

Henry James Metcalfe



1835 - 1906

Brass band composer, arranger and publisher

by Norman Field, 2007

This page is still very much 'a work in progress'; it will contain mistakes and inaccuracies. However, the narrative is gradually being improved, and new information incorporated.

It is believed that this web-page is the first to be devoted to H.J. Metcalfe; as no references to him could originally be found – at least be me – on the Internet. Though this project is still in its early stages, we have already received generous help from many people, who are listed below. Any readers interested in the history of brass band music or other matters found here are of course welcome to use this material, provided due credit is given. Equally, should you have any additional information about HJM (as we shall call him) we would be delighted to hear from you; and of course, you will be fully credited for any contributions.

But what did HJM actually do? Was he in any way important? And why does he need a web page?

Well, to answer the last question first, he was one of my great-great grandfathers, and since my son Julian has been doing lots of family research lately, this is very much a family history page. I have 'adopted' HJM as my special project, because my grandfather Arthur Holder often used to mention him; and I am also a musician, though in very different style

– I imagine that HJM would have regarded playing 1920s-style Jazz on the clarinet & saxophone as the height of musical barbarity!

The impetus provided by my son, plus visits to paper archives, on-line research plus cooperation from many generous people, has enabled a fairly detailed chronology of Henry James Metcalfe's life to be set down. [Click here](#) for a simple chronology of his life, including the names of his numerous children. You may even have come to this page while researching Metcalf(e)s, and you might be descended from one of them: if so, please do get in touch!

“What did he actually do?” Well, from 1857, he was resident in Walsall, Staffs., and from 1861 in Wolverhampton, Staffs. He had formed a brass band in Walsall, and almost by chance (as we shall see) began to write music for it to play. These compositions of his were evidently successful, and the publication & sale of them formed the basis of a long and increasingly successful career as a composer, arranger and publisher of brass band music, until he died in 1906. He was based continuously in Wolverhampton during this time. In 1881 he was living at 2, Church Street, seen here as it is today: a substantial property, indicating an established commercial base. But before then, he had lived in much more modest houses in Grimstone Street, Berry Street and Great Hampton Street. He was to move from Church Street into the prestigious (and adjoining) St. John's Square - but I must not anticipate...



From about 1871 he published a 'Journal' in order to promote and sell his music. The idea was, brass bands would subscribe to 'journals' like this, and in return, receive regular 'parcels' of music. Usually once a month, sets of band parts of a number of different pieces in different styles would be sent to each subscribing band. HJM called his the 'Star Journal'. What form the 'Star Journal' took at this time, we do not yet know. Clearly, each parcel of band parts would be accompanied by some sort of leaflet or news-sheet (the 'Star Journal' itself I suppose) that would reassure the subscribers that they were getting good value for money, and extol the virtues of the pieces to be contained in their next parcel. This system of marketing music was still in place in the 1930s & beyond, when dance bands subscribed to the 'parcels' of hits sent out by publishers like Lawrence Wright, Francis, Day & Hunter et. al., and for all I know the same system is still in place. Except that now it supplies electric rock bands with 'sure-fire' hits, in case they are unusual in not writing their own stuff, as most rock bands commendably do.

Each of Metcalfe's parcels would have contained, for each piece, a complete set of parts for a brass band. He catered for various sizes of band. The numbers that comprised each of these classes varied somewhat over the years. In 1885, a small band was reckoned to

be 12 players; a medium band of 16, and a large band of 20. However, in 1888, the Annual Subscription to his 'Star Journal' was £1 1s. (one guinea, or £1.05) for a band of 20 pieces; 19s. (95p) for a band of 15; 14s. (70p) for a band of 10, and 10s. 6d. (half a guinea, or 55p) for a band of 7 pieces. I am yet not entirely sure how many pieces per year one received for your subscription.

In 1885, the 'Star Journal' (whatever it may have looked like) was absorbed into the very impressive 'Metcalf's Musical Express'. This was a broadsheet, i.e. a full size newspaper (~23" x 16") with 8 pages, published monthly.

The Victorian Era was now nearing its zenith, and the proud mast-head of the new paper reflected this, as you can see!



Even if you were not one of the regular Journal subscribers, you could of course purchase HJM's publications on a one-off basis. For example, in 1885, his arrangement, as a Quickstep, of 'Wait till the clouds roll by' cost a mere 10d. (~4p) for a band of 12; 1s. 1d. (~5.5p) for a band of 16, and a still-modest 1s. 6d. (7.5p) for the full might of a 20-piece band. This piece is described as: "A splendid Quickstep; the best out on the above favourite and popular Air."

