

# **The Curtain Falls - the end of St Hilda's Band**

*James Southern, December 1937 [edited by Gavin Holman, May 2020]*

*[with added illustrations of the St Hilda's Band over the years]*

It has for many years been my privilege and pleasure to write and publish notices, biographies, histories and general notices and reports with regard to bandmasters, soloists, bandsmen, and bands in various Musical periodicals, but on this very special occasion I feel that an exceptional privilege has been conferred upon me by being asked to write the history of St. Hilda's Band (champions of Great Britain and the Colonies up to the year 1926), specially for readers of *Musical Progress and Mail*. It seems, perhaps, fitting that I might be entrusted with this task, because I have known and resided among the bandsmen in the North of England for 35 years.

## **The Beginning**

The founder of St. Hilda's Band was the late Mr. John Dennison. His son Robert, and indeed the whole of the Dennison family, was well known by me, thus I feel that I am in the right position in an endeavour to give a true account of this very remarkable combination. The band was founded in the year 1869, as a deputation of miners who worked at the St. Hilda Colliery, called upon him with a request that he would form a band amongst them, and the result was the inception of a Miners' Champion Band. Every member without exception was a miner working at the colliery. In spite of the fact that the original group of men brought together were almost entirely ignorant of music, Mr. Dennison managed to get them into shape, and, with intensive practice, the band became a force to be reckoned with in a surprisingly short time.

The first contest was attended in 1874, but without success. The St. Hilda men, however, were piqued by the nature of the decision, and adopted the unusual course of challenging the winning band to a musical duel, stipulating stakes of 25 a side to add spice to the occasion. The extraordinary event, which aroused great excitement among bandsmen in general, ended in an easy triumph for St. Hilda's Band, although the betting had been 3 to 1 against it.

Eventually this combination amalgamated with another local band, controlled by members of the same family, known as the Dennison Family Band. Another change of title was brought about and the band became the South Shields Borough Band. This amalgamation took place at the end of the year 1885. For a number of years they frequented a number of contests, but with little success, but continued to attend all the functions of the St. Hilda and Marsden Collieries, besides a good many engagements in and out of the Borough. The band by this time had been becoming dissatisfied in many ways, and not the least of their many troubles was the fact of their poor support from the collieries, so that at the latter end of 1905 they found it impossible to make ends meet, and they decided to approach the St. Hilda's Miners' Lodge of the Durham Miners' Association with a view to taking over the band as a "going concern" and, by good

fortune, this was readily agreed to at a general meeting of the Miners' Lodge. (This was in December, 1905.)

Thus, the band, through all its ups and downs and many changes of name, had reverted to its original title, "The St. Hilda Colliery Band," with the welcome alteration, "Silver," instead of "Brass."



*St Hilda Colliery Prize Band – c. 1908*

### **Success at the Palace**

The band, under its new name, attended West Stanley Contest in 1906, but was unsuccessful. It was now decided that a professional teacher should be called in, and the choice fell on Mr. J. A. Greenwood, at that time a most promising young gentleman, who was very quickly forging his way amongst the big teachers of the day. This was the real beginning of a big change that was about to take place in the fortunes of St. Hilda Colliery Silver Band. With a few lessons from Mr. Greenwood the band seemed to take a new lease of musical life, with an entirely different view of the situation from a contesting point of view, and was very successful during the year 1908, when they won first prize in the Junior Cup Section under the conductorship of Mr. Greenwood. In that year the band was winning many local contests and gradually making their presence felt on the contest platform. In 1909 they again appeared at the Crystal Palace, and won the second section contest and *Daily Graphic* Cup, Mr. Greenwood again conducting. This qualified the band to compete in the Championship Section at the Crystal Palace, amongst Britain's best bands, but the band was unplaced in the prize list. Undaunted,

the band returned home, all the better for their experience amongst the " big guns " of the brass band world.

### **The Two "Jimmies" Join the Band**

Now comes the greatest change in the history of this remarkable band. The year 1911 brought to them a new Bandmaster, Mr. James Oliver, and another great turning point in the same year was the arrival of Mr. James Southern as solo trombone. Undoubtedly the appointment of Mr. Oliver, together with that of Mr. Southern, was the turning point in the destinies of the band. They engaged Mr. W. Halliwell as their professional teacher - thanks to the efforts of Mr. Southern - whose energies as a coming manager were observed.

