

The Cyfarthfa Band

Introduction

The Cyfarthfa Band was first formed by Robert Thompson Crawshay, son of William Crawshay II and Isabel Thompson, around 1838. Merthyr Tydfil, at the time, was a town of sharp contrasts. Thirteen years earlier Cyfarthfa Castle had been completed at the order of William II, a grand castellated mansion looking out over an area of industrial bustle and social deprivation.

The band was formed to provide music for the ostentatious and grand tastes of the family, being the 'inhouse' entertainment for family functions. They were expected to excel in all manner of musical forms whatever the occasion, be it flower shows, dances or classical concerts. However, before very long Robert Thompson wound up the Band because the players did not live up to the high standards he expected of them. His dream still lived on to have a Band with the Cyfarthfa name and he soon enticed capable semi-professional musicians from all over the country with offers of jobs, accommodation, ensuring that the new Band were of the highest standard possible. The first conductor was Mr Gratian. He was succeeded during the 1840s by Ralph Livsey ('Old Raafe'). The Livsey family had control within the Band for the remainder of the nineteenth century, with George Livsey succeeding his father in the role of Bandmaster.

Much of the repertoire of the Band came from within, some of the players also arranged existing music for the Band to perform, thus widening the scope of the music beyond that specifically written or arranged for the brass genre. Robert Thompson still demanded the very best from the Band, and in his quest for this he employed the talents of George D'Artney, a bizarre and brilliant French musician, to arrange music. D'Artney was a highly strung man, often worse for wear for alcohol and given to fits of temper. However, he was held in high regard by everybody with whom he came into contact for the brilliance of his musical talent.

The Cyfarthfa Band had uniforms representing the Crawshay family heritage: blue uniforms, braided in gold with the Crawshay family motif (a mastiff) and motto (Perseverance) emblazoning their caps. It should be remembered at all times that this Band was a private band which rarely mixed with other groups of a similar nature. They seldom entered contests and a large proportion of their music was arranged with the Cyfarthfa Band in mind.

It is thought that Robert Thompson actually played in the Band for the first twenty years of its existence. Sadly, towards the end of the 1850s Robert Thompson was rendered deaf by meningitis (perhaps) and was thus unable to fulfil as active a role as he had done previously within the Band. He still maintained his interest in the Band until his death in 1879, jealously guarding the decisions made concerning the playing of his precious music.

The Band's hey-day came in the early 1860s, when they conquered the contesting world by winning two national contests within two years at the Crystal Palace. Ralph Livsey died in 1863 and was replaced by his son, George Livsey, who stayed with the Band until the early twentieth century.

Following Robert Thompson's death, the Band gradually descended from being the great Virtuoso Brass Band to exhibiting merely a shadow of its previous grandeur. The local authority assumed responsibility for the Band in 1908 but interest was quickly lost and the Band ceased to exist sometime after this. There is evidence that they were still active in 1915, there is a Conductor's Book dating from this year. But it seems that by the time George Livsey died in 1923, Cyfarthfa Band was just a memory.

"The Origins of the Species" - The Brass Band in Context

The brass band genre extends far beyond popular perception and expectation in modern Western culture.

Horns and trumpets, though crude in design, have been in use right across the world for thousands of years, originally more for ceremonial and declamatory use than as a medium for music-making. During the fifteenth century, slides were developed, enabling players to vary their harmonic range. Later, in the classical period, the cornet declined in popularity. The trumpet and horn, on the other hand, found their way into the early symphony orchestra. Eventually, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, keyed or valve instruments were invented, thus allowing the playing of chromatic passages with more ease.

This development in technology coincided with the growth of industrial communities across Britain, community spirit was enhanced by the establishment of brass bands and choral societies. Music historians usually suggest that the brass band movement as we know it today had its beginnings in the heart of South Wales industrial communities, especially around the present 'Heads of the Valleys' area of Blaina in the early 1830s. It was not unusual for the industry bosses to finance these ventures. They saw the investment as aiding the productivity of their particular industry, the reasons being two-fold - firstly, if the men were involved in choirs and bands, they were not drinking in the public house, and therefore had a clear head for work in the morning; and secondly, the band fostered a spirit of brotherhood and this carried itself over into the workplace.