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But if your sights were set higher, and you wanted your band to play highly involved and ambitious pieces at contest standard, that was no problem. H.J. Metcalfe was still your man. Consider for example, his 'Grand Contest Selection': "Verdi's Works"! However, even written for a mere 12 pieces, the cost of this elaborate score was 3s. (15p). For 'a band of 16' you paid 3s. 6d. (17.5p), while 4s. (20p) was the cost for the full 20-piece orchestration. Mind you, the grandeur of the description of the piece marched in step with the cost of it; which was only fitting:

"Containing Solos for Euphonium, Cornet, and Trombone, with massive and richly harmonized passages for full Band. The greatest care has been taken with this superb Contesting Piece, in order to show up the various Instruments with the best possible effect, without being too difficult; the various numbers too, being carefully selected in order to please and interest the performers by the introduction of the most pleasing morceaux in preference to the ordinary monotonous movements, so depressing to the public and players alike. This piece, with careful and conscientious practice, so as to master its various details, will prove to be a certain success, of this we have no man-ner of doubt whatever, therefore, send in early to obtain first copies. Any other Selection or Fantasia, two sets of Quadrilles or Valses, or four Quicksteps, or any piece of the same price, can be had in place of the above Grand Contest Selection."

Four shillings (20p) was quite a large sum in 1885, when a craftsman might only earn about £1 a week. But, shared between 12, 16 or 20 members of dedicated brass band, the cost per individual was much reduced, so it must have been difficult to resist such tempting advertising copy?

But we have rather got ahead of ourselves. Where and when was HJM born? And how did he get involved with music in the first place?

Well, he was born in London on 23rd February 1835, the son of plain Henry Metcalf, who was a hatter. The 1841 census tells us that this Henry Metcalf was then living in Southwark, presumably in his business premises, as was usual in those days. Alas, this Henry Metcalf seems to have been ill-fated. First, he was disinherited by his father Hugh.

Why, we will doubtless never know. Seen here in the deliberately archaic legal script of the time, is a codicil to Hugh's will, made and also modified in 1843 (the year he died), in

which he withdraws the £150 that Henry would eventually have received. The subsequent history of this Henry Metcalf is obscure but tragically short: he died, age about 40, circa 1848. By 1851, his widow Margaret was living in Walsall, Staffs., together with our Henry James Metcalfe (age 15) and his siblings Margaret, Benjamin, William, Hugh and Sarah. It must be assumed that this widow with six children was

METCALFE'S
Newest and best Valse,
SWEET VIOLETS.

A CAPTIVATING AND PRETTY SET.
SO EASY,— that the most moderate player will find no difficulty in doing them justice.
SO PLEASING,— that every dancer is continually asking for "those pretty Valses" to be played again, and again, and
SO CATCHY,— that those who do not either dance or play, are "humming" and "singing" the popular and charming melodies, on which these beautiful and taking Valses are founded, at all the outdoor performances these favourite Valses are in constant demand, if you want to please your audience, play "**SWEET VIOLETS**."— Band of 20, 2/-—Band of 15, 1/6,—Band of 10, 1/1, ready for instant delivery.

The Three
LEADING VALSES.
METCALFE'S
LILY QUEEN
STILL THINE OWN
AND
Songs of the Season.

All are pretty, full of melody, and (above all—easy to play—(even when the lips are tired out,) they are likewise the greatest favourites with all the dancers and each set has the new popular and fashionable, "Singing Valse" which can either be played or sung, in all parts of the Kingdom, the press speak in the highest terms, and give them the most unqualified praise,
Price of each set, Band of 20, 2/- Band of 15, 1/6. Band of 10, 1/1.
Or the three sets Complete, for the Price of two—Free by post, and ready for instant delivery.
METCALFE, SONS & CO.
WOLVERHAMPTON.

in rather straitened circumstances? She was engaged in needlework, as was her oldest child Margaret, while Henry James's occupation is given as 'blacksmith', though at age 15, maybe he really was only a blacksmith's apprentice? The younger Benjamin (age 13) is an errand boy. None of this seems to indicate any prosperity or bourgeois situation, as formerly; no, quite the opposite. Indeed I think we may legitimately conclude that these Metcalfs had fallen on hard times in the early 1850s.

Perhaps in view of this poverty (and possibly prompted by the rumblings of the approaching Crimean War?), HJM joined the army in January 1853.

