ear and knowledge of a professor to discover an error. Among the company present, on Thursday, we observed Sir Hussey and Lady Vivian, Sir E. Blakeney, Sir Maxwell and Lady Wallace, Hon. Colonel Dundas, Major and

Mrs. Forster, Captain and Mrs. Beville, Doctor and the Misses Rennie, Miss Yea, Miss Holmes, Miss Logan, Mrs. Hort, Miss Saurin, several officers of the 5th Dragoon Guards, the 15th Hussars, the 83rd regiment, with a number of the members of the Amereonie Society.

Decision of the Judges – We ascertained yesterday evening that the decision was given in favour of the band of the 5th Dragoon Guards, but with all due credit to the 83rd for the excellence and ability of their performance. The judges could not agree, Mr. Pigott being of opinion that the band of the 5th Dragoon Guards was the better; to this Mr. Logier would not submit. Mr. Pigott called on the umpire for his opinion. Dr. Smith coincided with him, giving the victory to the 5th Dragoon Guards' band, but with the utmost commendation to their rivals for excellence in their performance.⁷

1843 - Totnes and Modbury Bands, at Newhouse, Monday 8th May

Totnes, in Devon, has had a number of brass bands over the last 200 years. The founding date of the earliest band is not known, but it did exist from at least 1834 through to 1849. More details on the bands of Totnes are given in the appendix, below.



Kinneil Band, c. 1857

Totnes Brass Band took part in three contests during 1843, in addition to some 'normal' playing engagements. The first of these is reported at the beginning of May 1843, shortly after the Band's performance to celebrate the news of the birth of Princess Alice.

On the arrival of the news of the birth of a Princess [Alice], the welkin rang with the merry peals of the far-famed Totnes bells, and the town was enlivened by the dulcet harmony of the liberal, and less noted, Totnes brass band.

⁷ *Kilkenny Moderator*, 16 April 1834

The Brass Band - A challenge having been given by the Modbury amateur band to the Totnes liberal amateur band, it has been arranged between the parties that a meeting is to take place on Monday, at Newhouse, Brent, for a trial of skill. The stakes are five pounds a-side. The meeting will be at ten o'clock a.m. John Caunter, Esq., of Way-house, near Ashburton, has kindly acceded to the invitation of the Totnes band to be one of the umpires.⁸



Cyfarthfa Band, c. 1855

Two reports of the contest are given below. It was a very civilised event, with each band giving ten selections of music, alternating between them. It appears that the Totnes Band went all out with 'difficult' pieces by well-known composers, and the Modbury Band with simpler choices of music. The result was a draw and a determination to hold further such events in the future.

Musical Challenge. The Totnes brass band having accepted a challenge from the Modbury reed band, the contest came off on Monday at Newhouse, between Totnes and Modbury, for £5 aside; for the purpose of deciding which were the best performers, each band being known to be very excellent. Early on Monday morning great numbers of people from the neighbouring towns and country arrived at the place of trial; and about 11 o'clock the performance began, in the wide space formed by the junction of two turnpike roads, near the Avon Inn. The bands were elevated on a platform, so as they could be well heard by the vast numbers who were present. The Totnes band chose for their umpire J. Caunter, Esq., Waye House, near Ashburton, but that gentleman could not attend being prevented by slight indisposition, and at his request his brother H. Caunter, Esq., of Ashburton, attended; Mr. Purton of the Marine band Plymouth, was chosen by the Modbury band; and each band played ten pieces of music of their own selection alternately. The pieces performed by each were from the best composers: the Totnes band played the *Hallelujah Chorus* in excellent style, as well as the other pieces of their selection; and the Modbury performers were nothing wanting in their manner of executing the various pieces of their choice;

⁸ *Western Times*, 6 May 1843

the Serpent player in this band is a first-rate performer, and was the admiration of all. After the performance was concluded, the umpires (gentlemen well known in the musical world) conferred together, each having kept separate notes of the proceedings; and after a patient investigation, it was found that each band had performed five pieces best, so that the umpires could not decide which excelled. It was then agreed that a Captain Dennis should be a third man; but on account of the performances being so nicely balanced, he could not decide, therefore the wager was withdrawn, each band having added fresh honours to its well known reputation. After the various parties regaling themselves at the Inn, they dispersed well pleased with the entertainment of the day.⁹

