

William Rimmer

Tim Mutum looks at the life of one of the early giants of the brass band movement and the contribution he made as a conductor, composer, arranger and teacher.

Introduction

I started researching this article on the basis that William Rimmer was born in either 1861 or, hopefully, 1862, as I wanted to pay tribute to the great man 150 years on from his birth. The late Dr. Roy Newsome, an acknowledged historian, suggested he was born in 1861, but clarified it by pointing out that some reports said 1862. My own research suggested 1862 but it could have been 1861. However, I am indebted to Derek Rawlinson from Huddersfield and Don Robinson from Ipswich, both close friends, who have provided evidence (not least the *Brass Band News* of July 1891) to show that William Rimmer was indeed born in 1861. So, I am a year late in celebrating 150 years since his birth, but I hope this does not detract from an interesting story about one of the great conductors of brass bands, who was also a formidable composer, arranger and teacher!

An argument that will never be satisfactorily resolved is the claim to be the oldest brass band; suffice it to say here that the evidence suggests that the brass band movement, as we call it, grew from a flourish of wind bands between 1800 and 1825 and that contesting started towards the middle of the 19th century - the Burton Constable contest took place in 1845. The Belle Vue, Manchester contest began in 1853 and in 1860 the first of Enderby Jackson's four years of contesting at the Crystal Palace began. Furthermore, the historian Trevor Herbert argues that the 1850s was a particularly important period of growth for banding and 'it was in that decade that many of the most important developments took place which generated a brass band movement that was widely based and primarily involved working-class people.' (*Bands*, edited by Trevor Herbert, Open University Press, 1991)

I have painted this brief picture to set the scene that by 1861, the year in which William Rimmer was born in Southport, brass bands were developing significantly and that by the late 1890s they would reach the height of their popularity, with claims that there were around 5,000 bands and up to 200 band contests held each year.

Rimmer's father, Thomas, was well known and respected as the conductor of the Southport Rifle Band (Old 13th Lancashire Rifle Volunteers), so it is understandable that early

on in his life William soon came across music. At the age of nine, showing a natural instinct for music, he started to learn the piano. When he was about 15 he joined his father's band as a side-drummer, moving to 3rd cornet and then repiano. His first appearance as solo cornet was at the age of 21 at the Belle Vue September Contest of 1882. This was a successful period for the band, under professional conductor Harry Round (of Wright and Round fame). Following that he played solo cornet with many of the then leading outfits - Besses o' th' Barn, Kingston Mills, Heywood Rifles and Radcliffe Old. At Southport another conductor Rimmer played under was John Gladney (one of the triumphant three that also included Alex Owen and Edwin Swift).

Rimmer also had lessons from Gladney. Writing in *British Bandsman* on 15 January 1910, Rimmer had this to say: 'Mr Gladney was a fine teacher and his lessons made a deep and lasting impression on me. It was through playing with Mr Gladney that I got playing with Heywood Rifles, contesting with the band at Belle Vue etc. I would also like to say that he recommended me to Black Dyke Mills Band.' He went on to say, 'I was playing at a contest held at Radcliffe when some of the Besses men heard me, and I was asked to join the band on solo cornet under the leadership of Mr Alexander Owen (who also gave him lessons). I consented, and there you have it.' Joining the band in 1888, he remained with Besses for a

period 'until I found myself in rather delicate health, being troubled with bronchitis and this, with travelling etc., proved a big strain, and I decided to give up playing.'

At this point William Rimmer decided to branch out on his own and started his teaching career. His first band was Skelmersdale Old. 'I remember well the first contest I took them to: it was to Westhoughton and the test, own-choice Quadrille [a short dance in five 'movements']'. He wrote a set specially for the contest 'and our fare was fourth prize. I can safely say it was the sweetest prize I ever got.' In 1891, at the age of 30, William Rimmer became a professional band trainer and for the next 19 years he trained and conducted many of the banding greats of that era including Irwell Springs, Wingates Temperance, Shaw, Black Dyke Mills, Hebden Bridge, Fodens Motor Works, Crook and Besses o' th' Barn. Of these bands, Irwell Springs was probably his greatest success. He dragged it from the position of relative obscurity in 1896 to become, by 1905, one of the leading bands in the world. Irwell Springs won the Crystal Palace contest in 1905, causing several overjoyed bandsmen to kiss Rimmer, and when the success was repeated in 1908 he was presented with a beautifully inscribed silver rose bowl. Rimmer had a 20-year connection with Wingates Temperance, which he joined in 1889. During this period he achieved the first 'double

Rimmer - a legend

double' in banding history (which has only been repeated once in 1976 and '77 by Black Dyke Mills under Major Peter Parkes). In 1906 and 1907, he won with Wingates the Belle Vue (now the British Open) and Crystal Palace (now the National) contests.

