

# THE GREAT TRIUMVIRATE – No.1: EDWIN SWIFT

Three musicians dominated the brass band scene in the final quarter of the 19th century, and two of them well into the 20th century. They were Edwin Swift, John Gladney and Alex Owen. In the first of a three-part series, Tim Mutum firstly examines the life of Edwin Swift, born 175 years ago in 1843.



Not surprisingly, brass banding was very different in the 19th century to what it is today. For a start, virtually all public performances, including contests, were open air. Bands were not seated, usually standing in a square and there may have been a conductor! Bands lucky enough to have a bandmaster and a professional conductor would also likely have the latter playing the major cornet solos.

From around the 1880s, the best professional conductors could be found conducting up to six bands at a contest, thereby increasing their personal chances of the top prize and lower placing prizes. In modern parlance they became 'personalities' and important with three of them - Swift, Gladney and Owen - dominating the contest scene. They became known as 'The Great Triumvirate' - John Gladney (1839 - 1911), Edwin Swift (1843 - 1904) and Alexander Owen (1851 - 1920).

The middle one, Edwin Swift, was born 175 years ago in 1843, the youngest son of Joseph Swift, a handloom weaver. They lived in Upper Clough, Linthwaite, which is near Huddersfield. Edwin only went to school until he was aged nine, when he commenced work as a 'shuttler'. This probably involved keeping the shuttles in the mill clean and loaded with full bobbins. The family's circumstances were such that Edwin was able to pursue an interest in music and joined the local drum and fife band. His brother Sam was a cornet player and young Edwin could be found practising on it. This didn't go down well with brother Sam, but on hearing Edwin being chastised, his mother apparently said, "Nah, Sam, if aw wor theee, aw'd neer play that thing ageean, becoss awr Edwin can beat thi head off." And that was the start of Edwin Swift's career in brass bands and within a year he was playing with Linthwaite Band.

He was entirely self-taught, but must have had considerable talent as by the time he was 14 he was conducting Linthwaite and playing solo cornet, as well as arranging marches and other tunes for the band. At the mill the owner must surely have been a very tolerant man, as on a makeshift desk Swift would be seen struggling with the mysteries of transposition, harmony and arrangements. He would ask him irritably whether he was working for the mill or himself. "Nay master", said Swift once, "I'm weaving something for myself today."

It seems rivalry was fierce. The Rylands Band was also based in Linthwaite and a new march of exceptional quality had been secured.



For two weeks the band secretly rehearsed it, but the Friday night before the first public performance Swift managed to attend the rehearsal. They clearly played it too much, for Swift was able to go home and write it down. He then called a quick rehearsal for the Saturday, performing the piece in the village in the afternoon, and thereby wrecking the dreams of Rylands, which soon afterwards disbanded!

Linthwaite was no different to many other bands, players having to buy their own instruments and not much consistency in that direction, but a public appeal yielded cash to buy some better ones and then the band joined the 34th West Riding of Yorkshire Volunteer Regiment and became their band. It gave them security and Swift was able to lead them in contests as they became one of the leading northern bands. Swift gave up playing, concentrating on conducting and arranging, but still working in the mill. He was working from 6am - 6pm, then band practice until 10pm several nights a week, followed by three hours' writing and study. Eventually in spring 1870 he was seriously ill as a result!

In 1874 performing as Linthwaite, but clearly with the regimental support, the partnership won ten contests, including the September Belle Vue, beating John Gladney and his Meltham Mills Band. The following year, aged just 32, he left the mill and concentrated solely on music, proclaiming he was, "a weaver by trade, and a professional musician by accident." The Belle Vue result was a turning point. He was in great demand as a conductor, and especially as an arranger, where he became a champion for the music of Wagner. It was Swift

who introduced many bands to Wagner's music in the 1870s. His most successful selection was Bayreuth, which contained music from several Wagner operas, but he also arranged selections from *Faust* (Berlioz), *William Tell* (Rossini), little known operas from Donizetti and solos as well.

