

Challenge issued – the brass bands which wanted a one-on-one contest

Gavin Holman, 13 August 2026

In the early days of brass band contests, it is fair to say that the audiences could be quite partisan in their support for the attending bands, and the decisions of the adjudicators were often questioned loudly and demonstrably. Indeed, there were the odd occasions when the poor judges had to flee the field of battle to preserve their honour, if not their life! Of course, today, the reactions to band contest results are more along the lines of a fierce mutter of ‘we were robbed’ and ‘the adjudicator must be deaf’ rather than any further actions or protestations.

At some events the judges’ decisions so inflamed a losing band that they would issue a challenge to the winner to meet them in a two-band contest to determine the winner once and for all – with an independent judge and, often, for a significant cash prize. These challenges and demands were probably issued in person between bandmasters or by postal letter, but sometimes their challenges were made in the local press and thus were available to the wider public and still visible today.



A despondent band returning from losing in a contest

Brass bands were not the only musical organisations to issue such challenges to their competitors – there are instances hand-bell ringer bands having similar battles in the mid/late 1800s. Also, largely in the USA, challenges were issued by major brass instrumental soloists (usually cornetists) to establish their self-proclaimed status as the ‘best in the world’, again often for a large monetary purse.

Returning to Britain, and the brass band contest arena, the early days of contesting had established a growing level of musical competence in the bands, adjudicators were increasingly accepted as professionally capable and the large number of contests in the latter half of the 19th century were a significant force in the standardisation not only of the rules of competition, but also of the brass band movement itself.

However, despite these levelling influences, feelings would still run high at contests and one outlet for those feeling they had been disadvantaged in some way, was to issue a challenge for a rematch with the band they were unhappy with. Unfortunately, it does not seem that many of these challenges (even those that were apparently accepted) actually took place, or at least if they did, we do not have a record of what happened. Nevertheless, here are some details of these challenges.

1856 Smith's Leeds Brass Band v. Leeds Railway Foundry Band

The Belle Vue brass band contest took place on Monday 8 September 1856, as part of the Wakes at the Belle Vue Gardens. Seven bands had entered and competed for the first prize of £25 and a Bb euphonium and other smaller prizes. Each band played two pieces – the Overture to Stradella (von Flotow), and a selection of their own choice. The bands were: Leeds Railway Foundry (18 players, leader J.W. Tidswell); Shelley (16 players, leader George Earnshaw); Accrington (16 players, leader Radcliffe Barnes); Smith's Leeds Brass Band (17 players, leader Richard Smith); Black Dyke Mills (16 players, leader F. Galloway); Batley (18 players, leader John Tarrar); and Foxhill Bank (17 players, leader Christopher Rigby). The adjudicators were Mr C. Godfrey, Mr J.R. Tutton, and Mr Mony. After all the bands had played their pieces, the judges required Leeds Railway and Accrington to play the set piece once more. The result was 1st: Leeds Railway Foundry; 2nd Smith's Leeds Brass Band; 3rd Accrington; 4th Foxhill; 5th Batley; 6th Black Dyke; 7th Shelley. ¹

While the report of the contest gave no indication of complaints, a subsequent open letter to the Leeds Intelligencer stated that some were certainly not happy with the result.

The Decision at the recent contest at Manchester certainly struck every one who heard the Bands play on that occasion as the most barefaced and ridiculous ever sent out to the Public; and that gentlemen possessing the situations and standing the Judges are supposed to have, could be hoodwinked to give it, excited the disgust of the Public, Amateurs, and Musicians assembled on the occasion, who received it with mingled hisses, cheers and groans. The Accrington Band, in Lancashire, has sent us the Appended Note, which shows their opinion of the Decision; and to support our sentiments of the same, WE HEREBY CHALLENGE THE RAILWAY FOUNDRY BAND, who received the Prize Instrument, to Play for a Purse of equal stakes of £50, £100, or any higher sum, either Band to Band as they now stand, the Leaders singly, or Instrument against Instrument, in One Week from this Date, the Money to be Staked in the Hands of some disinterested and respectable Party; and thus expose one of the worst Pieces of Jugglery and Imposition ever practiced on the Public at a Pretended Band Contest; the greatest par of the Persons assembled declaring that they (Railway Foundry Band) Played the worst but One on the occasion. ...etc.

From the Members of Smith's Leeds Brass Band²

It is not known how this situation resolved, no record of subsequent communications or actual musical meetings of the bands has been found. It seems that, despite the Smith's Band's 'sabre-rattling' and challenge, the Leeds Foundry Band was content to

¹ Manchester Courier, 13 September 1856

² Leeds Intelligencer, 13 September 1856

rest on its laurels and retain its prize money and instrument, secure in the knowledge of their win.