Harmonious Pugnacity. Monday being the day for the trial of skill between the Totnes brass band, and the Modbury band, according to the challenge of the latter, for five pounds aside, to come off at the Avon Inn, Newhouse, Brent, the Totnesians prepared a wagon for a stand to play on; the morning being very fine, they arrived early at Newhouse. Full of confidence, the Totnes band played boldly to the place of rendezvous, preceded by their banner, painted by R. Harris, jun., one of the amateurs, but not expressly for this purpose. The Modbury folks had arrived sometime previously with their referee, Mr. Purton, Royal Marine Band, Plymouth, but probably willing to reserve their breath until the time of contest, walked in quietly. Mr. Henry Cauntor, of Ashburton, shortly after arrived, instead of his brother, John Cauntor, of Waye House, Ashburton, the Totnes referee, who was seriously indisposed. The lot falling on the Totnes band, and the time having arrived, they mounted the stand, and commenced with playing "*God save the Queen*", arranged by a member of the band. The style in which it was executed excited general admiration. The Modbury men next took the same stand, and played a very pretty pleasing air, which same style pervaded all their performance, whilst the Totnes men performed the most difficult pieces from the most celebrated authors, such as "*The Heavens are telling*" by Haydon; the "*Grand Chorus*" by Handel; "*Life's a bumper*" by Dr. Callcott, "*Grand March*" by Sir Warwick Hele Tonkin, &c., during which, the audience was often so pleased and excited, as to express their feeling by clapping of hands, "bravos." Ten pieces having been played, the last of which was "*God save the Queen*" by the Modbury band, and which fell very far short (as must be acknowledged by all) of the commencing tune. The referees retired to decide, and then called on Captain Daykin as umpire. The Totnes men did not consider that playing a simple tune correctly would be the criterion of skill, provided the above named difficult pieces were well performed, but as the agreement was worded "to play," and had no reference to the compositions of the best music, a common tune played correctly would have had as good a chance as their Grand Chorus. After a long consultation, the referees decided that each party should take up their own stakes. The Totnes men immediately challenged their opponents to play for £10 a side, in a week, or any time they (the band) should propose, with this condition - that each party should play the same pieces. This was not accepted. The novelty of the contest attracted the attention of the country for many miles round, and an assemblage of nearly one thousand had congregated round the Avon Inn. The weather, up to the conclusion of the performance, was delightful, and had drawn numbers of both sexes to the spot, unprepared for a storm, when as it "seldom rains but it pours," it did in reality pour. The inn was crammed almost to suffocation, and many must have been drenched before they reached home. James Cornish, Esq., kindly invited the Totnes band, after their performance, to take refreshments at his house, which were as kindly received. They were entertained in the usual hospitality of an old English gentleman. Mr. Cornish was

⁹ *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 13 May 1843

so much pleased with the novelty of the proceedings that he promised to subscribe £5 annually, on the 25th August, being his birthday, to be competed for by bands of music, and he stated that he would endeavour to get country gentlemen, his neighbours, to add to the fund.¹⁰



Pendeen Band, c. 1860

1843 - Totnes Brass and Reed Bands, at Diptford, Monday 5th June

The Vicar at Diptford, a few miles west of Totnes, having attended the band contest at Newhouse, saw an opportunity to reduce the occurrences of anti-social behaviour in his parish by holding a similar event. He put up the money for prizes and invited six bands to compete. Sadly, only two turned up – the brass and reed bands, respectively, from Totnes.

