

# THE HORN PLAYER WHO TRIED TO CHANGE THE HORNS

**IFOR JAMES FAMOUSLY STATED THAT HE ONLY PLAYED THE FRENCH HORN BECAUSE HE COULDN'T SING. IN FACT, HE PLAYED BEAUTIFULLY AND ENJOYED A SUCCESSFUL PERFORMING CAREER.**

**FOR A TIME, JAMES RETURNED TO HIS BRASS BAND ROOTS AND TRIED TO CHANGE BANDS' LONG-ESTABLISHED INSTRUMENTATION. HIS EFFORTS WERE TO PROVE UNSUCCESSFUL, AS TIM MUTUM EXPLAINS IN THIS EXCLUSIVE ARTICLE FOR BRITISH BANDSMAN IN THE YEAR JAMES WOULD HAVE CELEBRATED HIS 90TH BIRTHDAY.**

Looking back over the past 60 years or so, a considerable number of musicians brought up in brass bands who left for professional pastures playing in orchestras came back to their roots. Their subsequent involvement in brass bands was hugely significant and influential and they made lasting change. Coincidentally, those who stayed the course over a substantial period were largely trumpet players – Bram Gay, Geoffrey Brand, Elgar Howarth, Howard Snell and James Watson. At the front of that list in historical terms would be Harry Mortimer, but one could reasonably argue that he never really left?

One former brass band player who went on to a brilliant orchestral career playing French horn before a brief return back was Ifor James. Sadly, he died in 2004 but, had he lived, this year he would have celebrated his 90th birthday. An opportune time, then, to reflect on a musician who is often overlooked for the impact he made on brass bands in the 1970s, possibly because it only covered a relatively short period of five years and involved only one band: Besses o' th' Barn.

Richard Ifor James was born in Carlisle, Cumberland, in 1931 where his father, Bill James, was a very good cornet player in Carlisle St Stephens Band. His mother, Ena Mitchell, was a famous soprano of the time. At the age of three, Ifor began playing the cornet and his first public appearance took place when, aged seven, he joined his father in the pit at His Majesty's Theatre, Carlisle. Due to child labour laws, he couldn't be paid money playing trumpet frequently in the theatre so he was rewarded with chocolate bars and pens.

From the age of 16 until he was 21, Ifor played football for Carlisle United but he knew that music was his future. He had always wanted to be an organist and during that time he became an



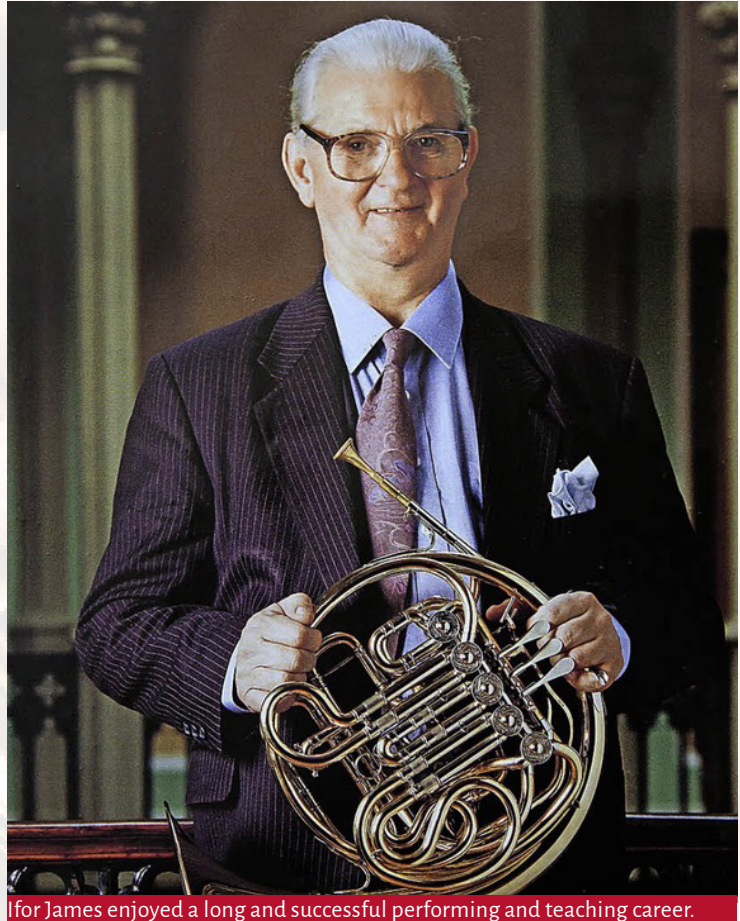
**Ifor James was renowned for his wit and sense of humour.**