1859 Chesterfield Band v. Northampton Band

The first salvo in the battle between these two bands was fired at the Leicester contest on 15 August 1859. At that time, the eight bands all played the '*Leicester Waltz*' with Northampton Band, leader George Ashton, taking 1st prize and Chesterfield, leader Henry Slack, taking 2nd. After this contest the Chesterfield Band raised a placard challenging the Northampton Band to play them for £20.



A battle of the bands...

Three weeks later the two bands met again at the Peterborough contest, on 5 September 1859. This time there were immediate concerns. Northampton had only received notice of the acceptance of their entry, late in the day, but the townsfolk were greatly excited at the prospect of their band competing that they filled a train of 'unusual length' with over 600 people to accompany the band to Peterborough. Each of the bands marched from the station to the contest field, with Northampton drawn first. However, Henry Slack, the leader of the Chesterfield Band tried to get Northampton disqualified due to the presence of, allegedly, two professional players. Ultimately, the Doncaster Band played first on the contest platform, followed by the other bands apart from Northampton. Eventually Northampton were allowed to play, with the proviso that the dispute would be settled afterwards. Northampton Band's performance of a selection from '*Il Trovatore*' was judged the winning one, but due to the ongoing objections, they were disqualified and the first prize awarded to the Doncaster Band, with Chesterfield taking third prize. The crowd were most dissatisfied with the result and took up a collection on behalf of the Northampton Band which they

took with them. The Chesterfield Band reminded Northampton of their challenge, who decidedly ignored it.³

1863 Auchtermuchty Band v. Campsie Band

The Cavalry Barrack Square in Perth was the location of a band contest on Saturday 18 July 1863. This was arranged following the success of a similar event the previous year. The brass bands that took part and their musical selections were: ⁴

Dumbarton Artillery
Whins of Milton "*The Witches*"
Auchtermuchty "*Guy Mannering*"
Earl of Strathmore's "*Cameronian Quadrilles*"
Bannockburn "*Emely Waltz*"
Dunblane "*Redcross Knight*"
Earl of Elgin's
Campsie "*Oneida Chief*"
St Ninians "*The 68th Psalm*"
Wishaw
Lanarkshire 2nd Volunteer Rifles
Dundee Thistle "*Burlesque Quadrilles*"
Auchterarder

Glasgow Blind Asylum "*The Heavens are Telling*"
Omoa
Newmains "*Le Petit Demon*"
Airdrie Union
Crofthead
Townhead (Glasgow)
Carron Works
Kilbarchan "*Fantasia on American airs*"
Banknock Haggs
Kinghorn
Masonic Thistle (Glasgow)
Shettleston
Aberdeen "*Waltz*"

Flute bands that also took part were: Dunblane (6th Perthshire Volunteer Rifles), Dunblane City, Stirling Sons of the Rock, and Perth Temperance.



Auchtermuchty Brass Band, 1887

³ Northampton Mercury, 10 September 1859

⁴ Fife Herald, 23 July 1863

The judges took two hours to reach their conclusions, during which time many of the people were excited with drink, and a good deal of fighting and quarrelling took place about the merits and demerits of the various bands. Eventually the prizes were awarded, 1st (a prize medal bombardon Sonorophone, Messrs Metzler, value £19) to the Dunblane City Flute Band, 2nd (a circular bass, Mr Higham's, value 12 guineas) to Campsie, 3rd (an electro-plated cornet, H.D. Douglas & Co., value 7 guineas) to Aberdeen, 4th (an Eb ventril horn, Mr Higham's, value 6 guineas) to Dunblane, 5th (a regulation drum, value £5) to Kilbarchan, and 6th place to Newmains.

There seemed to be a lot of confusion in the announcements and prize-giving and many of the crowd backed Auchtermuchty and Whins of Milton, giving a challenge to any band in the square to play against them for £10 a side. This appeared to be a challenge that did not go any further at the time.

Auchtermuchty Band were not pleased with the result, particularly given the large contingent of supporters which had accompanied them and thought they should have won. The Band therefore issued a challenge to the winners (Aberdeen) for a £20 contest between the two of them. However, the challenge was actually issued to the Campsie Band (who took second place) and this was rejected by them.

1863 Camelon Band v. Whins of Milton Band

The Band Demonstration at the Gilmorehill Gardens, Glasgow, on 1 August 1863, attracted nineteen bands to the contest. Whins of Milton took first place (with a prize of £15 and a cornet), Hawick second (£10 and a cornet) and the 25th Lanarkshire Rifle Volunteers (Glasgow) took third (£5). Camelon Band were not placed. Their disappointment led them to issue a challenge in the local newspaper:

Our readers are aware that the result of the Band contest in Gilmorehill Gardens, Glasgow, on Saturday week, has given very general dissatisfaction. For the purpose of testing whether the Band which was awarded the first prize is really entitled to the distinction or not, we are authorised by the Camelon Band to challenge them to play for a suitable length of time, before impartial judges, for £20 a-side. We will be happy to receive or hear of an acceptance of this challenge. ⁵