Furthermore, he has the distinction of being the only conductor to win five consecutive 'doubles' (Belle Vue and Crystal Palace). This is his record between 1905 and 1909:

Year	Belle Vue - Winner	Crystal Palace - Winner
1905	Irwell Springs	Irwell Springs
1906	Wingates Temperance	Wingates Temperance
1907	Wingates Temperance	Wingates Temperance
1908	Black Dyke Mills	Irwell Springs
1909	Fodens Motor Works	Shaw

Interestingly, after that William Halliwell won both contests four years in row!

A considerable achievement, but place that into context with today and it is perhaps not quite as significant as it first seems. Rimmer was taking the 'crack' bands, often six at the major contests. Thus if, say, Allan Withington, had the time and inclination (and was allowed!) to conduct Black Dyke, Brighouse and Rastrick, Grimethorpe Colliery, Fairey, Fodens and Cory every year for five years at the British Open and the Championship Section National Final, he would probably win every contest too! In 1908, Rimmer became the first professional conductor at Fodens Motor Works Band. He stipulated a complete restructuring of the band as a condition. When this was refused he promptly resigned, but with contest success continuing to elude the band, the company directors realised their mistake and Rimmer was re-engaged. The firm promptly wrote a letter to the local press saying, 'Every man round the stand is a master of his part, and all we need now is perfect combination for which purpose we are having Mr Rimmer here once a fortnight. We intend going to all the big contests and you

may take it our band will cause a considerable stir amongst the first-class bands this season.' 1909 was the last year the ballroom at Belle Vue was used for the contest and on Monday 6 September the band won at its first attempt leaving 19 other bands in its wake. On its return to Elworth, the band toured the village playing the test-piece - a selection from Marliani's opera *Il Bravo* - and the marches *The Cossack* (Rimmer composed it especially for the reconstructed

band) and *Pat in America*. This was printed on the reverse side under the name of Hiram Eden, one of Rimmer's many *nome de plumes*.

Three weeks later, Fodens Motor Works Band and William Rimmer competed at the Crystal Palace but had to settle for runner-up prize and The Daily Telegraph Cup. Edwin Foden and William Rimmer were content with their six months work and the owner joked to Rimmer, "Come and tell me when you've won 'em both." Sadly it was never to be.

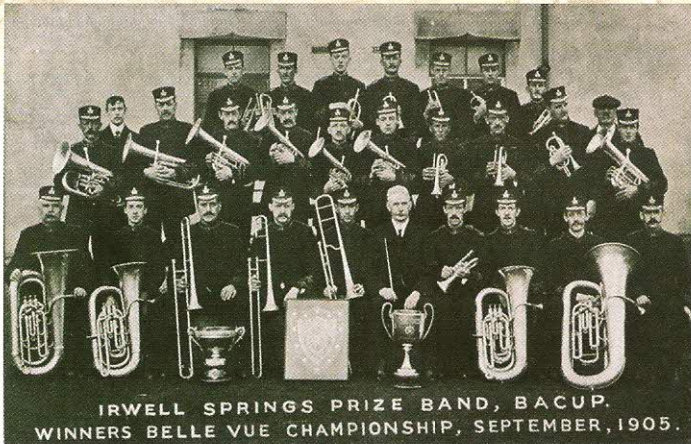
Herbert Shergold played flugel horn for 15 years for Fodens Motor Works. He joined in 1912 from Gossages Soap Works Band as a result of William Rimmer recommending him to William Halliwell and the Foden management. William Rimmer was professional conductor of Gossages during Herbert's time there. Speaking to Arthur Taylor in 1983 Herbert said, "He gave me a lot of good advice. And such an ear, such a talent. I remember once we were rehearsing a quartet when he came into the bandroom. He hardly seemed to have noticed anything, but he picked up a note that was flat and told the player exactly how he should have fingered it." Herbert went on to say, "He was a strict disciplinarian.

No playing around when Mr Rimmer was in charge. He would cut you like a knife with sarcastic words if he wanted to. Yet he was so kind and gentle in normal conversation." In this age of easy communications and transport it is difficult to envisage how Rimmer would have managed to travel to conduct so many bands at competitions. This may have been a factor in his decision to quit conducting, at the age of only 48, which he announced in early 1910 to enable him to concentrate on composition and arranging. It is in this area that he is remembered most. Yet his achievements with the baton should not be underestimated. Indeed it is a fair assessment to say that William Rimmer was the leading brass band conductor in the early 20th century.

He had a field of bands, but as his friend J.A. Greenwood remarked, "Rimmer travelled the hard road. At the time of our first meeting (1894) he was persevering with a few bands at Quadrille contests - popular in those far off days; but the players at his disposal were often of the poorest type. Occasionally he would meet on the contest platform the three giants of Gladney, Owen and Swift, usually without success at first." It was, though, with these bands - Irwell Springs, Pemberton and Wingates etc. - that he established his reputation.

