

WESLEY HALL PRIZE BAND.

Gt. Ancoats, Manchester.

Wesley Hall, a branch of the Manchester and Salford Wesleyan Mission, stands right on the front of Ancoats just by the Midland (now L.M. & S.) Goods Yard.

It is here that Sunday after Sunday for the last 35 years the band has paraded for the open air work of the Mission. When Wesley Hall (Gt. Ancoats Chapel) was built in 1826 there were no railways in Manchester, and to the outsider Ancoats is connected with everything that is bad. Certainly it has had a bad past, but whatever it has been, it is a far different place to-day, thanks to the efforts of its religious and social workers.

The Wesley Hall Band, a photo of which appeared in our January issue, was the outcome of the efforts of one man, a mission worker, Mr. James Roughley (now deceased), who used to stand and play hymn tunes on a cornet under a street lamp, and invite the people to a meeting held in a cellar. Later, through the kindness of the late Alderman John Harrop, a room over his stables in Crook Street was given, and from the lads of the neighbourhood a band was formed. A few second-hand instruments were purchased, and the people in the neighbourhood canvassed for one penny per week subscriptions.

This has gone on for 30 years and now there are between 250 to 300 people in Ancoats, Ardwick and Beswick who subscribe weekly to the band. The bandsmen collect it and on the last Saturday in October every year the subscribers are invited to a tea and concert.

So popular has this event become that they have to run two concerts on the same evening, one for subscribers and another for their children, with about 400 to tea. This is for subscribers only, but they may introduce a friend (probably a prospective subscriber).

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To take the lads from the street corner (there were no Lads' Clubs and Evening Schools, Pictures, etc. then) and form them into a band was no easy task, and the noises that came from that upper room were heartrending. Anyhow they got the services of a young man, Ernest Jones, who had been brought up in an Industrial School Band and he came to their rescue.

Scales were put on the blackboard and slowly progress was made.

Later the services of the now veteran, Mr. J. H. Baxter, were called in.

After some time they could play an easy march, but could not march and play at the same time. They were loaned the use of a large loft over a stable and coal yard, so that they could get over the difficulty, a man marching in front with a lamp. Suddenly to their surprise the light went out, their leader had gone through a trap door to the floor below. Fortunately he was more frightened than hurt.

The lads were keen and would practise every night in the week until progress was rapid.

In 1891 they went to an engagement at Smallbridge, near Rochdale, and it was such a terribly wet day that they were taken into an old mill for shelter. They must have inhaled some of the sewer gas for immediately nearly all the men were ill, four being taken to Monsall Hospital with Typhoid Fever.

The instruments were disinfected by the authorities, and after a short time the Mission Room was closed and they were transferred to Ancoats Chapel (now Wesley Hall), where they have been ever since.

Owing to stress of work, Mr. Baxter (who was bandmaster at Central Victoria, Wesley Hall) resigned in 1904, and their present conductor, Mr. W. C. Colman, was appointed his successor, a position he has held ever since, with the exception of three years, 1923, 1924 and 1925, when owing to eye trouble he had to stand aside, the late Mr. Tom Hill and one of their old bandsmen, Mr. J. E. Hayes, taking charge in the meantime.

They are the oldest band in the Manchester and District Band Association, and at one time or other had held Class A, B and C shields, and in the year 1913 won the quartet cup with 26 competitors in the field. They believe in playing their own men, and the same men seen on the contest stage are seen parading for the Mission on Sundays. They have a good list of yearly engagements, some of which they have held for 25 years, being one of the first bands to be engaged for Manchester parks. They have been booked again for this engagement for the coming season.

Their lads are scattered all over the Globe, holding responsible commercial and musical positions. They have an Old Boys' Association, their secretary, Mr. J. W. Gledhill, being an indefatigable worker who keeps in touch with all those who are still proud of the old band.

In connection with the band they have a benevolent fund for sick and needy members; every man paying one penny per week and at Christmas and the New Year the band turns out for the funds of same.

After 35 years connection with the band, Mr. W. C. Colman still continues to conduct, and Mr. J. H. Baxter is still playing and conducting the Central Hall Band.

The bands of the Mission are Central Hall, Dock Mission (Salford), Victoria Hall, and Wesley Hall.