Whins of Milton Band responded with a letter to the *Falkirk Herald* as follows:

The Recent Brass Band Competitions. We are requested to state that the attention of the leader of the Whins of Milton Band having been drawn to an article in last Saturday's *Falkirk Herald*, purporting to be a challenge from the Camelon Band, he begs to state that, holding as he does the dignified position of leader of the Champion Band of Scotland, he cannot but be open to the challenges of all bands that have arrived at any degree of eminence, nay even of those that have been 'weighed in the balances, and found wanting,' yet, nevertheless, are puffed up with an inordinate opinion of their own abilities. But he wishes it to be understood that all challenges must be addressed to him personally - couched in respectful language - and forwarded through the proper channel; then they will meet with such consideration as they deserve. Meanwhile, his band being 'with laurels crowned' - not imaginary ones - know what value to attach to the querulous and

⁵ Falkirk Herald, 13 August 1863

splenetic insinuations of disappointed and jealous rivals, and will, in future, treat them with silent contempt.⁶



Camelon Old Band

This seemed to be the end of the matter, although the editor of the *Herald* did comment at the end of the article that:

We have heard both the Camelon and the Whins of Milton bands, and declare that the former is to the latter as “Hyperion to a Satyr”. The Whins band is brassy, noisy, defective, and inharmonious, and we flatter ourselves that we are able to judge.

1864 Kinneil Rifle Instrumental Band v. Grange Instrumental Band

At the Edinburgh Miners’ Demonstration, at Queen’s Park, on Friday 2 September 1864, there was a band competition among some of the bands that had accompanied the various miners’ lodges in their processions. The Grange Instrumental Band, from Grangepans, won first prize, a cornopean valued at £3 10s, and Whins of Milton Band won second prize, a three-keyed concert flute valued at £1 10s.⁷

The Kinneil Instrumental Band from Bo’ness, one of the other competitors, was very dissatisfied with the result and sent the Grange Band a challenge to play them for £10 or £15 a side, which they delayed in doing.

On 22 September the Grange Band replied with a counter-challenge for a contest between them for £15 a side, each band choosing its own music. In addition the Grange Band would stake £15 to their £10 that the Kinneil Band could not play a tune at first sight (the music to be provided by the Grange Band).

⁶ Falkirk Herald, 20 August 1863

⁷ Caledonian Mercury, 3 September 1864

The Kinneil Band accepted, and proposed a time and place of meeting, in October 1964. The Kinneil Band showed up, but the Grange Band did not, instead sending a note which said they would trouble themselves no more in the matter.⁸



Kinneil Instrumental Band, c. 1864

Later that month, the recently formed Bo'ness Pottery Brass Band visited Grangepans and the two bands played together before travelling to Bo'ness to regale the folk there. It was commented that this friendly interaction between the bands was much preferable to the wranglings between Grange and Kinneil, largely carried out in the press.⁹

The contest eventually was held on Saturday 19 November 1864, on Glasgow Green, each band playing three pieces each before the judges, Mr Agnew, Signor Operti, and the Bandmaster of the 92nd Highlanders. The result was a win for the Kinneil Band, being the best 'both in time and tune.'¹⁰

The Grange Band, however, were not satisfied with this result, and responded in the press the following week. This, now, seems to have been the end of the matter:

... the Kinneil Band wanted us to put the competition hack for fifteen weeks, for they wanted that time to practice, and the Grange Band wanted them to compete in two days. By discussion we brought them to compete in three weeks before three professional men. The day appointed was on the 19th Nov., and came off on Glasgow Green, and the judges gave the decision to Kinneil that they were the best. Now, ever since, we are dissatisfied, for we think that we did not get fair-play, and the reason we have, after we came, we gave them a challenge for £20 to compete immediately after in Linlithgowshire, and they will not accept; and we have a professional judge from Dalkeith to prove that these judges that were in Glasgow

⁸ Falkirk Herald, 15 October 1864

⁹ Falkirk Herald, 22 October 1864

¹⁰ Falkirk Herald, 3 December 1864

were not professional judges. They are using a gentleman's name that was one of the judges; he was not the bandmaster of the 92nd, he is only sergeant of the 92nd; and we are ready to compete with them at any day for £20, and our money and music ready. We are,
Grange Instrumental Band, Grangepans, 6th Dec. 1864¹¹

1866 Farnley Iron Company Band v. Kirkstall Band

A brass band contest was held at the Rifle Barracks on Park Street in Hull, on Monday 25 June 1866. Seven bands competed, with the adjudicators being A. Koenig of the 13th Hussars, York, and Jules Rivi re. Kirkstall Band, playing “*Satanella*” and “*Morceai de Concourse*” took the first place and prize of £14. Clay Cross Rifle Volunteers Band were second, Stanningley Band third, and Buttershaw Mills Band fourth. The non-placed bands were Farnley Iron Company, Thurlston, and Mirfield.

