A Brief History of Music in The British Army

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Today, armed forces' music is well-known for its use in parades and ceremonies, such as on Armistice Day or Trooping the Colour but Army music also has a very rich and varied past. Historically, music has played a major part in the everyday life of the British soldier, whether on campaign or stationed in barracks.

Military Bands have existed for centuries. They originate from the ceremonial heralds and private musicians of monarchs and nobles and they used a wide range of musical instruments and influences from multiple countries and cultures. The men who served in early military bands were both volunteers and professionals who were also gentlemen, dedicated to the music they composed and played. As time advanced so did the bandsmen and a *musician culture* was developed.

In 1763 the Royal Artillery established the first permanently organised military band that remained with the regiment through active service. Huge changes took place through the 18th century until the early 20th century which saw the military band of the British Army transformed into to the modern bands we see today.

The military band has always utilised a variety of musical instruments, from a series of large and small bass drums to trumpets and hunting horns. During the 19th century a fascination with the East led to the cymbal being introduced and the introduction of a heavy cymbal tower nicknamed the *Jingling Jonny*. Due to the exotic nature of some of the instruments, up to the mid-19th century men of musical talent of African descent were in high demand. These men would have their own exotic variants of clothing worn during band duties.

Military bandsmen had the same pride in their regiments as their brother fighting soldiers and had beautiful customised art or banners painted on, or attached to, their instruments. The art related to the past glories or traditions of the regiment they belonged to. Due to their exotic nature and prestige, capturing military band instruments and equipment as war trophies was much encouraged.

Other instruments used by military army bands included clarinets, brass horns, oboes and the famous (or infamous) bagpipes if the regi-

ment was of Scottish origin. Military bands of the British Army as also evolved their own unique ranking system, traditions and uniforms. From the late 17th century to the mid-19th century musicians' uniforms were more ornately decorated and of a much higher quality than the uniform of the standard soldier.

During battle, the military band focused on playing their music and they were armed only with swords for self-defence. The music they played on the battlefield not only lifted the morale of the marching and fighting men but along with the music of the fifers and drummers, signalled the orders of commanding officers to the larger bodies of fighting men over the noise of combat.

In 1854 during the Crimean War in a victory parade at Scutari in Turkey some embarrassingly bad performances, with the national anthem played by a series of regimental bands, was witnessed by Prince George, the Duke of Cambridge. To raise standards, this event led to the establishment of the Royal Military School of Music. Since then, this school has taught generations of army bandsmen and is involved in education the modern musicians of the armed forces.

During times of peace at home the Bandsmen of many regiments happily performed their music to the public at both public events and in organised concert performances and parades for the Victorian state. During this time, the more ornate uniforms that had slowly been declining on the battlefield, were still worn during concerts and public parades.

The men who played the fife (a small pipe) and the kettle drum were separate from military bands during the earlier part of British Army history. Introduced by King Henry VII in Tudor times and influenced by the French, these men were financed by the regiments they served and would have been in the thick of the fighting. They relayed the signals from the band to the fighting men and were also responsible for escorting and dealing with the walking wounded. Despite the nickname of drummer boys, this position was occupied by both boys and men up to middle-age, some of which joined up as private musicians. During the brief rule of King James II the fife was abolished but in 1747 it was once again established alongside the drum by the Duke of Cumberland, Commander in Chief of the British Army during the earlier part of the Georgian era.

Shortly after this in 1751 a royal warrant was issued raising the standards of the drummers' uniforms to that of the Bandsmen. In 1768 King George the III issued his own warrant ensuring the coloured uniform

coats and the lace of the drummer and fifers uniforms were reversed when compared with the common soldier of the line. This meant that the coat of a drummer would be white with the lace, lapels and the ends of the jacket sleeves being red.

While on campaign, drummers and fifers also had many other tasks assigned to them. This ranged from ensuring that soldiers were billeted and not roaming the streets, to assisting in parades and even the infamously brutal displays of punishment when military law was broken. When a soldier was discharged dishonourably from the army, they were 'drummed out' by the famous Rogue's March. Drummers were also used with much of the same theatrical manner in recruitment parties during this era to help entice volunteers into the army.