Musical Contests - The late musical contest at the Avon Inn, between the Totnes and Modbury bands, is likely to tend to the most beneficial results in this neighbourhood - the contest having so much pleased the gentry and yeomanry that prizes to be contested for are likely to be given in many places this summer. One of these will be on Monday next, at Diptford, the annual revel taking place on that day. The Rev. -- Johnson, in order to do away with the disgraceful scenes that usually took place there such as cock-fighting, and making the most drunken wretch they could find, Mayor and driving him in a wheelbarrow round the village, (such as we are sorry to hear took place a short time ago in that modern watering place, Torquay) – has most laudably, in his own name, and in those of the respectable yeomanry of the neighbourhood, prohibited those most brutal customs, and in lieu thereof has substituted a musical contest for a prize of four pounds for the best performers; three pounds for the second best, and two pounds for the third; each band to play eight tunes. Competent judges will be provided by the rev. gent. It is rumoured that there will be six bands in attendance, the performances of which will occupy the principal part of the time of the afternoon. The contest is to commence precisely at twelve at noon. Thus, will introduced one of the most rational amusements that it is possible to imagine, which is hoped will do away with the debasing practices of olden times.¹¹

¹⁰ *Western Times*, 13 May 1843

¹¹ *Western Times*, 3 June 1843

A Kind-hearted Clergyman. Monday last being the day for the musical contest at Diptford, under the auspices of the much respected minister, the Rev. W. C. Johnson, the two bands from Totnes, viz: the brass and reed bands, left here in the morning, the weather looking rather unfavourable, but it soon cleared up, and the day generally was fine. On their arrival they found that they had no competitors, and were surprised to find the Modbury band absent. All things having been arranged, the reed band (Tory) commenced, and played the first tune, after which they were followed by the brass band (Liberal). and so on alternately, each playing eight tunes. The village of Diptford was densely crowded with people of all grades, who came from far and near to hear so rational and delightful an entertainment. The villagers expressed their delight by their happy countenances, and the innkeepers theirs by their alacrity in handing potations of potent ale to well filled houses. The contest having ended, the rev. gent. awarded the first prize of £4, to the brass hand, expressing himself much delighted, and said he had not the least hesitation in deciding in their favour, and requested them to give him a few tunes on his lawn. On its being hinted to him, that no doubt a vast crowd would follow them, he replied that he would not mind the grass, but hoped no one would injure the shrubs. The second prize of £3 was given to the reed band, who almost immediately, with the best of feeling, that of gratitude, went and gave the rev. gent. a few tunes on the lawn, and the brass band was proceeding to do the same, according to invitation, when the lawn gate was closed against them by the gardener. The pressure from without, however, caused the gate to be opened, and the band proceeded to take up a position and was playing, when the gardener whose name is Perring, commenced a general attack on the crowd, and endeavoured to get them out, but did not succeed. The rev. gent. meanwhile saw the people on the grass, but did not object to it, no person attempting to injure the shrubs. The secret of the gardener's wish to keep out the liberal band, appeared to arise from the fact that the cornopean player in the tory band (whose father, three brothers, and two brothers-in-law, were members of that band) was his brother-in-law. The reed band was then requested to play alternately, as they had done during the contest, which they declined and left the lawn. The last prize of all, the rev. gent. said he would distribute in some other way for the amusement of the villagers. Thus ended one of the most praiseworthy attempts at reform, and one which succeeded so entirely as to give general satisfaction to everyone. There would have been more bands there, had it not been for this circumstance. A band from Ugborough, on the road to the scene of the musical action, stopped to play a few tunes at Marley, in compliment to Lady Carew, whose liberality is well known amongst her tenantry, and others at Ugborough, when her ladyship immediately engaged them to return with her to Ugborough, whither she afterwards went and regaled at least 160 women, and perhaps half as many men, with a comfortable cup of team after which she bountifully supplied the females with blankets, petticoats, gown-pieces, &c. The Buckfastleigh band had also been engaged by her ladyship, which prevented their appearing in the contest. The reed band went next day to Marley, where Lady Carew regaled her tenantry, and the villagers of Rattery, in the same manner as she did the villagers of Ugborough on the previous day.¹²

¹² *Western Times*, 10 June 1843



A German band on the streets of St Louis, Missouri, c. 1850

1843 - Totnes Brass Band, at Newhouse, 25th August

Following the Diptford contest, another event was arranged by James Cornish, as he had promised at the earlier Newhouse competition. Unfortunately this was even less auspicious an event than the Diptford one, with only the Totnes Brass Band turning up. Despite this, they did perform well for the audience and satisfied the sponsor, James Cornish. There were hopes that this type of contest would become more common in the future.