The Farnley Band were unhappy with this result and issued a challenge to the Kirkstall Band, stating that they would play the Kirkstall Band for £20 a side, and would meet at Mr Tidswell’s, the bandmaster on Tuesday 3 July between seven and half-past in the evening.¹²



FARNLEY IRON:—The Toughest and Best in the World. Easiest to Smith. Safest to Weld.

The Kirkstall Band, on receipt of this, immediately sent a deputation to the Farnley Band with their counter-challenge. We can assume that the Farnley Band backed down, as nothing further seems to have happened:

The deputation made the following proposition, viz : 1st That as they were dissatisfied with the decision at the Hull Contest, both bands should play the same pieces as played at Hull. 2nd Or we would add four or more selections to them. 3rd To appoint two military judges, who should select or compose two pieces, to be played by both bands at first sight, or each band to have them a specified time before the contest came off. To none of the above propositions would the Farnley band agree. We then proposed that each band should deposit

¹¹ Falkirk Herald, 10 December 1864

¹² Leeds Evening Express, 30 June 1866

£5 each, for the purpose of paying three military judges, and that a room or grounds should be engaged, and the proceeds should be handed over to the Leeds Infirmary; this they also refused. All we want is to vindicate the honour and prestige to which our band has attained; and in order that the public may see that we have no desire to shirk the challenge (insulting though it be) - if the members of the Farnley band mean business, we will accept them on their own terms. Each shall choose one judge, and the two judges to choose another. Articles to be sent to the *Leeds Express*. - We remain, etc., The Members of the Kirkstall Prize Band. Kirkstall, July 6th, 1866.¹³

1870 Burnley Band v. Bacup Band

Bacup Band, conducted by John Lord, had won seven out the eight contests they entered in 1870, including the British Open on Monday 5 September. Burnley Band, conducted by William Harrison, had entered six contests and only won one, at Accrington on 30 April.

Somehow, the Burnley Band felt dissatisfied and issued a challenge to the Bacup Band to play two pieces of music, to be written specially for the occasion, for £50 or £100 a side. Despite this seeming to be a hoax, the Bacup Band met together to discuss the challenge.¹⁴



Bacup Old Band

John Lord, on behalf of the Bacup Band, then agreed to accept the challenge on the conditions that: they played for the sum named; the winning band to receive all the gate money as well; and the losing band to pay all expenses.

It appears that the Burnley Band realised the futility of their challenge at this time and the battle between these two bands never occurred.

¹³ Leeds Evening Express, 7 July 1866

¹⁴ Burnley Gazette, 17 September 1870

1877 Clayton-le-Moors Band v. Healey Hall Band

The Ramsbottom contest, on 11 August 1877, attracted 13 bands to compete, playing a quickstep and quadrilles. The judges, Mr H. Nuttal and Hamer Hayes, gave their decisions, with Healey Hall Band taking first prize of £14; Boarshurst second, £8; 88th L.R.V. (Haslingden) third, £3; Wardle fourth, £2; and Stacksteads fifth, £1. The unplaced bands were 8th L.R.V. (Heywood), Bury Temperance, Clayton-le-Moor Volunteers, Edgworth, Helmshore, Stubbins Vale, Tottington Amateur, and Tottington Original.¹⁵

The Clayton-le-Moors Band (2nd 7th Lancashire Rifle Volunteers) obviously felt hard done by the result and, the following week, their bandmaster James Lord issued a challenge to any of the other bands, at either Quicksteps, Quadrilles, or Selections, for £50 a side or upwards.¹⁶



Clayton-le-Moors Band

The Healey Hall Band's bandmaster, Joseph Law, accepted the challenge, with each band to play the same music and with the same members that played at the Ramsbottom contest. Clayton replied, rejecting the terms that Healey Hall proposed with the result that the discussion between the two bands seemed to then cease.

Mr. Law, and to the members of the Healey Hall Brass Band. Gentlemen - We, the undersigned having seen your advertisement of the 25th inst. accepting our Challenge of the 18th inst. and in that challenge we offered you and others a great advantage, allowing any band the choice for either Quickstep, Quadrilles or Selection, for £50 a side, but not for any band to pick their own music and to pick our music too. We the Clayton-le-Moors Brass Band will play the Healey Hall Brass Band for £50 a side, each band being allowed one professional man. We will play you either in quickstep, quadrilles. or selection. We challenge but quickstep and quadrilles. to be written for the occasion by someone whom the bands may appoint, and each band to play the same. Each band to receive the music on the same date

¹⁵ Bury Times, 18 August 1877

¹⁶ Bury Times, 18 August 1877

as each other; if selections each band can play one and the same selection, written for the occasion; both bands receive it at one date or each band play a selection of their own choice. If you should accept this offer two or three of our members will meet the same number of your members some week end as early as convenient, at Ramsbottom. If you reply address J.C. Hallworth, John Street, Clayton-le-Moors. Secretary of the Band – Clayton-le-Moors. September 6th 1877. ¹⁷

As a matter of interest, the corresponding judges' remarks for the two bands' performances at the Ramsbottom contest are recorded:

No. 2 Band [Healey Hall] - Quick step: Tempo rather slow, time however well kept; intonation creditable, tone good, style moderate, ensemble good. Quadrilles: Cornet excellent, tempo good, expression and style fine; a really splendid performance.