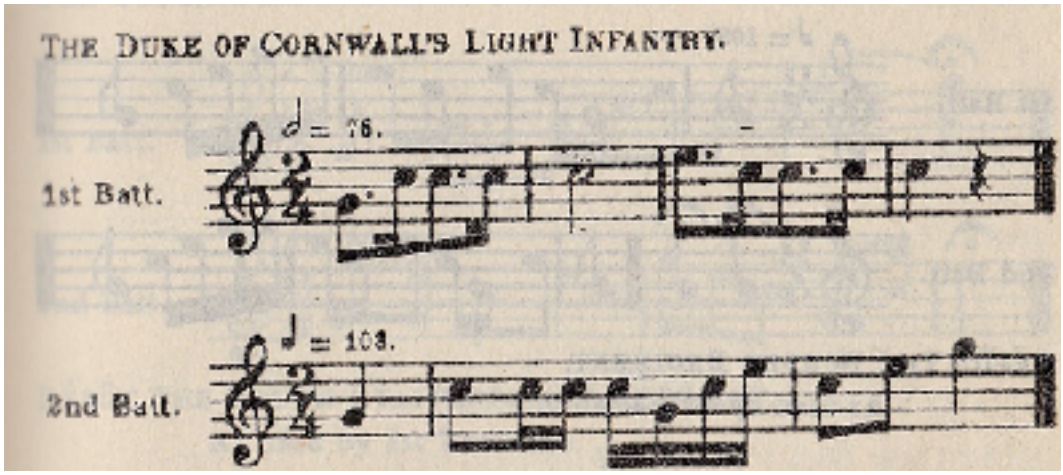
Drummers also played during the sombre funerals of their regimental comrades in the field and to announce victories back home outside their depots to the public.

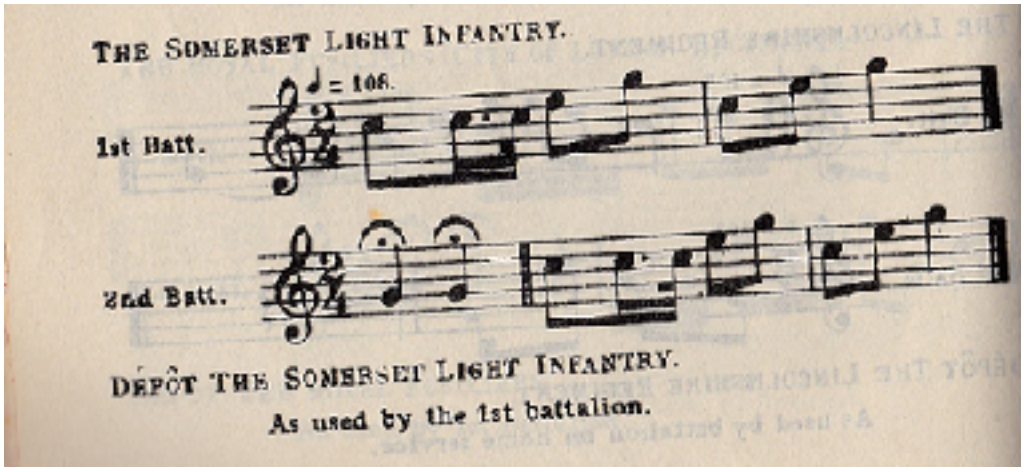
The Bugle

The bugle is a very important instrument for the Light Infantry. It was introduced to the British Army in the 1760's when a new approach to fighting was being developed during the 7 Years War in the dense forests and rougher terrain of what is now the American-Canadian border. In the fighting against the American Indian allies of the French, the Bugle was easier to carry and operate than a drum or fife and its sharp, brief calls were perfect in the chaotic skirmishing of light infantry operations. Both the Light Infantry and the bugle were permanently adopted into the British Army by the end of the 18th century.

An example of the Bugle Horn iconography on a light infantry cap badge.

The bugle horn itself is traditionally associated with the men who volunteered and filled the ranks of the skirmishing infantry and rifleman specialists of the 18th and 19th century. They were hunters and foresters who lived off the land. The instrument became a symbol of these men, adorning the standards, pennants and badges mounted on their caps from then to the present day.





Regimental bugle calls from the early 20th century.

British Army bugle calls in the 19th century dictated the life of both soldier and officer in the grounds of the barracks. These calls informed everyone in the barracks of the time and ensured that the regimented and scheduled life of the common soldier ran like efficient clockwork. At this time, watches were a luxury that the common soldier could ill-afford and the musical bugle calls helped with organisation and timing of the strict regimen of duties and services a soldier performed in the barracks.

Music itself is still central to Army training and parade-ground drilling. It is used to signal the manoeuvring and changing formations to the soldiers performing the parade drills in the same way it told soldiers of the past to manoeuvre on the battlefield. Modern Musicians themselves have a role to play outside their music and are trained as specialist engineers whose duties include breaching into buildings using explosives and the knowledge of construction and demolition of minor fortifications and obstacles.

Back home the military band performs the same duties outside the barracks as it did in the 19th century, playing music for the British public for both state and civil events through the country. Along with the more traditional musical instruments and styles, specialists are now trained to handle more modern unconventional electronic instruments and styles. And even today, the uniform of a British Army bandsmen is unique and they retain their own unique traditions

Credits and Further Reading:

Information and images in this article are taken from Hugh Barty-King's *The Drum, published by the Royal Tournament 1988*

A useful reference book is Military Bands and Their Uniforms by John Cassin-Scott and John Fabb, Blandford Press 1978