

T. J. Powell and the Melingriffith Band

Stephen Nicholas, 2016

A tribute by E. Vaughan Morris in the Conductor magazine, April 1965: 'T. J. Powell: A Mighty Friend'. W. G. Atkins September 1969.

T.J. (Tom) was born in Tredegar, Monmouthshire on 12 October 1897 to Edgar and Sarah Anne Powell. As has been the case with many musicians in the brass band movement, he started as a boy in the Salvation Army, and was playing side-drum in the youth band at the age of seven. He transferred to the Tredegar senior band on cornet and studied theory and harmony during this period with Mr. Hurley who was bandmaster there. Just prior to the First World War, joined the Tredegar town band but then left South Wales to serve with distinction in the band of H. M. Royal Marines; he furthered his studies during the war in the Marines School of Music. In 1920 he was appointed musical director of the Melingriffith Volunteer and Cadet Corp and which was connected to the Melingriffith Tinplate Works at Whitchurch, just outside of Cardiff; he lived locally for many years at No. 81 Velindre Road, Whitchurch. This was the beginning of an association which lasted all his life, and the name of 'Melingriffith' and 'Tom Powell' will be forever linked together. He conducted with Mr. Tom Moore - a top Cornet with 'Besses of the Barn' - who had been coaching the band in those early days and within three years the band had progressed very rapidly from Class C to Class A. At the same time he coached the Cardiff Transport Band and had quite some successes with them. Over the years the Melingriffith Band grew in reputation with Tom Powell conducting, and T.J. eventually came to adjudicate all over the country and was in great demand as a coach, despite the fact that he never advertised.

Composing was a great joy to him. Early in his career with Melingriffith he wrote a march called 'Appreciation', dedicated to Mr. David Millard who was secretary of the band at the time and who helped Tom in his early days. He excelled at writing marches and 'Appreciation' was a forerunner of more than fifty. Some have never been printed, but are on manuscript in the library of Excelsior Ropes Band who succeeded Melingriffith on the closing of the Tinplate works. Many of the marches were named after Welsh castles - Castell Coch (The Red Castle), which was visible from his home, and Castell Caerdydd (Cardiff Castle) and Castell caerphilly (Caerphilly Castle) were close by. 'Caernarfon Castle' was written in 1958 when HM the Queen announced that Prince Charles was to be made Prince of Wales. His March the 'Contesor' had been recorded by Nlack Ddyke Mills, amongst many others. Harry Mortimer once referred to him as the 'Welsh Sousa'. He also composed many selections, waltzes, studies and solos, to his credit, he arranged many pieces for brass band, including a complete book of Welsh hymns.

T. J. Powell's works are often broadcast and frequently used as test pieces. There are some interesting anecdotes about the inspiration for some of his works, for example 'Snowdon Fantasy' was written by Tom following a visit to Snowdonia with Mr. Hughes - A North Wales bandmaster who lived at the foot of the mountain. 'Forest Bells' was inspired by the pealing of church bells in the Forest of Dean when he was walking through the forest to rehearse Pillowell Band there. He wrote many pieces for solo instruments with piano accompaniment: his quintet 'The Tops' is a favourite

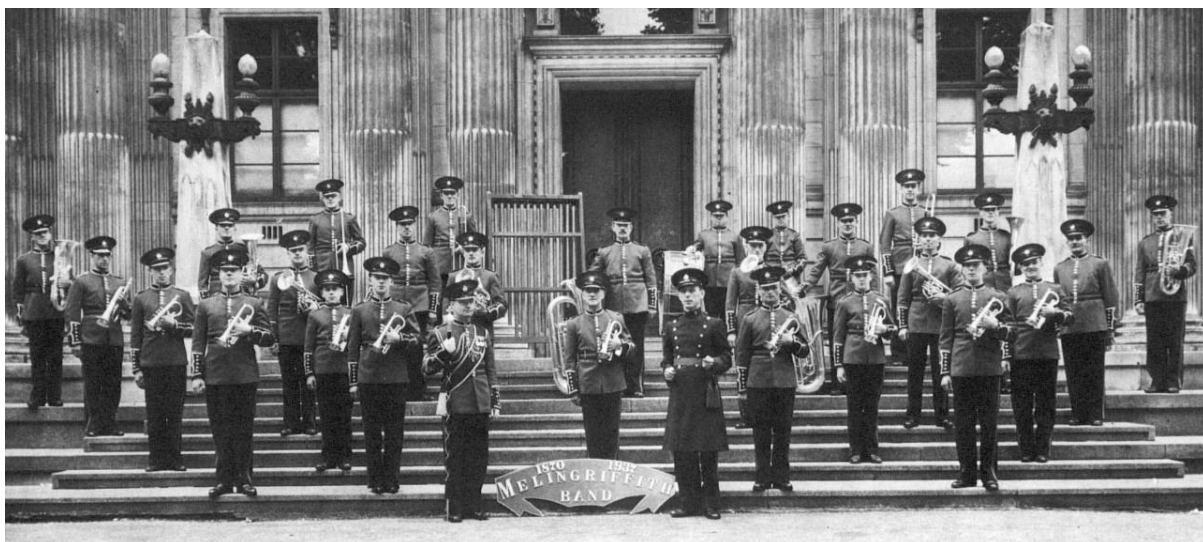
of many bands. Some works were composed specifically for Melingriffith bandmen, and for want of titles he reversed their surnames - Snikta is an Ed Bass Theme and variations while 'Elyod' a euphonium solo and variations. He was an exceedingly quick writer of manuscripts; he would often try out an idea on the piano' and have full band parts and score ready by the next rehearsal.