The list of bands he took over his career is almost endless - at least 35, of which Leeds Forge, Oldham Rifles, Mossley and Lindley might be familiar names, plus the celebrated Wyke Band or Wyke Temperance, as it was often referred as (but not to be confused with Wyke Old which was conducted by John Gladney). Swift won at Belle Vue again in 1883 with Littleborough Public. When Swift was working with Wyke Temperance for one Belle Vue, several supporters went to listen to Wyke Old. They later spoke to Swift, commenting, "We have been listening to Wyke Old, and Mr Gladney does this and that with the music." After listening carefully, Swift replied quietly with a smile, "Mr Gladney is quite entitled to do what he thinks best for his band, but he is only conducting Wyke Old. I am conducting the Temperance and I am doing what I think best." If this story is true then it was 1888 and Wyke Temperance won with Wyke Old fourth! Wyke Temperance and Swift won again in 1889.

The year 1895 - considered to be possibly the year in which brass bands reached an absolute peak in number and popularity - proved an interesting one and such to relate the contesting exploits in some detail. Over the winter months two correspondents of Brass Band News had been assessing the relative merits of the two 'crack' bands (today they would be ranked 1 and 2!) - Black Dyke Mills, conducted



Wyke Temperance Band (1895)



Leeds Forge Band (1888)

by John Gladney, and Besses 'o' th Barn, led by Alex Owen. Which was better? A contest was to take place in Nelson and the question was who would come out top? In the end neither did! It was Swift who took both first and second places with Wyke and Cornholme bands. Besses were third and Dyke fourth. Next up a few days later was Kidsgrove with a different judge, but the same music. Again, Swift won with Wyke and took Mossley to third place. Besses were second and Dyke fourth. Later at Keighley, only three bands entered and the result was first Wyke, then Black Dyke and third Besses, somewhat finally disproving the argument as to who was the best band. It should be noted though that at Belle Vue in the September Black Dyke won with Wyke second and Besses third! After all this, one writer commented of Swift: "He never bounces, but he trounces." Swift went on to one more Belle Vue success in 1898 with Wyke Temperance. His total of five Belle Vue wins places him equal seventh in the list of all-time winners of this great contest.

Edwin Swift did not enjoy good health as the years progressed and struggled from considerable pain and a lack of sleep. He lost his two sons in 1899 and 1900, which was of considerable anguish to him. At the 1901 Crystal Palace contest he again conducted Wyke Temperance, playing Gems from Sullivan's *Operas Number 3*. It contains the funeral anthem - *Brother thou art gone before us* (from *Martyr of Antioch*). During the performance, Swift was overcome by emotion, and when asked later by a well-known conductor where the inspiration had come from, he replied, "Eh lad, when playing that, I am following my two lads to the grave."

On 12 January 1904 Swift stopped writing, failing to finish what he thought would be his best arrangement. Shortly after 2pm on 9 February 1904, Edwin Swift died from cancer of the kidneys, leaving a wife and six children. He was 60. At his funeral on 12 February, there was an enormous crowd with some factories stopping work to allow their employees to attend. Over 80 players, including the whole Linthwaite Band headed the funeral cortège. Tributes poured in, including from John Gladney, Alex Owen, William Halliwell and William Rimmer.

What are we to make of Edwin Swift? He came from a modest, but not poor background. He stayed within his locality of the Huddersfield area and taught himself. He was described as a simple and loveable character, with unfailing courtesy and good humour. If he failed to win a contest, he simply put it down to the judges not liking his style. Swift's output of music was prolific, but not much of it has survived. Linthwaite Band still exists, but its library contains none of his selections. Wyke Temperance no longer exists. A limited amount of his music is with Besses and Black Dyke and the latter have recently recorded Swift's arrangement of the *Finale* from *William Tell*.

Edwin Swift today is less well-known than either John Gladney and, especially, Alex Owen but, alongside these two men, dominated brass banding contesting over a considerable period. In his will, Swift left £504, which today equates to a little over £50,000. As we will see in the next two articles, this was a modest amount in comparison to Gladney and Owen who died considerably richer men.