

Feature

THE GODFATHER OF BRASS BANDING

A blue plaque commemorating one of the most significant men in the history of the brass band movement – John Henry Iles OBE, was erected in Bristol last month. Thomas Dunne charts the colourful life of the impresario, without whose legacy 21st Century brass banding would be unrecognisable

On the 29 April, a ceremony took place in Bristol to erect a Blue Plaque commemorating one of the most significant men in the history of the brass band movement - John Henry Iles OBE.

Henry Iles, as he preferred to be known, was born on 17 September 1871 in Bristol, to a family of grocers who lived in various locations around the city, as the family business expanded and prospered. He had a keen interest in music from an early age, serving as a church choirboy and later becoming organist, choirmaster and a bass vocal soloist. The talented young man also proved a first-class cricketer, playing at a county level for Gloucestershire in 1890 and 1891. After spending time working as a timber merchant, Iles's entrepreneurial spirit won out and, by 1896, he had firmly established himself as an advertising contractor and publisher. By 1897, he had moved to London to further pursue his business ventures and it

was in 1898 that his association with brass banding would come to fruition. Despite being musical from boyhood, he had no prior experience of brass bands. Whilst on a business trip to Manchester, the young entrepreneur found himself with time on his hands and was persuaded to attend the brass band competition being held at the Belle Vue gardens. Upon hearing brass bands for the first time, Iles sat enthralled for many hours "thunderstruck and thrilled at the sound!"

This experience had a profound impact on Iles. On his return to London, he did his own research into the brass band movement of the time and soon contacted Sam Cope, Editor of a small magazine called The British Bandsman, to offer his assistance. This sparked a lifelong friendship and, within 12 months, Iles had purchased the magazine and its companion, the R. Smith and Co. publishing house.

As one of his first major acts with the

magazine in 1899, Iles began a fundraising campaign in support of the dependents of casualties of the Boer War. This culminated in a grand massed brass band concert held at the Royal Albert Hall in January 1900. Spurred onwards by the considerable success of this event, Iles proceeded to hold the first ever National Brass Band Festival at Crystal Palace in July of the same year. His skill as a promoter certainly paid off, and the event attracted large crowds and great acclaim. Thus, the National Brass Band Championships were born, becoming an annual event that is still held to this day.

Always with a keen eye for opportunity, Iles promoted Besses o' th' Barn Band around the UK as '1903 National Champion'. Such was the effectiveness of his promotion that the band received invitations to play for the Prime Minister, Henry Balfour, and even for King Edward VII at Windsor Castle. With invitations pouring in from across the globe, Iles supported the band in two extraordinary World tours between 1906 and 1911, each lasting a staggering 18 months! The band performed to huge crowds wherever it went - a real testament both to the band and Iles's promotional flair. It was on the first of these World tours, in 1906, that Iles visited the Scenic Railway at Coney Island in the USA. Immediately grasping the potential in such amusement activities, he swiftly acquired the UK rights, resulting in the next great step in his career - that of amusement park entrepreneur. He constructed one of the UK's earliest scenic railways in Blackpool in 1907, with more to follow around the World in locations such as Paris, Berlin and Barcelona. He is perhaps most famous, however, for the development in 1919 of the highly popular Dreamland in Margate, which is still open today.

As part of these endeavours, in 1924 Iles acquired the Belle Vue gardens in

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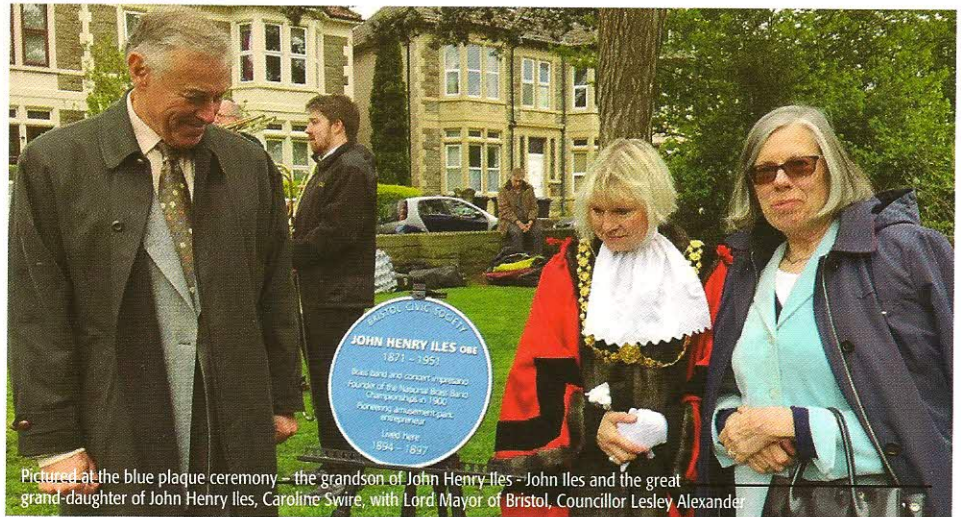
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The godfather of brass banding – John Henry Iles



