

The showman who created a brass band dynasty

TIM MUTUM EXPLORES

THE LIFE OF JOHN HENRY ILES,

THE ENTREPRENEUR WHO

INSTIGATED THE NATIONAL BRASS BAND

CHAMPIONSHIPS OF GREAT BRITAIN



In the history of brass banding, how many people can be said to have been real game changers and done something with significant and lasting impact? The Belgian instrument maker Adolphe Sax was perhaps the first when, in 1844, following a meeting with the Distin family in Paris, the saxhorn took off, which was crucial to the development of the brass band in the UK. In compositional terms there have been watershed moments, such as the arrival of Gilbert Vinter at the beginning of the 1960s. Harry Mortimer did much to raise the profile of the brass band in the conscience of the general public, especially during his time at the BBC, and the other trumpet playing influences - including Bram Gay, Geoffrey Brand, Elgar Howarth, Howard Snell and James Watson - had success in persuading mainstream serious music makers that the brass band deserved a place around the table.

From a contesting perspective, one of the early pioneers was John Jennison, who opened Manchester's Belle Vue Zoological Gardens in 1837 and, after the success of a competition for drum and fife bands in 1852, launched a Grand Musical Contest on Monday 5 September 1853 - the start of the local Gorton Wakes holiday week and the beginning of the longest established band contest, now known as the British Open. Nearly 50 years later, it was a chance visit to the Belle Vue contest by John Henry Iles that planted the seeds for a competition in London that today is still the focal point of brass band competition in the UK - the National Brass Band Championships of Great Britain. It is unique, as it is the only competition where every brass band in the UK has the opportunity to enter and compete on equal footing, with the potential to reach the pinnacle and be crowned Champion Band of Great Britain at London's Royal Albert Hall. It didn't start out that way, and undertook a major refit in 1945, but it was John Henry Iles who created the circumstances that enables us to still enjoy this unique music festival in 2018.

Born in Bristol on 17 September 1871, John Henry Iles displayed an interest in music at an early age, which was encouraged during the six years he was a pupil at Ashville College, Harrogate. He was appointed, at the age of just 15, as choirmaster and organist at a Methodist church and studied singing under the famous Clara Butt. Iles also developed a

sporting flair, playing cricket at county level. Talented at organising concerts, a useful skill for later in life, he went on to gain control of a magazine called *The Organist and Choirmaster* and, in the 1890s, he had a journalistic interest in several periodicals. 1898 was a significant year. By then he had been working for 12 years in the commercial world in the City of London; he was a Victorian 'whizz kid' and a definite risk-taker. Those attributes were exactly what was needed for the path he was to follow in the world of entertainment.

On Sunday 4 September 1898, during the course of a business trip to Manchester, a bored John Henry Iles asked a porter at the Midland Hotel what entertainment was on offer in the city. Iles was told about the brass band contest to be held at Belle Vue the next day and he duly attended, albeit with no great enthusiasm. He was overwhelmed, later writing, 'It is not too much to say that I was positively astounded... I came away from that contest a completely converted enthusiast for their cause.' Years later, Iles wrote to *The Times* recalling the experience. 'When I first heard our then champion bands at Belle Vue in 1898, I made a vow that I would do my best to make the country sing with appreciation of the remarkable talent among our workers,' he wrote. 'Like most people of those days, to me the very name of brass could only mean noise and discord, and I had the musical surprise of my life when I heard them playing as if for their lives in the Belle Vue championship. It took me some time to realise that I was listening to amateurs and working men.'

Iles returned to the city after the contest but couldn't remove the experience from his mind. He was fascinated by what the bands could achieve musically with such limited resources and wanted to get involved. True to form, he met the desire head on and approached Sam Cope, Editor of *British Bandsman*. His message was simple, 'I want to help'. He and Cope quickly became firm friends and, not a man to let the grass grow, within a few months he had bought *British Bandsman* and R. Smith and Co. It was Iles who, in 1902, turned *British Bandsman* from a monthly to a weekly publication. He was to become the paper's fifth Editor from 1942-1951.

The importance and impact that *British Bandsman* then had under Iles can be

illustrated by the contents of a letter from Boosey and Co. to him dated 28 June 1906. In it the writer refers to the Besses o' th' Barn Band tour of the world, which Iles had steered the band into (he had previously promoted it on an extensive UK tour after its sole National win in 1903) and was perhaps his most ambitious promotion ever. The intention was for Besses to play exclusively on Boosey instruments and part of the arrangement was that Boosey was 'prepared to pay you £75 for an advert on the whole of the outside cover, the edition to be 100,000 copies.' A print run of that number suggested a significant reach for the paper and that it was widely read.

And then Iles became aware of Enderby Jackson's 1860s efforts with band contests at the Crystal Palace, since when the owners of that great venue had realised that brass bands belonged 'up north!' The upshot was that Iles jumped onto the rolling bandwagon of the Kipling Fund to raise money to help relatives and dependants of soldiers fighting the Boer War. The result was a major concert in the Royal Albert Hall with ten bands. He managed to persuade a reluctant Sir Arthur Sullivan to conduct the massed bands in his arrangement of Kipling's popular and patriotic poem, *The Absent-Minded Beggar*. Never one to miss a trick, Iles purchased the rights to the arrangement!