assistant cathedral organist in Carlisle. He remained a player with Carlisle St Stephens until he was 20 then, when a horn player in the local orchestra became ill, Ifor borrowed the man's horn and did the job. Liking the instrument, he decided to try it for two years and studied privately with Aubrey Brain, a friend of his mother and

son of the famous horn player, Dennis Brain. His talent shone through as he won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music. Later, he remarked: "I play the horn because I can't sing. If I could sing, I would not play the horn." He would train for football in the morning, study music in the afternoons and play football games on the weekends.

Following the Royal Academy, he was offered a post on fifth horn in the Hallé Orchestra after being invited to audition for Sir John Barbirolli and then went to the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra on principal. Later, Ifor moved to London where he played with many orchestras and chamber groups. He became professor of horn at the Royal Academy of Music, principal horn of the English Chamber Orchestra and horn player in the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble (PJBE) from 1966 until 1980. With that group he toured the world and made more than 30 recordings.

Ifor James was known for his incredible agility and secure high range but also a broad spectrum of tone colour. The late Philip Jones said: "What fascinated me about Ifor was his ability to play all over the instrument with enormous panache and great momentum." The chance for Ifor James to showcase his French horn talents with a brass band came in 1971 after Edward Gregson was commissioned by the then British Federation of Brass Bands to write his *Concerto for French Horn and Brass Band*, which was dedicated to him. The first performance was given by James and the Black Dyke Mills Band, conducted by Geoffrey Brand, in Wigan on March 13, 1971.



Ifor James enjoyed a long and successful performing and teaching career.

## 'His first contest with Besses was the North West Area on *The Plantagenets* in 1973 and then the London Finals. In between he was performing in San Paulo and was shot in the a\*\*e by bandits whilst waiting to be served in a fast food joint'

Less than two years later, in the midst of this glittering career, James responded positively to an approach in January 1973 from Besses o' th' Barn Band to become its musical director. He was recommended by Bram Gay. Perhaps he saw the same possibilities that Elgar Howarth was then forging across the Pennines with Grimethorpe Colliery Band?

Besses was a fine band at the time but was steeped in tradition and dogma which had been both a strength and a weakness of the

brass band movement.

As well as being a wonderful musician, Ifor James also had the gift of humour: "A sense of humour is the only way that can get you through but I am always a serious person when it comes to music" – and of being able to forge friendships, both attributes which would become very apparent during the next five years.

A fine example of his humorous side was related by former solo cornet player, Peter Read: "His first contest with Besses was the North West Area on *The Plantagenets* in 1973 and then the London Finals on *Freedom*. In between the two he was performing in San Paulo in Brazil and was shot in the a\*\*e by bandits whilst waiting to be served in a fast food joint. The story is that Ifor was queuing to be served when the robbers came in, making a lot of noise and harassing people. Ifor thought they were in a hurry and wanting to be served so he gestured to them to take his place in the queue and one of them pulled a gun and pointed it at Ifor. He instinctively turned away, the gun was fired and the bullet got him in the backside."

The incident was reported in the national press. Fortunately, Ifor recovered and saw the lighter side when he returned to Besses. Peter continued: "He dropped his trousers in the band room and he was wearing the underpants he wore when he was shot, with the bloodstained hole showing for effect. He then produced an x-ray photo showing the bullet lodged in a delicate place which, according to him, was too delicate to be removed. I'm not sure about the authenticity of the x-ray, but it was hilarious.

"When he walked on to the stage at the Albert Hall to conduct

*Freedom*, he was still using a walking stick, which he hung around the principal cornet's neck. This raised a laugh in the audience. There's no doubt he was a showman."

