



FIRST PRIZE
YEAR 7

The brass band community and what its future holds

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Note: the essay printed below is a shortened version of the original. To read the full essay, including the appendix with the survey conducted by the author, please contact Dr Seal.

Brass bands are an established part of British culture, but the instantly recognisable sound that is such an important part of fetes and parks could be heard less in the future if solutions cannot be found to the challenges facing the 'banding' community. In this essay, I will explore where brass bands came from, identify the challenges they face today and look at what bands are doing and could do to ensure they thrive deep into the 21st century. In writing this essay, I will draw on a range of sources including a survey of brass players I carried out which was completed by 87 people.

Although they date back to the early 1800s, Brass bands largely developed in the late 19th century. Many were funded by collieries, factories and the temperance movement to keep men out of trouble after a day of work 'banding' was a popular activity and by the 1890s there were more than 5,000 bands. These a source of pride for local communities and boys grew up aspiring to play in their local band.

Grimethorpe band was formed in 1917 by the colliery as a leisure activity for miners and is now a Championship band ranked fourteenth in the world. In 1992, the colliery closed and the band lost its funder. However, due to its strong sense of community Grimethorpe managed to carry on, raising funds from performances and tours. In 1995, the band featured in the film 'Brassed Off', based on the band's own experience and a new generation became aware of the incredible community and sound of brass bands.

Another Championship band, Jaguar Land Rover, formed in 1944 as an Air-Training-Corps band and has had many name changes. Today it takes its name from its funder and is lucky to be one of just a few bands to have a sponsor. Daventry Brass is a lower level community band formed by the merging of two railway workers' bands with the Daventry Working Men's band. The band has had success in contests but like many it relies on paid performances to fund itself. It struggles to get a full band at every performance or rehearsal and relies on borrowing 'deputies' from other bands.

Despite their strong heritage, for many, continuing the community of their band has been a struggle. From the peak of popularity in the 1890s the numbers of bands fell at the beginning of the 20th Century. The decline has slowed since the 1960s, but there are now only about 1,200 active bands left and many of these, like Daventry Brass struggle to attract and keep enough players or secure the funding they need.

Some people believe brass bands are at risk of dying out; so, what are the challenges that brass bands face, and what can bands do to change?

The main issues facing bands that came up in my survey were internal politics and competition within and between bands; the amount of time taken up by rehearsing, performing and competing; the stress and pressure of contesting; lack of public support and limited performance opportunities. Other issues mentioned were lack of money, traditional repertoire and the need to attract youngsters and new blood into bands. Comments included:

"Refusal to move away from age old traditions that are either discouraging people or not allowing for new developments."

“The following of brass bands is becoming smaller and it is becoming more and more difficult to get an audience to attend a concert which is what generates revenue and keeps the band going.”

“In financially challenging times it can be difficult to keep a top band running smoothly.”

“A lack of funding, it’s so difficult to get anything from the present funding from the Arts Council etc.”

“Difficult to obtain modern music and arrangements.”

“Less encouraging of females and younger musicians, very set in their ways.”

Nearly half of the people who completed my survey joined their first band over 25 years ago, suggesting bands are dominated by older players. For a lot of younger players banding is not seen as ‘cool’ and they are not interested. The future of brass bands relies on new players, but not many young people want to pick up a cornet or tuba instead of a guitar or iPad and it is becoming increasingly difficult to persuade the next generation to join in.

There used to be a supply of children desperate to learn a brass instrument, with long waiting lists for training bands but recently a student from the Conservatoire stated, “From what I have seen, there appears to be very few children joining bands who don’t already have links to the band.” More than half of people who completed my survey joined their first band aged younger than 12. Now, fewer children learn brass instruments at school and most children who are learning brass, have family with banding in their blood. Overall bands are losing players as more drop out than join.

Even if bands attract players it is hard to retain them. Responses to my survey suggest issues that lead to loss of players are politics within the band, tradition, time-consuming, contesting, funding and members leaving to go to university or to better funded bands. The situation was summarised on a brass band forum by one user who said, “I would say that people are packing in playing at a faster rate than people are learning to play and there are too many bands for the amount of players that are about.”

However, it is possible to change this. Not all bands need to contest. For many, spending months

working on a single piece for one competition piece is boring. Bands also need to be more open to change, promote themselves better and encourage all brass players to join them. One responder to my survey said they did not play with a brass band because their instrument was not typically included in a brass band. This doesn’t have to be the case. Bands could allow players of other brass instruments to join.

The Unibrass competition for example, allows trumpets and cornets to play together. Traditionally there may be 28 instrumentalists, but people will enjoy listening to a brass band with seven tubas and only 5 cornets as much as they enjoy a traditional band.