No.2983 Private Henry Metcalf of the 3rd Foot, that is, the East Kent Regiment; known better still as 'The Buffs', soon found himself in a Depot Battalion in Ireland. Depot Battalions were, in effect, reserve bases in the United Kingdom for regiments that were serving overseas. They acted as recruiting & training centres and places where casualties could recover. The Buffs, already of very ancient lineage, were accustomed to spending many years abroad: e.g. in this time period, the Crimean War; the Indian Mutiny, China. Still, HJM was spared the full rigour of service overseas. Indeed, his duties allowed him time to fall in love with, and marry Betsy Hickson Jackson, on 19th July 1854. She was 18 years old, and HJM was 19. Betsy was born in Lincoln in 1836, and of course, they may have known each other before - but we cannot tell. In balance, it is most probable that Betsy was the daughter of a soldier based in (or recently sent to) Ireland, and HJM met her there.



As to the 'musical connection', that is largely explained by the fact that on 18th April 1855, HJM was appointed a 'Drummer'. This meant that he joined the bugle, fife and drum band of that Depot Battalion. All members of this were expected to acquire the skill to play all three instruments. Doubtless various men would show primary talent on one of these three instruments, and which would, whenever possible, be taken account of; nevertheless, all were known as 'Drummers'.

Now whether HJM was 'into' music before he joined the army, or chose to go into music while he was in the army, or even joined the army so that he could get into music, we will probably never know.

We do know, however, that music was the primary factor behind his leaving the army, in 1857! In that year, still age only 22, he was discharged on the basis that he was suffering from ‘palpitations of the heart’, which rendered him unfit for blowing any wind instrument. Now when writing up anything uncertain, it is always necessary to employ ‘Occam’s Razor’... which means that you must not make any assumption that is unwarranted by the available evidence. This we naturally try always to observe. In the case of HJM’s leaving the army, we find ourselves in a slight quandary. At this distance in time, it is rather futile to conjecture what might have made someone take such-and-such a decision. However, in early 1857 (as will soon be seen) we may rightfully conclude that Betsy was pregnant, and the future of ‘an army wife’ may have been a topic of earnest conversation between Betsy and HJM? On this basis, HJM may have decided to leave the army. But how? More research is needed on this topic, but in any event, HJM certainly began to suffer from an affliction - ‘palpitations of the heart’ - that was sufficient grounds for his discharge from the army during July 1857.

To what extent these ‘palpitations of the heart’ were genuinely the result of general stress in a young married person; or possibly the result of a sympathetic and accordingly tacit attitude on the part of the army hierarchy to one who wished to quit the service (surely very unlikely!); or even the self-administration of compounds long known to hardened soldiers in order to produce the symptoms of various illnesses, will forever remain unknown.

His discharge being approved in Dublin on 20th July 1857, it is conjectured that HJM and Betsy went to another Depot Battalion in Winchester, Hants. (England) in connection with the finalisation of his discharge, because their daughter Florence Metcalfe is recorded as having been born there in 1857.

We are fortunate in having the next part of the story in his own words. It is related in the third person, in an editorial in the MME of 7th January 1888; but surely must have been written by HJM himself.

“About the year 1857, at which time Mr. H. J. Metcalfe, then a very young man, left “the service” in Ireland, and proceeded to his native city, London, where he remained for a short time, when he was persuaded by his mother and brothers, who had re-moved to Walsall, Staffordshire, to repair to that town, so that they might all live near each other. This advice Mr. Metcalfe, after some hesitation accepted, and he arri-ved and settled in Walsall, in the latter part of the same year 1857—at which time there had not been a band in the town for twenty-two years, and being urged by many people, started the “Walsall Brass Band” in that year.”

1857 then, was a very eventful and crucial one for HJM.

The 1888 editorial was written to underline the importance of a great innovation in brass band music which Metcalfe claimed. Namely, that he was the first to write dance music especially for brass bands. The standard dance tunes and airs had been written, by tradition, for violin and/or piano, and thus were often unsuitable for transcription for brass band. [Click here](#) for the extensive text of this article (~2,100 words), which also lists

many of his early compositions, and those of others, of which he made arrangements. Of course, the primary function of his article - and the Musical Express as a whole - was to foster the sales of HJM's music, hence the grand sweep of the prose, and the continual reiteration of the virtues of the music!