In 1912 the band attended Belle Vue July Contest and gained 4th prize, and at the September Belle Vue Contest they won 2nd prize under their new Conductor, Mr. Wm. Halliwell. At the Crystal Palace in the same year they won the Championship of Great Britain and the Colonies for the first time, which meant bronze medals for every performer. The band's reception on their return home to South Shields was simply indescribable. It was a memorable day when the Thousand Guineas Trophy was handed over to the band for the first time. This brought many engagements during 1913. They again competed in the Championship Section and again achieved another great success by gaining second prize. The following year the contest held at the Crystal Palace was abandoned owing to the Great War.



PHOTO BY.

ST. HILDA COLLIERY BAND.  
CHAMPIONS OF THE WORLD. 1912.

R. H. CARLING.

*St Hilda Band - 1912*

After the outbreak of the Great War, the band decided to abandon competing at band contests and to do all they could for the various charities, Mr. Southern being now the active Manager of the concern. After the Armistice, the band were fortunate in getting back nearly all their players, and re-asserted their former supremacy by winning the 1st prize at the North of England Musical Festival, held at Leazes Park, Newcastle, 28th June, 1919 - £40 in cash, the *Newcastle Chronicle* Gold Cup, valued at 200 guineas, and specials for soloists.

The season of 1920 commenced with the band winning the Durham and Northumberland Championship Contest at Sunderland, Easter Monday. Then followed the winning of the 1,000 Guinea Trophy, many special prizes and silver medals for each member, at the Crystal Palace Contest on 25th September, one of the most popular wins on record. Out of 20 competitors at Glasgow in 1920, they gained first prize for best dress and deportment.



*St Hilda's Band - 1921*

*[Note: During the 1920's St Hilda's band recorded for almost every record company, often a mere repetition of items, but apart from their test pieces the output was somewhat unimaginative. They seemed to favour the lesser known marches, especially those of J. Ord Hume, and such trivialities as "Three Blind Mice", "Pop Goes the Weasel" and "Dinah's Holiday". Among their more serious items we find the "Ballet Egyptien Suite" and Liszt's second "Hungarian Rhapsody", arrangements which require the tone colour and definition of the military band to be effective. "Cleadow Park" written by their first professional conductor, J.A. Greenwood, was recorded on Marathon 138, Cleadow being an attractive village near South Shields. "St Hilda" written by another band trainer of that period, Mr George Hawkins under the pen-name of "Raymond", (Zonophone 2182 and HMV B1554) and*

*"Sergeant Major" by James Oliver (Zonophone 2581). Their cornet soloist during the early years was Arthur Laycock, although somewhat of an eccentric he was one of the greatest cornet players of all time. His artistry can be heard on Columbia and Zonophone recordings. Other players who recorded were Harold Laycock and E. Boam, trombonists, which both Jack Mackintosh and Harry Mortimer were at one time members of the solo cornet section.]*

For the season of 1921 they succeeded in arranging a month's tour in various parts of the country with tremendous success, and again competed and won the Crystal Palace 1,000 Guinea Trophy and the Championship of the British Empire for the third time, with special, gold medals for each member - a record to be proud of. [Adjudicator's remarks: "Tone, tune, time reading, technique and expression of the finest culture."]

1922. Continuous tours in many parts of England, with phenomenal records at every place visited. Also winners of the open competition and *Newcastle Chronicle* Gold Cup, valued at £200, and £50 cash. 1923. Winners (for the third time) of *Newcastle Chronicle* Gold Cup, and continued successful tours.

1924 was St. Hilda's most successful year. Their consistent records and touring of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, and Isle of Wight, again showed their popularity at every place they visited. They again competed at the Crystal Palace Contest, winning the 1,000 Guinea Trophy for the fourth time, thereby setting up a world's record of four wins, one second and two fourths in seven consecutive contests. This is an achievement of which St. Hilda's may well be proud. On this occasion the Crystal Palace Contest was vested with more than usual interest. Our cousins from the Overseas Dominions, Newcastle Steel Works (Australia), were among the entrants. Previous to this contest they had carried all before them. As they had met and beaten all our leading contest bands, St. Hilda's, therefore, became England's only hope of retaining the ashes. How they rose to the occasion, giving one of the most inspired performances ever heard from any band, is already brass band history.



To the credit of the Australians, be it said that they admitted defeat. This Bandmaster, in a letter of congratulation, said: "Success justly deserved." [Adjudicator's remarks: "A huge triumph in artistic playing."]



Two postcards of the band in late 1924, with two dress styles

1925. Continuous tour throughout the summer, organised and arranged by the sole Manager, Mr. James Southern.

TOWN HALL,  
:: STAINES ::

VISIT OF THE  
- FAMOUS -

## St. Hilda Band

(The World's Champion Band).  
Winners of the Thousand Guineas Trophy.  
A record never equalled by any Band.