The concert was held on 20 January 1900; it was a foggy and unpleasant evening, but there was a packed hall, bulging with 10,000 people, and thousands turned away. It was a hugely successful concert. I have a copy of the original programme from that evening. Interestingly, several of the bands are listed as champions of a specific region including St. Albans City - Champion of London and the Home Counties, West Hartlepool Operatic - Champion of the Northern Counties and Nantlle Silver as the Champion of North Wales. Every player for each band is listed, with John Paley shown as solo cornet with Black Dyke and John Gladney as conductor. Iles had spared no expense in producing a lavish 20-page, ribbon-bound programme.

Later Iles told J.H. Elliot in *The Brass Band Movement* (Dent, 1936) how he stood at Sullivan's side on the platform and how the composer was deeply moved and vastly impressed by the sound of



Frances Bantin (extreme right) looks on as Iles conducts the draw at the National Championships

a 250-strong 'brass orchestra'. Sullivan turned to Iles and said, "What can be done for these fellows?" Those few words were probably as important to brass bands as the financial success of the concert was for the relatives of Boer War soldiers. It was a turning point for brass bands. Iles answered the question after establishing that Sir Arthur Sullivan was a director of the Crystal Palace Company. With Sullivan 'converted', Iles, with his help, developed plans for a new contest to be held at that venue. It was arranged for 21 July 1900. There were three sections and, in contrast to Belle Vue, which was limited to northern bands, other regions were represented to make it a 'National' event. Twenty-nine bands competed overall, with the top section (playing an arrangement of Sullivan's operas made by J. Ord Hume) being won by Denton Original, conducted by Alex Owen. At the insistence of Iles, the major trophy was the 'Thousand Guineas', originally provided by the Crystal Palace owners for competition at the choral festivals held there. It was recovered from the vaults of the Crystal Palace where it had lain for many years.

The next couple of years were a bit shaky, including a failed attempt to create area qualifying contests in 1902, but with rugged determination Iles established the National Brass Band Festival as an event to equal Belle Vue. His legacy was not, however, merely confined to establishing the event, nor even a festival attracting

large crowds. By 1913, Iles had decided that a new challenge was needed and, in May of that year, *British Bandsman* announced that the test-piece would be 'a modern work, specially written for brass band by a composer of note.' The commission was, of course, Percy Fletcher's *Labour and Love*.

After World War I, Iles ensured the Crystal Palace event was resurrected. It was also the start of the era of the leading British composers writing for brass band (the richest period being 1928-1937). How much credit Iles should get for this is very debatable. As owner of the contest he controlled the purse strings, so he would have paid the commissions. However, Herbert Whiteley was Editor of *British Bandsman* from 1906-1930 under Iles, and it was him through the columns of the paper and his influence with Iles that saw the development of original music. This is borne out by Whiteley's daughter, Marjory Nicholas, who told Arthur Taylor in *Labour and Love: An Oral History of the Brass Band Movement* (Elm Tree Books, 1983), that "it was my father who chose all the test-pieces by people like Cyril Jenkins, Henry Geehl, Hubert Bath, Dr. Denis Wright and Sir Edward Elgar." Whiteley spent years begging and pleading with Elgar to write a piece for brass band. She added, "I didn't know John Henry Iles as well as these other people - the composers - but I got the impression that he wasn't really all that interested in music. He was interested in what you might call

the ballyhoo - he was a showman, not a musician."

Harry Mortimer confirms this view of Iles: "according to my information, he used to hire the Crystal Palace, lock, stock and barrel, for the day's contesting, for £1,000. There were lots of contests going on during the day - six or seven sections. All the results used to be kept secret until the interval of the evening concert. He used to do a lot of the announcing himself. A great showman, he was." It was whilst touring in the USA with Besses in 1906 that Iles visited Coney Island, well known for its amusement parks and leisure facilities, and acquired the rights to build similar parks elsewhere. He ended up developing these parks across the UK and Europe including Aberdeen, Blackpool, Great Yarmouth, Brussels and Paris. In 1919, he designed his own amusement park in Margate - Dreamland - which still exists today in revised form. The amusement park at Wembley Exhibition came under his responsibility in 1924 and he built a scenic railway which he later relocated to Belle Vue, Manchester. He was able to do this as, in late 1924, the Jennison family decided to sell Belle Vue and, from 1 January 1925, control was vested in a new company, Belle Vue (Manchester) Ltd. The front page of *British Bandsman* dated 7 March 1925 had one simple headline - 'BELLE VUE SOLD'. There were initially three principal players in this company, one of whom was John Henry Iles. It wasn't long before the other two

directors resigned and, by 1929, he had taken over the management of the venue and was in sole charge.

