

'A Softening Influence' :
R. T. Crawshay and the Cyfarthfa Band

by *TREVOR HERBERT*

In the summer of 1908 members of the Merthyr Borough Council turned their minds to a niggling problem. The Cyfarthfa Band, which had effectively been stripped of the patronage of the Crawshay family for more than thirty years and no longer enjoying the success and prestige that it once did, had petitioned the Council for help. More precisely the band looked to the Council to take them into Borough control. It was not a good time for the local authority to be taking on new responsibilities even if they were minor ones.

On July 24 the 'General Purposes' Committee was informed that 'Mr Crawshay was prepared to hand over to the town the Cyfarthfa Band which consisted of 28 instruments, 21 iron music stands and 291 books containing 842 pieces of music, upon condition that the name 'Cyfarthfa' was retained in the title of the band in perpetuity'. The offer was not received with unequivocal approval, there were matters that needed to be considered 'particularly with regard to questions of cost'. The General Purpose Committee, itself a sub-committee, decided on a course of action that has characterised Welsh local authority administration for most of this century. They formed a further sub-committee to which the matter could be referred. Less than a month later, at the meeting of the General Purposes Committee of August 11, after lengthy debate, it was resolved that the main recommendations of the report of their sub-committee be accepted and that the Band be named 'The Cyfarthfa and Merthyr Municipal Band'. It was noted that the band had 26 players who were employed mainly at the Cyfarthfa and Dowlais works and Collieries and that the conductor was paid £30 a year.

The cost to the Corporation was estimated at £25 per year but provisions in the report ensured that all of the bands' material possessions became the

property of the Council and the duties of the band were so defined that the Council got more than its moneys' worth. In the summer months they were required to play in public for a minimum of two evenings a week. The Corporation was to have first call on the band's services and the Band were not to accept engagements from outside promoters without the expressed consent of the Mayor and Corporation.

The band officials who were required to be present for interview on that evening were the conductor George Livesey, the secretary William Batty and Mr B Phillips, the treasurer. They must have felt some satisfaction as they left Merthyr Town Hall on that summer evening but at least one of them might have reflected on the occasion with a hint of sadness. George Livesey was nearing the end of his life. A life of considerable musical distinction. He had been a player and conductor for the period when the brass band movement was taking flight as one of the great popular musical forces of the Victorian era. In the small group of bands that shone out with some distinction the Cyfarthfa Band was one of the brightest stars. George Livesey and his father Ralph before him had witnessed the glory of the band for most of the previous half century. He could be excused if a morsel of bitterness inhabited his countenance as he sat before a group of councillors pleading for a measure that saved from total extinction the most famous, and possibly the first, manifestation of Merthyr's heritage of instrumental art music.

In 1860 the Cyfarthfa Band achieved its most conspicuous exposure when it won the first National Brass Band Contest at the Crystal Palace. That famous event is well documented and I will return to it later but by 1860 the band had been in existence for at least twenty years. The actual date of its formation is quoted and misquoted. I have revised my views on the matter at least three times. Margaret Stewart Taylor, in her book *The Crawshays of Cyfarthfa Castle*, states that the band was formed in 1844. This is certainly wrong as are numerous letters published over the years in the Merthyr press extolling the past glory of the band and quoting 1844 as the year of its foundation.

The earliest relevant primary source known to me that has unequivocal authenticity is a bill of sale contained in the Crawshay papers at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. The bill is from the London instrument maker and dealer Charles Pace and is dated March 21 1840. It presents an account for £9.9.0 to Mr Robt. Crawshay for the supply of three keyed bugles with tuning slides. A related document in the same collection of papers shows that the bill was paid, but not very promptly.

Clearly then the band existed or was in the process of formation in 1840 but a different source dates the formation of the band as 1838 and though this source is slightly weaker I have regarded it, for a variety of reasons, as accurate. The source is 'A note on the Crawshays' published in the Merthyr Express on May 17 1879, the time of the death of Robert Thompson Crawshay. In it reference is made to the band.