No. 5 Band [Clayton-le-Moors] - Quick step: Time well kept, good attack, intonation good, trombone indifferent, tone and expression might have been better. Quadrilles: Great carelessness in quadrilles, many slips. This band deserves severe reprobation, as on its first performance it had the elements of success.

1878 Barnsley Corporation Brass Band v. Barnsley Volunteer Band

In the late 1870s there were several brass bands in Barnsley – the Barnsley Corporation Brass Band, Barnsley Conservative Brass Band, Barnsley Model Brass Band, Barnsley Temperance Band, and Barnsley Volunteer Rifles Band (37th Yorkshire West Riding Rifle Volunteers).

The Barnsley Corporation Band had been in existence since 1871, and the Rifles Band, since the late 1850s, on and off.



Barnsley Brass Band

¹⁷ Bury Times, 8 September 1877

In January 1878 the Corporation Band challenged the Volunteer Band to determine which was the best band in Barnsley. The Volunteer Band had not contested since 1868, and the Corporation Band had but two contest appearances in 1877. As with most of these challenges, there appears to be no evidence that the two bands actually met to resolve their differences.

Barnsley Corporation Brass Band Challenge – The members of the above Band feel desirous of solving the question as to which is the best band, and in order to do so, the members of the Corporation Band will play the members of the Barnsley Volunteer Band Six Pieces of Music comprising two Operatic Selections, two Oratorio Selections, and two Quick Marches, for from £20 to £100, to play at the Queen's Grounds, Barnsley, and will stake 2 to 1 to the above amount. The Proceeds of the Gate to go to the Beckett Hospital. The Bands to be judged by one or more competent judges, to be agreed upon afterwards. Each Band to play with its own present bona fide members, and no professional allowed whatever. A match can be made next Friday night, Jan 11th, from seven to ten o'clock, at the house of Mr Cross, the Cross Keys Hotel, May-day-green, Barnsley.¹⁸

Later, on Saturday 20 April, the Barnsley Corporation Band, led by their professional conductor John Gladney, showed their skill and musicality by taking the first prize, of £18, at the Great Horton contest, against a field of 17 bands in total. Sadly, the Barnsley Volunteer Band did not compete at this time, so no direct comparison could be made.

1878 Wooley Band v. 1st Durham Engineers (Jarrow) Band

On Monday 5 August 1878, the Ancient Order of Foresters, High Court Meeting, Newcastle, held their demonstration and fete at the Newcastle Cricket Ground, Northumberland Street. A brass band contest was one of the many attractions for the public, offering prizes totalling £20.

Nine bands entered the contest, which was won by the Garibaldi Band, South Shields, playing a selection from the opera "*Attila*", taking the prize of £10. Second place went to the Durham Old Band, £6, and third to the Wooley Band, £4, and fourth to South Derwent Colliery Band, £2 5s. The judge was Edward Potts, bandmaster of the 1st Newcastle Rifle Volunteer Corps. Other bands known to have competed were the Jarrow Volunteers (1st D.E.V.) which were placed fifth, Blyth, and East Cramlington.

The bandmaster of the Jarrow Engineers Band, W.G. Davis, was most unimpressed with the way the contest was run – the adjudicator was squeezed into a corner of a communal tent; the bands were placed on four wagons 25 yards from the tent with many people talking and laughing between them and the judge; and there was a delay of an hour before the ballot for places.¹⁹

He then compared his band's performance with that of the others and concluded that, apart from the Garibaldi Band, Jarrow were superior to the others and should have been awarded second if not first prize.

As a result of his lengthy exposition and complaint in the press, the Wooley Brass Band challenged the Jarrow Engineers to play at a contest, in Jarrow, for the sum of £50,

¹⁸ Barnsley Chronicle, 5 January 1878

¹⁹ Jarrow Express, 9 August 1878

under the same conditions as the Newcastle contest, i.e. the same conductors to conduct and not to play, six selections or overtures to be played by each band, and such pieces not to have been played by either band for two years at any other band contest.

Once again, no report of the outcome, if any, of this challenge is known.

