A Short History of the Brass Band Movement in England

Unknown author – c. 2010

But what exactly are 'brass bands' and how did they come about? Those are questions I'm trying to answer. And, for the moment, I am speaking only of brass bands as we know them where I live - in the United Kingdom. Some, by the way, call themselves Silver Bands but this makes no difference. It simply implies they use brass instruments that have been silver-plated.

Until about 1840, there were no brass bands, because the necessary instruments were only just being invented. Things had started to move with the arrival of valved brass instruments (valves were patented in Berlin in 1818).

Notable inventors in the development of valves for brass instruments were Heinrich Stoelzel, Friedrich Blühmel and François Périnet. Périnet's achievement with his 'gros piston' was in effect to use each valve to add a crook to the total tube length, thereby establishing the principle still in use today.

The brass band movement, military bands and the world of jazz also owe a great debt to Jean-Louis Antoine Halary (real name Jean-Hilaire Asté), who in Paris in the 1820s invented the cornet by fitting a post-horn with valves.

Within the next few decades a full range of valved brass instruments appeared – from soprano cornets, capable of very high notes, right down to the huge Bb basses, providing the deep notes.

The instruments needed someone to play them. But conventional orchestras and composers of classical music showed remarkably little interest.

So brass bands began to form. The early days of the brass band movement are associated with the working classes in the North of England. Many colliery bands appeared, often financially supported by the mine owners. A famous example is the Grimethorpe Colliery Band.

Why did this happen? What attracted these tough mining folk to music-making? And why did they choose to play cornets, euphoniums and basses rather than violins or flutes?

I think it was because using the lungs to blow through a large metal instrument seemed a manly activity and it certainly produced a lusty sound; and with a bit of practice you could get those instruments to play surprisingly tenderly too: I am sure that also appealed to the miners. From the colliery owners' point of view, sponsoring a band was good for morale and company loyalty.

And why did they insist on being brass bands, excluding such traditional band instruments as clarinets, flutes, piccolos and (when invented) saxophones? It was because they quickly discovered what a uniquely glorious sound is achieved when a range of purely brass instruments is played in harmony, with no alien tones or timbres, such as those produced by reeds.

Of course there were also bands in which brass instruments played together with plenty of woodwind and percussion. These are known in the U.K. as military bands (even if they have no connection with armed forces) or concert bands. But they are a separate subject. It is not about them that I am writing.

You can imagine the miners, after a long, hard shift down the mine, having a wash, a good meal and then deriving enormous pleasure from meeting their pals in the local welfare hall to practise their art and develop great skill.

We have to remember there were few other distractions in those days – no TV, no films, no computers, no radio, not even telephones.

Some people might say they chose brass instruments because it was easier to learn to play them than to play other instruments. Personally, I am doubtful about that, though it may have helped that – in the early stages at least – you can learn fairly quickly to play a few simple tunes and enjoy playing in a group with similar players.

What I have said applied not only to collieries. Hundreds of towns and villages set up their own brass bands, as well as numerous engineering works and other industrial companies. Think of the great village-based Brighouse and Rastrick Band. Think of the celebrated Black Dyke Mills Band (originally based at a wool mill) and the Yorkshire Imperial Band (set up by a copperworks).

A large proportion of the early bands had para-military origins. At the time, men were encouraged to enrol in the local rifle volunteer corps, where they would receive a limited amount of military training and thereafter be military reservists. Officers quickly realised a brass band would be very useful for their parades. So many bands were formed with such titles as The 4th Lancashire Rifle Volunteers Band.

Things moved fast: there is evidence of many brass bands being in existence by the 1860s. They fitted themselves up with circus-style uniforms, with hats ranging from cloth caps to peaked military-style or even aristocratic Prussian, with plumes.

A remarkable curiosity is that a huge number of the early bands included the word ‘Temperance’ in their name, such as The Ashdown Forest Temperance Band or Preston Temperance Band. Why was this? Maybe they were making the point that – in the days when the Demon Drink was held to blame for most social ills – these musicians at least would set a fine example of abstinence. I think it more likely that there is a hint of good old British irony in the use of the term. (I remember a Temperance Society at university: its stated aim was to save the local population from the horrors of Drink by consuming all the beer itself.)

