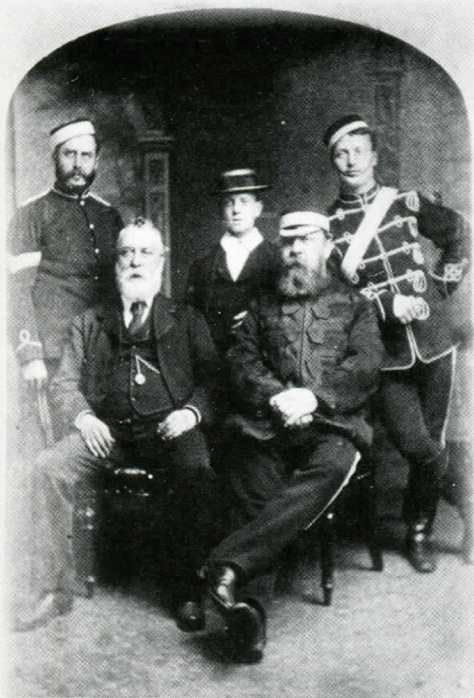


# A Victorian bandmaster

by John Roberts

My brother and I had known for many years that a great-grandfather, Alfred James Phasey, had been a musician. My father, born after his grandfather had died, told us something about him. Phasey had served in the British Army and had invented, so it was said, a brass musical instrument. He had been a military bandmaster, and his daughter (our grandmother), had also been musical. But she had died nine years before I was born, and no-one seemed to be very interested in finding out more about the family.



Alfred James Phasey (in uniform, seated on the right, next to an unnamed friend) with (standing, left to right) his sons Walter, Ted and Handel.

We possessed a couple of mid-Victorian portraits of the musician's wife and parents, inherited from my father in 1962, along with documents that revealed information about the family that was new to us, so we were able to write a few pages about the history of that branch of the family.

Banbury town's brass band was

established in 1836 under the direction of Mr T Hall. He was a local watchmaker of 20 Parson's Street, and probably on good terms with visiting military bandmen. Indeed, his daughter Elizabeth was wooed by a young bandsman, serving with the Coldstream Guards, who arrived in the Oxfordshire town with his regiment. According to B Harrison and B Trinder in 'Drink and Sobriety in an early Victorian Country Town: Banbury 1830-1860', an article published in the *English Historical Review* in 1969, 'Army detachments often stopped at Banbury en route for new barracks, and the publicans had to accommodate them...'. The young soldier who fell for Elizabeth Hall was Alfred J Phasey, born at Marylebone, London, in 1832, and the son of a soldier. He was probably in his late teens at the time (the information on his antecedents and date of birth extracted from an obituary published in the *Cheshire Observer* of 15 August 1888).

The British Army was in the throes of reform. Recalling his service in *Fifty Years of Army Music*, published in 1926, J Mackenzie Rogan, a young bandsman who joined the Coldstream Guards a decade later than our ancestor, wrote:

*Where there was proper supervision, the food was very good and plentiful...Card playing was on no account permitted in the Army, either for money, or for love. It was a crime, a punishable crime, to be seen handling a pack of cards...swearing, when I joined, was a crime which as a rule was severely punished...The soldier's pay...was eight pence a day...*

Discipline was strict. Savage floggings for minor offences were still the order of the day, and 'D' (for Deserter) or 'BC' (Bad Character) might be marked on the diaphragm of a deserter. 'Bad soldiers' were still sometimes 'dismissed with ignominy' in elaborate 'drumming out' ceremonies.

The instrument Alfred Phasey first learned to play in the Army was probably the ophicleide, a now little-known brass instrument developed in France and employed on occasion by composers as diverse as Berlioz, Schumann, Wagner, Rossini, Donizetti and Verdi. [Bandsmen of Phasey's era would, however, soon be introduced to improved trombones, the Saxhorns of the famous Belgian Adolphe Sax (who gave us the saxophone), the German tenorbass, the baritone - and the euphonium].

