

Recreation, Respectability and Rebellion-Brass Bands 1880-1914

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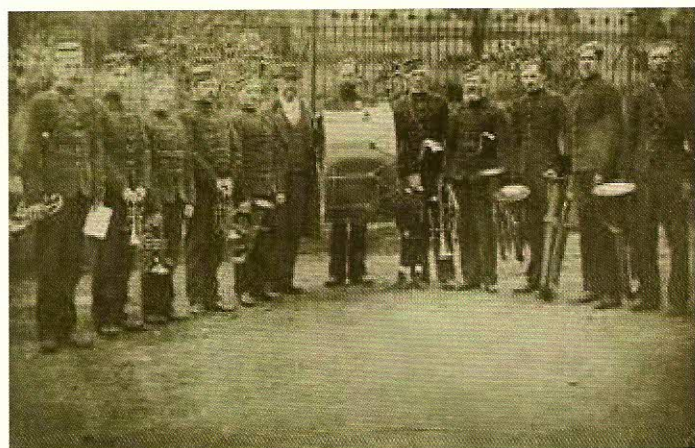


In 1897, brass band publications reported on an 'ugly incident' in which an entire band, who had been placed out of the prizes in a contest, assaulted the adjudicator, swearing, spitting and booing as he lay 'dazed and trembling' on the ground. The band then encircled him and began to play the *Dead March* from Handel's *Saul* to further add to the abuse and humiliation. This was not an isolated incident in the history of banding and reports of bands intimidating contest judges if they were placed lower than expected were recorded in the *British Bandsman* or the *Brass Band News* nearly every year between 1880 and 1914.

Despite this, brass bands were originally formed by the upper classes in order to morally reform the working classes. It was therefore hoped that bands would be a rational recreation that would deter the working classes from the pubs and 'beguiling women' and instead improve their education, moral tone and cultural tastes. Although brass bands were in theory a rational recreation for the working classes, and were viewed as a leisure pursuit that would educate and improve them, in practice this was not the case. Gambling and drinking occurred to an equal, if not greater, extent than for their peers and immoral behaviour increased as the movement grew.

In this paper the questionable behaviours of bandsmen and their supporters are examined, and it is argued that these were purposeful rebellions in an attempt to create a working-class movement and identity, free from upper-class involvement.

The amateur nature of brass bands was also being challenged in this period, and examples of professional players, players being poached from neighbouring bands and rivals being sabotaged were also more apparent. Bands received criticism for their recruitment of players, and Foden's were especially targeted. Bainbridge claims that this was unfair as all bandsmen were employed in their works and their only advantage when compared to other bands was that they could pay for the best training. An excerpt from a book commemorating one-hundred and fifty years of Foden's, however, does suggest that success in contests was the most important factor in the recruitment of players. Early in the life of the band, William Rimmer was appointed professional coach and decided that the band needed a fresh intake of players, and refused to conduct until this had been implemented. The proposed overhaul began and the company offices were used for auditions where some of the finest players in England were recruited. The intake of new players meant that several existing band members had to leave, and in later years Edwin Foden's son William often recounted how he, his brother and brother-in-law were told to return their instruments and leave; it was apparent that "nepotism had no place in perfection".



A brass band, circa 1880.

Bandsmen generally engaged with immoral behaviours in an attempt to alienate themselves from their upper-class sponsors and thus create their own movement that was solely comprised of the working classes. Sabotage was a common occurrence in the lead up to a contest, usually comprising the rearrangement of a few valves or a clod of earth dropped into a euphonium bell. Bandsmen also became increasingly abrupt with their social superiors in an attempt to alienate them from the movement. When funds were being collected for Wyke Old, a patron put a sixpence in one hand and a shilling in the other and asked the collector "which will you take?" In typical bandsman fashion of this period, the collector replied "both". Although this is a humorous example, it nevertheless demonstrates the extent to which the working classes showed little discipline when talking to their patrons, even though it was expected (by elites at least) that they would show respect. This demonstrates the way in which the working classes were willing to accept help from the upper classes to form bands, but they later attempted to alienate the elites in order to create their own individual movement and identity.

The brass band world's engagement with alcohol also disregarded notions of rational recreation. This was never more apparent than when rehearsals were held in public houses. Wyke Old were supported financially by the landlords of the village's pubs and as a consequence used their rooms to rehearse. Dobcross' band room in the 1880s was also situated above a pub, The Nudger Inn, and the bandsmen developed a system whereby a jug was let down on a rope in order for it to be filled with ale. This caused some embarrassment when a Constable discovered the jug at an 'unacceptable hour', but this did not deter the bandsmen and they continued to drink their ale throughout rehearsals. The *British Bandsman* soon learned of the excess alcohol intake by bandsmen and wrote damning articles on the subject. This inspired many letters into the publication which openly accused bandsmen of 'telling the missus - well I'm off to the bandroom because it's practice night - but they don't. They end up in a pub!