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Pictured at the blue plaque ceremony – the grandson of John Henry Iles – John Iles and the great grand-daughter of John Henry Iles, Caroline Swire, with Lord Mayor of Bristol, Councillor Lesley Alexander

Manchester. As a by-product of this investment, Iles now controlled the Belle Vue contests, now better known as the British Open Championships, meaning that he controlled both of the major brass competitions in the UK, which he would continue to run successfully for many years to come. This firmly cemented his place as, arguably, the most influential figure in brass band history.

This considerable stature within the musical world was reflected in his membership of the Worshipful Company of Musicians. He was clothed in the Livery of the Musicians Company as early as January 1909, and was appointed Master of the Company between 1932 and 1933. In further commemoration, the Company would later establish the John Henry Iles Medal in 1947, which is still awarded annually for services to the brass band movement at the British Open Championships' awards ceremony.

After a hugely successful career of entrepreneurial risk-taking, Iles pushed his luck a step too far in the late 1930s. He invested a quarter of a million pounds of his personal fortune into a venture in the film industry; the rebuilding of Rock Studios at Elstree. Unfortunately, this particular gamble utterly failed and Iles was declared bankrupt in 1938, bringing his career to an abrupt end. While forced to step back from his major business roles, he was not forgotten by the musical world and he began writing, once again, for *The British Bandsman*. The pinnacle of his retirement came in 1944, when he was

awarded the considerable honour of an OBE in recognition for his outstanding contribution to brass music - a fitting tribute to his lifetime of passionate service to the genre.

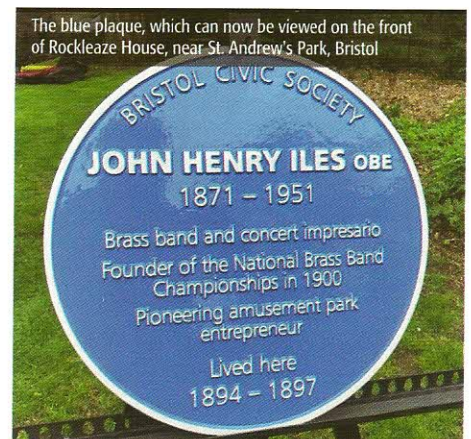
John Henry Iles died on 21 May 1951 to an outpouring of grief from the brass band community. During his life, this one man had single-handedly changed the course of brass band history through his concerts, promotions, journalism and major competitions. If he had not decided to listen at Belle Vue in 1898, the 21st Century brass band movement would, quite simply, be utterly unrecognisable, such is his mighty legacy. The esteem in which he was held was evident in the floods of tributes to this great pioneer, but is perhaps best summed up in his funeral tribute: "We shall not see the likes of him again. The ageless godfather of brass bands is no more."

The recent chronicling of Iles's life occurred quite by chance. Local industrial historian, Martin Bolton, happened to be researching the life of Henry Iles's son, Gordon, who invented an early flight simulator during the Second World War and, by chance, happened upon the colourful career of his father. He became quite fascinated during the process and, speaking at the ceremony Bolton, explained: "I researched industrial technology and history, so Gordon's story was of interest to me. However, his father seemed to be a quite incredible character, so my research went in another direction too. It's taken about five years to get to today and, although I'm not a brass band aficionado, I'm delighted to

have shed some light on someone who seems to have been a leading figure in its early 20th Century development."

Following his research, Steve Ellis, Chairman of the City of Bristol Band, took up the case for erecting the blue plaque to commemorate John Henry Iles. After a lengthy process, his tireless efforts were rewarded by Bristol Civic Society's approval of his request and the plaque was constructed with assistance from the Worshipful Company of Musicians.

The unveiling of the plaque was carried out by the Lord Mayor of Bristol, just outside of Rockleaze House, on Sommerville Road, Bristol (BS7 9AE), where Iles lived with his wife, Eleanor, after their marriage in 1893. The City of Bristol Band provided a welcome musical accompaniment for the occasion, whilst Iles's grandson, John, paid a warm tribute to his many achievements, stating: "His was a wonderful life, colourful and well lived." ■



The blue plaque, which can now be viewed on the front of Rockleaze House, near St. Andrew's Park, Bristol