Wednesday, March 25th, 1925

Doors open 7.30 Commence at 8 p.m.

Proceeds towards  
Staines Town Band  
New Instrument  
Fund

:: PROGRAMME. ::

1. Overture ... "William Tell" ... *Rossini*  
"William Tell" was the 37th and last Opera composed by Rossini. The well-known story of Tell's heroic struggle for the independence of his country has, no doubt, helped to make the Opera founded upon it widely popular. Rossini, who had fixed upon Paris as the City of his adoption, composed music to a French libretto, and, under the title of "Guillaume Tell," it was produced at the Academie Royal de Musique in 1829.
2. Grand Selection "Tannhauser" ... *Wagner*  
Richard Wagner was born in 1813, and died in 1883. He was the composer who exerted the greatest influence upon musical art during the 19th century. He revolutionised operatic methods and, doing away with set ballads and choruses, endeavoured to give the same unity of action to an opera as would be realised in a play without music.
3. Intermezzo "Wedding of the Rose" ... *Jessel*
4. Cornet Solo "Perfection" ... *White*  

Master ALWYN TEASDALE  
(Wonderful Boy Cornettist).
5. Rhapsody "On the Cornish Coast" ... *Geehl*  
TEST PIECE, Crystal Palace Contest, September 27th, 1924, when this famous Band won the Thousand Guineas Trophy and Championship of the World for the 4th time, previous wins being in 1912, 1920 and 1921.
6. Euphonium Solo "My Dreams" ... *Tosti*  

Mr. TOM BRENNEN  
(King of Euphonium Players).
7. Suite ... "Ballet Egyptian" ... *Luigini*
8. Excerpts from "Iolanthe" ... *Sullivan*  

"God Save the King"

Conductor - Mr. JAMES OLIVER.

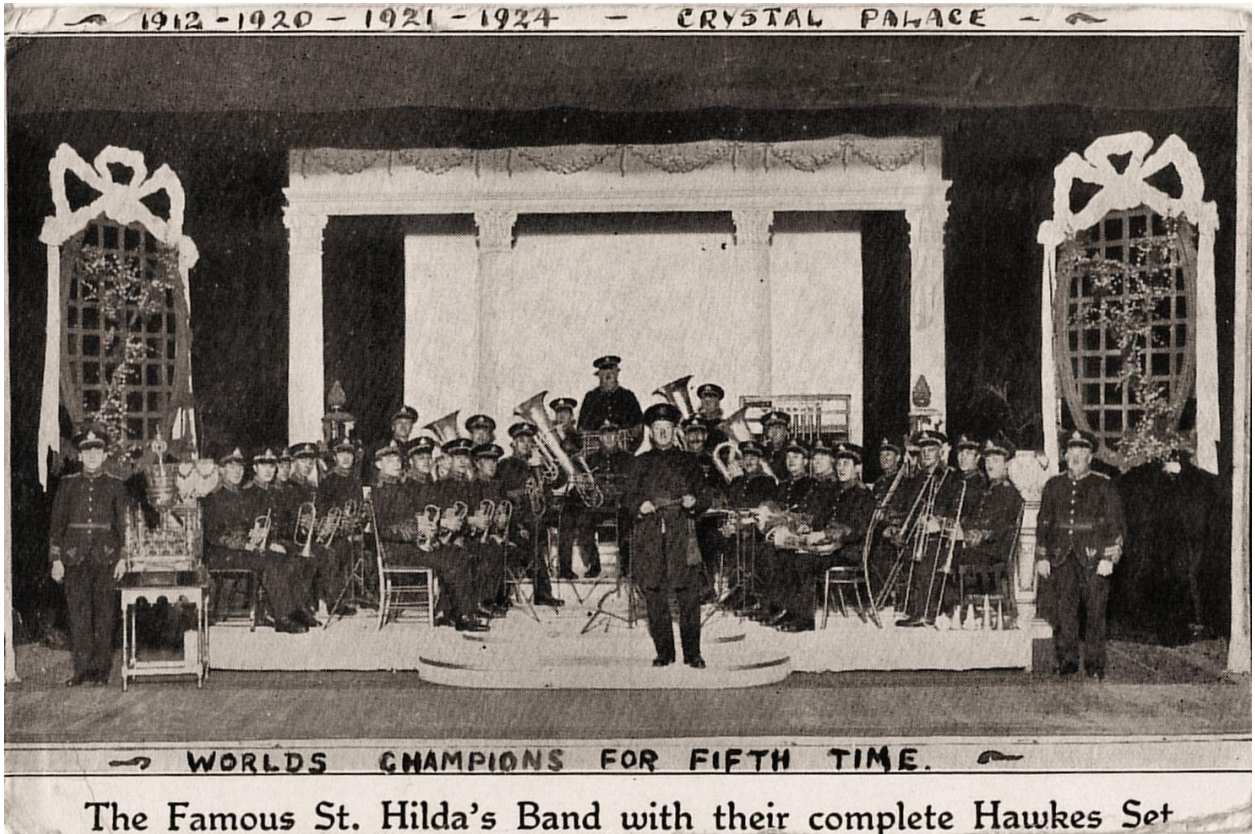
Business Manager: Mr. JAMES SOUTHERN,  
55, Leighton Street, South Shields.