It would be remiss to suggest that Robert Thompson Crawshay was driven purely by such mercenary attitudes. He enjoyed participating in the Band activities, but a man as ambitious as he was must have had money at the back of his mind when establishing the Band. One of the major differences between the Cyfarthfa Band and its contemporaries is that Robert Thompson imported semi-professional musicians and employed them in his iron works. Their trade was music and they had to learn a new skill, ironworking, in order to pursue their music with the Cyfarthfa Band. This made the industrial productivity of the Cyfarthfa Works secondary in Robert Thompson's mind to the productivity of his beloved band.

Robert Thompson's method of recruiting players was controversial, to say the least! The nearest rival to the Cyfarthfa Band was the Llanelli Town Band. This indigenous band objected to the claim that Cyfarthfa was the finest Band in Wales. How could they be? The band's line-up, according to Llanelli, was made up of too many "imported Englishmen" to be regarded as Welsh.

One of the most notable assets of the Cyfarthfa Band was their fine set of instruments, acquired by Robert Thompson from all the best suppliers across Europe, including Charles Pace and Boosey's. Other bands of the time tended to have whatever instruments their players could afford, and it was not unusual for the bands to loan instruments to players and have

them returned when the player ceased his association with the band. Some bands had non-brass instruments, because willing volunteers could not always play the now traditional brass instruments.

Cyfarthfa Band rarely competed with other bands, and they were very successful in the two high profile contests in which they competed in the 1860s, and there are reports of them triumphing in the National Eisteddfod in 1881. However, they were essentially a private band, sponsored and owned by Robert Thompson who preferred to hear them play at private functions, balls, garden parties, regattas and the like. This band was kept on a tight rein by their patron, who protected their exposure. Later, when the Corporation took over sponsorship of the Band they tried to maintain this strict vigilance, but this eventually played a part in their downfall as they could not sustain themselves within such strict guidelines.

Repertory

Cyfarthfa Band was probably the first virtuoso brass band, and possibly the first Welsh virtuoso musical ensemble of any standing. Their repertory reflects the lack of specialised compositions for brass bands at the time of the formation of the Cyfarthfa Band. Close inspection of the surviving Cyfarthfa Band Part Books reveals a strange phenomenon - a large variety of musical compositions acquired by many and varied means.

Robert Thompson ensured that within the Band there were a number of competent musicians who arranged classical compositions for the Band and some who were able to compose original pieces for their repertory.

The Band favoured classical works and enjoyed the acclamation they received for their renditions of great composers' finest works. The Band's repertory survives in around 105 part books and two catalogues, not all surviving from the same date. The catalogues describe the repertory as falling into three main categories:

- (1) light diversions: quadrilles, gallops, waltzes etc;
- (2) transcriptions and arrangements of 'art music', including religious works;
- (3) miscellaneous pieces which fit neither of the above categories, original pieces - The Tydfil Overture fits into this category.

The extent of the variety in the surviving Part Books suggests that the Band used these for the majority of their repertory rather than the published journals of the time, although they almost certainly possessed such books. Robert Thompson felt that individualism within the repertory of the band was so important that he procured the services of a brilliant and eccentric Frenchman called George D'Artney.

Little is known of D'Artney. It is thought that Robert Thompson gave him free use of a cottage on his estate. There is little evidence that he worked in the Cyfarthfa Works, his sole employment was to arrange and transcribe music for the Band. Some accounts of D'Artney describe him as a mad genius, but he was rather an eccentric musician. David Morgans asserts in his account of the Cyfarthfa Band that "Beer was his enemy".

