

## **Sightless but full of sound – blind band musicians of the past**

*Gavin Holman – February 2020*

Among the many institutions that were established in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to provide for the various segments of society which did not fit into “normal” life, were those that provided for the physically and mentally handicapped. Some of these will no doubt have used music as a means of, if not therapy in modern terms, then education, training and entertainment.

A number of bands were established – rather few compared to those of able-bodied institutions but, given the additional challenges the players and organisers faced in learning and performing music, this is perhaps not surprising. An additional bonus for some bands was the ability to raise funds for their institution through their playing. Most of these bands were associated with schools or institutes for the blind.



*Royal Asylum for the Blind Brass Band, Glasgow*

The legacy of these blind band musicians of the past is kept alive today in the inspirational band of the Ohio State School for the Blind.

Here are details of such bands from the British Isles, followed by some overseas bands

- **Aberdeen Blind Asylum Brass Band** - Active in 1867, conductor Mr Coombs. Still active in 1900. Conductor Mr Christie in 1872, W.Benzies in 1885. All the players were employees of the asylum.
- **Belfast Workshop for the Blind Brass Band** - Active in 1893. Still active in 1895. Founded by the Association for the Employment of the Industrious Blind, which was located at Royal Avenue
- **Bethany Home Brass Band** (Kinver, Staffordshire) - Pastor Ernest Hexall founded the Midland Counties Crippled Children's Guild in 1906, and he arranged with Mr Martindale of Kinver for groups of four or five children at a time to stay in his house, for which he paid 6/- per week per child. Demand was such that the Guild leased Hyde House, renaming it Bethany. One of its main claims was that it had the only crippled children's brass band in the world, and George Kimberley came to help out with teaching the children how to play. The band travelled around in the home's bus giving concerts in the neighbouring towns. Pastor Hexall died in 1915, falling off the home's bus, and the home was then run by Richard Davies. Sadly, after a case of neglect in 1919, the home (and band) closed.



**The Only Crippled Children's Brass Band in the World !**

- **Blackpool and Fylde Blind Brass Band (1)** - Active around 1910

- **Blackpool and Fylde Blind Brass Band (2)** – Founded in 1927, consisted of 10 players, conducted by J.R. Fairhurst (conductor of the Blackpool Lifeboat Band). Still active in 1935. Officers included Percy Hargreaves (secretary), Norman Quayle (librarian), and J. Irvine (chairman). J.T. Welch was a player in 1935.
- **Bristol Blind Asylum Brass Band** - Active in 1855 to 1861
- **Cork Industrious Blind Asylum Brass Band** - Founded in December 1860, formed of patients in the asylum, conductor Robert Howard. Still active in 1865
- **Derby Charity Brass Band for the Blind** - Active in 1908
- **Devon and Exeter Institution for the Blind Brass Band** - Founded in 1863, conductor J. Wyllie. First public appearance on Wednesday 24th June 1863, at Fairfield Lawn, Topsham Road. The band consisted of inmates of the institution
- **Drumcondra Male Blind Asylum Brass Band** (Meath, Eire) - Active in 1886, 25 members
- **Edinburgh Blind Asylum Brass Band** - Active in 1862
- **Edinburgh Royal Blind Asylum Brass Band** - Founded in 1882. Active at various times between the early 1880s and the 1960s, with several gaps. Disbanded in 1889, reformed in 1895. Conductor A. Bennett in 1887, Thomas Bowie in 1895-1901, J. Nelson in 1903-1904, Walter Gilroy in 1906. Active in the 1940s/1950s. Probably folded in the 1960s. A concert in Queen's Park in June 1901 was: Robin Adair (Jenkins), Edwinstowe, Love in a Mist (Round), Echoes of the Ocean (Round), Angels' Chorus (Lecont), Lurline (Wallace), Scottish (Haigh), Dinna Forget (Carl Albert). A concert in Holyrood Park in June 1903 was: Sea Lion (H. Round), Irish Airs (H. Round), Round and Round (H. Round), Echoes of the Ocean (H. Round), Old Kentucky Home (Neilson), Royal Clyde (J. Gleadhill), Ever Green Melodies (H. Round), Fair Italy (H. Round). A concert in the East Meadows in July 1902 was: The North Star (Rimmer), Day Dreams (Smith), Gems of Evergreen Melodies (Round), Round and Round, Scottish Melodies (Roche), Fairyland (Round), Brigadier (Rose), God Bless the Prince of Wales (Round). A concert in July 1904 was: Soldier's Tear (J.O. Hume), Summer Blossom (Knellor), Irish Melodies (Newton), Crown Jewel (Southwell), Dream of Lucknow (Nelson), Standard Gems (T. German), Colleen (F. Burns), Scotch Airs (Round).



*Edinburgh Royal Blind Asylum Brass Band*

- **Glasgow Royal Blind Asylum Brass Band** - Active in 1854, based at 100 Castle Street, Glasgow. Conductor Robert Scott in 1863. Still active in 1928-1934, conducted by Thomas Scott. In the 1850s the band consisted of 14 players from the male adult workers at the asylum. Took first prize in a contest at the City Hall in February 1856, beating Glasgow Thistle Instrumental Band into second place. According to a report in a Washington (USA) newspaper of 1929 the band was recently re-organised and “the members memorised every piece, having first being learned from Braille characters. Bandmaster Scott leads his musicians by pulling strings attached to each player’s leg.”
- **Leicester Blind Institution Brass Band** - Active in 1865. The Institute was located on the High Street.
- **Liverpool Blind Asylum Brass Band** - Active in 1897 and the 1900s. The school was in Brunswick Road.
- **Liverpool Workshops for the Blind Band** - Founded in 1885, conductor G.W. Nicholson. Active through to 1918, conductor W.R. Gasking in 1894. A concert, played by memory, in Stanley Park, Liverpool in August 1897 was: *March from Bohemian Girl* (Balfe), valse *Princess Henry* (Lancelot), *The Mikado* selection (Sullivan), lancers *The Favourite* (Medhan), melody *The Mighty Deep*, suite des vales *Chionodores* (Breta), God Save the Queen.

