

## Bethany Crippled Children's Brass Band - music from an Edwardian children's home.

*Gavin Holman, 30 November 2022*

Ernest George Hexall (1859-1915) arrived at Oldbury, Worcestershire, around 1880, where he started a revivalist mission that was so successful that within twelve months £600 had been raised to build the 'Wooden Church' - more formally known as the Providence Mission. Hexall opened a grocery shop in Oldbury, the Churchfield Stores, and employed Richard Davies, to assist in the shop and help in the religious work. Davies could play the organ and piano and had a fine singing voice.



In 1906 Pastor Hexall founded the Midland Counties Crippled Children's Guild to raise money 'to provide relief for little sufferers from the slums and alleys of our towns'. The Guild arranged for children to have short holidays at Martindale's (Try Our Ninepenny Teas) tea garden, at Kinver, at a cost of six shillings a week, including full board at Compa Cottage overlooking the tea-garden.



*Compa Cottage at Martindale's Tea Gardens*

Hexall was keen to do more. He initially investigated buying the Edge View Hotel in Kinver, but the cost at £4,000 was too much, and he was unable to obtain support from the town council for his scheme. However, just outside Kinver was Hyde House, which was vacant in 1906 when the Guild was offered a 21 year lease at a nominal rent as a home for crippled boys.

In a little three-penny booklet written to raise money and entitled '*Crippledom*', Hexall described the house as having 40 good sized rooms and extensive gardens, including a large lawn on which children could romp and play, all enclosed by a substantial wall. This new home was named '*Bethany*' and housed up to 20 or 30 crippled boys there during its 13 years of existence. Richard Davies became the home's Secretary and his wife, Nancy, was a non-resident matron. There were dormitories for four to eight boys. Each of these was named after a Black Country town where a collecting guild had been formed to furnish it.



Younger boys went to school in Kinver, but the aim of the home was to give them independence by teaching them a trade by which they could support themselves as they grew older. The basic trades taught were shoe repairing and plain tailoring, but the home had been given half a dozen typewriters by various companies and a few boys were taught to type.

Balance sheets for the home show an annual expenditure of about £600, including the exceptionally low figure of just over £200 to feed about thirty people for a year. The home was supported by a number of concerns – its kitchen garden was productive; there was possibly from subsidy from the grocery shop in Oldbury; donations were solicited from well-wishers and organisations across the region.





*Typewriting school at Bethany*

Much of the money needed came from house-to-house collections. A town would be selected and a gang of four older and more mobile boys spent several days pushing leaflets and small envelopes through letter boxes. Later in the week they returned and became adept at collecting envelopes 'with a little something' in them.

One of Hexall's friends at Oldbury was George Kimberley, a glass cutter at Chance Bros Ltd and a member of the Oldbury Town Band. Oldbury had a long tradition of bands dating back to at least 1857, with various bands, respectively:

- Oldbury Brass Band (conductor Henry Bell), founded in 1857
- Oldbury Carriage Works Band, active in the 1860s, conductors H. Goodyear in 1862, Henry Widdinson in 1863 - the works band from Johnson's Carriage Works. It was still active in 1865.
- Oldbury Euphonic Temperance Band – active from 1860
- Oldbury Rifle Corps Brass Band - founded in 1862, conductor H. Goodyear. The band of the 16<sup>th</sup> Worcestershire Rifle Corps Volunteers.
- Oldbury Temperance Saxhorn Band - active in 1862 to 1869. Conductor Samuel Wall in 1863
- Oldbury Town Band – active from 1891 through to World War 1.

Kimberley established a brass band among the children at the Home, and every Saturday morning he would cycle from his home to Bethany, where he and Richard Davies rehearsed the '*Only Crippled Boys Band in the World*'.



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

*George Kimberley stood, centre, c. 1911*

The band had an open sided coach, along the roof line of which a large sign announced: 'All Boys in This Band Crippled for Life'. Large collecting boxes were fixed to each side of the coach. The coach would drive slowly down a busy shopping street or stop in a market place. While the band played, several boys would move among the shoppers with collecting boxes. There was also a great dane, named Rhona, with a collecting box strapped to her back. The band also appeared at concerts, raising money and public awareness of Bethany.

Although the boys' band was styled the '*Only Crippled Boys Band in the World*', it certainly was not the first such, and possibly not even unique at that point in time. In July 1896 the London South West District Ragged School Union had a 'Cripple Children's Band', based at their Battersea home, which performed at a grand picnic for some 400 children under the care of the Union at Battersea park. Other homes with disabled children also had bands at various times. In most cases it was a sad fact that although the children's musical efforts were supposedly to give them skills and educate them, nonetheless they provided a significant source of funding for their respective homes.