In 1838, the famous Cyfarthfa Brass Band was started, and we make no apology for introducing here some account of the origin and growth of this splendid corps of musicians, upon which Mr Crawshay looked with so much pleasure and pride before his first terrible affliction in loss of hearing, and indeed always after. Originally there were 70 members, and a man from Staffordshire came down to instruct them; but, being all novices in the art, they made much "sound and fury" without music. Mr Crawshay went to London and fell in with a Mr Berrington, one of the leaders of the orchestra of Her Majesty's Theatre, and three brothers. He engaged them to come down, and Mr Berrington weeded the 70 down to 24 and then set them in training . About the same time, Mr Francis Crawshay started a band at Treforest, where he had Mr Gratian, whom he picked up at Wombwells menagerie. Gratian left Treforest, came to Merthyr, and established the band, which, in his hands ,rapidly acquired proficiency, and skill. Shortly afterwards, Mr Crawshay being in London, at Vauxhall met the late Mr Livesey "old Raafe" as Ralph came to be called, father of Mr George Livesey, the present conductor

The attractiveness of this source is that it was created when the relevant facts were still comparatively fresh in the minds of those who had witnessed the setting up of the band. It also clears up some confusion about the type of band it was and in particular whether it really was a working class band or, as I have elsewhere argued a private band that was in some respects professional. The source suggests two stages in the bands' early history. The first stage was the formation of a large band of little musical merit which, apparently, didn't last very long. The second stage was the creation of a more carefully hued and selected smaller group of players who were musically literate and technically accomplished. The article goes on to explain that the developing virtuosity of the band was due not so much to the fruits of the labours of those from the

original 'untutored' group of seventy players but rather to the importation of men from afar who were already established instrumentalists and were enticed to Merthyr by Crawshay.

. . . There had been, and continued to be, jealousies in the band, as the native element did not at all relish the introduction of 'foreigners' but Mr Crawshay picked up class men wherever he found them, and in this way perfected his corps.

Crawshay certainly did 'pick up class men'. The members of the reconstituted 1840s band included players from London theatres, travelling circus troupes and individuals or even dynasties of distinguished amateur musicians from the north of England. Several of the names associated with the band are now well known in Merthyr-Livesey, England, Walker among them. Other musicians of distinction were the French arranger and infamous drunk George D'Artney and the ophicleidist Samuel Hughes. Hughes was born in Shropshire, recruited by Crawshay in 1858 with the enticement of a good job as a railway agent and was destined to become, by George Bernard Shaw's reckoning, the finest exponent of the instrument in London.

By the time Sam Hughes joined the band it was already acknowledged as the premier band in Wales. Though a correspondent to a brass band magazine later in the century (who turned out to be a member of the Llanelly Silver Band) reflected that Cyfarthfa could not be labelled a 'Welsh band' as it contained so many imported English players, it was certainly one of the most potent cultural products of new urban Wales by 1860.

The great brass band contest at the Crystal Palace Sydenham in July 1860 confirmed and exposed that status of the Cyfarthfa Band. It was a remarkable occasion. The contest was held over two days. It is not certain how many witnessed the spectacle but *The Times* estimated that over 22,000 were present on the second day. More than 40 bands competed on each day (*The Times* mentions 44 *The Daily Telegraph* 48). The competing bands were split into six groups for the preliminary contest, the best twelve on each day went forward to the final contest where they were adjudicated by eighteen judges most of whom were prominent professionals and army bandmasters. It was, according to *The Daily Telegraph* 'the first Contest of Brass Bands ever held in the south of England'. *The Times* which devoted as much space to the event in its issues of July 11 and 12 1860 as it has to the brass band movement since, noted that 'For a first experiment of this kind the success was quite extraordinary.'

The first days contest was won by a new band from Yorkshire which had been formed only five years previous, it was called the Black Dyke Mills Band. The second prize was given to a band sponsored by the celebrated industrialist and philanthropist Sir Titus Salt—The Saltaire Band. *The Times* reported that the third prize was given to,

the Cyfarthfa Band (supported by Mr Crawshay, and from the ranks of which the late Jullien obtained Mr Hughes the celebrated ophicleide, and other excellent performers—conductor Mr R.Livesey) [they] played a selection from Balfe's opera *The Bondman*.