1879 Coatbridge Band v. the rest, and later Cambusnethan Band & Cleland Bands

On Saturday 16 August 1879 a contest was held at Merryston Bridge, Coatbridge, which attracted six bands to compete. Coatbridge Band, conducted by W.B. Howell, won the first prize of £14 and a silver-mounted conductor's baton. There was some dissent following the result, with the local band winning the contest.²⁰

Following this, a large musical demonstration was held in Houldsworth Park, Wishaw, on 6 September 1879, at which 15 bands took part, but there was no competition, merely a collective presentation of their musical skills – the bands involved were: Morninside I.O.G.T., Larkhall, Newmains, Whitburn, West Calder, Cambusnethan I.O.G.T., Wishaw, Dykehead, Cleland, Carluke, Crofthead, Airdrie Old Union, Airdrie, Armadale, and Coatbridge Sons of Temperance.²¹



A 'beastly' banding battle

Although Coatbridge Brass Band did not take part in the demonstration, they were aware of some murmurings in the press about the relative skills of various bands, particular after their win at the Coatbridge contest, so they issued a challenge to the bands which attended the demonstration, to take part in a contest.

²⁰ Wishaw Press, 23 August 1879

²¹ Wishaw Press, 6 September 1879

This took part on 1 November 1879, in Houldsworth Public Park, Wishaw, with eleven bands competing - namely: Larkhall, Newmains, Whitburn, West Calder, Cambusnethan I.O.G.T., Wishaw, Cleland, Crofthead, Airdrie, Coatbridge Sons of Temperance, and Coatbridge Brass Band. The judge was J.P. Clark, bandmaster of the Scots Guard, London. Cleland took the first prize, £14; Cambusnethan Templars second, £9; Coatbridge Brass Band third; Whitburn fourth; and Newmains fifth. ²²

Coatbridge Brass Band were not happy with this result at their own challenge contest, and immediately issued another challenge to Cleland and Cambusnethan I.O.G.T. to play for £30 a side.

Sadly this second challenge did not appear to be accepted.

1879 Crofthead Band v. Whitburn Band

Arising from the Wishaw contest on 1 November 1879, the Crofthead Band were also not happy with the result. For some reason, their leader, George Peacock, challenged the Whitburn Band (fourth place in that contest) to play them for £14 to £20 a side under the same rules as at Wishaw. ²³

The Whitburn Band accepted the challenge and three representatives of each band met in Mr Thompson's Inn, Longridge, to make arrangements for the match. It was agreed that it would take place in Airdrie and that a subsequent meeting would take place to appoint judges.



Whitburn Band

Once more, it seems that the challenge went unresolved, as no further mention of this has been found.

²² Eskdale and Liddesdale Advertiser, 5 November 1879

²³ Hamilton Advertiser, 15 November 1879

1882 Wereham Band v. Marham Band

Wereham and Marham are two villages in Norfolk, England, about six miles apart. The Wereham Brass Band had been in existence since 1870 at least, and the Marham Brass Band dated back to 1847 – though probably not continuous. Neither band had entered any contests in the past (or in the future, as it happens).

The first intimation of the challenge came when a notice, posted in a pub, came to the attention of the Wereham Band:

Sir, A number of persons calling themselves the Marham Band have thought fit to hang up in a remote country public-house, viz., the Bell Inn, West Dereham, a nondescript kind of challenge to us, to play them for a sum of money. Such a proceeding is almost too contemptible to be noticed, and we are of opinion that there is more characteristic "bounce" about it than anything else. Still, as a very small amount of our credit, as a band, may be at stake, we are willing to accept their challenge upon the following conditions: 1st That the competition shall take place before three competent judges, chosen from either Norwich or Lynn, the losers to pay their expenses. 2nd That two or more pieces of music, selected by the judges and unknown to either band, shall be laid before each to play. Also that a number of selections, known to both bands, shall be played. 3rd That each band shall be examined by the judges in the theory of music. 4th That in addition to the ordinary brass instruments the contest shall also be with violins, clarionets, harp, violoncello, and pianoforte. 5th That the result of the contest shall be published in your paper. By inserting the above in your widely circulated paper, you will greatly oblige,

Yours respectfully, The Wereham Band. 5th July, 1882. ²⁴



Wereham Brass Band

The response by the Marham Brass Band to this set of conditions for the contest was published in the next issue of the newspaper:

Sir, Allow us to reply to the letter in your last issue signed "The Wereham Band," which contained a great deal of wind if not "bounce," for they offer such conditions as they well know that a brass band cannot accept. Their conceit magnifies their

²⁴ Downham Market Gazette, 8 July 1882

ideas about music. They must know that for a man to play a brass instrument correctly it is not necessary for him to play a violin or a pianoforte, although the two latter instruments, we admit, are a great acquisition. If the Wereham Band are willing to agree on conditions for a challenge for the brass instruments alone, at £1 per man, and will submit conditions for our approval, or let us prepare conditions and submit them for their approval, we are willing to meet them at Downham, to be judged by such referees as may be agreed upon, and as soon as conditions are agreed to between us. We are, Sir, yours, &c., Marham Band. ²⁵

The following response from the Wereham Band seems to have ended the matter, with the Marham Band probably backing down from their challenge.