He received many honours. He was presented to HRH Princess Marina by the South Wales & Monmouthshire St. Johns' Ambulance Brigade function in Caerphilli when he was awarded a medal for loyal service to the Ambulance Brigade and for several years he was president of the South Wales & Monmouthshire Brass band association. He was invited to conduct at many important functions with the National Brass Band. He was one of the few holders of the Silver Medal of Worshipful Company of Musicians of London, presented to him at Belle Vue in 1958. He was presented with the Diploma of Honour of the NBCCC of Great Britain. As an ex-Marine he was always spick and span and expected his band to be likewise. Mr Alan Spence-Thomas (whose family owned the Melingriffith Works) was Captain in the Welsh Guards and he designed the MGB uniform to be similar to the Guards. He too was insistent that the band should be well turned out for all occasions, and over the years many prizes were won for marching and deportment - more often than not marching in one of T.J.'s compositions. Tom Powell inspired all who were around him and commanded their great respect as conductor and composer and also in his qualities as gentleman and friend. His tragic death on 29 January 1965, whilst guest conducting the Cory Band, brought to an end a life which had been spent in ungrudging service to others. The brass band movement lost a champion. Undoubtedly Wales' 'Man of Brass'.





*Whitchurch Brass Band, 19 September 1908. From left to right, back row: *T. Bodger, *Callaway Smith, *E. C. Smith, W. Nicholas, T. Fuse. Middle row, from left to right: W. Thomas, T. Richards, T. Howells, S. Fuse. *A. Villa, *F. Smith, B. Smith, F. Morgan (Chairman), J. Morgan. Front row, from left to right: Aubrey J. Morgan (Secretary), *P. Collins, E. Billing, Mr. J. Chivers (Conductor), *T.H. Collins, A Baker, Arthur Morgan (Treasurer), D. Thomas (*Members of Committee).*



It was during 1937 that the Melingriffith Band, upon the instigation of the then president Mr. Alan Spence-Thomas, adopted their now famous scarlet Welsh Guards pattern uniform, and one of the first things to do was have their photograph taken on the steps of the County Hall in Cardiff.

Some history of the Melingriffith Band taken from T. J. Powell's annual report in 1949

It has occurred to me that, as we have quite a number of new members it would be a good thing to say something about the history of our band. I think it is a fine thing when one knows what lies behind any cause for which one works or strives especially if, by knowing, one can realise a source of pride and pleasure from such knowledge. If I can convey to you, in part at least, the past of this band I feel sure we will all find both pride and pleasure in our connection with it. How far back in history it goes we are not quite able to say -but it is fairly certain that it goes back a hundred years at least. We have heard that it was originally a drum and fife band, later becoming a sort of semi-military in the days when they were owned by a family called Booker. It seems that in some ways the band was then on a similar basis to the present day Foden's in as much that the main interest of the employer owner family was in the men's ability to play in the band. The players were often at the boss's house playing instead of at work. There is no evidence though of any strides having been made outside of their locality at Melingriffith,

Eventually the band left the environment of the works and became Whitchurch Brass Band and flourished quite well for many years having some well known men of that day as conductor players, such as James Livesay of the famous Cyfartha band family and Elias Billings one of the leading cornet players of his time. These two men were still about when I came to Melingriffith in 1920, thirty years ago. I can give you a much better picture from then of course. I found a band of 11 players when I came, little or no funds, in the main a poor lot of instruments, a library which had hardly an item complete and uniforms for some and not for others. You must remember that there had been a break in the activity during 1914-1918 war. What I did find here was plenty of enthusiasm and a tremendous willingness to be led. I knew very little of the running of a band on amateur lines, but we got down to work and in 6 months had a full band, the following year entering the first contest. It will be of interest to you to know that, in our ignorance of band matters, we found we had entered Class 'B' contest and went up against band like 'Cory's' and Aberaman, who were Class 'B' bands at that time. You don't need me to tell you we were placed last.