On the second day no others matched the performance of the men from Merthyr

The first prize—£30 in money, with a silver cup for the bandmaster, and a complete set of Boosey's Brass Band Journal, in 16 volumes, presented by the publishers, was awarded to the Cyfarthfa Band (conductor Mr R.Livesey), from Messrs. Crawshay's ironworks, South Wales. The piece selected for this band was Verdi's overture to *Nabucco*.

The day's events didn't finish until 9 o'clock, the band must have been exhausted by the time they reached home but their endeavours were well worth it. It wasn't just that they had won; they had won what might be regarded as the most important contest in the history of brass bands. It was, as I have said, the first event of its kind in the capital. The London audience and the assembled competitors drew in their collective breath with admiration at the deft musical skills that Crawshay's band exhibited.

Crawshay may not even have been present but the prestige he acquired by their achievement was not unnoticed. It was common in mid-Victorian Britain for middle class people to regard participation in musical activity as particularly virtuous. It was one of the pastimes accessible to the working class people that was classified as a 'rational recreation'. Those who sought to improve the moral and intellectual abilities of working class people were themselves the objects of respect and admiration. Up to that time Crawshay had demonstrated little ambition to better the lot of his workers. The evidence shows that the Cyfarthfa Band was to all effects and purposes a private band

formed and sustained by him as part of the elaborate image that demonstrated his wealth and status. As I have already shown, the original, raw ,working men's band was quickly defunct and replaced with a more finely manicured and carefully selected corps of musicians. But the achievement of 1860 provided a good opportunity for Crawshay to exhibit an image of himself which would place him high on the list of the wealthy philanthropists and friend of the working man.

The most famous projector of this image was none other than Charles Dickens. Two months after the 1860 contest Dicken's magazine *Household Words* devoted several of its pages to an essay with the title 'Music in Humble Life' The article listed the values and progress of music among the working classes. With the sound of Crystal Palace still ringing in their ears the authors sounded their litany of the musical achievements of the lower orders in Merthyr Tydfil and attributed the remarkable achievements of its band to the kindly patronage of its most illustrious inhabitant.

Another set of harmonious blacksmiths awaken the echoes of the remotest Welsh mountains. The correspondent of a leading London newspaper, while visiting Merthyr, was exceedingly puzzled by hearing boys in the Cyfarthfa works whistling airs rarely heard except in the fashionable ball-room, opera house, or drawing room. He afterwards discovered that the proprietor of the works Mr Robert Crawshay, had established among his men a brass band, which practices once a week throughout the year. They have the good fortune to be led by a man (one of the roll-turners) who must have had somewhere a superior education.

The article goes on to describe the music that the band were capable of playing and the pride that they drew from their achievement. But the greatest achievement was Crawshay's.

... I have been told it cost Mr Crawshay great pains and expense to bring the band to its present excellent condition. If so, he now has his reward. Beside this, he has shown what the intellectual capacity of the workman is equal to, and above all he has provided a rational and refined amusement for classes whose leisure time would otherwise probably be less creditably spent than learning or listening to music The habits and manners

of these men appear to have been decidedly improved by these softening influences.

The private papers of RT Crawshay show that in the months following the Crystal Palace victory William Jones, his private secretary, had to deal with a number of requests for the bands' services. He guarded his ownership of it jealously. In September 1860 Mr David Jones of Britton Ferry was firmly chastised for advertising the appearance of the band in Neath when permission had not been obtained from Crawshay,

I cannot imagine why such an announcement should have been made without first of all obtaining my permission. I have received your letter on the subject but I do not acknowledge the excuse sufficient for such a liberty

Those who took the proper course by requesting permission to engage the band were left in no doubt that Crawshays own use of them would always remain a priority. In March 1861 Mr Edward Lawrence took the precaution of asking for the bands services several months in advance. Crawshay's reply left Mr Lawrence in no doubt as to what the priorities of the band were

The time arranged for your concert is rather a long time distant and I cannot tell whether my Band will be required for some purpose of my own or not so scarcely like promising it to you; but if you will run the risk I have no objection to allowing you the band . . . providing I do not require it myself for some other purpose.