This music was printed 'in house'. My grandfather Arthur Holder would tell me of his visits to his grandfather's house, where he would see the music being printed from a stone: lithography of course. The census of 1881 shows that a Charles Williams, age 39, and originally from Cheltenham, lived with the Metcalfes. He was an employee, and his occupation was 'Litho. Printer'. At the moment, the only fragment of his music we have is seen here: "Kings Own" - Grand March by Metcalfe. (The reverse of this contains 2 pieces, a cornet part for "The Seige Of Badajoz" (sic), composer unknown, and a bombardon (brass bass) part for the Avondale Schottische by W. Tyler.) Some other parts in excellent condition are in the British Library, and we are in the process of acquiring copies. However, looking ahead in the long term to a possible performance of any of his music, we would really need to find a complete set of parts for one of his pieces. The chances of finding such a set are not impossibly remote; there must be many boxes & trunks of old brass band music still lurking away in cupboards, attics &c.



It is not known how or where the 'Musical Express' was produced, though probably locally. [was it hand-set? If so a prodigious task - when did Linotype machines come in?]

HJM appears in trade directories under a variety of descriptions. 'Composer and arranger...'; 'Musician and bandmaster...'; 'Professor of music...' and so on. We certainly know he led the brass band in Walsall, but not whether he did the same in Wolverhampton. My grandfather had an advertising leaflet of Metcalfe's, now lost, but I recall seeing it many years ago. It appeared that Metcalfe has arranged or been involved in band concerts for the relief of victims of an influenza epidemic - I believe this was in the 1870s. If this is correct, then he probably still conducted a band at least 'on demand', if not all the time. The leaflet also stated that in recognition of this, "he was presented with a sum of money and a splendid silver cornet." We can see from the adverts. for band instruments in the Musical Express that 'presentation model' cornets with elaborate engraving &c., were evidently presented to bandmasters in commemoration of special events. Of course, bandmasters were frequently if not invariably able to play all the instruments in a brass band. But the cornet was naturally the 'star' instrument! Still, no reference has yet been discovered to HJM playing any instrument subsequent to his army service.

Once again, my grandfather told me that HJM had been to Antwerp - which was 'a very important trip'. I might add at this point, that my grandfather's memories, whenever it has been possible to check them out, have always proved to be startlingly accurate (even though he himself never got farther than a trip to the Isle of Man in 1903.) It was not surprising, therefore, to find confirmation that HJM had indeed been a delegate to the International Musical Congress in Antwerp in August 1885. These were held regularly, in different cities around Europe. This Antwerp congress was divided into four streams or sections, and HJM participated in the one concerned with musical teaching. Click here for the details of the congress that HJM gave in an editorial article in his *Musical Express* of June 20th, 1885. For once, HJM is quite laconic about what must have been quite an honour for a provincial English musician? He merely prints the names of delegates from England in small capitals; so at least his own appears emphasised thus. (We have looked, so far in vain, in subsequent issues, for his report on his experiences at Antwerp...)

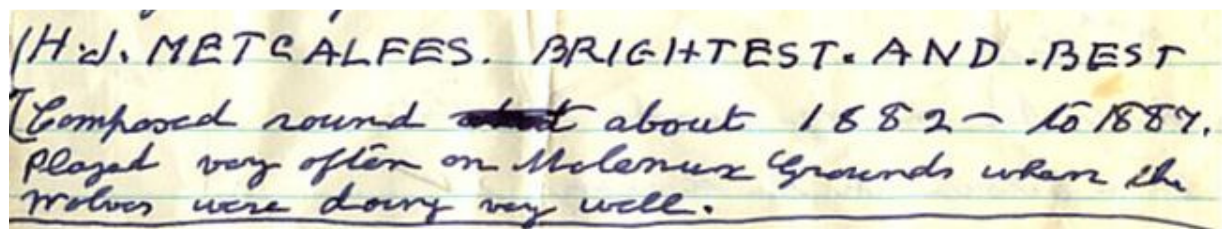
Once again, my grandfather's memories may be called upon. Arthur Holder (1882 - 1979) told me that at some unknown time, HJM took legal action against the composer (or more probably, the British publisher) of a march which he considered employed a strain based to some large extent, on one of his own. It is interesting that various branches of the families descended from H.J. Metcalfe have each preserved different versions of this story. The basic form of the anecdote is that Metcalfe once sold a march, for a small sum, to another musician or composer, who subsequently made a lot of money from it, as it became very popular. Actual titles of this march have even been preserved in family legend. One family branch has it that it was 'Punjaub' - March. Another branch claims that it was 'Old Comrades'. Still another, that it was 'Colonel Bogey', no less! Here, one is compelled to wield Occam's Razor remorselessly - but impartially. My grandfather never told me this anecdote, which he surely would have done, were it true? Instead, he told me about the legal action described above. I believe that it is this legal action which has evolved into the various 'family legends'. Still, the march which my grandfather claimed was the subject of the action, is hardly less sensational than any of the others named so far! It was 'Belphegor', which remains to this day an all-time classic march. 'Belphegor' was written by Edouard Brepsant, who, from his name, was probably from northern France or Belgium. Details of his life are not readily available on the Internet. He seems mostly to have composed music for the clarinet. If we have researched the correct Edouard Brepsant, one of his clarinet pieces was performed in London circa 1861. This would make him contemporary with Metcalfe, and probably rather older.