The advantage of using D'Artney was that he was familiar with the limitations of the Band and scored to their abilities. According to some reports, D'Artney could recall music heard many years before and transcribe it for the Band purely from memory, such was his

brilliance. His talents extended far beyond music, however. He often sketched his wife's and daughter's faces onto the manuscripts and was known to be fluent in a number of languages, including French, German and English. He could also read and write Welsh but found speaking it difficult.

A number of Band personnel turned their hand to transcribing classical music for the Band, and the limitations of the Brass instrument were merely challenges for the Cyfarthfa Band. Reports describe a performance of Rossini's "William Tell Overture", Ralph Livsey played the flute solo on bugle, Walker (on ophecleide) played the opening, written for violin/cello. If the Band could not achieve the originally desired sound, the scoring allowed them to achieve an equally impressive performance.

Such works as "The Overture to Nabucco" were made popular in Merthyr Tydfil by the Band's performances, as transcriptions of great Italian Operas by composers like Donizetti and Verdi made up the staple of their repertory. It was observed that the Band could do a week-long tour to Tenby or Aberystwyth and never repeat any piece of music during the entire week, so vast and encompassing was their repertory.

Some players in the Band readily gave their time to writing transcriptions and compositions for the Band and never put their names to them. Family tradition tells of John England composing hymn tunes and short compositions for the Band and never giving his own name to them, these were later taken as the work of somebody else. The amount of truth in these reports is questionable, but nevertheless it further indicates the talent within the Cyfarthfa Band.

The Tydfil Overture (Part Book)

One significant piece of music in the repertory of the Cyfarthfa Band is the Tydfil Overture. This is found in one set of partbooks (Book J) with the epithet "The Tydfil Overture, composed and arranged for the Cyfarthfa Band by J Parry". Note the absence of the title 'Doctor' before J Parry. This suggests that the overture was composed relatively early in Parry's life.

Joseph Parry was born at No 4, Chapel Row in Merthyr Tydfil in 1841, the son of a Puddler in the Cyfarthfa Works. He would have grown up with the strains of the Band constantly echoing around him. Joseph Parry moved to America in the early 1860s, and was therefore in Merthyr during the hey-day of the Cyfarthfa Band. He never forgot his roots, the Tydfil Overture was composed especially for the Cyfarthfa Band.

This is particularly remarkable because 'The Tydfil Overture' is believed to be the first composition specifically for brass band written by an established composer. Parry wrote few purely orchestral pieces, he excelled rather in Opera, Oratorio. He also wrote many hymn tunes, including 'Merthyr Tydfil' and 'Aberystwyth',.

This has to be the most significant piece in the Cyfarthfa Band repertory for the simple reason that Parry retained his links with the Band and the town in which he had his roots, although he never actually returned to Merthyr Tydfil to live. A number of the players in the Band wrote or transcribed music for the Band, but to have a masterpiece like Parry's in the repertoire was something of a coup for the Robert Thompson's Band. The Overture was never published, it remained only in print within the Cyfarthfa Band archives.

Characters

The story of the Cyfarthfa Band would not be complete without mentioning some of the characters who played significant roles in the life of the Band at various stages in its life.

Robert Thompson Crawshay - Founder and Patron

Robert Thompson Crawshay was born in 1817, the eldest son of William Crawshay II and his second wife, Isabel Thompson. He assumed responsibility for the Cyfarthfa Works on the death of his elder halfbrother William Crawshay III, who drowned in the river Severn in 1839. It is unclear when, exactly, Robert Thompson's patronage of the Cyfarthfa Band began. There is evidence, however, that he purchased instruments from the London instrument maker and dealer Charles Pace in 1840.