The bands needed a shape and they needed music. So they modelled themselves on conventional orchestras. Cornets were the equivalent of violins, euphoniums would be the cellos, and so on. The printed music too largely comprised adaptations from classical music and light opera. Music used for the national contests of the late 1800s included arrangements of works by Haydn, Verdi, Gounod, Meyerbeer, Weber, Rossini, Spohr, Balfe, Mozart, Donizetti, Wagner and Humperdinck. Complete symphonies, overtures and suites were re-scored for brass bands. Popular ballads and arias were arranged for solo instruments, with the rest of the band in support. There was plenty of work for arrangers, music publishers and – eventually – original

composers. (The day would come when Sir Edward Elgar would compose his Severn Suite specially for brass band – but that was not until 1932.)

Soon, Tone Poems began to appear – newly created pieces exploiting the very special sound of the brass ensemble. Some of the music publishing houses that made a speciality of furnishing brass bands were: Boosey and Hawkes, Wright and Round, Distin, R. Smith and Co., W. Paxton and Co., Bourne Music Ltd., Francis, Day and Hunter, Edwin H. Morris, Chappell and Co. Ltd., Frank Music Co. Ltd., and Williamson Music Ltd.

Meanwhile, the Salvation Army published its own music from its headquarters in Judd Street, King's Cross, London, and even had its own instrument-making factory at Campfield Works, St. Albans.

In parks and seaside resorts throughout the land, bandstands started to appear – often impressive and elaborate structures. Concerts in the park were huge events, drawing audiences of several hundreds.

Just as the shape of a soccer team eventually settled into a group of eleven players, so - over a period of about forty years - the shape of a brass band became established. Partly this was because experience soon showed what balance of instruments worked best for those concerts in the park. But it was even more influenced by competitions.

Brass band contests quickly became popular; and they needed rules and regulations. Surviving records from the early days of contests show that bands typically had between 14 and 17 players. The instruments included some that were soon to disappear from brass bands: trumpets, keyed bugles, sonorophones, and in particular the ophicleide. It was not until about 1880 that the standard contesting brass band became settled as comprising one soprano cornet, up to ten other cornets (often known as principal, three first, repiano, two second, two third, for example), one flugelhorn, three Eb (tenor) horns, two Bb baritones, 2 Bb euphoniums, two tenor trombones and one bass trombone, two Eb basses (tubas) and two Bb basses. In addition there would usually be one, two or three percussionists.

However, the truth is that most bands were unable to put out the full complement of players. They made do by maintaining a balance of instruments, but having fewer in each department.

By the mid-Twentieth Century, it was becoming still more difficult and bands would often appear – even at contests – with an instrument or two (usually a cornet and a Bb bass) missing.

Incidentally, the only part of the band not 'brass' is the percussion section and I often feel the tap-tapping from the drums is an alien sound that I wish the bands would dispense with. But this is only a personal opinion and even I must say the percussionists in the brass bands are usually of an extremely high standard.

Since very early days, brass band contests have been held, the first believed to have been in 1845. In these contests, each band in turn plays the agreed 'test piece' which is usually chosen because it invites artistic interpretation and also presents technical challenges to all sections of the band. Judges (normally behind a screen to prevent

them knowing which band is playing) award points and write critiques. In my day they used to focus on intonation and dynamics. Consequently, bands paid close attention to these matters. Contesting over seventeen decades has been an important feature of brass band life (though there are a few bands whose policy is not to participate) and it has undoubtedly raised the standard of musicianship.

In recent years, Harrogate, The Symphony Hall in Birmingham, the Guildhall of Preston and the Albert Hall, London, have become the central venues for contests. But I recall Belle Vue, Manchester, as the place to compete sixty years ago.

We have to remember how uncommon it was for working people to travel very far from their home village in an entire lifetime. Going to contests in other regions provided great days out for the musicians and their families and fans.