T. E. OWEN & Co., Printers, Moor Lane, Staines

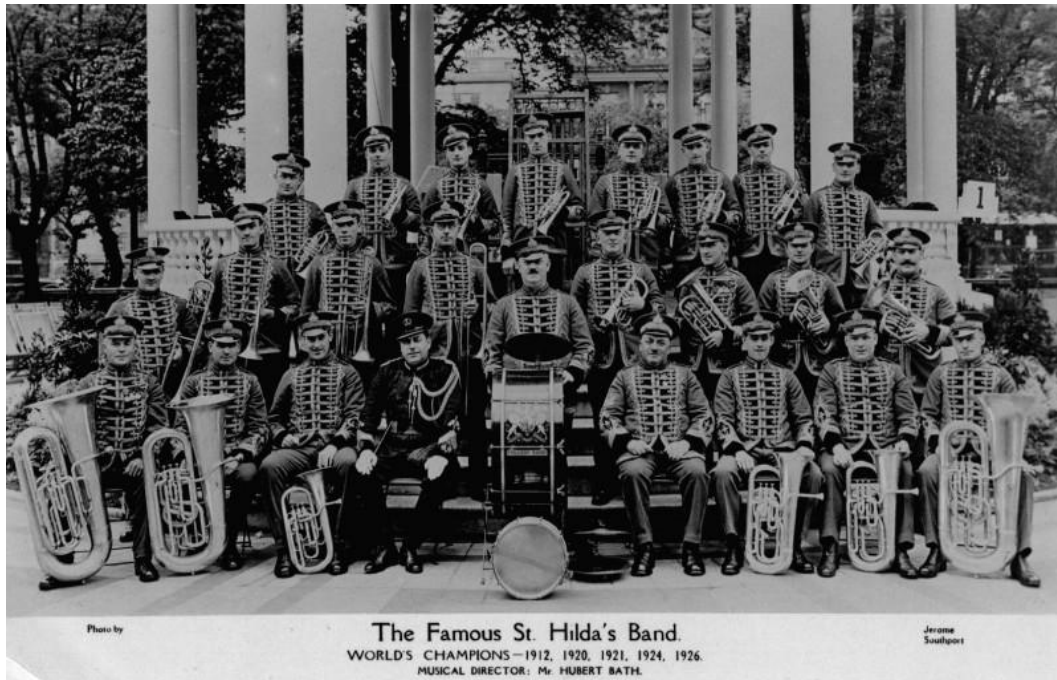
1926. The story of St. Hilda's Band winning the world's championship and the Thousand Guineas Challenge Trophy for the fifth time on Saturday, September 25th, 1926, is known throughout the civilised world, and need not be further commented on here; but, needless to say, much of their splendid success was largely due to the same personnel remaining with the band year after year, and to the generous assistance given by the late President, Mr. James Kirkley, J.P., and family, the late Sir James Readhead, Bart., and family, also the St. Hilda's Colliery officials' and miners' annual subscriptions, together with numerous patrons of South Shields.



*St Hilda's Band at Wharfe Meadows, Otley, 1925*



At this time I may mention, amongst the many proud recollections, the five Royal Command Performances, notably in 1913, when the band played before His Late Majesty King George V. and Queen Mary, at Lambton Castle, and in 1921 at Buckingham Palace.