However, 6 months later, having to drop players to compete, on account of the numbers restriction we registered our first win gaining first prize at Treorchy in a Class 'C' contest. Mr Jimmy Roberts was our coach, acting over me as I would now act over of say BM of say Pillowell. I wasn't quite happy about him though as I felt that he was not quite the man we wanted, I wanted tuition too as well as the band and it was arranged to call in Mr T. G. Moore who taught me more in ten minutes than anyone else has in my whole life. We had success with him, but the financial side was poor in those days and we resolved to leave competition and try to build up in other ways. We went out to popularise the band for engagements and succeeded very well indeed being able as a result to obtain good uniforms, instruments and a good library, that this was very much to the good there was no shadow of a doubt for, when we decided to return to the contest field in 1928 nothing could stop us, without a coach or outside help of any sort, starting at Chepstow open contest in 1928 we walked through to Class 'A' in three years, and have stayed there ever since.

The amount of work to put in, in those days would hardly be believed and how necessary it all was is apparent when I tell you that I can remember an annual meeting such as this when our funds showed a credit balance of 9d' Quite a different story of today. The building up of equipment has been a very hefty job and I would like the younger people realise that, easy as it seems now to be equipped with uniform, instrument, music, given decent transport to jobs, paid lost time and indeed having everything made as comfortable as possible is only the result of very hard work in the past. It was in 1931 that we first broadcast. For 25 years this has been the foremost band in Cardiff District, having played for Royalty and all big public functions more than any other band can claim. Just one other thing in this very brief run over the past. In 1950 I find myself the oldest member as far as the playing membership goes, with one exception, Dick Brown, who was a member when I came. With that I am afraid, very sketchy run into the past I come to the report of 1949.



Thomas James Powell (12 October 1897 - 29 January 1965)



The Melingriffith Band 1923



Melingriffith and Cadet Corps Band 1930

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bid3w2dqR6o>

Slideshow of photos T. J. Powell and the Melingriffith Band, song being played is the 'Contestor' which was composed by Tom Powell.



