

James Shepherd Versatile Brass

by founder member David Horsfield

Part two



It was in the 1960's that I first met James Shepherd, when he was the principal cornet player with The Carlton Main Frickley Colliery Band, under Jack Atherton. I was a member of The Brighouse & Rastrick Band at the time and because of our enthusiasm for solo and quartet competitions, we met most weekends on the non-stop rounds of these terrific training days. With our respective quartets, friendly rivalry meant that we all became good friends.

Perhaps it was this early love of small brass ensemble playing that set the pattern for both our future days with JSVB.

INSPIRATIONAL LEADER

In 1966 when I joined Jim at the Black Dyke Mills Band, I soon found myself on repiano cornet seated just behind him, and what an inspiration he was. When I became a member of the Dyke Octet, the small ensemble love was maintained and this was one reason I feel that the idea of JSVB came about. While still at Dyke, Jim asked me along with Harvey Whiteley and Colin Aspinall if we were interested in "having a blow" with other players from Grimethorpe and Hammonds, along with Pete Ferris, an ex Joe Loss Orchestra trumpeter. Rehearsals were held in Wakefield, which was home for many years to come, and always on a Tuesday, but never clashing with the Monday and Thursday Dyke rehearsals. Life was pretty hectic, having

young children at home and with the Dyke engagements wives were certainly "band widows" at this time (bless 'em).

In our first year with JSVB, the experience was certainly an eye-opener to say the least, and Uppermill Civic Hall, Dewsbury Town Hall and Mansfield Civic Theatre were early concerts never to be forgotten. The repertoire was a mixture of octet and band music reduced down with a few swapping parts on the stage, but the early signs were there that JSVB was here to stay.



James Shepherd Versatile Brass in 1983.

SPECIALIST MUSIC

Dennis Wilby, Bill Charleson and Andy Owenson were the men who provided special compositions and arrangements which made the group "stand out from the crowd". These were *Tuxedo Junction*, *Waltz No. 1*, Shostakovich, *Marriage of Figaro* and *Carpenteria* and these classic works for the ten-piece saw the increase in bookings until, in mid 1973, it became decision time for Jim, Colin and myself at Black Dyke. Jim had done his ten year stint at Dyke and had already decided to focus on VB. This was a difficult decision

for me - I had a Dyke Besson *International* cornet, so the early "gig" with Jim at Leeds Playhouse performing in the pit for "Canterbury Tales" came in useful and bought me my brand new cornet (again another "International"). I acquired a second-hand trumpet (Vincent Bach) and was now in the business. It was some years later that I ventured on to the Flugel Horn, when it

became necessary to have a case specially made to take all three, plus mutes etc.

RECORDING WORK

Top composers were now noticing the group; Elgar Howarth, Edward Gregson, John Golland and Ray Woodfield sent specials for us to have a look at and these early titles were a real boost for the morale of the team. A big reputation was now being gained and new bookings were 'flooding in', in addition to TV and Radio work, not to mention recordings on LP and cassette. BBC TV, Yorkshire TV, Decca Records, Polyphonic Recordings, Look Records and Quad Records were the big names who helped promote the group. The direct-cut "Whole-in-One" record was a real test of the group's pedigree,

having to do a complete side of each record in one take. We had to be very careful placing mutes in bells, changing instruments and turning pages on the music stand. The resulting vinyl has a real 'live' feel to it with an electric atmosphere obvious with tremendous playing by the ensemble. This high-profile exposure was the reason why many bands formed their own ten-piece group and it was a tribute to the heights reached by JSVB.

TOP VENUES

Highlights of the early years were three Royal Albert Hall appearances (two at the National Finals Festival concert and another before the results of the very first European Championships). Other high profile venues in the 1970's included the Queen Elizabeth Hall on the South Bank in London; Usher Hall, Edinburgh; Kings Hall, Belfast; Brangwyn Hall, Swansea; the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield and Kings Hall, Belle Vue before the results of the British Open Championship. Other types of work included playing at trade exhibitions and these events gave the group experience of playing to a new kind of audience. A hi-fi exhibition in Dusseldorf, Germany was one such engagement and in Monaco JSVB was the guest of Case, the world-famous tractor manufacturer at their world conference



JSVB appearing with Thora Hird in a British TV programme.

and while there JSVB topped the bill at the Sporting Club, a fabulous variety show at this famous night club.