Newhouse – The 25th instant being the day appointed for the musical contest between the bands of the different towns, for whom Mr. Cornish, of Blackhall, had not only provided a handsome entertainment, but had also most liberally offered a prize, expectation was on tiptoe to know which military band would get the prize. Whether from a misunderstanding, or from a wish on the part of the others to allow the superiority of the Totnes band, no other appeared to compete for the honor of the prize, and so they literally walked over the course. But this did not hinder their giving public proofs of their ability, by playing many pieces of music, which elicited applause from their audience, and high encomiums from Mr. Cornish and Sir Warwick H. Tonkin, who complimented them upon their musical skill. The finale of the day was a dance, previous to which, before the umpires, the Totnes band, regretting they had no competitors, offered a challenge to any band in the county to play against them. This has led to the idea of a subscription by amateurs, to award a prize, or prizes, of such magnitude, as shall induce rivalry in the musical world, and promote the cultivation and practice of music.¹³

We have no doubt that this will lead to the establishment of prizes to be contended for by district bands, and will have the effect, probably, of calling into existence many village bands, and causing dulcet sounds to issue from the glens and valleys of the country, hitherto vocal only with sounds more powerful than melodious. A correspondent states that the reason the Modbury band did not attend, was because they were not satisfied with the proposed arrangements, and

¹³ *The Exeter Flying Post or, Trewman's Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser*, 31 August 1843

would be willing for a trial if an umpire were chosen from “Her Majesty's Military Band”.¹⁴

1844 - Holt and Winsley Bands, at Holt, Wednesday 6th March

Holt and Winsley are two villages in Wiltshire, near to Bradford-on-Avon. Their bands took part in a contest, again based on a wager, to determine the better set of musicians. The Holt band is later referenced as performing for the Bradford-on-Avon Oddfellows third Anniversary on Whit Tuesday, 1845. No further mention of the Winsley musicians has been found.



Thurlstone Band, 1858

Provincial Harmonics. On Wednesday the 6th inst., a trial of musical skill took place at Holt, between the bands of Holt and Winsley, for a considerable wager, in the presence of many hundred persons, amongst whom were several of the musical profession, and also some distinguished amateurs. Much excitement existed, as the parties enjoyed a reputation in their respective circles for talent, and had heard of each other's fame with feelings of a rather jealous nature. The preliminaries being adjusted, the belligerent powers (alike confident of success) met, attended by their referees and umpire, and after playing the National Anthem, lost no time in eliciting all the sweet sounds from their instruments that their powers admitted of. They executed several pieces very successfully, but the superior proficiency of the Holt musicians was too apparent to render the decision at all a matter of doubt, and the umpire in the following manner addressed the parties: Gentlemen – “Never in the course of my experience as a musical professor have I been called upon to perform a more agreeable duty than that which now devolves upon me of deciding between the merits of the Holt and Winsley bands. We have met for the purpose of contention, it is true, but it is a contention of a generous nature arising from that laudable source, honorable emulation, a principle so praiseworthy that whilst it has incited some of our friends present to great practice and consequent improvement, it cannot be justly accused of occasioning one solitary thought that does not harmonize with every

¹⁴ *Western Times*, 1 September 1843

kind and good feeling. In awarding the palm of victory to the Holt musicians, I am doing my duty as your chosen umpire, and my reasons are, first, because of their better selections of music and secondly, on account of their superior execution of that they have performed. But in being defeated, I would observe that the Winsley band sustain no disgrace, and that although “the laurels of victory, and the wreath of fame” have fallen to their opponents, yet in struggling nobly and acquitting themselves right gallantly, they have proved themselves worthy opponents, and talented though unsuccessful, they must not, and indeed cannot consider that a shame which has shewn them the desirability and imperative necessity of a close and systematic application to practice. Had genius alone been the requisite for ensuring victory, our Winsley friends may have won, but lacking that strict discipline, assiduous practice, and able Leadership, which, combined with genius, must give success, they have been unable to compete with their more fortunate and diligent opponents, and in awarding the contest to the Holt band, I must say that it is a trial, alike honorable to the Victors and the Vanquished.” Great applause followed the Umpire's speech, which was approved of universally with the exception of one person [an ignorant carpenter] who was jealous of the office held by the umpire. A select portion of the company then adjourned to the Seven Stars Inn, where after partaking of Mr. Hanks's hospitality, the evening was spent in conviviality and harmony.¹⁵

