



James Shepherd

Later this month James Shepherd celebrates his 80th birthday. Tim Mutum looks back on the glittering career of one of our legendary cornetists.

guidance of his father, Richard, who taught him the fingering and gave him a tutor book to follow but, as he later related, "I wasn't very enthusiastic and I only joined the Newbiggin Colliery Junior Band (aged 13) because some of my mates joined. Later, I joined the senior band and eventually got to solo cornet. When I was 18 I could have gone in the pit or done compulsory National Service." His father had been in the Newbiggin pit and was determined Jim would not follow suit, so the Army it was. He signed on for three years simply so he could get into the band, the Royal Army Medical Corps. He was lucky, as within three months he was playing top cornet. "The solo player they had before me was a red lip player [he played on the red part of the lip instead of the white tissue] so he couldn't last long; his lip couldn't hold up. That was a Godsend to me - I was on musical duties only and it gave me the chance to get down to work and develop as a player."



From time to time, the cry goes out for a list of the best players ever - usually on cornet, euphonium or trombone. In their own way they are quite good fun and it's good to see when something is published if your all-time favourite player is listed. On the other hand, many will view them as pointless as it is simply impossible to make meaningful comparisons. Who can really judge if Phillip McCann is a 'better' cornet player than Edwin Firth? The former still plays and had the chance to help develop a modern cornet. The latter died at the front in World War I in 1918 aged only 30 and would have played a vastly inferior instrument. And how could you determine the placings of Trevor Groom, John Clough and Lyndon Baglin - three giants of the euphonium - in comparison with David Childs, Steven Mead or Glenn Van Looy?

That said, any discussion around all-time greats in the field of cornet playing would inevitably result in Jim Shepherd's name cropping up. He is something of a legend and on the 25th of this month he will celebrate a major milestone - his 80th birthday. Most famous for his stint of ten years from 1963 to 1973 as principal cornet of Black Dyke Mills Band and then founder of the James Shepherd Versatile Brass, Jim has also been a peripatetic teacher, formed and conducted two bands, as well as teaching his own daughter, Claire, who went on to become a fine player in her own right. Various descriptions of him as the most accurate cornetist of all time, an artist of the cornet, a legend and, affectionately, Gentleman Jim, life started in Newbiggin-by-the-Sea in Northumberland. His early playing days were under the

On leaving the Army he came home and joined Pegswood Colliery, a 4th Section band but very enthusiastic. Jim needed work and "I got a job in the grocery business and eventually got to be Assistant Manager. Within a week of getting that job, Jack Atherton, the Musical Director of Carlton Main Frickley Colliery Band came around." The band was on its way to Edinburgh to play at a contest and Jack stopped off *en route*. Jim relates that a friend of his father had told Jack all about him and also listened to a tape of him playing. "That night Jack talked me into it. I handed in my notice at the grocer's and they picked me up on the way back from Edinburgh. I'd made up my mind there and then, as Jack said I could stay where I was and become the local grocer, or I could go down to Yorkshire and get into the band business."

That was in 1960. Two years later, in May 1962, Maurice Murphy made his last appearance as principal cornet of Black Dyke Mills Band. By July, there was speculation that Jim Shepherd, by then Champion Soloist of Great Britain, would replace him, but he changed his mind and remained at Carlton Main. John Clay, a member of the cornet section, took over the 'hot seat' from May until September and then Keith Caldwell, a New Zealander, replaced him on a temporary basis. In April 1963, after the 'Area' contest, Jim

Shepherd took over as principal cornet at the age of 26. His first engagement was the celebration of the centenary of the change of the band's home village's name, in 1863, from Queenshead to Queensbury. "It took me three months to settle in at 'Dyke", Jim said, "I remember the first time I went there, in that bandroom, they put out such a sound. I thought: 'How am I going to cope with this lot?' But you blow up to them, and in three months it was alright." During his tenure at Black Dyke, the band won the National Championship in 1967 and '72, the British Open in 1968 and '72 and the World Championship in 1970, all under Geoffrey Brand. In 1972, when *A Kensington Concerto* was released for the National Finals, Black Dyke issued the parts to the players well before the first rehearsal. The piece opens with that gorgeous cornet solo, which Jim, as principal, went through very carefully alongside the rest of his part. It was only at the first full rehearsal when Jim started playing, and nobody else did, that it dawned on him that, alongside every other principal cornet, he would be playing the opening bars in the vast, packed Royal Albert Hall on his own!

