

BRASS BANDS OF CWMAVON

A. Leslie Evans, 1990

Over the years, a succession of competent brass bands has delighted the lovers of good music in our area, many of the bandsmen, taught by dedicated local musicians, having achieved the highest standards demanded in open competition. Unfortunately, all the older bands have long disappeared, the only one now in existence in Port Talbot being that sponsored by British Steel plc. Records relating to them are apparently non-existent, references in print being extremely rare, so that it will be impossible to furnish a satisfactory account of them. However, the facts that I have garnered may be of interest.

Local brass bands certainly existed in the 1850s, and possibly much earlier. In his essay on the history of Cwmavon, printed in 1853, the Rev John Rowlands refers to an unnamed band which took part in processions connected with events which took place in Cwmavon in April and May 1852. It was specifically called a brass band and there can be little doubt it was comprised of Cwmavon men. As most of them were engaged by the old English Copper Company, it is highly likely that it was sponsored by its managers, being formed after the company came to Cwmavon in 1841. This band flourished in succeeding years, being greatly in demand at various concerts organised in the village. On 11 August 1859, for example, it is recorded that the Cwmavon Brass Band held a concert in the local Boys' School, the conductor being named as a Mr Baillie.

Following the formation of the local 2nd Battalion of the old Volunteers in 1859, the constituent companies immediately established brass bands at Cwmavon, Taibach and Aberavon, where Charles Vowles, grandfather of the late Aurelia John, was conductor for many years. The Cwmavon unit, consisting of 120 men, was known as the 9th Glamorgan Volunteer Corps, being formed under the command of Captain Griffith Llewellyn of Baglan Hall. He was succeeded in 1860 by Captain William P Struve, who was appointed as the manager of the Cwmavon Copper Works in that year. Reference is made in the *Cambrian* newspaper of 5 April 1861 to a recently formed Drum and Fife Band at Cwmavon, and a later report made on 4 September 1863 informs us that Captain Struve's Volunteer Band had won the first prize in the brass band contest at the Swansea National Eisteddfod. This success must have been gained by experienced players, many of them having played in the earlier Cwmavon band, referred to in 1852. These Volunteer bandsmen were probably led by a T. Weston, referred to as the Cwmavon Corps' Brass Band conductor in the *Cambrian* of 4 May 1866. It is possible that his name was Thomas West, however, for a person of that name, living in Ty'r Eglwys Cottages, appears in the voters' list for Cwmavon printed in 1878. From about 1880 until the turn of the century, the band was led by A Hall, a highly proficient bandmaster; he conducted it in the Boys' Schoolroom when the renowned Dr Joseph Parry of Merthyr attended a concert there in January 1882.

Shortly after the Volunteers were disbanded in 1907, many of the former Cwmavon bandsmen established a new brass band, among them the late Howell John, who played under the baton of A Hall in 1889 as a lad of fourteen, Ben Cockwell (uncle of the late

Bryn Cockwell), David Samuel, Harry Davies and Jim Corcoran. Some years ago, I was given a hand-written sheet, in copperplate writing, which is headed: 'Rules of the Cwm Avon Brass Band', and although it is not dated it appears to relate to this new band, for among the many names of members listed overleaf are those of William Jackson and William Jones, both of whom conducted the Cwmavon band much later. Others named are G Llewellyn, David Lewis, Thomas Jones, David Richards, D Morris, John Richards, William Thomas, William Lavis and John John, bandleader.



Cwmavon Brass Band; date and members not known. It could well have been that formed in 1915, for its leader in the photograph would appear to be James Coombs. Furthermore, the bowler-hatted, bearded gentleman behind him bears a close resemblance to the great Cwmavon-born M.P., William Abraham, better known as Mabon

There were thirteen instruments owned by the band: four cornopeans, three trombones, two French horns, two clarionets, one orphicleide and a drum. Band practices were held from 8pm to 10pm every Thursday in the old Mechanics' Institute, and a fine of 6d imposed for non-attendance. Other rules related to the care and maintenance of instruments, members being fined for neglecting them.

The band was virtually reformed in 1915, one of its members being nine-year old Howard V Davies, conductor of a later band and now an octogenarian. Jim Coombs, who was then conductor of the Taibach Temperance Brass Band, took over the Cwmavon band in the above year and in spite of difficulties it flourished during the war years. Later bandleaders were John Jackson and Will Jones of Treherbert, and after a

thriving period the band had a notable success in 1932, when it was placed third in the Port Talbot National Eisteddfod competition, despite the fact that it gained 195 marks out of 200, the adjudicator admitting that it was difficult to differentiate between the first three bands. Competing against the best bands in the country, it later scored a similar success at Crystal Palace.

The late Jim Ratcliffe, an able conductor, led it over the period 1936 to 1942, but owing to the fact that many of the bandsmen were called upon to do war service it was forced to disband. After the war, however, it was reformed under the baton of Howard Davies, and to the members' joy it excelled at the Mountain Ash National Eisteddfod in 1946, being victorious in the brass bands' contest with a score of 76 points out of a possible 80. Entitled the Cwmavon Silver Prize Band, it took over the old Bible Christians' Chapel in Pelly Street as its headquarters about 1947, gaining other successes throughout Wales until 1950, when Howard Davies reluctantly laid down his baton. A Monmouthshire man named Howells then took over from him, and under his conductorship the band had a further significant success in a brass band championship held at Oxford in 1951.



Cwmavon Brass Band conducted by the late Jim Ratcliffe, fifth from left in the third row down. Crawshay Williams, wearing a light suit, is seated on his right.

However, having spent a great deal of money on the purchase of new instruments, the band's finances were then in a parlous state, and following desperate appeals to the local Council and the public for financial help, the members were obliged to disband in 1952, when Dick Lucas of Taibach was bandmaster. Thus, a century of brass band traditions died in Cwmavon, although some of the bandsmen eventually had the opportunity of joining the BSC's band when it was formed four years later.

Earlier in the century, other local brass bands ceased to exist for various reasons, among them the Port Talbot Workmen's Band, led by D.J. Stevens, and the Pontrhydyfen Silver Prize Band which folded up shortly after the death of its conductor, T. Entwhistle, in 1950. Further up the Man Valley, however, the Aber-Blaengwynfi Silver Prize Band, founded by local miners in the 1920s, still soldiers on; even so, its future appears to be rather uncertain. Appropriately enough, its present secretary is called Mr Blow: Cymmer also had its own Fife and Drum Band at the turn of the century, which won a prize at the Caerphilly Eisteddfod in 1896, and many miners in the area were attached to the Glyncoerrwg Brass Band which flourished early in this century.