Alfred Phasey was the author of *An Instruction Book for the Euphonium* and, two years later, of *A Popular Instruction Book for the Trombone*; he was also 'the composer of fantasias on operas for euphonium, cornet, etc' according to H G Farmer, quoted by Wally Horwood in *Adolphe Sax 1914-1984: His Life and Legacy*.

Roger Swift, in *The Guards Division*, writes that:

*The Coldstream tradition of exceptional musicians was continued during Charles Godfrey's era by bandsman Phasey, a virtuoso who did much to popularize the euphonium in Britain. Indeed...Mr Phasey's contribution to its technical development was such that it was almost named the Phaseyphone; wisely he rejected the honour. He instead gave it the name of euphonium...*

The Royal Military School of Music began its work at Kneller Hall in 1856. Located in a magnificent early 18th century mansion near Hounslow in Middlesex, the School represents the Victorian passion for reforming institutions of all sorts. The Army's leading musicians were seconded to teach there. Alfred Phasey was appointed as a professor at Kneller Hall in 1859 to teach the 'tenor bass' [euphonium], and his photograph was taken with his colleagues in 1862 when his instrument is described as the euphonium. Phasey had joined a corps of teachers that included

Thomas Sullivan, who a contemporary student later praised for his versatility and humorous style of teaching. Student bands played in the grounds of Kneller Hall on two afternoons a week, when visitors were welcomed. Sullivan's son Arthur, then in his late teens, and later famous as Sir Arthur Sullivan of Gilbert and Sullivan, took the opportunity to learn about a variety of instruments during that time. Other colleagues of Phasey included 'the famous Lazarus' (who taught clarinet), the first professional bandsman to obtain the degree of Doctor of Music from Oxford University.

The removal of the Crystal Palace that had been built for the Great Exhibition of 1851 from Hyde Park in central London to Sydenham in the capital's south-eastern suburbs proved to be a landmark in the story of music-making in England. Sir Arthur Sullivan later commented that 'all singers and players of the world are heard at one time or another at the CP'. Practically all the rising composers of the century were introduced to the British public at the Crystal Palace, re-erected at Sydenham in 1853.

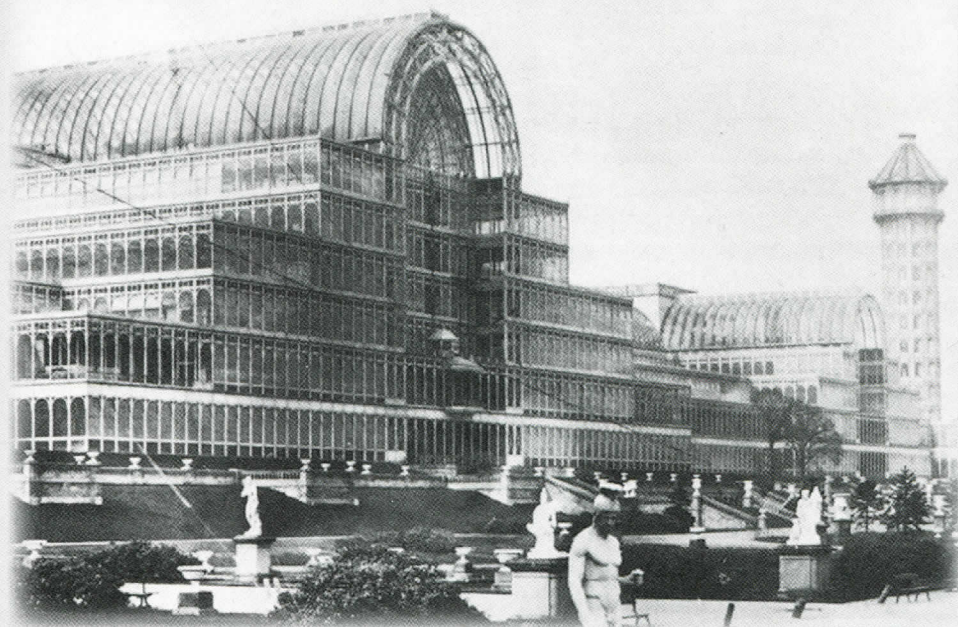
The initial musical offerings at the

composer, John Philip Sousa, was also raising the roof.