One trip of the Bethany Children's Brass Band was reported, in July 1911. The band made a visit to Tewkesbury on Saturday 1 July, staying the night and returning to Kinver in their motor brake on the Sunday. They 'acquitted themselves well' and apparently also did well from a monetary point of view. Following the visit, one of the boys, Willie Dyke, wrote to the Tewkesbury Register and Agricultural Gazette, which published his letter in their issue of 8 July.



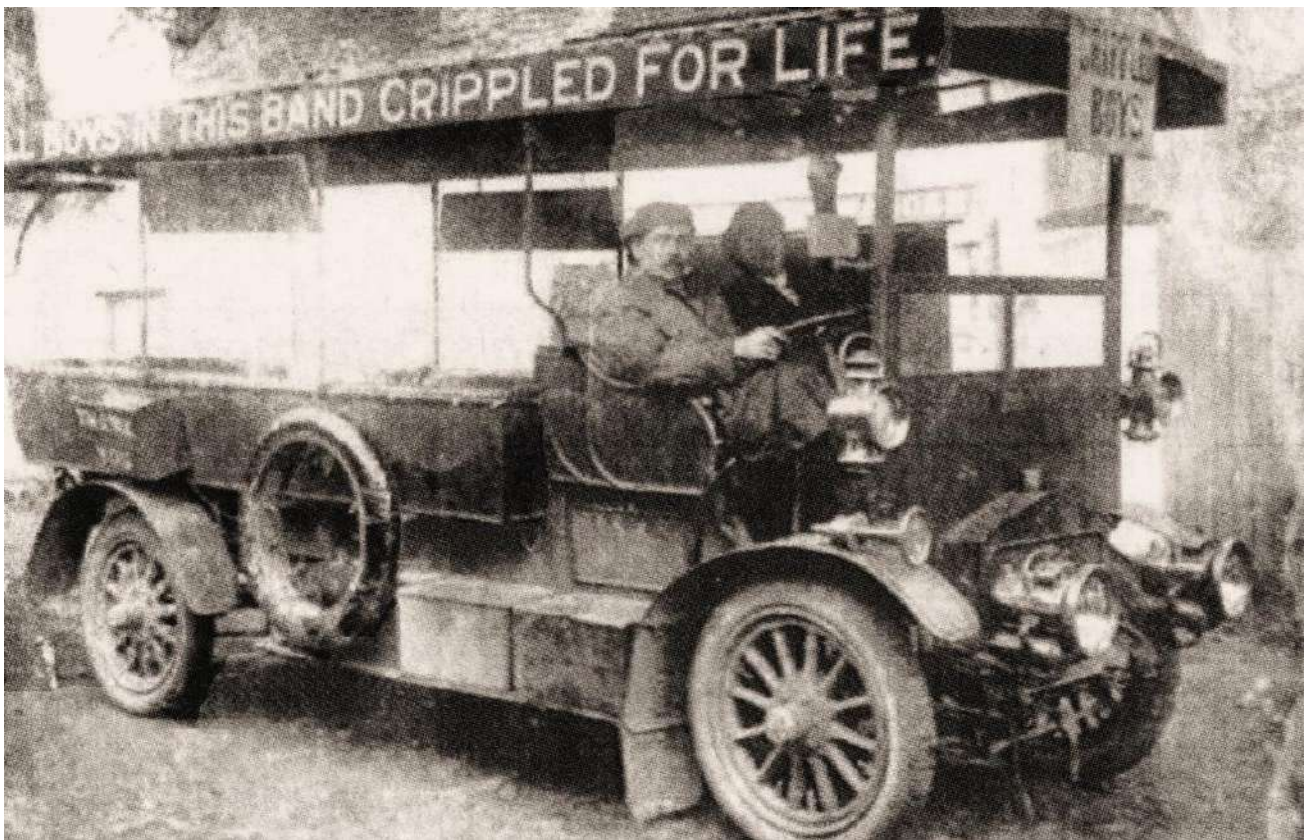
“My Dear Sir, Will you kindly allow me through the medium of your widely-circulated paper to thank His Worship, the Mayor (Mr. A. Baker), and the kind people of Tewkesbury, for the very generous interest shown by them last Saturday to our Crippled Children’s Brass Band, during our visit to your beautiful town.

The good-natured responses of the general public in Tewkesbury far exceeded our expectations, and will live forever in the memory of us poor Crippled Boys and Girls. Thanking you in anticipation that you will be good enough to insert these few lines in your next edition.

I am also permitted to say that we shall only be too pleased to received into “Bethany” any poor Crippled Boy who needs a good Home.

With kindest regards from our Governor, and boatloads of fondest love from all the Crippled Children, including myself,

I remain, my Dear Sir, Yours faithfully, Willie Dyke, Crippled Boy, aged 14.”



*Coach custom built, for the Bethany Brass Band, by Alldays & Onions Ltd., of Birmingham*

Visitors were encouraged at the Home. At weekends the boys looked forward to trippers alighting from the trams and making for the house, where they were escorted round and persuaded to donate to the good cause of Bethany.