After ten years at Black Dyke, Jim was looking to develop his solo career and also to pursue a group he had formed the previous year, a ten-piece brass ensemble by

Jim Shepherd - King of the Cornet



Jim Shepherd fourth from the right on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the village of Queensbury's name change

the name of James Shepherd Versatile Brass. Thus, after a decade of distinguished service, Jim Shepherd left Black Dyke Mills Band in May 1973 with a smooth transition to his successor, Phillip McCann. This was achieved by Jim sitting 'top man' for two concerts with Phillip as number two and the roles reversed for the final two concerts of his tenure. Years later, Jim related that "I never thought, as a youngster, that I'd end up at Black Dyke. In my early days I'd heard Willie Lang and knew Maurice Murphy from when he was about 12. They both inspired me but I never thought I'd follow them into the top chair."

The James Shepherd Versatile Brass (JSVB) was something of a phenomenon. Most of the players were with top-flight bands, which they left to help create this groundbreaking group. Six came from Black Dyke Mills with others from Grimethorpe Colliery and Hammonds Sauce Works. The founding ten players included David Horsfield (cornet), Gordon Higginbottom (tenor horn), John Pollard (trombone), David Moore (euphonium), Colin Aspinall (Eb bass) and Harvey Whiteley (percussion). The key word was 'versatile' and the group departed from the accepted brass band repertoire and its stereotype presentation. Consequently, a lot of new music was written and arrangements especially made for the group, embracing a wide range of musical styles. JSVB became

immensely popular and quickly gained a reputation in the UK and around the world. The group performed throughout Europe - including five visits to Switzerland alone - and even as far afield as Australia. There were also frequent radio broadcasts and appearances on TV.

JSVB also performed three times at the Festival Concert after the National Finals at the Royal Albert Hall, as Jim Shepherd recalls, "The second time at the Albert Hall, we just couldn't get off; the audience wouldn't let us, although all the massed bands were waiting to come on. I think that's got to be the most memorable moment of my career." The group had a sabbatical period during the 2000s, but Jim decided to reform Versatile Brass in 2013 with a mixture of long-standing members and new talent. However, by 2015, Jim and a few others decided that it was finally time to call it a day. A farewell concert was given to a packed audience at the Millgate Arts Centre in Delph on 16 December 2015, only a couple of miles from the venue of the inaugural concert in Uppermill 43 years earlier. Jim's day job from 1963 was as a peripatetic teacher with the then West Riding County Council. In 1969, he formed Queensbury Music Centre Band after persuading John Foster and Son Ltd. to loan the instruments from the previously disbanded Black Dyke

Junior Band, and convincing the West Riding County Council that the talents of local children should be channelled accordingly. He went on to form Jayess Band with schoolchildren as young as nine, all of whom were taught by Jim at local schools and music centres. Overall, his teaching career led to dozens of young people filling seats in brass bands, including many of the leading outfits, military bands, amongst them the Life Guards, the Scots Guards and the Irish Guards, and orchestras.

As Jim Shepherd celebrates so should all of us and pay tribute for all he has done both as a player and teacher. His peers recognise him as a gifted soloist and so it is fitting that one of them, James Scott, a former champion cornet soloist and principal at Munn and Felton's (Footwear) Band in the years immediately before Jim Shepherd joined Carlton Main Frickley, should have the final word. "There are few performers of whom it can be said that they were a legend in their own lifetime. That James Shepherd is one of the few there can be no doubt. A cornet player for whom I have a long held and unceasing admiration, not just for his immaculate technique, nor yet his faultless and innate musicianship, but his modest and unassuming personality. He has always been, and remains, a role model for the young and aspiring cornet player."