Little else is clear about the inception of the Cyfarthfa "Works" Band. Some stories assert that one Mr Gratian of Wombwell's travelling Menagerie was the first Bandmaster, others mention a musician from Her Majesty's Theatre, Mr Berriman (or Berrington), whose services were procured by Robert Thompson at a substantial price. Which ever account is correct, it is certain that the Band was functioning by 1846 when Robert Thompson married Rose Mary Yeates. Rose Mary recalled the reception she and Robert Thompson received when they returned to Merthyr after their marriage at Caversham (the family home in Berkshire), this included their procession into Merthyr escorted by workers and the Cyfarthfa Band. Also mentioned in this recollection is Francis Crawshay's Treforest Band, although little is known about this Band.

Cyfarthfa Band was, effectively, a private Band, held on a very tight rein by Robert Thompson. There are reports of his tyranny, but he certainly regarded the Cyfarthfa Band as a labour of love. The Band provided music for balls and galas within Cyfarthfa Castle, making their purpose two-fold for Robert Thompson. They catered for his ostentatious artistic inclinations, and until he was left deaf by meningitis in 1858 he was active as a player within the Band. He enjoyed the music on a level which allowed him to associate with his workers, both on an equal footing as a player and on a grand level as their patron.

Many of the players recruited by Robert Thompson were professional musicians. However, he expected them to earn their keep from manual work in his iron works, thus gaining maximum productivity from his workforce, in every capacity. Therefore, the Band had amateur status, but held professional values and principles.

He continued his patronage of the Band until his death in 1879, and there are numerous reports of the Band performing on the Castle forecourt towards the end of his life. Indeed, there is a photograph of the reception given to him when he returned from a stay in hospital in 1877 in which the Band is seen clearly in the foreground, supporting their patron.

There was no provision for the Band in Robert Thompson's will and it is thought that there was a gradual decline after his death, until the Band finally ceased to function in the first twenty years of this century.

The Livsey Family - Musical Directors and Players

The Livsey family had an extensive connection with the Cyfarthfa Band. The patriarch Ralph Livsey became the second Bandmaster of Robert Thompson's band in 1848, and was succeeded by his son, George, in 1863. But this only scratches the surface of the family's involvement with the Cyfarthfa Band. Ralph Livsey was born around 1805 in Shawside, Lancs. and came to Merthyr through his connections with the music of Wombwell's travelling Menagerie.

Mr Gratian, of the same group, was the first Bandmaster of the Cyfarthfa Band, and recommended Ralph Livsey to Robert Thompson in 1848. Ralph (Old Raafe), a man large in stature (it is thought he weighed around twenty two stone) and a talented musician, moved to Merthyr in 1848, bringing with him his wife, Margaret, and five of his six children, the sixth had yet to be born. Robert Thompson Crawshay employed Ralph in his iron works, thus making his value to Robert Thompson twofold.

George Livsey was about fourteen when his family moved to Merthyr Tydfil, and he began to play in the Cyfarthfa Band immediately. Thomas, Ralph Livsey's younger son (and grandfather to retired MP for Brecon, Richard Livsey), who was less than a year old when his family moved to Merthyr, also became active in the band later on.

It is unclear when the Band was wound up and re-established, but Ralph certainly made his mark on it almost immediately and brought the Band up to a standard which was acceptable to their patron. In the three years immediately prior to Ralph's death, he took the Band to two notable National Band Contests at the Crystal Palace in London, winning the 1860 contest and jointly winning the 1862 contest (after having their performance sabotaged).

Ralph Livsey died in 1863, after only fifteen years with the Band. His eldest son, George, inherited his position within the Band, on his own merit rather than his family connections. Having played from a young age, George was an accomplished player, as well as a competent Bandmaster. It seems that that Band never quite reached the same pinnacles of success under George that they had under his father's baton, but this could be linked more to Robert Thompson's failing health and advancing age than to the competence of the respective Bandmasters.

Reports of the Bands exploits after 1863 are scarce, but it is understood that George Livsey led the Band to success in the National Eisteddfod, held in Merthyr Tydfil in 1881. The same year they played for King Edward at Swansea. The Livsey family continued to be closely associated with music beyond the father and son partnership of Ralph and George within the Cyfarthfa Band. One of George's sons became a member of the Cardiff Orchestral Society, another (Ralph) was french horn soloist with the Coldstream Guards and was also a member of the Italian Opera and the Lyceum Orchestra.