A further massive development to which I briefly alluded dates from 1878. In that year, William Booth founded the Salvation Army and perhaps his most important insight was that brass bands would be just the thing to support his cause. Soon Salvation Army brass bands were formed. By 1884 they were publishing The Salvation Army Band Journal. In 1888 they initiated junior bands, training boys to play in the bands. The Salvation Army did not participate in contests, so virtually any grouping of brass players would do: if a Salvation Army corps had a band of just a couple of cornets, a tenor horn, a euphonium and an Eb bass, that was all right with William Booth.

But this was the Salvation Army; and its strict rules applied to all its members. They had to be truly temperance bands. Apart from the ban on drinking, there were many other restrictions on what the musicians were allowed to do in their private lives. Also, the music they played had to be strictly and exclusively religious. No Salvation Army band would have been permitted, for example, to play a selection from an operetta!

It is not surprising that over the next hundred years the Salvation Army trained (and lost) many fine musicians. Hundreds of brass players left the Army bands and went on to join conventional brass bands.

Eventually the Salvation Army had to become more flexible in its attitude to its musicians and I understand from my friend Dave that the Salvation Army bands of today play a wide variety of secular music and also that their players are no longer barred from joining other bands.

Credit must be given: the Salvation Army has made a massive contribution to musical education in the United Kingdom. Many of the greatest brass players in our brass bands and top orchestras had their first music lesson in a junior Salvation Army band.

As the end of the Nineteenth Century approached, brass instruments were being manufactured by Besson, Boosey, Hawkes, Distin, Higham, Gisborne, the Salvation Army, and Courtois and Gautrot in France, not to mention the Americans, the Germans and others.

Incidentally, the development of the brass band movement in America ran in parallel with that of the United Kingdom.

Probably about 2000 brass bands existed in the U.K. by the end of that century. And in 1900 the first major brass band festival took place – at the Crystal Palace that still existed then in South London.

An interesting sidelight: elsewhere is the Commonwealth the British craze for brass bands was copied. For example, the Australians adopted this feature of British culture, made it their own, and produced some remarkable results.

It became fashionable to have performances by massed bands, when two or more (preferably of the very best) bands would combine to produce a majestic and roof-raising sound in such venues as the Royal Albert Hall.

In modern times, contesting has imitated the world of sport. Bands are in sections (leagues) according to ability; and you can be promoted or relegated to another league according to your performance. There is also slightly less sense of loyalty and belonging than there used to be. Top players – like top footballers – sometimes transfer to higher-grade bands.

By the mid-Twentieth Century there were still hundreds of brass bands and by now they had plenty of printed music from which to choose.

To give you some examples, the Hornsey British Legion Band (with me on second cornet!) might play in a London park in the 1950s Royal Review, a ‘ceremonial march’ by Arnold Steck (but arranged for brass band by Denis Wright), Au Revoir, J’Attendrai arranged for us by Eric Ball, In Martial Step – a selection of marches put together and arranged by W. J. Duthoit, Because (a popular cornet solo) arranged for brass by Shipley Douglas, The Thin Red Line (Kenneth Alford’s famous march), Bal Masqué (a charming Valse-Caprice by Percy Fletcher), The Minuet and Galop from 'Orpheus in the Underworld' (always a winner), Tchaikovsky’s Solemn Overture 1812 (arranged by the prolific Denis Wright), a Selection of Irving Berlin’s Famous Songs arranged by Charles Field, The Anniversary Waltz arranged by Arthur Jessse, The Little Shoemaker arranged by J. McInnes Smith, Cornet Carillon by Ronald Binge, and The Gay 90s (imagine a title like that these days!) in which Charles Field (yes, him again) had put together some of the favourites from the 1890s – 'Daisy Daisy', 'After The Ball Is Over', 'In The Shade of the Old Apple Tree' and others.