This created an interesting scenario for Iles. Until then the Belle Vue contest was the opposition, but now he owned both events. Was the Crystal Palace National contest under threat? Not a bit of it, with Iles declaring both events would 'march forward together'. In fact, Belle Vue developed musically with the old operatic selections being replaced by original music commissions - all published by R. Smith, of course - and Thomas Keighley was a major provider of these. Iles now owned both major contests, promoted them through his ownership of British Bandsman and published the music played, via R. Smith and Co., which he also owned. It might be argued he was not very interested in music, but he certainly knew how to make money from it!

The lack of interest in music did not go as far as not wanting to conduct brass bands. After every National he would conduct the massed bands - usually seven of them - in part of the evening concert, but anybody who has seen any old Pathe newsreels will quickly realise it wasn't one of his strengths. As Harry Mortimer related many years later, "The first thing that struck me, was that although he insisted on conducting part of the massed bands concert, he wasn't very good at it. I kept having to whisper things to him: 'This should go faster, Mr Iles' or 'This should be slower, Mr Iles'". In his autobiography *Harry Mortimer On Brass* (Alpha Books, 1981) the author relates the story of how, in 1944, with the end of the war in sight, Iles organised a grand patriotic display at Belle Vue entitled *March to Freedom*, featuring ten massed bands and a vast choir, 'with John Henry Iles in his element as director of this mammoth gathering.'

Similarly to World War I, the ending of the second resulted in things never being quite the same way for brass bands. But change for Iles had started before all of that. He had wide business interests including the amusement parks and greyhound racing. He had also invested in films in the 1930s, an activity which brought him bankruptcy in 1938, as a result of losses of in the region of £250,000, reputed to be his personal fortune. The year before he had quietly resigned as Chairman and



The medal presented to Iles in 1948

Managing Director of the Board of Belle Vue in anticipation of his bankruptcy. His place was taken by his son, H.F.B. Iles. He had to resign all his directorships, though he somehow maintained control of the National and British Bandsman. The attitude of Belle Vue was generous, reflecting his commitment to the company in its early days and his family's continued involvement in the management. Debts he owed Belle Vue were written off pending realisation of his estate and he became a technical adviser, but his actual involvement was limited to the band events.

Prior to the war, and during the conflict, Iles was to be found broadcasting at the BBC. These included the Massed Bands from the National Festival, a Homage to Rimmer (1936) and, in April 1941, a three-part series '40 Years of Brass Band Contests' on the Home Service. Letters arrived from listeners expressing their pleasure at the broadcasts, some going into great length about their own bands. One even addressed his letter to 'Sir Henry Iles, BBC London'. Another, clearly a close friend, wrote after the 1941 series, 'It was indeed nice to hear your voice once again... clear, crisp and to the point,' adding, 'I only wish the future looked brighter for us all.' In 1945, Iles was over 70 and in dire financial straits. The Daily Herald had sponsored the *March to Freedom* at Belle Vue and had been very impressed by the public response to it. Now having a contact at the paper, Iles decided to suggest that they might like to consider taking an active part in the National once it was possible, after the war had ended. Remembering his first concert at the Royal Albert Hall, and with the Crystal

Palace gone and the Alexandra Palace not being available, his thoughts turned to this iconic venue as a home for the contest. Eventually the paper agreed to be sponsor, ownership of the contest passing to Odhams Press Group of which the Daily Herald was a part. Iles was allowed to remain as a figurehead. As Harry Mortimer explained, "to present the prizes and, above all, to retain his beloved place on the rostrum for a small part of the massed bands finale - to have removed this privilege from John Henry would have been to deprive him of his annual pride and joy." Having secured a future for the National Iles continued his band role at Belle Vue, and at the 1948 September contest he was presented with medals recognising his 50 years of involvement in brass bands. His secretary was Frances Bantin, who worked with him for 25 years during many of the prominent band years. It was she who provided the front-page coverage of the British Bandsman edition of 2 June, reporting his death on 29 May 1951. She wrote: 'Everyone will agree that it has been his influence and work which have brought brass bands to their present position. Since he took an interest in them in 1898, it has been a labour of love to him to do everything he could for their advancement.' His son, Eric, became Chairman of the company that owned British Bandsman, Frances Bantin was appointed Managing Director and Eric Ball became the Editor.

John Henry Iles was clothed in the Livery of the Musician's Company in January 1909 and was appointed Master in 1932. Iles received the OBE for services to the brass band movement in 1944. The Iles Medal is awarded annually by the Worshipful Company of Musicians for significant contributions to the brass band movement, a practice started in 1948.

A Memorial Service was held in the Church of St. Sepulchre, Holborn, London on Sunday 10 June 1951. The Lesson was read by Frances Bantin, Harry Mortimer played cornet solo as the accompaniment to the hymn *Lead Kindly Light* and the address was given by Eric Ball. The hymns were accompanied by Enfield Town Central and representatives of Hanwell Band, conducted by Frank Wright.

Frances Bantin was right when she wrote in British Bandsman 'and in our brass band world at least, we shall not see his like again.'