The Founder of "Bethany" and some of his Deformed Family.

*Pastor Hexall, sitting, with Richard and Nancy Davies standing at the back*



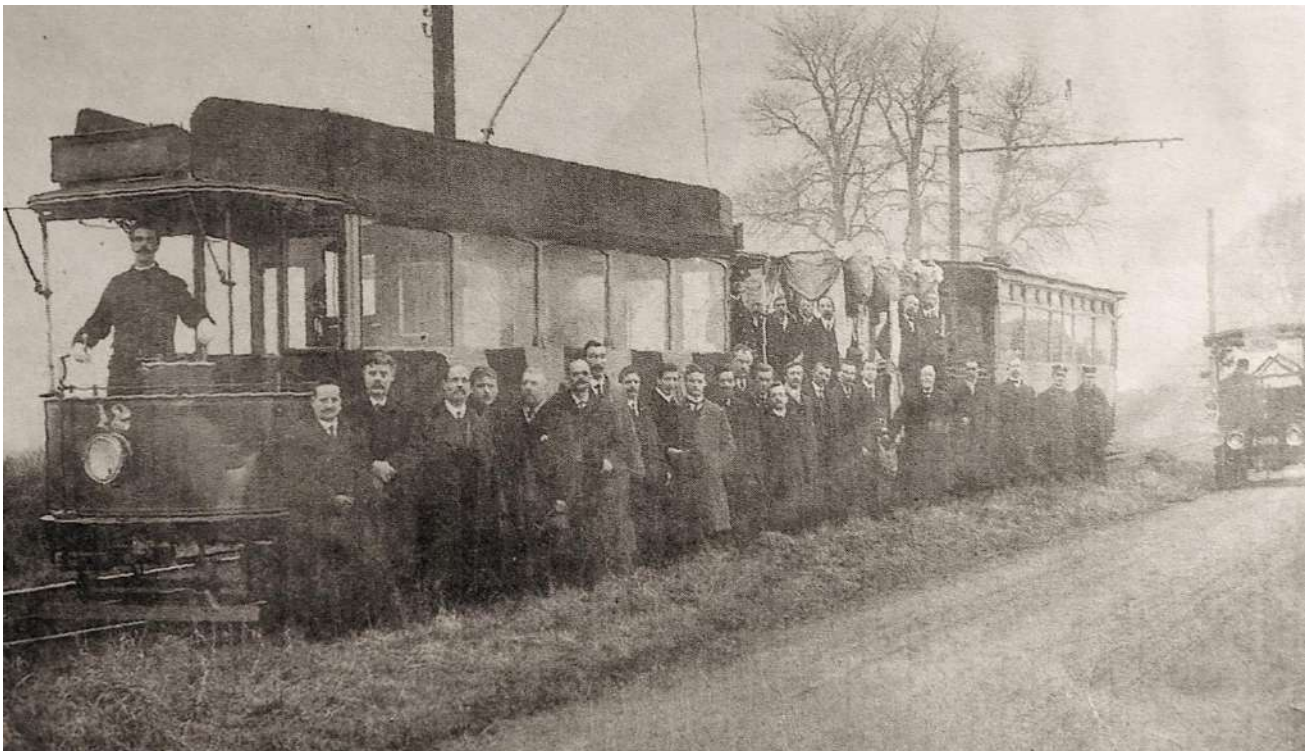
*Some boys with their crutches, outside, and the Davies' in the doorway*





*Some boys with their crutches in the rear gardens of the Home*

In January 1915 Pastor Hexall was returning to Bethany in the band's coach when it crashed, and he died shortly afterwards from his injuries.



*Pastor Hexall's coffin on its way back to Oldbury from Kinver*

After Pastor Hexall's death, Richard Davies and his wife moved into Bethany, to manage the Home full time, but neither had the dedication to continue with the work effectively. Numbers at the home fell as income decreased, and discipline among the boys became more of a problem.

In July 1919 Davies was prosecuted and fined £25 with six guineas costs, for thrashing a thirteen-year old boy, George Sandell, at the Home. In his own defence, Davies stated that Sandell was 'exceedingly refractory, and was the small bully of the Home.' The following week John Bull, the national magazine, published a piece about the case headed '*The Butcher Bully*'. Funds for the home soon dried up and Bethany closed before the end of 1919.

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**JOHN BULL.**

**AUGUST 9TH, 1919.**

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## **SCANDAL OF A CRIPPLE HOME.**

***THE BUTCHER BULLY AND THE PARALYSED CHILD.***

### **Further information:**

- Anon – Scandal of a Cripple Home: The Butcher Bully and the Paralysed Child – *John Bull* – 9 August 1919, pp. 6  
[[www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0003234/19190809/062/0008](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0003234/19190809/062/0008)]
- Lewis, Roy – Bethany: a home for crippled boys – *Picture Postcard Monthly* – Number 395, March 2012, pp. 42-44