And so Rimmer entered the third phase of his musical life, although he had been composing long before this - the march *Honest Toil* was written in 1880 and *Slaidburn* in 1901 plus *The Cossack* for Fodens. Between the 1890s and 1920s, he composed well over 100 contest marches. Popular ones that survive in concerts to this day are: *The Australasian*, *Cross of Honour*, *Honest Toil*, *Punchinello* (written for Wingates Temperance in 1904), *Ravenswood* (still a popular Whit Friday choice), *Viva Birkinshaw* (1896 - named after G.F. Birkinshaw [1852-1893] who was an outstanding cornet player and subsequently conductor of Black Dyke Mills) and *Salome*.

Elgar Howarth famously described Rimmer's best marches as "miniature symphonies". Bram Gay summed it up thus, "For many, Rimmer



is the March King. His marches are wonderful pieces, every one with its own unique personality. None has the routine formality, the writing to a formula, which we find in the works of other pretenders to the title."

Other than marches Rimmer's catalogue was enormous and included waltzes, great selections from the masters - he arranged the test-pieces for the Crystal Palace contest in 1910 (*Gems of Schubert*), 1911 (*Les Huguenots* - Meyerbeer) and 1912 (*William Tell* - Rossini) - and solos. Many will know of *Zampa*, *Rule Britannia* (1923), Selection from *Carmen* (1929), *Hungarian Rhapsody No 2*, *The Bronze Horse* and *Les Preludes*, which was only published after his death.

Solos include *Hailstorm* (1929), *Jenny Jones* (1899), *My Old Kentucky Home* (1924), *Weber's Last Waltz* and *Arizona Belle*. His selections formed an essential element of band concert programmes as late as 1950. Some of his music is still played today; almost certainly much more of it is now forgotten.

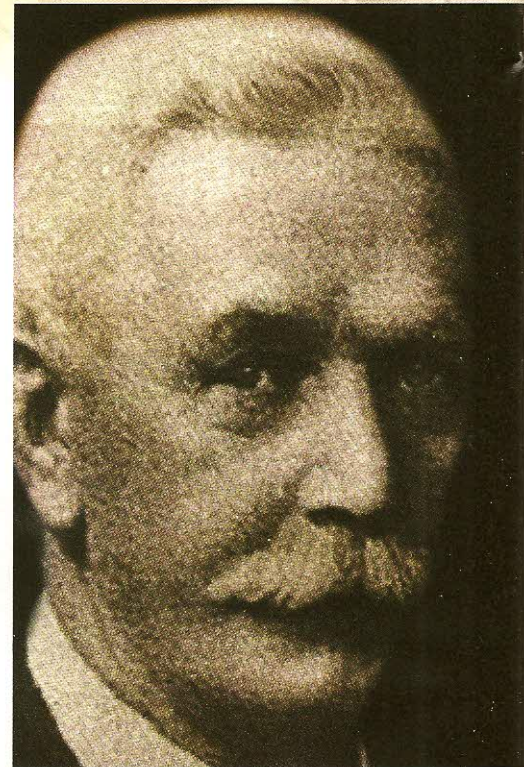
Rimmer joined the famous publishing firm of Wright and Round in 1913 as Music Editor. He had held similar positions with F. Richardson Ltd. (The Cornet Journal) for eight years from 1897 to 1905, during which at least 70 pieces were published, and R. Smith and Co. (The Champion Journal) from 1905 to 1912. In his book *Brass Roots* (Ashgate, 1998) Roy Newsome assesses Rimmer's total output at 410 compositions/arrangements.

As a teacher Rimmer's best-known pupil was Harry Mortimer. Here is what the great man said about his teacher, "Whenever he could spare the money, father used to send me to Southport, for cornet lessons with Mr Rimmer. I remember my first time in his front room: 'Ah', he said. 'You're Fred's lad.

Well, you'd better play something.' I played him *Softly Awakes My Heart*. I thought I had played it well. When I'd finished Mr Rimmer said, 'Have you got a tongue?' Yes sir, I said. Well, why don't you use it?' Projection of the notes you see - that's what he was thinking about."

Rimmer was an early Proms success for brass! In Prom 34 on Wednesday 1 October 1902 at the Queen's Hall, London, he made his debut. In the final piece before the interval, his *Fantasia on Welsh Airs* was performed by Walter Reynolds on the euphonium with Perry Pitt on piano. During his final years, Rimmer spent a lot of time locally devoting his vast experience and knowledge to the musical activities of the Baptist Tabernacle. One Saturday in July 1930 he received a pleasant surprise when a coach party of 30 members of the Irwell Springs Band arrived in Southport to renew their acquaintance with their old tutor. Six years later on 9 February 1936 William Rimmer died in Southport in his 75th year. He was interned at Birkdale cemetery.

On 21 March 1936, the BBC paid tribute in an hour-long radio programme devoted to his life and works. Titled *Homage to Rimmer* taking part were Fodens Motor Works (Fred Mortimer),



a quartet consisting of Clifton Jones (cornet - Irwell Springs), Owen Bottomley (cornet - Black Dyke Mills), Fred Fletcher (horn - Wingates Temperance) and Fred Appleby (euphonium - Hebden Bridge). All the music featured was written or arranged by William Rimmer and the programme was presented by John Henry Iles. William Rimmer is long gone but his music lives on.