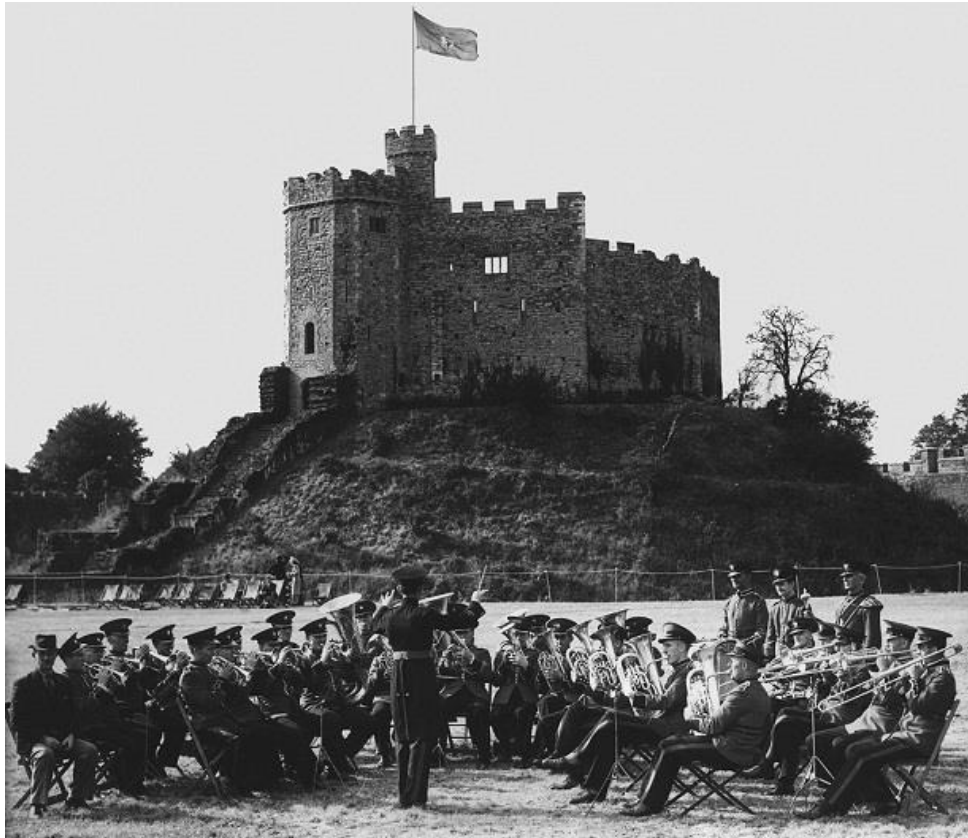
Melingriffith band 1950



The Melingriffith Band 1960 Eisteddfod Cardiff, Tom Powell the conductor in the centre.



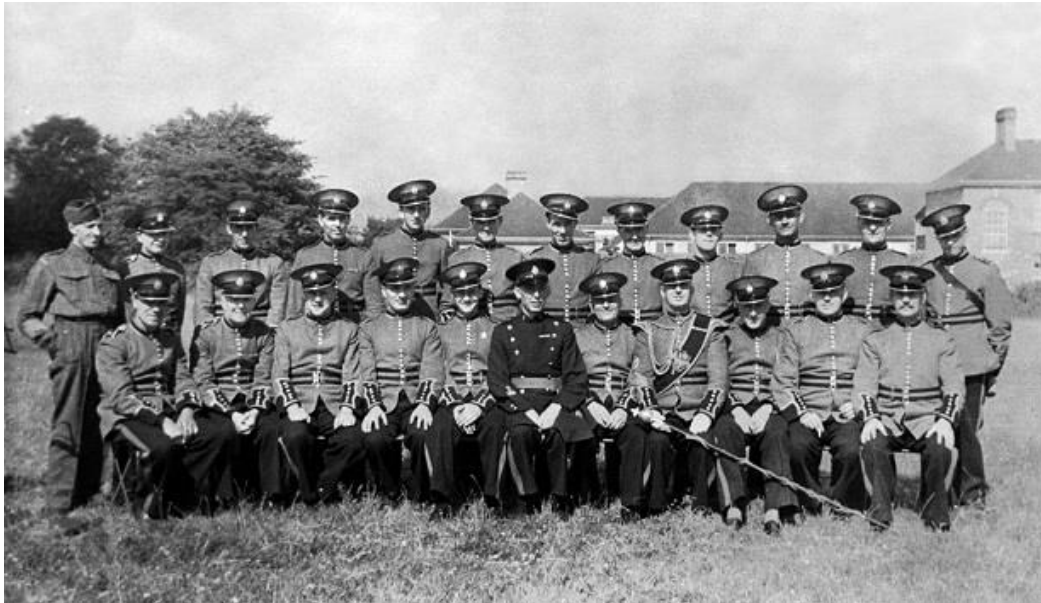
Members of the Melingriffith band get a pep talk from conductor T. J. Powell before competing in the National Eisteddfod in Singleton Park, Swansea, in August 1964.



T. J. Powell leads the Melingriffith band at celebrations for the handover of Cardiff Castle in the city by Marquis of Bute in 1948. Under Powell the band became justifiably famous for their marching skill and immaculate turn-out, their high-coloured scarlet tunics being modelled on those of the Welsh Guards.



T. J. Powell rehearses the Melibgriffith band prior to their visit to Welsh Industries Fair in London, 1947. At this time, the band room was the old Whitchurch piggery near Ty Mawr farm.



Melingriffith Band at Home Guard sports day at Whitchurch Grammar School field, 14 June 1943. From left to right, back row: J. Atkins, T. Bravery, N. Rees, W. Williams, W. Hocking, J. Brown, R. Squires, a. Cosh, -?-, F. Jones, J. Shepstone, H. Atkins. Front row: G. Atkins, J. Hurman, W. Parkins, W. Thomas, R. Oliver, T. J. Powell, E. Baker, J. Moore, A. Atkins, H. Morgan, A. Morgan.



T. J. Powell leads the Melingriffith band at celebrations for the handover of Cardiff Castle in the city by Marquis of Bute in 1948. Under Powell the band became justifiably famous for their marching skill and immaculate turn-out, their high-coloured scarlet tunics being modelled on those of the Welsh Guards.



Melingriffith Band with T. J. Powell marching through Whitchurch to mark the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953.



T. J. Powell started his musical career as a boy in the Salvation Army Band and was playing side drum in the youth band at the age of seven. This postcard of the Salvation Army Band came from T. J. Powell's own collection of memorabilia, he is seen here in the back row, far right.