Since the mid-Twentieth Century there have been big changes in the brass band movement in the United Kingdom. It has become leaner but is still very fit. Dozens of bands have become extinct. A few new ones have appeared. But playing in the band is no longer a hobby for the miners. All types of people participate and many of them are serious music students and music graduates. Most important, women now play in the bands, many of them in principal positions. In the brass bands at the very top of the leagues, the musicianship is of an amazingly high standard and many of the players are virtually professionals, or they are professional teachers or have day jobs in the music industry.
Contesting is still very important in sorting out the best bands. But I must add another personal viewpoint here. Some extraordinary music has been composed specifically for brass bands, much of it for contests, and it can be thrilling and

fiendishly difficult to play; but it has failed to make an impact on the general public. People attending park concerts still prefer good old tunes they recognise, in lively, rich arrangements.

Such composers as Martin Ellerby, Dean Goffin, Elgar Howarth, Goff Richards, Philip Sparke, Philip Wilby and Derek Bourgeois have done extremely good work for the brass bands. But – outside of the brass band movement – very few people, I suggest, have heard of them.

Looking in more detail at the question of how many brass bands existed in England over the decades, I found it very difficult to obtain precise figures. Bands have never been compelled to register their existence, so evidence is lacking.

What is clear is that hundreds of bands that formed at about that time and early in the Twentieth Century have disappeared. Many from that period have survived (sometimes with their names undergoing changes). And quite a few new brass bands have been established in the last forty years or so.

Almost 3000 brass bands are known to have become extinct, many by merging into other local bands. For example, the North Middlesex Silver Band in 1949 merged with the Enfield Town Silver Prize Band to form Enfield Brass Band.

A typical example of a band that died is the Alston Band, formed around 1850. It became the Alston Town Band in about 1902. It gave its last performance in 1946.

These days, the brass band movement is co-ordinated by the British Federation of Brass Bands and there is a greater sense of professionalism about the recording and administration of this interesting branch of popular culture. But there is still no central register of the bands in existence.

So at best I can only estimate how many brass bands there have been over the years. They were almost certainly at their greatest number during the period 1890 – 1910.

Band music publishers Wright and Round suggested there were as many as 40,000 or at least 30,000 bands but these figures are absurd. They would imply there was one band for every 1000 members of the population. They were merely 'talking up' the situation in their own commercial interest.

'Expert' estimates were given by such persons as J.H. Elliot, Arthur Bliss and Peter Wilson at various moments during the Twentieth Century. Their consensus seems to be that the figure fell from about 6000 at the start of the Century to 2000 by the 1980s. I presume they were including Salvation Army bands. Even so, I think enthusiasm for the music may have slightly exaggerated their judgements.

Wikipedia even makes the unsubstantiated statement that there were 'in the 1930s ……. around 20,000 brass bands in the U.K.' but this claim needs to be viewed very sceptically indeed. It would mean, for example, that every modest-sized village would need to have had two or three brass bands.

Early editions of the British Bandsman magazine do not give total figures; but the reports are helpful simply in mentioning bands. For example, in 1913, the magazine

reported on the activities of 230 bands in Yorkshire. Interestingly, in 1920, the magazine mentioned only 156 bands in Yorkshire. It seems likely that one of the forgotten casualties of the First World War was the brass band movement.

There was a continuous decline from that time (also notable shortly before and after the Second World War) and no doubt the radio, and the new social trends of cinema-going and television-viewing did not help: they drew people away from band practices.

For today's figures, we can get a little help from local Brass Band Associations. For example, the Leicestershire Brass Band Association currently lists 27 bands. The Yorkshire and Humberside Association lists 48 bands. The South West Brass Band Association, covering several counties, has 67 bands, as coincidentally does the North West area association. The Gloucester Association (covering five counties) has 27 bands.

Partly extrapolating from these figures (relating the number of bands to population size) and using my own observations, I estimate that there are about 1300 brass bands in England today (including Salvation Army bands). Salvation Army bands started in 1878 and have followed a similar pattern to that of the mainstream bands – a boom early in the Twentieth Century with a decline ever since. They still have plenty of bands, but for years local Salvation Army bands have in many cases limped along with only ten or so players, or even fewer.

To sum up, I think the truth is more likely to have been that there were never more than about 2000 brass bands in England and that the figure has fallen to about 1300 now.

However, the good news is that the bands of today are generally in a healthy state, aiming at high musical standards, trained by well-qualified musicians and nurturing the youngsters in specialist training groups.