Reports show that a delegation went to the Merthyr Tydfil Corporation in 1908 to request financial backing. According to Council records, the Bandmaster Goerge Livsey was part of this delegation, and was therefore still active with the Band, though into his dotage.

George Livsey lived in Merthyr Tydfil until his death in 1923, and, like so many of his family before him, was buried at Cefn Cemetery. It is unclear when he retired from the Band. Reports of his funeral state that the Salvation Army Band, rather than the Cyfarthfa Band, accompanied the cortege at his funeral.

England Family - A Brass Band Dynasty

From its inception the Cyfarthfa Band relied upon the contribution of several key families. One of which, the England family, were seen as the backbone of the band. The successive generations of musicians from this dynasty drew upon the experience of their forefathers in helping to establish a tradition of solid musicianship for which the Cyfarthfa Band was renowned.

The England family were the most numerous, sixteen members were active participants at different stages in the life of the Band. At one point, according to legend, there were no less than twelve family members active within the Band.

John England, the patriarch, came to Merthyr Tydfil in October 1847 with his wife and three children. Wombwell's Menagerie wintered in his hometown, Wilsden, and its Bandleader, Gratian, became familiar with England's musical prowess and orchestrated the move.

The extensive associations of the England family with the Cyfarthfa Band could be explained by the nature in which the family grew: John England had four sons, William, Joseph, John and Harry; William had four sons, Joseph two. John one. William also had two grandsons. The men in that family were active in the Band for the whole of their adult lives. Joseph England was played in the Band for fifty four years.

Robert Thompson Crawshay derived great amusement from the England family. He enjoyed pointing out this musical dynasty to guests at Cyfarthfa Castle. The England family were not the only family to have extensive connections with the Cyfarthfa Band, but theirs were the most comprehensive. Their expertise ranged from trombone (John) to cornet (William). William was described as being the best cornet player in the country (Britain) during his prime. The England family's notoriety was as much for their capability as their presence. John England was also a capable composer, although he preferred not to be known for this. The Cyfarthfa Band was comprised of the cream of Merthyr's musical virtuosi, and to have such a number active from the same family was a notable achievement.

Sam Hughes - Ophecleidist

The Cyfarthfa Band attracted many characters to its ranks and much talent was nurtured through the Band. One such character was Samuel Hughes. This man joined the Cyfarthfa Band as Ophecleide player, although the date of his initial involvement and his departure are unclear. Like so many other players in the Cyfarthfa Band, it is thought that Sam Hughes was enticed to Merthyr Tydfil and the Cyfarthfa Band by Robert Thompson with offers of employment in his iron works and accommodation.

Sam Hughes' first son was born in Merthyr in 1852, yet there are records of his employment in Staffordshire in the 1840s. This could be significant to his musical training, as the Potteries were in a state of development at this stage, and with this growth came an increase of music interest in the form of choral (tonic solfa) training and brass bands. When he was engaged by Robert Thompson, he became solo ophecleidist. He played with the Band from around 1849 and throughout the 1850s, it seems. However, Sam Hughes was not present at the Grand Band Contest of 1860, John Walker is mentioned in this position.

Sam Hughes came into his own as a instrumentalist when he was 'spotted' by the celebrated conductor, Julian Band (Julien) or, according to some stories, his associate, Koenig at an instrument shop in London trying out an ophecleide.

It is understood that Hughes joined the Julien entourage for a much anticipated American tour in 1853. The regular ophecleidist, Prospère, had decided against joining the tour and Julien sought his replacement. It seems that Sam Hughes was active within the Cyfarthfa Band between tours with Julien. His discovery seems more of a matter of being in the right place at the right time, although this cannot detract from his ability and reputation as virtuoso ophecleidist.