James' limited contest appearances as conductor and subsequent results suggest he had little interest in this area of activity and at the Open in 1974 and 1977 the resident conductor, Frank Bryce, took the band. He was, though, spectacularly successful in increasing the range and quality of the band's concert work.

Frank Johnson, band secretary at the time, later related: "It was a change of attitude for us. We'd been like most other bands. The repertoire was the march, the waltz, the overture. The only other band that was doing anything else was Grimethorpe, with Elgar Howarth. I for opened the door to new music."

Besses began performing at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London and at music festivals instead of the school hall. Stuck with the brass band classics, I for also commissioned new music using his friendships and musical contacts. Frank Johnson said: "He already knew Paul Patterson and he asked him to do something for us. I wrote to the Arts Council and got them to fund it. The result was *Chromascope*."

It was first performed at the 1974 Harrogate Festival. Other commissions included Roger Payne's *The Age of Anxiety*, Edward Gregson's *Concerto for Tuba and Brass Band* (1976) and John McCabe's *Images* (1978) which was first performed at Goldsmith's Hall, London. James also recorded serious repertoire LPs with Besses, one of which featured pianist John McCabe in a transcription for piano and band of Mendelssohn's *Capriccio Brillante*.

Moves by James to revisit the instrumentation of the brass band were less successful. The standard set-up of today was broadly established in the 1870s, largely as a result of the efforts of John Gladney. Since then, the variations have largely been for specific pieces such as Edward Gregson's *Dances and Arias*, commissioned for the National in 1984 in which two flugels are needed.

In just over 12 months after his arrival James had introduced the

tenor cor to replace the traditional Eb horn and the Eb trumpet instead of the soprano cornet. Another innovation was a completely new seating arrangement, whereby he positioned many of the players on the opposite side of the platform to that which they formerly occupied.



Besses o' th' Barn Band's horn section, including one tenor cor.

In his book on the life and legacy of Adolphe Sax (Egon, 1992) Wally Horwood wrote that tenor horns in D flat were once popular in the mid-19th century, adding that "other varieties around this pitch have appeared from time to time, the most lasting being the tenor cor, an alto – tenor horn usually in F and E flat, sometimes



I for, second from left, pictured while performing with the legendary Philip Jones Brass Ensemble, which set new standards for chamber brass playing.



Besses o' th' Barn Band, under the baton of Ifor James, performing at the National Brass Band Championships of Great Britain in the Royal Albert Hall.

with an extra slide to put it into C. The idea has been, apparently, to deceive the eye as well as the ear since it is twisted into a circular shape to resemble the French horn, nevertheless being fingered with the right hand."

Besses historian, Stephen Hughes, advised that those used by the band were Eb pitch, right-handed, piston valves. They were Yamaha prototypes provided by Bill Lewington Ltd, of London. It wasn't a success and the band reverted to Yamaha tenor horns in time for the area contest in 1976. When Roy Newsome arrived in 1978, he insisted on Sovereign tenor horns.

What caused James to leave in 1978 is unclear. Maybe he felt a five-year tenure was enough; perhaps he became frustrated at immovable traditions or possibly he just wanted more time with his first love, the French horn.

Peter Read looked back on the time with some affection: "I really enjoyed working with Ifor at Besses and we did some wonderful, quality concerts with him. It was a really good period for Besses and it won the 1978 *BBC Band of the Year* under him. I think the winning broadcast included Elgar Howarth's *In Memoriam RK*."

Ifor was professor of horn at the Royal Northern College of Music

in Manchester from 1977 until 1979 and also at the University of Aberdeen. In 1983 he became professor of horn at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Freiburg, Germany, where he taught until



Ifor James and Frank Bryce with Besses in 1976, when the band temporarily moved away from tenor horns.

his retirement in 1996. He was one of the world's most successful teachers, with more than 60 players in the profession, among them several who pursued solo careers and more than 20 principal horns. He advocated developing the discipline to practise for hours and to love practising and never be satisfied. "The world owes you nothing, and this profession is not waiting for you. You have to work hard enough to deserve to be in it," he said. It is a work ethic which stood him in good stead and which contributed to a successful professional career, albeit one which did not change the instrumentation of the brass band in the long term.

Ifor James died of cancer, aged 73, on December 23, 2004.