From about 1868 Alfred Phasey also led a band, and for this he was given a testimonial in 1872; all 24 members of the Band of St George's Rifle Volunteers signed the testimonial, 'as a Token of their Regard and esteem for his great professional reputation and the interest he has taken in the Welfare of the Band during the Four Years he has been their Bandmaster'.

Phasey, and his sons, were making a success of their careers in music. Having already achieved some fame as a wind-player, Alfred Phasey had also developed the new euphonium. The obituary I have already mentioned says that he was originally an ophicleide and bass trombone player, but that in about 1858 he devised a plan of enlarging the diameter of the bore of the tenor baritone Saxhorn, christening it the euphonium.

What the obituary omits to mention is another of Phasey's musical enterprises for, during 1873, the Cheshire Yeomanry recorded that:



**The Crystal Palace, re-erected at Sydenham in south-east London, was an important venue for new British music, and for Alfred Phasey, 'a distinguished member of the Crystal Palace orchestra'.**

Crystal Palace came from a military band; full orchestras followed. It was a fine time to play in a brass band. Two of the century's greatest composers, Wagner and Verdi, were producing marches and fanfares that became wildly popular, and by 1880 that great bandmaster and

*...negotiations were entered into with Mr A J Phasey of the Crystal Palace Band, London, which resulted in the engagement of a band of 16 performers and himself for £90 per annum, exclusive of railway fares...*

This post with the yeomanry continued until his death; a successor was appointed in December 1888. In addition to his duties at Chester, Phasey had continued with the Crystal Palace Band, and he had also become a player in Queen Victoria's private band. In 1880 Alfred Phasey was the third listed trombone player in the orchestra of the Philharmonic Society of London (*First Philharmonic: A History of the Royal Philharmonic Society*, by Cyril Ehrlich, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995).

In 1887 Alfred Phasey wrote a letter to his daughter Phoebe Kirby, then in Malta, an island to which her sister (my grandmother) and her family emigrated, saying that, with his wife, he had determined 'to endeavour to get Alfred [his son] home from America to take my position' or, alternatively, to purchase William's discharge from the Army so that he could take over. Thereafter, he wrote, the couple would visit Malta. In the middle of preparations to visit Chester, he had received an order to attend for two days at Buckingham Palace, in connection with the queen's jubilee [Victoria's Golden Jubilee of 1887]. His busy life was summed up in the obituary printed by the *Cheshire Observer* in 1888:

*For 29 years he was a distinguished member of the Crystal Palace orchestra. He also held prominent positions in Her Majesty's Theatre and Covent Garden Promenade Concerts, appearing nightly at front as soloist. He was made a member of Her Majesty's Court Band by command of the late Prince Consort...[before 1862, therefore, as Prince Albert died on 14 December 1861]...He had been for more than 15 years bandmaster of the Earl of Chester's Yeomanry Cavalry, and was present with the regiment at its last permanent duty at Chester. His remarkable musical ability has been inherited in ample measure by no fewer than three of his sons. We may especially single out his eldest son, Mr Alfred John Phasey, who has achieved very high distinction in America. Mr Phasey junior was in the United States ten years achieving a great reputation not only as a soloist on the euphonium, trombone and the antoniaphone, but also as a conductor of several famous bands, and he has succeeded to most of his father's other positions in this country. The deceased was held in very much*

## Musical ancestors

**MARCH**

**ROYAL**

**HONORABLE ARTILLERY COMPANY**

(LONDON.)

DEDICATED  
BY SPECIAL PERMISSION TO  
LIEUT. COLONEL  
THE EARL OF DENBIGH.

IN COMMEMORATION OF  
Their Visit to America  
As Guests of  
THE BOSTON  
ANCIENT HONORABLE  
ARTILLERY COMPANY.  
1903

COMPOSED BY  
**Handel Victor Phasesy.**  
(BANDMASTER.)  
**BRITISH GUARDS' BAND**  
NEW YORK CITY.