When exactly he ceased to be associated with the Cyfarthfa Band is unclear. The museum has an ophecleide dated around 1867 - 71 inscribed with Sam Hughes' name and the name W T Crawshay (Robert Thompson's son). This further complicates the analysis of Hughes' association, as it is generally believed that he had graduated to bigger and better things by this time. However, some scholars believe he retained his connections with Cyfarthfa throughout the rest of his life, guesting with the Band when required.

He was elected a member of the Royal Society of Musicians of Great Britain in 1861. In 1862, he is believed to have played for Queen Victoria. Unfortunately, in 1866, he lost his most prized ophecleide in the Crystal Palace fire.

Hughes' musical talent caught the imagination of even the most unlikely audience. George Bernard Shaw, who called the ophecleide 'the chromatic bullock' appreciated Hughes' prowess on the instrument:

Even Shaw's sharp tongue had to admit he had been moved by Hughes' rendering of O Ruddier Than The Cherry. (Western Mail)

Sam Hughes became the personification of all the good things that Robert Thompson sought to nurture in his Band - international acclaim, musical excellence, high regard and commitment to the fine arts. This acclaim continues through modern generations because he joined the small select group of ophecleide virtuosi, showing talent for a now obsolete art form.

Chronology

- c 1838 Robert Thompson Crawshay decides to launch his own brass band, a group of amateur musicians who will be available to play at family functions and events, indulging his own passion for the arts. Robert Thompson plays with the Band, thus re-affirming his involvement with the group. The band consists of around eighty players of no fixed ability, under the leadership of one Mr Gratian of Wombwell's travelling Menagerie.
- 1848 Ralph Livsey succeeds Gratian as Musical Director. It is thought that Gratian recommends Ralph Livsey to Crawshay. The keen and talented bugle player became the first in the Livsey dynasty to be involved with the Band.

- c 1858 Robert Thompson Crawshay suffers a bout of meningitis and is left deaf, he is therefore unable now unable to play in the band or to enjoy the beautiful music produced by this group of musicians. His patronage of the Band continues, however.
- 1860 The Band enters and wins a "Contest of Brass Bands" at Crystal Palace. The win is reported in The Times on Thursday July 12th 1860: *"The first prize -£30 in money, with a silver cup for 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."*
- 1863 Ralph Livsey dies in his fifty-seventh year. His son, George Livsey, is appointed as his successor.
- 1871 Robert Thompson's second daughter, Henrietta Louise (Pops), marries William Crawshay "Cokie" Ralston. Photographs of this wedding clearly show that the Band is in attendance outside Cyfarthfa Castle.
- 1879 Robert Thompson dies, leaving the Band with no patronage. Within ten years, William IV, Robert Thompson's son and the last Crawshay remaining in Merthyr Tydfil, retires to the family estate in Berkshire, leaving Cyfarthfa Castle empty.
- 1881 Cyfarthfa Band wins National Eisteddfod, held in Merthyr, beating five other bands from across Wales. There are also reports of the Band playing for the then Prince Edward (later King Edward) at the opening of the new dock at Swansea.
- 1908 The Band petitions the local authority for help. During the summer, the Corporation receives the Band effects into their possession - '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 Borough set very strict guidelines for the governing of the Band; (these strict controls would eventually lead to the demise of the Band.) At this time George Livsey is still Bandmaster.
- 1910 Cyfarthfa Iron Works closes, due to lack of investment.
- 1923 George Livsey dies. The Salvation Army Band, rather than the Cyfarthfa Band, play at his funeral, and, according to the Merthyr Express, only the remnants of the 'old Cyfarthfa Band' are present to pay their respects.

There seems to be no mention of the exact date of the final demise of the Cyfarthfa Band. However, the last mention in any form is that of their representation at the funeral of the Bandmaster George Livsey, and that was only a token appearance by the former bandsmen.