As alcohol became an ever-increasing aspect of the banding world, the *British Bandsman* realised it would have to accept it or lose many of its readers. They consequently stopped publishing articles criticising those who drank and by 1905 its opinion had seemingly totally changed; indeed some editions would have you believe that bandsmen were brought up on ale. In 1907 it ran a competition to find the last line to this limerick:

There is a musician called Rimmer, Who at contests is always a winner,
His experience is wide, And he's quite without side,
[winning line] Let's toast him 'good health' with a brimmer.

Violence was also an act of rebellion by the working classes and often occurred due to the proximity of bands to one another, which created extreme rivalry. This was demonstrated in Wyke as both bands had to share a train home after contests and the winners would display their emblem on the front carriage. To get back to Wyke the train had to cross a brick viaduct and crowds would gather to see who had returned victorious. After the 1888 Belle Vue contest where the Temperance won, a furious supporter of the Old Band was heard to rage: "I hope the viaduct will fall and send the bastards to hell." He had forgotten that his beloved Old were also on the same train, thus demonstrating the extent to which rivalries, and violent behaviour, took hold in Wyke.

Violence may also have occurred as masculinity was seen as an inherent part of the brass band world. The *British Bandsman* always contained male chauvinism and Sam Cope, one of the earlier editors, was always suspicious of female involvement. In 1891 he printed, with no hint of irony, 'we males have a distinct advantage over the weaker sex in manipulating our larger

instruments'. When it was reported that there was a female only brass band in Walsall, Cope made urgent enquiries to 'unearth this very worrying news'. It transpired that a group of ladies were responsible for polishing the brass objects in a local church and had become known as the 'brass band'. Cope was temporarily pacified that the movement would remain a male dominated one.

It is therefore apparent that elements of masculinity within the banding movement could cause violence and abuse to occur. Dr. William Spark described the aftermath of a contest he had judged in the summer of 1888: "As soon as one band found that they were unsuccessful, the members... launched a torrent of epithets which I doubt if the lowest riff-raff... could supersede or equal." Spark then travelled home on the same train as his critics, many of whom "reeked of drink" and one "was kind enough to say that he would tear me limb from limb, an operation which I politely thanked him for and asked to postpone." Spark's claim was not directly aimed at a particular band, but it was strongly implied that it was members of Wyke Temperance who were responsible. Dr. Spark later apologised to the Temperance, as he had been informed that they were teetotal and therefore it could not have been them who caused the trouble. The blame was consequently put entirely on the Old Band, where it remained until two months later when, in a similar situation, G. F. Birkenshaw, the conductor of Wyke Temperance, led the audience in abusing another judge. This incident was one of many examples of abuse that occurred at contests and this form of rebellion by the 'dangerous classes' continued to increase in an attempt to prove their masculinity through loyalty to a chosen band.

Brass bands flourished in a period that considered rational recreation to be the key factor in educating the working-classes. The question of managing the working classes had been a troublesome issue since the eighteenth-century and William Wilberforce provided articles for the management of the masses in 1797 when he stated: "that their more lowly path has been allotted to them by the hand of God; that it is their part faithfully to discharge its duties and contentedly to bear its inconveniences." Brass bands were therefore viewed as a way to educate the working-classes and prevent them from engaging in low pastimes; gambling and drinking to name just two.

The emergence of a class-based society in industrial England was also highly significant in the development of the banding movement. Music both reflected and had an influence on class structures, and a pattern developed which mirrored divisions in society, but also allowed movement between classes. This was a product of the nineteenth and twentieth century class system, as it was clearly defined but also created opportunities for people to progress. Individuals were therefore able to make permanent progress up the social scale, or simply form temporary connections with their 'inferiors' or 'superiors' through music. This was an attempt by the upper classes to implement paternalism within the brass band movement, as they believed that bands would be unable to completely free themselves from their origins. The hope was that the working classes would always be reliant on the elites for necessary commodities such as band rooms, but this was not always the case and bandsmen often rebelled against upper-class control, notably through raising funds to form their own bands.

The working classes were able to rebel against their upper-class patrons and sponsors in a bid to alienate them from the movement. The banding world was a 'great brotherhood of men' which had both positive and negative connotations for the upper classes. Certainly brass bands promoted unity and co-operation and lifelong friendships were formed, yet this also created divisions which led to genuine attempts to remove all upper-class involvement. The working-classes held great strength and unity, and their actions certainly repulsed some upper-class sponsors and led to their withdrawal from the movement. It would not be sensible to dismiss this as merely hooliganism; the working-classes were, for the most part, aware of their actions and what the consequences would be.

This paper has therefore shown that brass bands were not a successful rational recreation for the working classes. Furthermore, by rebelling against upper-class involvement in the movement, the working classes were able to exert their own influence and disregard elements of respectability that had entered the movement due to upper-class influence. Brass bands if not encouraged then certainly allowed immoral behaviours such as alcohol consumption, gambling and violence to occur and thus became a movement that was synonymous with working-class identity, through taking an upper-class version of working-class identity and transforming it into something that was uniquely their own.



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