1844 – the contest that never was – Erlestoke and Market Lavington bands

These two neighbouring villages, also in Wiltshire, were only a dozen or so miles away from Holt, where the contest had been held a month earlier. The Erlestoke band clearly had heard of the event, and some of its members may even have attended – suffice it to say that they were enthused enough to issue a challenge to their rivals in Market Lavington. Sadly nothing seems to have come of it, but there is an interesting exchange of notices in the local newspaper:

Sir, - A Musical Challenge having been offered – “Erle Stoke *versus* Market Lavington”, I beg to say that in consequence of the Market Lavington young Brass Band, consisting of brass instruments only, and the Erle Stoke Band chiefly of reed instruments, I am under the impression (being informed that the majority of the Erle Stoke Band, having a proper sense of their inefficiency in the beautiful science of Music are averse to such meeting), that such vulgar and empty bounce proceeds entirely from the stupidity of a certain party residing within one hundred miles from Erle Stoke Dog Kennel. If these *would be Musicians* can produce seven of their members (brass performers) against seven of us, we will accept their challenge for any amount they please, allowing them to name the place of meeting.

I am, Sir, Your humble servant, A Member of the Young Brass Band. Market Lavington, April 17, 1844.¹⁶

Erle Stoke, April 25 1844. In answer to the Market Lavington “Sprouts” calling themselves “A Brass Band”, (they are called “Sprouts” from the circumstance that there was an old Band in Market Lavington called “The Cabbage-Stump Band”, from which this *Brass Band*, as they call themselves, has risen, it is therefore now called the “Sprouts”); the Erle Stoke Band beg to say that they have been to their own Town to accept their challenge, but the “Sprouts” would not come to the

¹⁵ Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, 14 March 1844

¹⁶ Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, 18 April 1844

scratch; however, they understand that the "Sprouts" are now begging round the town to try to get their sum made up to play. The Erle Stoke Kind declare that if they cannot beat such a party as these "Sprouts" are, (in spite of the assistance of an animal from Wombwell's Menagerie) they will have an auction and sell all their instruments, and give the money to the poor of the parish; and they think if the "Sprouts" lived in the same parish, they would come in for the greater part of the money. If the "Sprouts" should get the sum made up, the Erle Stoke Band will meet them any evening they like to deposit the money, and they will play them on one day or one month's notice.¹⁷



A band playing on the deck of S.S. Great Eastern, 1858

The French Connection

There is evidence that some of the military bands in France had competed together during musical festivals in northern France, particularly in Calais and Boulogne, during the early decades of the 19th century. It is not known when these started but they were common enough to be reported in the British press in the 1830s. Similar events appear to have taken place in Belgium around the same time. Some later band competitions, in southern France, were witnessed by Lady Chichester, of Burton Constable Hall, which led her to sponsor and arrange the 1845 contest in the grounds of the family estate. The impact of knowledge of these French *Concours* on the bands of England is not known, but it would be nice to think they helped to ignite the sparks of competition in Britain.

One such 'battle of the bands' was scheduled to take place in July 1830, near Paris:

"This day (27th) was the Fete of St. Christopher, which is annually celebrated in the village of Villette, upon the banks of the beautiful canal de l'Ourcq. The official notices published by the Mayor of the village, enumerated a variety of amusements that were to take place, and amongst others, that the military bands of several regiments were to be stationed upon the banks of the canal, and perform each a piece of music in competition for a prize, which was to be given upon the occasion, and that the amusements of the day were to conclude with a

¹⁷ Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, 25 April 1844

grand display of fireworks upon the water, in representation of the storming and surrender of Algiers, assisted by the militant manœuvres of about four hundred troops provided by the government.

