

ROYAL NAVY BANDS OF THE VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN PERIODS

What were the Royal Navy Bands that, during the early years of the 20th Century, were absorbed into the new Royal Naval School of Music to emerge from that establishment as Royal Marine Bands? How were they organised and why do we glimpse them only rarely in photograph or on film?

To find answers we need to examine the development of bands in the Royal Navy throughout the 19th Century. We also need to place these answers alongside the story of the established Royal Marine Divisional Bands located at Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth.

During the 19th Century, Royal Navy ship's bands were working bands; they were not designed, or required, to entertain the public. Neither were they expected to take part in ceremonial parades, tattoos or tournaments. In general they were musically trained to a level good enough for wardroom entertainment and for 'musical motivation' whilst, for instance, a ship's crew used the capstan to raise anchors, or loaded a ship with coal, ammunition or other necessaries. As functional bands they were suitable for Royal Navy ceremonial in port or at sea but their development and use was such that they were never intended to be compared to, or on a par with, the Royal Marine Divisional Bands or Army Bands – all of which would become increasingly familiar through public appearances.

The history and development of Royal Navy bands up to the inauguration of the Royal Naval School of Music can best be indicated by the following anecdotes. In 1799 when a Dutch ship surrendered to the British and its crew, including a band, was interned. However the band, which was made up of German, Dutch, Scandinavian and other foreign bandsmen, took service in the British flagship; the Admiral paying their salary for the next three years. By the end of this period the band were asking to go home – which they were allowed to do.

Whilst Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, Admiral John Jervis (later 1st Earl St Vincent) recruited a band of 26 bandsmen, mainly Maltese and Italians. These men accompanied him back to Britain and served with him until, on Jervis' being promoted to First Lord of the Admiralty in 1801, Admiral Nelson offered to take ten or twelve of them and to continue paying their salary.

In 1808 a ship's captain (apparently an 'MP of high birth') brought his own band of 20 men on board. This meant that not only did 20 of his experienced seamen have to be put

ashore in order to create space but more work had to be done by those remaining since bandsmen were excused ship's duties.

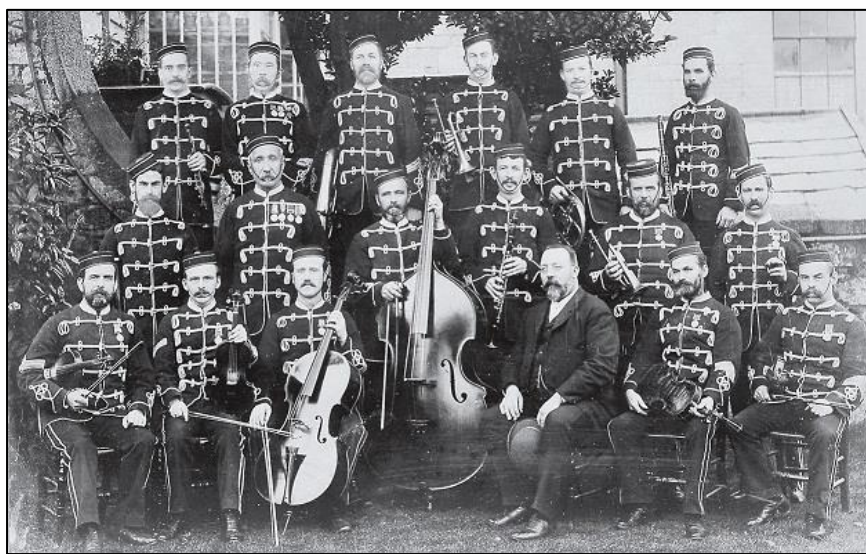
Stories such as these help to show that, during the first half of the 19th Century, the provision of music in the Royal Navy was organised in a very 'relaxed' manner by, and usually for the benefit of, its officers. Later, many of the officers who had inherited the obligation to pay for the bandsmen out of their own pockets would become less disposed to continue the arrangement and more inclined to dispense with bands

The Admiralty continued to provide a Musician (usually known as a 'ship's fiddler' and not the same as a 'Bandsman') to provide music in support of tasks such as raising anchors and coaling ship.

In 1847 the Admiralty put ship's bands on an official footing by establishing the Continuous Service rating, or rank, of Bandsman. At the same time, a complement of bandsmen for various classes of ship was fixed.

The next step taken by the Admiralty was to introduce Petty Officer appointments of Chief Bandmaster (a Non-Continuous Service (NCS) Chief Petty Officer) and Bandmaster (Petty Officer 1st Class). This occurred in 1863 as did the introduction of training of boys as Bandsmen for

the Royal Navy Training Ships *Impregnable*, *Implacable*, *St Vincent* and *Boscawen*. Many of these boys were recruited from orphanages or children's homes. A few years later the Admiralty agreed to pay for musical instruments for the Training Ships but mitigated the overall costs by 'capping' the number of boys in the bands. In addition, musical instruction was to be undertaken by Bandmasters, not



Members of the Royal Naval Band of the Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth, c1891-1899. They have orchestral instruments and are probably providing Officers' Mess entertainment as a small orchestra. The Hussar-type uniform for RN Bands, introduced in 1879, was never popular and was later replaced with a Naval pattern blue cloth uniform. (Photo: Copyright Trustees of the National Museum of the Royal Navy)

Musicians, and as a result musical ability started to improve. By this time, the Royal Navy was well behind the Army in terms of musical training and continued to have a lack of interest in, or need, public performance.