The repertory of the band and sources relating to the private affairs of the Crawshay family show that the band was used to provide music for the elaborate balls that were frequent events at Cyfarthfa Castle. The band were also used as a musical backdrop for other festive occasions such as garden parties and flower shows. But, as time progressed there was a wider audience for the band in Merthyr. The broadening of the bands role in the community was caused partly by the sheer demand on them for their services to the extent that Crawshay simply couldn't control it, and also by the growing influence of the conductor George Livesey. The other cause of Crawshays relaxation of his strict control of the band (though he never relaxed it completely) was the

onset of his deafness which was quite profound by the mid 1860s. His main distraction by this time had become photography, his personal account books show regular and substantial payments for photographic equipment.

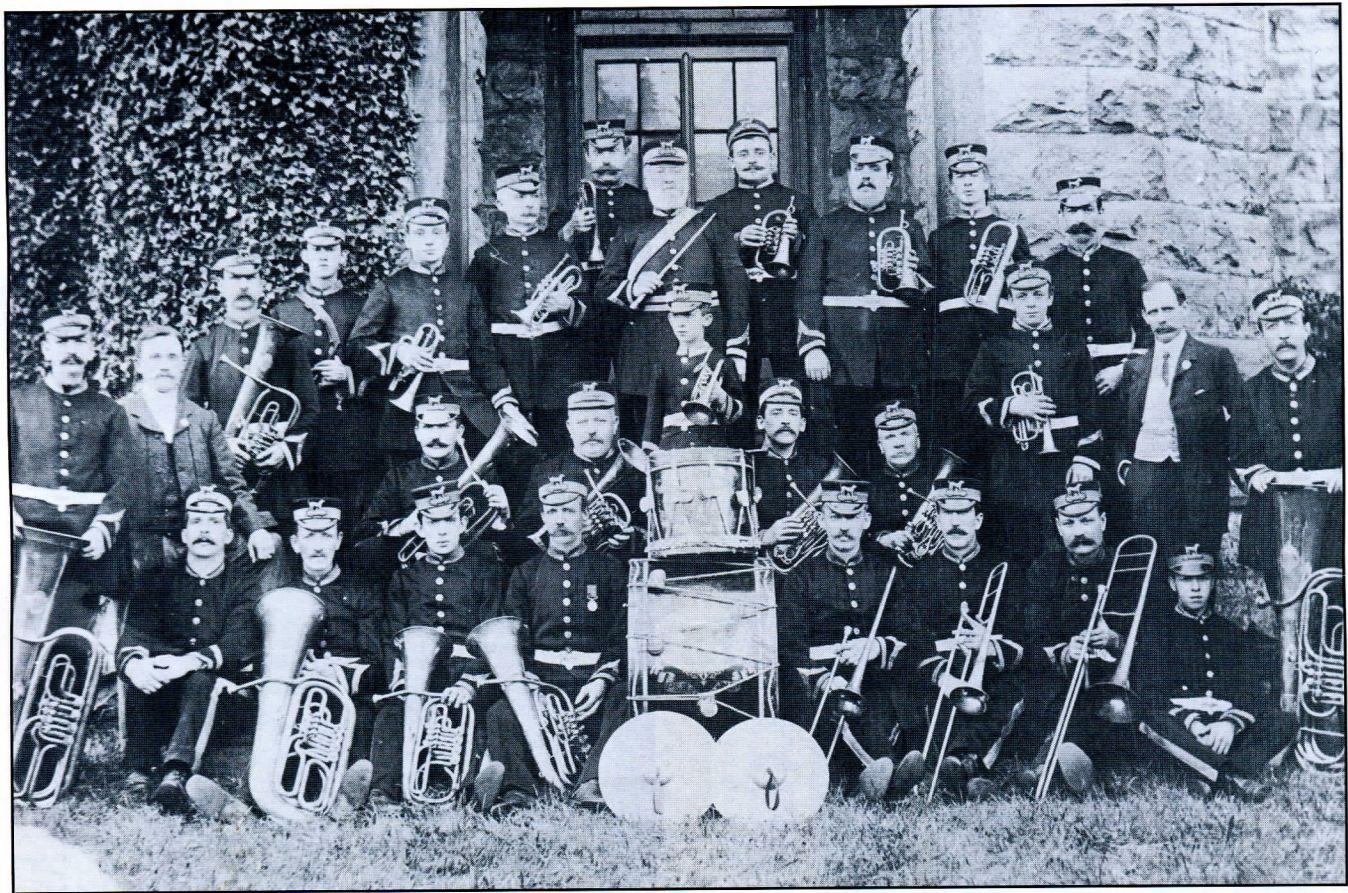
It became much more common for the band to appear in public in the town's parks and by the end of the century *The Orchestral Times and Bandsman* attributed the introduction of Sunday band concerts in Wales to the Cyfarthfa band. The innovation was not of course without controversy but John Vaughan proposing a vote of thanks to the band for one of their appearances referred to their performance as a 'musical sermon'.