Another problem is that many people see brass bands as old-fashioned and dated. “People think of brass bands and think of coal mines, cloth caps, and marching down the street” but this typical stereotype shows that brass bands were, not necessarily what they are today. Some bands may still play marches at concerts wearing heavily braided blazers, but this isn’t all they do. Beneath the highest ranked bands, hundreds of groups get together in towns and villages across the country every week. There are many examples of bands doing exciting, interesting and innovative things. In my opinion bands are not dying, they are just changing. There is a lot of positive activity and innovation.

Today there is a growing youth brass band movement with training bands developing young musicians to take over seats in adult bands. These are more attractive to many younger players who may be put off by the idea of playing with people 30 years older than them with a lot of rehearsals and performances. Some people argue that “Youth bands are better than ever these days, with more members, and a better standard of musicianship.” This year the National Youth Brass Band Champion of Great Britain were held at Warwick School with 30 youth bands competing over four sections.

Following on from the many training bands the NCBBGB (National Children’s Brass Band of Great Britain) and NYBBGB (National Youth Brass Band of Great Britain) “exist to give gifted young brass instrumentalists the opportunity to perform advanced music and receive the highest quality teaching, care and help to provide the brass band movement and the music profession with the next generation of brass players”. These thriving national youth bands

have many alumni who have gone on to have highly successful careers in music, and not just in brass bands.

Bands are also experimenting with repertoire. Jaguar Land Rover band recently produced a CD called Fusion which brought together big band, jazz and traditional brass band music and musicians.

This project, funded by the Arts Council created an incredible new sound and shows that brass bands don't have to stick to tradition. Similarly,

Tredegar band played a big band show with a Michael Buble-style singer to a full audience. Zoe Hancock, one of the players, said "We had all the music rearranged and it was a great concert with big lights and a huge audience. They love that kind of thing, so perhaps that's a different route for brass bands to try and modernise a bit".¹⁰ These are good examples of bands adapting to what people like and enjoy in order to attract a new audience and keep people interested.

Uni Brass has been described by Brass Bands England as the most innovative thing to happen in 100 years. It is the world's only inter-university brass band contest. It was founded in 2010 and the first contest took place in 2011 with 12 bands. As well as running the competition, the organising competition supports the creation of new university bands and in 2018 the competition attracted 21 bands, which shows there is an interest in banding among younger generations. Unibrass is very important in giving players the opportunity to continue brass banding when they leave school, a time when many stop playing. It does this by creating opportunities to continue playing and to compete but also to move away from traditional images of band competitions.

In my full essay, I outlined the five things I think brass bands need to do to thrive: get more young people interested, change the image, keep people interested, expose people to bands and work as a movement. Here is a sample of what I wrote for the last of these:

In order to gain more recognition and credibility bands need to work more as a banding movement. In recent years Brass Bands England has started to play a more active role. Below are some of their aims:

- Help bands to be outward focused, engage with communities and other bands, and share resources and expertise.

- Raise understanding with the wider public, funders, organisers, stakeholders and partners of the value of brass bands.
- Help bands access funding.
- Encourage innovation and engagement with other art forms.
- Lead on campaigns which help brass groups attract and reach wider audiences, gain a broader support base and pave the way for creative collaboration.

Despite the challenges facing brass bands I believe they do have a bright future if Brass Bands England can deliver this and if bands are prepared to change more quickly and embrace the innovative things I have mentioned. Rachel Veitch-straw from Brass Bands England says "Musicians of all ages are part of this [brass band] community and it is a tradition that will continue. There may only be a small number of them, but there are enough to sustain them and provide them with a future".

From my survey (please contact Dr Seal to see the full Appendix) it is clear that banders get a lot out of being part of a brass band, the biggest positives being:

1. Friends, belonging and social life
2. Being part of something bigger
3. Playing with others
4. Musical development and challenge
5. Performing
6. Pride / achievement / satisfaction
7. Excitement, buzz, enjoyment

Bands need to build on these positives, to value their heritage but also be prepared to move away from old traditions to become more relevant to the present. With the right approach people of all ages can fall in love with banding.

Having fallen in love with brass when I heard the band at my local fete I have become a member of the banding community. However, I had challenges to overcome. I was the only person interested in brass at my primary school and tried very hard to get school lessons but was told there were not enough people to offer them. Instead, I had to find my own way to learn. I was taught the basics by an inspirational teacher who had been a military musician. He encouraged me to join the local music service training bands where I was supported by other musicians who were active in the brass band community. They encouraged me to join a full brass band. Despite being a competing adult

band, they were welcoming and flexible about my rehearsal attendance. They have really helped me develop and I have progressed to become a front row player and regular soloist. They gave me the confidence to perform not just in their concerts and competitions but also in concerts at school. My trumpet playing at primary school introduced more children to the idea of a brass instrument and when I left for senior school 10 pupils signed up for brass lessons out of 170 in the school. Lessons are now provided. It may have been difficult to begin with, but I have been given plenty of opportunities by the banding community and in a small way may have encouraged a few children to become future brass band players.

“Brass bands are wonderful, let’s all get out there and show people just how great we are.”

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