Published by **HANDEL VICTOR PHASESY** New York City.  
E. 11 - 1440 BROADWAY.

Handel Phasesy's march dedicated to the Honorable [sic] Artillery Company was published in New York in 1903.

*respect by a large number of the citizens of Chester. The funeral took place on Tuesday at the Chester Cemetery.*

Alfred Phasesy's son whose career is best documented was not Alfred John, or William, but Handel Phasesy. Yet another brass player, he went on to a career as a bandmaster and spent some years in the United States where he had some success with his own band. Handel also wrote several marches and had them printed, one in particular celebrating the Honourable Artillery Company, whose HQ was Armoury House in Finsbury in the City of London. Handel Phasesy was in touch with my father until his sudden death in 1913, after which our branch lost touch with all other descendants of the

Phasesys. My brother and I later assumed that the First World War had seen the end of the family.

We may well have had a host of distant cousins living around the town of Banbury, but no mention of such a possibility ever came from our father. On his death in 1962 we knew only of a couple of first cousins living in the United States, and by the time I had compiled our few pages about Alfred James Phasesy and sent a copy of them to Kneller Hall, nearly 35 years had gone by. We had also assumed that all our paternal relatives were probably long dead. How wrong we were! In the first year of the 21st century we received a letter from a distant cousin and then, in the following year, one from another relative and then

one from a third, similar cousin. Each had been seeking information about their musical ancestor, had got in touch with Kneller Hall, and been rewarded with information about our researches and our family details.

The result? After 60 years of believing that our living relatives were all on our mother's side of the family, my brother and I have acquired details of some 60 descendants of Alfred James Phasesy who are scattered across the world, in Australia, Belgium, Canada and the United States. Still the information rolls in, a cousin in Australia being especially diligent in collecting information posted on the internet and regaling us with the details. ✍

### Useful websites

[www.army.mod.uk/schoolarmymusic/index.htm](http://www.army.mod.uk/schoolarmymusic/index.htm) Pages for the Corps of Army Music. Click on 'Bands' and 'Kneller Hall' for histories of the individual bands and the Royal Military School of Music.

[www.military-bands.co.uk/coldstream\\_guards.html](http://www.military-bands.co.uk/coldstream_guards.html) A history of the band of the Coldstream Guards on the Droit Music Ltd site.

[www.wcwband.co.uk/opficleide.htm](http://www.wcwband.co.uk/opficleide.htm) A directory of different types of ophicleides by John Davies with photos of current players and their instruments and useful links.

[www.music.ed.ac.uk/euchmi/ujt/ujt3590.html](http://www.music.ed.ac.uk/euchmi/ujt/ujt3590.html) Pages on the ophicleide from Edinburgh University's collection of historical musical instruments, including pictures, history - and you can hear the sound of this instrument!

[www.users.quista.net/euphobass/](http://www.users.quista.net/euphobass/) Home page of the British Euphonium & Wind Band. Click on 'The Euphonium' for technical information.

[www.harrogate.co.uk/harrogate-band/misc31.htm](http://www.harrogate.co.uk/harrogate-band/misc31.htm) A page for people to record their search for ancestors or relatives involved in the brass band movement, arranged alphabetically by 'people' and 'bands' - includes Alfred James Phasesy.

[www.ibew.co.uk](http://www.ibew.co.uk) Home page of The Internet Bandsman's Everything Within.

[www.saxgourmet.com](http://www.saxgourmet.com) A site on everything 'saxophone'. Enter site and scroll down to 'Saxophone History and Reference' and click on 'Adolph Sax' for a lengthy article on his life.

[www.cph.rcm.ac.uk/Tour/Pages/Lazarus.htm](http://www.cph.rcm.ac.uk/Tour/Pages/Lazarus.htm) The obituary from *The Musical Times* of April 1896 for Henry Lazarus.

[www.crystalpalacefoundation.org.uk](http://www.crystalpalacefoundation.org.uk) Home page of the Crystal Palace Foundation.