Sir, We again beg a small amount of your space to answer the letter signed "The Marham Band," published in your last week's issue. May we inform the Marham Band, or rather the gentleman who wrote their letter, that we are the challenged, not the challengers, and therefore have the right to choose our own weapons. He says that we offer conditions that no brass band can accept. Will he allow us to respectfully inform him that they are conditions that we ourselves can comply with. In the creditable West Dereham public-house effusion, the production of which was perhaps owing to the author's being influenced by an amount of "Dutch courage," we are challenged, to play them as a band, the adjective "brass" not being used. We accepted that challenge, and now they use the pitiful loophole to escape by, viz., that they cannot fight us on all our ground, but choose only apart which they consider advantageous to themselves. We are perfectly aware how they would like to meet us - viz, on the brass instruments alone, and to play old tunes that they have performed every year during their existence as a band. We believe that in these days of musical education the playing of airs with extempore harmonies will not do, and we, therefore, beg to say we shall abide by our conditions, with this slight exception in their favour - that in the "string" competition they can choose their own instruments. They have till last week professed to be a string as well as a brass band. Therefore, if they wish to compete with us, they have only to prove what they say they are, to carry out the letter of their first challenge, and there is no fear for the result by, Yours respectfully, The Wereham Band. ²⁶

1882 Droylsden Village Reed Band v. Heywood Unitarian Temperance Reed Band

Another unsuccessful result, which inflamed the Droylsden Village Reed Band, took place at the reed band contest in Ashton-under-Lyne on Saturday 12 August 1882, promoted by the Hurst Reed Band.

The bands and conductors were: Stalybridge Ancient Shepherds (J. Quarmby), Heywood Unitarian Temperance (J. Gladney), Moorside Mills, Oldham (C.J. Robinson), Ashton Borough (S. Bradbury), Saddleworth (M. Berry), and Droylsden Village (W. Grosse). Huddersfield, Todmorden Lobb Mills, and 1st L.R.V. Liverpool bands had entered but did not attend. The judge was J. Sydney Jones, late bandmaster of the 5th Dragoon Guards, and a well-known adjudicator.

The Heywood Unitarian Temperance Reed Band took the first prize of £15, Stalybridge second, Saddleworth third, Moorside fourth, Ashton fifth, and Droylsden were placed

²⁵ Downham Market Gazette, 15 July 1882

²⁶ Downham Market Gazette, 22 July 1882

last. This result seemed to surprise a good portion of the audience who felt Droylsden were the equal of Heywood. The judge's remarks on the two bands in question were:

No. 2, "*Reminiscences of Rossini*" - Unitarian Temperance, Heywood. Plenty of reed tone here, perhaps a little too much at times, but a very superior tone to No. 1. Tuning very good, particularly with the reed portion. Fortes not so pure in intonation. Clarionet solos most beautifully rendered in every respect, and worthy the greatest praise. Once rather uncertain, and E flat clarionet clumsy. General style of playing good; accompaniment to euphonium solo thin, but clearly played. This band is worthy in every way the highest position. I therefore have great pleasure in awarding it the 1st prize.

No. 6, "*Norma*" – Droylsden. Tone very rough, exceedingly out of tune, and without any reclaiming feature whatever. The whole of the brass appears to be much sharper in pitch than the reed. Flute and clarionet in the 9-8 movement were particularly bad for intonation, and the baritone (or euphonium) upon the top notes was excruciatingly sharp. I cannot conscientiously award this band a prize, although by the applause I hear I might judge it to be the best in the contest. ²⁷



So, it appears that some of the crowd greatly appreciated the Droylsden band's performance, even though J. Sydney Jones clearly did not. Indeed, three gentlemen took it upon themselves to write letters in support of the band to the newspaper, complaining about the result, and offering to challenge Heywood Band to a match, for £25 or £50. That feelings were high in this regard is indicated by the newspaper editor in his remarks at the end of the letters in question:

²⁷ Denton and Haughton Examiner, 19 August 1882

We have taken out several very severe personal references in two or more of these letters, because they were libellous, and would have made the writers into defendants in actions for slander. Even if the allegations were true, the law says truth is the greatest libel, if it holds a man up to injury, or contempt. ²⁸

The Heywood Band responded with a letter in the newspaper the following week suggesting that the challengers set up a rematch of the contest, with the same six bands and rules of the Hurst contest, with a suitable judge. They also remarked on the attitude of the Droylsden Band which, when the winners (Heywood) took the stage again to play another piece for the audience, marched out of the field playing a quickstep loudly and in contention with the Heywood Band's performance. ²⁹

The rematch did not take place, and we can assume that emotions cooled somewhat between the two bands.