WORK ABROAD

Early days saw JSVB travel to Switzerland as guests of Jean-Pierre Chevalier, where the Valais area of this beautiful country resounded to the distinctive sounds of the group. Trips to the Vara Festival in Holland twice saw the group play in Amsterdam and Zandaam. For this trip we recorded a vinyl record for the Dutch radio station based at Hilversum.

TV WORK

Many bookings for the small screen were now coming our way and this proved a brilliant showcase for the talents of the group, with guest appearances with Marian Montgomery, the jazz singer and the late Roy Castle, himself a fine trumpeter. On this programme Gordon Higginbottom did a mellophonium duet with the Huddersfield-born entertainer. In addition to these standard repertoire programmes, appearances in comedy programmes such as "Hallelujah", "Where's there's Brass" and "The Silver Cornet" brought JSVB to a wider audience. Other TV work included filming for "The Outsider", "Rag Doll Anna" and "Your Hundred Best Hymns".

MUSICAL DIRECTORS

In my time with the group many top conductors were used including Dennis Wilby, Ray Woodfield, Peter Sumner, John Golland, Wilfred Heaton, Frank Renton, Michael Hopkinson, Ray Farr, David Loukes, Michael Antrobus, Frank Bryce and Geoffrey Whitham, each with their own style to enhance the unique VB sound.

STUNNING PERFORMANCE

Jim's playing was always an inspiration to the rest of us and personally I remember a performance of *Pandora* in Berlin on a live German Radio/BBC "Friday Night is Music Night". To say that his playing was "stunning" would be an understatement and I rate this the best I heard from JS in the twenty years I was a playing colleague of his. His featured solos were many, not only the traditional cornet standards, but special arrangements by Ray Woodfield, Mike Hopkinson, Kevin Edwards and J. Graham Walker, who all did many special titles for him.



JSVB after touching down in Australia in 1978.

MULTI-INSTRUMENTALISTS

The cornet section also featured trumpets and flugel horns, with Graham Walker specialising on the Bb Piccolo Trumpet. His duet with Colin Aspinall on Tuba in *Bubble & Squeak* became a classic number. I took up the flugel horn as a featured soloist after much encouragement from Gordon and we formed a terrific understanding of each other, which only comes with time, especially in small ensemble playing. In addition to his alphon prowess, Gordon developed his comedy routines, mainly using the very versatile mellophonium. This was also used with the three trombones in quartets, David Moore doubling on trombone when needed. The comedy idea began at an engagement in Prescott, Lancashire when featuring the triangle



James Shepherd Versatile Brass warming-up as Frank Renton looks on.



James Shepherd Versatile Brass reunion in July 2008.

and when Gordon imitated the return bell sound of the "Typewriter", he donned white gloves to the amusement of the audience. From there the famous comedy numbers flowed from the pens of our resident writers and such numbers as *The Blight of the Fumble Bee*, *Captain Shepherd and His Band*, *O Dear What Can the Matter Horn* and *Waltzing Matilda* became standards the fans loved.

2008 REUNION

July 4th this year saw the original Australia tour team of 1978 (except for the late Harvey Whiteley and Ian Copland, whose eyesight difficulties prevented him taking part) give a concert in Brighouse just thirty years after they played in the same town a

week before departing on a two-week tour "down under". Frank Renton directed then and he made a return to West Yorkshire to lead JSVB at the Central Methodist Church. As one would expect the professionalism shone through on this nostalgic occasion and after nineteen weekly rehearsals the group played to a packed house, getting standing ovations at the close of this memorable evening. The concert was recorded, initially for personal memorabilia for the members, but after listening to the quality of the playing it may be made available to the many fans of the group. Let's hope so.

The 1978 re-union team was:-
James Shepherd, Stephen Thornton, J.Graham Walker, David Horsfield, Gordon Higginbottom, Derek Southcott, Alan Widdop, David Moore, Colin Aspinall and Kevin Edwards, with Frank Renton directing.