The bands' major period of greatness was between about 1850 and 1870. After that they continued to be a very fine band but they held no sway over the bands of the north of England. Their significance in the mid-Victorian period is that they were not just a fine band but that they offered an example of working class musical potential when the brass band movement was just gaining momentum.

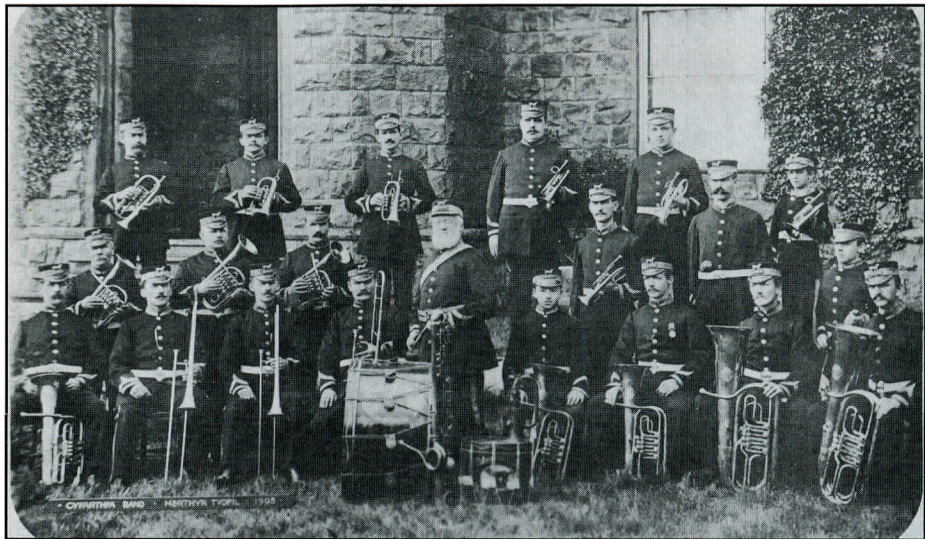
In the early twentieth century, after the adoption of the band by the local authority they struggled along as musical functionaries for the borough council. The relationship was not, it seems, an easy one. The weight of the duties that were expected of them and the size of their fees were often subjects of contention.

This frequently led to headlines such as 'Cyfarthfa Band dissatisfied' in the Merthyr press. The intricacies of those arguments need more examination than I can give them here. It seems clear though that the duties expected of the band were such that it was necessary to pay the men for playing. They had become, in effect a professional band. It is difficult to avoid making a comparison between the way that the band was treated by the local authority and the way it was treated by Crawshay fifty years earlier. The similarity is striking. One cannot but feel for poor old George Livesey. A fine portrait of him hangs at Cyfarthfa Castle Museum. He looks resplendent in his uniform. His musicality is beyond question and, in truth, it is to him that the success of the band was due. It is a pity that he spent his closing years witnessing the decline of a band which, at its zenith, matched any in the world.

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Cyfarthfa Band, about 1900, with Bandmaster, Livesey. Photo courtesy of Mr. & Mrs. Hugh Watkins.



Cyfarthfa Brass Band, 1905.