



The Royal College of Music enjoys a connection to brass bands today - but it isn't the first link between bands and the institution.

From Leeds to London - a connection forged in brass

Band historian Tim Mutum explains the link between a brass band in Leeds and London's Royal College of Music.

London brass bands cannot lay claim to anything like the success of those from the strongholds of the genre in the north, and now of course, South Wales. The two most successful bands, Hanwell and Hendon, are no longer with us, at least in their original form. In close proximity to the capital, Morris Motors and Luton have faced similar fates.

Other bands have emerged in more recent times, one of the more successful being Zone One Brass, now brass band in residence at the Royal College of Music. The college is located in South Kensington, opposite the rear of the Royal Albert Hall. The band was started in 2002 and undertakes education projects, concerts, corporate events and contesting. The players are a mixture of pros and students, led by Richard Ward, head of brass at the University of Huddersfield and a tutor at RCM.

Despite the modern link, brass bands and the college are entwined as far back as the late 1880s in a fascinating story that starts in Leeds. A man called Samson Fox was born in 1838 in Bradford, West Yorkshire, and by the age of eight he was working in the woollen mills. In 1852 he was apprenticed to Smith, Peacock and Tannett where he learned about the forging of steel. Fox went on to become a travelling representative with the company and eventually became acquainted with Glasgow shipbuilder Scott Sinclair, who later provided Fox with much of the finance he needed to start his own firm. Fox founded Leeds Forge in 1874 at Castleton Field, Armley, Leeds, initially making hammer forged crank pins and axles for locomotives. Later, in 1877, he registered a patent for corrugated furnaces for steam boilers.



Alexander Owen is a former conductor of Leeds Forge Band.

Like many a northern industrialist, Fox decided on forming a brass band. Started in 1882, members were originally all workmen in the Leeds Forge company works. The band practices took place in the Forge every Sunday from 10.30am to 12.30pm, with several others held during the week. The players were equipped with two sets of instruments, two sets of uniforms and full rehearsal accommodation.



Leeds Forge Band in 1888, only a couple of years after it entered the contesting arena for the first time.

Fox was very ambitious and offered gold medals and further funding if they could beat Besses o' th' Barn Band, which was one of the leading bands of the era.

Leeds Forge began contesting in 1886 and made a very successful start with high placings at the September Belle Vue – fifth in 1887, third in 1889, and second in 1890. Up until 1890 the band was led by Edwin Swift then by Alexander Owen who secured the band's best place at Belle Vue that year. Further contest victories ensued but neither of these two great and successful conductors was able to win a first prize at Belle Vue.

Down in London the Royal College of Music was founded in 1883 to replace the unsuccessful National Training School for Music. The school was housed in a new building in Kensington Gore, west of the Royal Albert Hall.

According to J H Russell and J H Elliot in their book *The Brass Band Movement* (Dent, 1936): "Only a year after its foundation, the band played at the opening ceremony of the original quarters of the Royal College of Music in May 1883. Musicians who were present informed Samuel Cope (who went on to establish the British Bandsman in 1887 and was its first editor) that they did not at first realise that the ensemble performing was a brass band – a pointer to the extent of the segregation of brass bands from general musical activity."

These musicians were of some significance as Richard Ward explained: "I came across in a book an old photograph of the Leeds Forge Band, conducted by Alexander Owen, at the Royal College of Music (RCM) in the late 1800s. Going to the Royal College of Music archivists, they found more photos and the programme of this band playing at the opening of the RCM. The band played a heavyweight programme including a Grand Selection of Rossini to an audience which included Hubert Parry (later the director of the college), the composer and conductor Charles Villiers Stanford and the other major composers of the day."

The original building proved prohibitive and a new one was commissioned in the 1890s on the present site in Prince Consort Road. Construction began in 1892 and was completed in 1894. The building was largely paid for by two large donations, one from the Prince of Wales and the other from no less than Samson Fox whose statue, along with that of the Prince of Wales, still stands in the entrance hall today.

What happened to the Leeds Forge Band? During the closing months of 1892 there were changes in the management and directorate of the Leeds Forge Company. A famous band which, according to Russell and

Elliot, was in fierce rivalry at the big contests with Besses o' th' Barn, Black Dyke Mills, Kingston Mills and Wyke Temperance, did not survive those changes.

Much to the astonishment of the band's supporters, the instruments and equipment were abruptly recalled and all activity suspended. The founders of the Armley and Worsley Band attempted, without success, to secure the instruments in 1894. The Samson Fox Silver Challenge Cup, presented for competition in Leeds in 1890, was transferred to Belle Vue in 1892. One wonders, does that cup still exist?

The Leeds Forge closed in 1929 – but the history remains.



Edwin Swift conducted Leeds Forge Band in its early years.