In any event, my grandfather went on to say that HJM lost the case! Doubtless the proceedings are recorded in a court archive somewhere; but we should also bear in mind that 'sensational' court cases have for a long time been excellent sources of publicity for all concerned! Perhaps, even, that was the intention here? Nevertheless, we have familiarised ourselves with the various strains of 'Belphegor', and thus will be able to compare them with the very many strains of H.J. Metcalfe's marches... when we finally manage to acquire them!

By 1888, HJM had moved into St. John's Square, which was then a still-prestigious area of the town, and thus almost certainly represents the culmination of his career. The British Library has none of Metcalfe's papers after 1890, but we do have a tiny fragment of one dated 1896, so it is certain that HJM continued uninterrupted in his business until that date. Indeed, as late as 1901, the census informs us that HJM was 'band music composer and publisher', though now living at 60 Church Lane, just to the east of St. John's Square.

He died, age 71, in 1906. His wife Betsy died in 1911, aged about 75. Apart from the imposing, even fierce image of HJM in his prime, seen in the engraving at the top of this web page, we have but one photograph of him.

As to the survival of Metcalfe's music, that is also imponderable at this time, with one notable exception. In 1972, aged 90, my grandfather made a tape recording of one of H J Metcalfe's marches, entitled 'Brightest and Best', played on the piano. It seems to have only two themes; we would have expected at least three. But here is a genuine and authentic link, going back by prime right, for more than 120 years. Arthur Holder talked to, and learnt from H.J. Metcalfe in the 1890s; Metcalfe was born in 1835, over 170 years ago! I wonder what Metcalfe's grandfather Hugh, told him of his youth in the 1790s, over two centuries ago? Again, we can never know. But this is how my grandfather described 'Brightest and Best' when he wrote a list of the titles for this tape of his favourite piano pieces for his niece Doris Hooper in 1972:



H.J. METCALFE'S. BRIGHTEST. AND. BEST
Composed round ~~about~~ about 1882 - to 1887.
Played very often on Molemarx Grounds where the
Wolves were doing very well.

The Wolves (that is, the Wolverhampton Football Team, the 'Wolverhampton Wanderers') have 'done very well' at various times since 1882-1887, though alas not lately.



The only known photograph of Betsy Metcalfe (born 1836). From a copy of an original photo. taken circa 1902-3 at a family wedding. H.J. Metcalfe is not present on this shot.

Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to this page. First must come my son Julian, who has diligently assembled a family tree containing nearly 900 individuals. Also Len Hooper, (a descendant of HJM) who furnished the fragment of Metcalfe's music and the tape Arthur Holder recorded for Len's mother Doris. Kay Kennett, in Canada, (also related to HJM), who furnished both history and astonishingly valuable memorabilia from a branch of the family that emigrated to Canada circa 1912. Ellis Sheldon (also a descendant of HJM), for the photo. of HJM and other help. David Atkinson for supplying Hugh Metcalf's will; Nick Ward who advised on military history. Anneke Croft (also related to HJM) who informed us of the British Library holdings. Gavin at the truly superb 'IBEW' brass band website www.harrogateband.org/ibew.htm who published our HJM query with astonishing alacrity and to great effect. The Wolverhampton Archives. The British Library (Newspapers) at Colindale, London. The Public Records Office at Kew, London. And others who may have been inadvertently omitted, but who will be included in revisions of the page. Besides this, we must write here this caveat, that some of the images we have included in this web page may have been used in error, in that certain very old 'public records' may still be subject to copyright. If this be the case, the offending items will of course immediately be removed on due notification by the appropriate authority.