- **Norwich Blind School Brass Band** - Active in 1860 to 1902. The Asylum and School for the Indigent Blind was founded in 1805 and was located in Magdalen Street. The performers were all blind. The band folded in late 1901 partly owing to sickness, and partly owing to the removal of pupils from the school, but mainly to the advanced age of the bandmaster.
- **Sharrow Grange Brass Band** (Sheffield) - Active in the 1930s to the 1950s. Consisted of blind players. Conductor J.H. Argyle in 1939. A report in 1930 stated “We learn that arrangements are being made to form a full brass band of blind Sheffield people. It will be the second of its kind in the country, and it is hoped that it will accompany works given by the Sharrow Grange Choral Society. Mr. Harry Tait, conductor of the Sheffield Police Band, is assisting in the organisation. At present there are about 25 blind people available — all blind since birth”. In 1935 the band, composed of 16 players, performed in parks in and around Sheffield.
- **Somers Town Blind Class Brass Band** (Middlesex) - Active in 1869
- **St Joseph's Blind Asylum Brass Band** (Dublin) - Active in 1884. Still active in 1893
- **West of England Blind Institution Brass Band** (Exeter) - Founded in 1863. Still active in 1869. The blind school was located at St David's Hill, Exeter
- **York Blind School Brass Band** - Founded in 1843 at the Yorkshire School for the Blind. Revived in 1861. Still active in 1883

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- **Austin Blind Institute Band** (Texas, USA) - Active in 1902
  - **Boston Blind School Brass Band** (Massachusetts, USA) – Active in 1884
  - **Hartford Institute and Home for the Blind Brass Band** (Connecticut, USA) - Active in 1896
  - **Fuh-Chow Blind School for Boys Band** (Fujian, China) – The school was founded around 1907 by Amy Oxley, whose husband Dr Wilkinson was in charge of the local hospital operated by the Church Missionary Society in China. A band, composed of blind musicians from the school was formed soon thereafter. More details can be found in Banks, Linda & Robert - *They Shall See His Face: The Story of Amy Oxley Wilkinson and Her Visionary Blind School in China* - Acorn Press, Australia, 2018. ISBN: 978-0647519776



*Fuh-Chow Blind School for Boys Band*



*Fuh-Chow Blind School for Boys Band*

- **Indiana Institute for the Blind Brass Band** (Indianapolis, Indiana, USA) - Founded in 1858, with a female instructress. Still active in 1894
- **Institution for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind Brass Band** (Staunton, Virginia, USA) - Active in 1851. Still active in 1878. Leader Professor A.J. Turner in 1866, T.M. Turner in 1868. A concert in December 1866, included the Palmetto Waltz, Cinderella Quickstep, Old Dominion March, and Washington Quickstep
- **Janesville Blind Institute Brass Band** (Wisconsin, USA) – Active in 1863
- **Melbourne Blind Asylum Brass Band** (Victoria, Australia) – Active in 1875
- **Missouri School for the Blind Brass Band** (St Louis, Missouri, USA) - Active in 1958, when they were taught to march by Harry Sprunk
- **Ohio State School for the Blind Marching Panthers Band** (Columbus, Ohio, USA) – Currently active. Consists of thirty-two blind players, thirty-six volunteer marching assistants, two band directors, and one music assistant. The band was formed in 2005 when now retired director Carol Agler added the Marching Band to support the Ohio School for the Deaf Football program.



*Ohio State School for the Blind Marching Panthers Band*

- **Sydney Industrial Blind Institution Brass Band** (New South Wales, Australia) - Active in 1888. Still active in 1921.
- **Talladega Blind Academy Brass Band** (Alabama, USA) - Active in 1892

- New Zealand Institute for the Blind Band** – Active from the 1935 to the 1950s. A scrapbook of the band 1935-1938 is held at the Auckland Museum. Members in 1935 were: G. Papesch, R. Martin, R. Gherardi, G. Harvey, T. Taylor, A. Morton, J. Shortt, J. Lee, J. Beverley, G. Ashdowne, J. Simpson, L. Hunt, A. Kennedy, J. McGuire, J. Egan, T. Morris, R. Brown, T. Tarewa, A. Peters, Sir Clutha Mackenzie (director), Lt. G.W. Bowes (bandmaster), G.W. Pilgrim, G. Dunn, and E.C. Frayling

## BAND OF THE N.Z. INSTITUTE FOR THE BLIND.

SOUTH ISLAND TOUR—1935.



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AT BACK—G. PAPESCH, R. MARTIN.

THIRD ROW—R. GHERARDI, G. HARVEY, T. TAYLOR, A. MORTON, J. SHORTT, J. LEE, J. BEVERLEY.

SECOND ROW—G. ASHDOWNE, J. SIMPSON, L. HUNT, A. KENNEDY, J. MCGUIRE, J. EGAN, T. MORRIS.

FRONT ROW—R. BROWN, T. TAREWA, A. PETERS, SIR CLUTHA MACKENZIE (DIRECTOR),

LT. G. W. BOWES (BANDMASTER), G. W. PILGRIM (STAFF), G. DUNN.

ABSENT—MR E. C. FRAYLING.