The following year (1871) the Ratings of Bandsman (2nd Class) and Band Boy were added to those of Chief Bandmaster, Bandmaster and Bandsman. During the 1870s a standardised uniform was introduced and a first connection between the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines was made when the Adjutant General, Royal Marines, was instructed by the Admiralty to order the Royal Marine Divisional Bandmasters to inspect the Royal Navy Training Ship Bands and to test and certificate the Chief Bandmasters twice a year.

It was also during this period that ship's officers began to complain about the foreign musicians, of which there were many spread throughout the fleets. The officers argued that, since the 'action station' of Bandsmen was handling supplies of gunpowder to the guns, it was hardly an appropriate duty for non-nationals. In addition, it was claimed that these men did not exhibit the same sense of discipline or respect as the British sailor.

By 1883 the strength of the Royal Navy Bands was 17 Chief Bandmasters, 12 Bandmasters, 68 Musicians, 363 Bandsmen and 104 Band Boys under training. The following year HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, the second son of Queen Victoria, then commanding the Channel Squadron, began to take an interest in bands and in their training. At this time there were three bands allocated to the Commanders-in-Chief at Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth. They were well trained, individually selected and therefore of a reasonable standard. The remaining bands were either on board ships at sea or in RN Barracks.

Another major change that was influencing the views of the RN officers with regard to the bands was that of decreasing space on board the new ships. As a result many officers believed that bands should be restricted to Flagships only.

Bands and Bandsmen had become a contentious subject by the mid-1880s. To the complaints about foreign musicians and concerns of space were added the problems caused by Non-Continuous Service Bandsmen (who comprised about 40% of the total) and the very question of whether or not bands were even necessary.

Foreign Bandsmen, who usually had received a far better musical education, were not only becoming the best candidates for promotion to Bandmaster but also, when promoted, made the best Bandmasters.

In 1888 a committee charged with reviewing Ratings, Rates of Pay and allowances in the Royal Navy recommended that:

- Only Flagships would take bands to sea due to the space problems
- Ratings of Band Sergeant and Band Corporal to be added
- Ratings of Musician and Bandsman 2nd Class to be abolished.

The proposal to restrict bands to Flagships only was vetoed by the Admiralty but the other recommendations were accepted, only to be reversed a year later.

By 1896 the total number of RN personnel had almost doubled and, a year later, a report defined the three distinct types of band in the Royal Navy:

- Bands entirely of Non-Continuous Service men, mainly foreigners, unpopular with the officers who had to pay for the Bandsmen's instruments and uniforms.
- Bands composed entirely of Continuous Service men who were better adapted for Service requirements having received military training and, often, had experienced active service. They were not as musically competent as the foreigners since entry qualifications for Band Boys had been kept low to secure sufficient candidates. The Navy, not the officers, provided uniforms.
- Mixed bands of NCS and CS men under a British, or foreign, Bandmaster. These bands were subject to the same disadvantages as the NCS bands described above,

but with the additional drawback of the inherent jealousy caused by foreign (NCS) Bandsmen being able to earn far more private pay than those who were CS.

This report included the unattributed statement '*A suggestion has been made that all Bandsmen for the Navy should be trained as Marines and that all drafting for ships bands should be done by them*'.

In 1898 a new structure was introduced by limiting the size of ship's bands. Ships without a band could have a Royal Navy Musician ('Fiddler'). In 1902 Admiral Fisher joined the Admiralty with a plan for Naval reform and by September the question of bands, once seen as a problem without solution, now became a mere detail in the much larger scheme of things.

At this time the Royal Navy's musical complement was:

	CS	NCS	Foreigners	Total	Allowed
Chief Bandmaster	13	18	(5)	31	27
Bandmaster	17	19	(14)	36	47
Band Corporal	36	25	(16)	61	68
Musician	7	23	(10)	30	75
Bandsman	371	253	(183)	624	683

At the same time, the established Royal Marine Divisional Bands located at Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth each had high quality bands whose personnel were as equally comfortable as orchestral musicians as they were in a military band. These men could not be drafted, remaining with their Divisions; only when accompanying Royalty did they go to sea or visit other countries. They were a common sight at bandstands, concert halls and public ceremonial.

The proposal for transferring responsibility for the provision of musical support for the Royal Navy to the Royal Marines was approved through Order-in-Council on the 20th May 1903 and was brought into force on the 1st August of that year.

The initial ranks were to be Chief Bandmaster, Bandmaster 1st Class, Bandmaster 2nd Class, Band Corporal, Musician and Band Boy. Each band would have a Bandmaster and a Band Corporal, and the number of Musicians would vary from 22 in senior flagships to nine in the smallest ships allowed a band. The Bandmasters in Admirals' bands would be 1st Class with Bandmasters 2nd Class commanding the remainder. Bandsmen would be enlisted into the Royal Marines as 'Musicians'.

The Royal Navy had never intended to create a band service for public entertainment, regarding music as only needed whilst at sea or in barracks. So it was that on 22nd July 1903 a band from the Boy's Training Ship HMS *Impregnable* became the first band to march into the new Royal Naval School of Music at Eastney Barracks which would then provide Royal Marine Bands to the Royal Navy.

John Ambler

(Note: This history up to the inauguration of the Royal Naval School of Music has been partially sourced from W G Perrin's *Notes on the Development of Bands in the Royal Navy* originally published in *The Mariner's Mirror* in 1922/1923 and, in abridged form, in *Globe & Laurel* during 1926.)