I repaired to the village about six in the evening, (the time fixed for the performance of the music). When I arrived everything seemed in active preparation, the soldiers occupied their posts, and the military bands only awaited the word of command to commence the performance; at last the order arrived - but lo and behold not for the music to strike up its dulcet notes, not for the amusing representation of battles already won, but for the troops to return to Paris with all possible expedition to engage with those very people who had been invited to assemble at this spot to partake of the amusements which had been so liberally provided for them.”¹⁸

A more successful Concours de Musique was held at Dunkirk in August 1835, which led to the Calais authorities sponsoring a similar event the following year. This included an invitation to bands from Kent to attend the competition:

“The Conseil Municipal at Calais recently voted a very handsome sum as prizes for the musical competition to be held here during the ensuing summer. The Concours which took place this year at Dunkirk was attended by nearly fourteen thousand persons, to whom the excellence of the arrangements gave universal satisfaction; and it is confidently anticipated that the approaching meeting will be equally attractive. A very general expectation prevails at Calais that some of the Kentish Amateurs may think it worth their while to put their talents into exercise, and visit the Continent to contest the prizes. Their reception, we are assured, would be most cordial; and it would form a new era in the affairs of nations to witness French, English, and Belgians, contending in harmony rather than in war.”¹⁹

The Calais competition, took place in August 1836:

“Late Fete at Calais - The concours de musique, and the prize sailing match, attracted an enormous assemblage of auditors and spectators, and gave universal satisfaction. On Sunday morning the National Guards of Calais, Gravelines, Bourbourg, Guines, Boulogne, St. Omer and Dunkirk, amounting with their effective bands to nearly 1700 men having assembled at Calais, were paraded through the town, and then retired to the Salle de Balls to refresh themselves. At five they re-assembled, and were reviewed by the Military Authorities. A commodious and well-arranged orchestra was erected on the Grande Place, where, at nine o'clock in the evening, the competition took place, and did not terminate until half past one. On Monday, the prizes were awarded. The gold medal was gained by the Dunkirk band.”²⁰

The bands played various French and Italian airs, to the delight of the audience. The gold medal received by the winning Dunkirk band was inscribed “*Grand Prix Musical de Calais, 1836*” with wreaths of laurel. Another gold medal prize was awarded to the band of the Calais National Guard, in second place.

¹⁸ *Norfolk Chronicle*, 14 August 1830

¹⁹ *Dover Telegraph and Cinque Ports General Advertiser*, 26 December 1835

²⁰ *Dover Telegraph and Cinque Ports General Advertiser*, 20 August 1836



Band of the Garde Nationale, Paris, 1858

Two further French band competitions, in 1837 and 1841, were reported in the British press during this early period:

“Concours de Musique at Boulogne. We are informed by the *Journal de Calais*, that a deputation of the National Guard at Boulogne, arrived there on Tuesday, to invite their Calais comrades to fraternise with them, and compete for the prizes at the *Concours de Musique*, which is to be held at Boulogne on the 27th of August. The invitation is of course accepted; and a letter has also been received from their neighbours, at Dunkirk, expressing the deep impression they received at the *Concours* at Calais last summer; and announcing their attention of being present at the anniversary of the musical solemnity, at Boulogne.”²¹

“The *Councours de Musique* offered by the national guards of Boulogne to the different military bands which assisted at the inauguration of the column on Sunday, took place on Monday [16th August], in the place des Tintelleries, in the centre of which was erected a splendid estrade, decorated with banners, trophies, and flags. The weather being fine attracted an immense concourse of spectators, who seemed delighted with the excellent performance of the different morceaux chosen on the occasion. About six o'clock the contest concluded; the awarding of the prizes took place in the evening, on the same spot, which was most beautifully illuminated with variegated lamps, and the effect was altogether enchanting. The band of the national guard of St. Omer gained the principal prize for execution, the curassiers the second, the Genie Militaire another, for a solo execution; the judgment displayed in the awarding of the same appeared to give general satisfaction, though at the same time some feeling of disappointment prevailed among those more directly interested in the honours of the day. About eleven o'clock it was all over, and the company retired evidently much gratified. One of the judges in the musical competition was Mr. J.B. Cramer.”²²