1889 Galashiels Band v. Alloa Band

The brass band contest at Laurelhill Park, Stirling, promoted by the Cambusbarron Band, on 27 July 1889, caused an upset for the Galashiels Town Band. There was keen interest in the contest, due to the presence of Alloa, Alva, and Galashiels bands, all three considered to be the premier bands in the area at that time. Indeed, the result bore this out, with Alloa taking first place, Galashiels second, and Alva third. ³⁰

Galashiels then intimated to the Alloa Band that, not being satisfied with the judge's decision, they were open to play the Alloa Band, on the same conditions as the contest, for £50 or £100. ³¹



Galashiels Brass Band

²⁸ Denton and Haughton Examiner, 19 August 1882

²⁹ Stalybridge Reporter, 26 August 1882

³⁰ Stirling Observer, 1 August 1889

³¹ Bo'ness Journal and Linlithgow Advertiser, 2 August 1889

Alloa Band responded that they would accept the challenge, provided: each band nominated three judges and ballot for three to adjudicate; the pieces played be selections of national airs, a sacred piece, a contest piece written solely for the bands, the bands to exchange their usual contest pieces for one month; both bands to have the same players and conductors as at the Stirling contest, and no lesson to be given to the bandsmen except by the conductor.³²

These conditions clearly proved more than Galashiels could entertain, and the anticipated match between the two bands did not happen.

1893 Bedford Wesleyan Band v. 3rd Bedford Rifle Volunteers Band

This particular challenge arose, not out of direct rivalry between the bands or from a perceived injustice on the contest field, but from a comment made by the Mayor of Bedford during a council meeting, when he complained that ‘no band [from this musical borough] was able, or had courage enough to compete in the recent band contest at Bedford.’³³

It was quickly pointed out that, in fact, the Bedford Wesleyan Mission Band had taken part in the contest and had secured fourth place playing their chosen test piece “*Linda di Chamonix*”. The winning band was, unsurprisingly, Luton Red Cross.

However this assertion started a vigorous discussion held by letters in the press about whether Bedford should have a ‘town band’, and should it be the Wesleyan Band. A match between the Wesleyan Band and the local Rifle Volunteers Band (the 3rd Bedfordshire) was proposed, but various arguments about the conditions; and whether the Wesley Band should adopt such a role, thus affecting their primary purpose in supporting the Mission; and whether a town band should, in fact, be supported by subscriptions. It also later transpired that the Volunteer Band would have been very happy to compete in the Bedford contest were it not for the fact that it was a brass band contest, and the Volunteer Band had a number of woodwind players, and therefore was not eligible to play.

In the end, there was not contest between the Wesleyan and Volunteer bands, but enough interest had been raised by the various exchanges that a subscription Bedford Town Band was established the following year, in 1894.

1894 Besses o’ th’ Barn Band v. Black Dyke Band

Besses o’ th’ Barn Band, one of the most successful contesting bands in England during the nineteenth century, had issued a challenge some time in 1891 to play any amateur band in the world for a stake of £100 or up to £500.

It was reported that Black Dyke Mill Band would accept the challenge, provided the bands play for charitable purposes only.

Besses’ response was that:

³² Southern Reporter, 15 August 1889

³³ Bedfordshire Times and Independent, 16 September 1893

Charities are all very good in their way, and Besses' o' th' Barn do their share in supporting them, but, at the same time, charities would not pay for tuition in preparation for a match of this kind. Besses o' th' Barn will play either Black Dyke Mills Band or any other amateur brass band in the world at a programme of music, consisting either of all test pieces or own choice, for any sum from £50 to £200, the winners to take half gate receipts, and the other half to go to charities in the county of the winners.³⁴



Besses o' th' Barn Band, 1890s

On 14 April 1894 Black Dyke Band gave a concert at the Middlesbrough Town Hall, and the same evening, six miles away, Besses o' th' Barn Band gave a concert at the Exchange Hall, Stockton-on-Tees.

This gave Besses an opportunity to reissue the challenge, directly to Black Dyke, with various reports stating that the challenge had been accepted along the lines of playing six to twenty pieces, or as soloists, with the proceeds going to charity.³⁵

However, subsequent to their close encounter in the northeast of England, the challenge between the two bands was dropped – 'the parties not being able to come to an agreement about each other's conditions.'

Joseph Hampson noted in his 1892 book, *Origin, History and Achievements of the Besses o' th' Barn Band*, that Besses and Black Dyke had met on the contest field 65 times, with Dyke beating them 38 times, Besses beating Dyke 26 times, and being tied once.

³⁴ Bradford Daily Argus, 10 April 1894

³⁵ Daily Gazette for Middlesbrough, 7 April 1894



Black Dyke Band, c. 1895

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