²¹ *Dover Telegraph and Cinque Ports General Advertiser*, 10 June 1837

²² *English Chronicle and Whitehall Evening Post*, 21 August 1841

Appendix: The Brass Bands of Totnes

- **Totnes Brass Band (1)** – active from at least 1834, taking part in the Newhouse and Diptford contests in 1843. It folded in 1849. Mr Bartlett was the conductor of the band in 1848, and the band was also known as Bartlett's Mechanics Band.
- **Totnes Reed Band** – this was active in 1843, taking part in the Diptford contest in 1843. Its members were associated with the Tory political party.
- **Totnes Brass Band (2)** – this was formed/revived in August 1850 when the performers agreed to reunite, and a new ophicleide was purchased to "complete the set". It disbanded some time before 1864.
- **Totnes Brass Band (3)** – Formed in 1865.
- **Totnes Rifle Volunteers Band** - Founded in 1861. Active through the 1860s. This was the band of the 17th Devon Rifle Volunteers.
- **Totnes Volunteer Brass Band** - Active in 1885. Conductor H. Ferrers in 1899. This was the band of the 5th Devon Rifle Volunteers. It is not known if the earlier Volunteer Band carried through the 1880 reorganisation of the Volunteer Force, or whether this was a new and separate band.
- **Totnes Borough Brass Band** - Founded in 1901, with bandmaster H.W. Ferrars. Still active in 1927.
- **Totnes Band** – This is the latest brass band in the town. It was founded in 1971, performing and contesting regularly, until 2018, when dwindling numbers threatened the band's existence. It is still active today.

Some events in the life of the first Totnes Brass Band:

- February 1834 – paraded through Totnes in support of Lord Seymour's election hustings.
- August 1834 – met and paraded with Jasper Parrot, member for Totnes on his arrival in the town.
- December 1842 – performed selections of Handel's *Messiah*, with the church choir on Christmas Day.
- March 1843 – paraded the streets of Ashburton, together with the Ashburton town band, on the occasion of the Ashburton election.
- April 1843 – performed selections of sacred tunes on the Plains on Good Friday, and entertained crowds on the bridge by playing on the river on Easter Sunday.
- May 1843 – entertained the crowds, together with the Ashburton town band, at the Ashburton Reform festival.
- June 1844 – played at Diptford fair.
- August 1844 – entertained the picnic crowd at Berry Pomeroy Castle
- March 1845 – the band performed at the South Devon Agricultural Association 'ordinary' following the ploughing match in Totnes.
- March 1845 – the band entertained guests at Follaton House
- September 1846 – took part in the Chartist Land Society's demonstration at Newton Abbot, together with the Teignmouth Temperance Band
- October 1846 – paraded through the town in support of Totnes races, and played during the race intervals near the grand stand.

- January 1847 – engaged to perform at the opening of the South Devon Railway on its reaching Newton Abbot. The band rode in a triumphal car drawn by Mr Sharpe’s eight magnificent greys. The Teignmouth band brought up the rear of the procession.
- September 1847 – performed at Dartmouth Regatta
- December 1847 – performed on the Plains on Christmas Day.
- January 1848 – performed for the Totnes Oddfellows Ball, in the Assembly Rooms.
- July 1848 – the band were granted permission, by the Duke of Somerset, to perform each Tuesday evening on the “Island” in the river in the town, for which they would be allowed to make a collection.
- July 1849 – performed at the cricket matches between Totnes and Bovey, at Totnes in July, and later, Bovey in August. The band was led by Mr Bartlett.
- September 1849 – performed at the ‘ordinary’ following the Totnes and Bridgetown races, at the Seven Stars hotel.
- December 1849 – played sacred music in the town on Christmas Eve.
- Early 1850 – the band folded.
- July 1850 – report of arrangements being made to restore the band, plan to purchase a new ophicleide – the ‘only instrument needed to complete the set’. Most of the original players had agreed to reunite.²³

²³ Exeter Flying Post, 27 July 1850