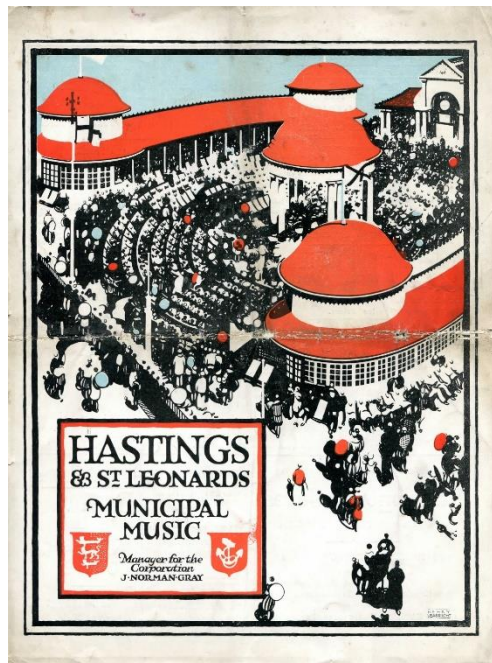


*St Hilda's Band at the Eastbourne Bandstand, 1926*



1927. The band's magnificent records brought about tremendous offers both at home and abroad. Unfortunately the Colliery closed down, but determined to keep this fine band together, and by a supreme effort, Mr. Southern, a trombonist himself and a miner, sacrificed most of his life savings, and bought the whole of the band property from the St. Hilda Miners' Union for a sum of £200 cash. He decided to shoulder the whole of the financial responsibilities of carrying on, with the unanimous vote of all the members, and the band to devote itself entirely to public performances throughout the year, which debarred them from competing at the Crystal Palace Contest.

Mr. Southern guaranteed the wages to the bandsmen and devoted every second of his time in scheming and completing plans and arrangements for continuous annual tours, to the delight of everyone concerned. He was successful with his arrangements for the whole summer, together with engagements at music halls during the winter, and also, for seven years in succession a special engagement of six weeks with Bertram Mills World's Greatest Circus, Olympia, London.



<p><b>BOROUGH OF HASTINGS.</b></p> <p><b>THE FAMOUS ST. HILDA'S BAND.</b></p> <p>Conductor — — <b>MR. JAMES OLIVER.</b></p>	<p>ENTERTAINMENTS MANAGER: J. NORMAN GRAY.</p>
<p><b>PROMENADE BANDSTAND and ALEXANDRA PARK, SUNDAY JULY 3rd, 1927.</b></p>	
<p><b>Afternoon at 3.</b></p>	
<p>1 Overture ... "Morning, Noon and Night" ... Suppe          2 The "Unfinished" Symphony 1st Movement... Schubert          3 Intermezzo ... "Wedding of a Rose" ... Jessel          4 Cornet Solo ... "The Nightingale" ... Moss  <b>Master George Swift, Boy Cornettist</b>          5 Vocalist ... <b>Mr. Lawson Williams</b>          Late Principal Tenor Carl Rosa Opera Company and Queen's Hall Concerts, London.</p>	<p>6 "An Epic Symphony" ... P. Fletcher  <b>Test Piece Crystal Palace September, 1926, when St. Hilda's won the Thousand Guineas Trophy and Championship of the World for the 5th time. Previous Wins—1912, 1920, 1921 &amp; 1924</b>          7 Trombone Solo ... "Lend me your Aid" ... Gounod  <b>Mr. E. Boam, The Famous Trombonist</b>          8 Excerpts from "Rose Marie" ... Stothart          9 Chorus ... "Hallelujah" ... Handel</p>
<p><b>GOD SAVE THE KING.</b></p>	
<p><b>Evening at 7.30.</b></p>	
<p>1 Overture ... "Solennelle 1812" ... Tschaiakowsky          2 Grand Selection ... "Oberon" ... Weber          3 Intermezzo ... "Bells across the Meadows" ... Ketelbey          4 Cornet Solo ... "Carnival di Venice" ... Arban  <b>Mr. William Oughton, The Cornet Virtuoso</b>          5 Vocalist ... <b>Mr. Lawson Williams</b>          Late Principal Tenor Carl Rosa Opera Company and Queen's Hall Concerts, London.</p>	<p><b>In the ALEXANDRA PARK. Afternoon at 3</b>  <b>ALBERT CROUCH'S ORCHESTRA.</b>          1 March ... "Under the Stars" ... Weiss          2 Overture ... "Morning, Noon and Night" ... Suppe          3 Song ... "The Curfew" ... Monk Gould  <b>Mr. JACK COOK</b>          4 Selection ... "Sunny" ... Kern          5 Intermezzo ... "Jours Passes" ... Horne          6 Song ... "The Watchman" ... Squire  <b>Mr. JACK COOK</b>          7 Suite ... "Three Light Pieces" ... Fletcher          8 Finale ... "With Sword and Lance" ... Starke</p>
<p><b>COMMUNITY SINGING under the direction of JOSEPH HAY</b>  <b>GOD SAVE THE KING.</b></p>	
<p><b>INTERVAL.</b></p>	
<p><b>WALLIS ARTHUR'S "PICK-ME-UPS" EVERY AFTERNOON in the ALEXANDRA PARK at 3.15 (Weather Permitting).</b></p>	



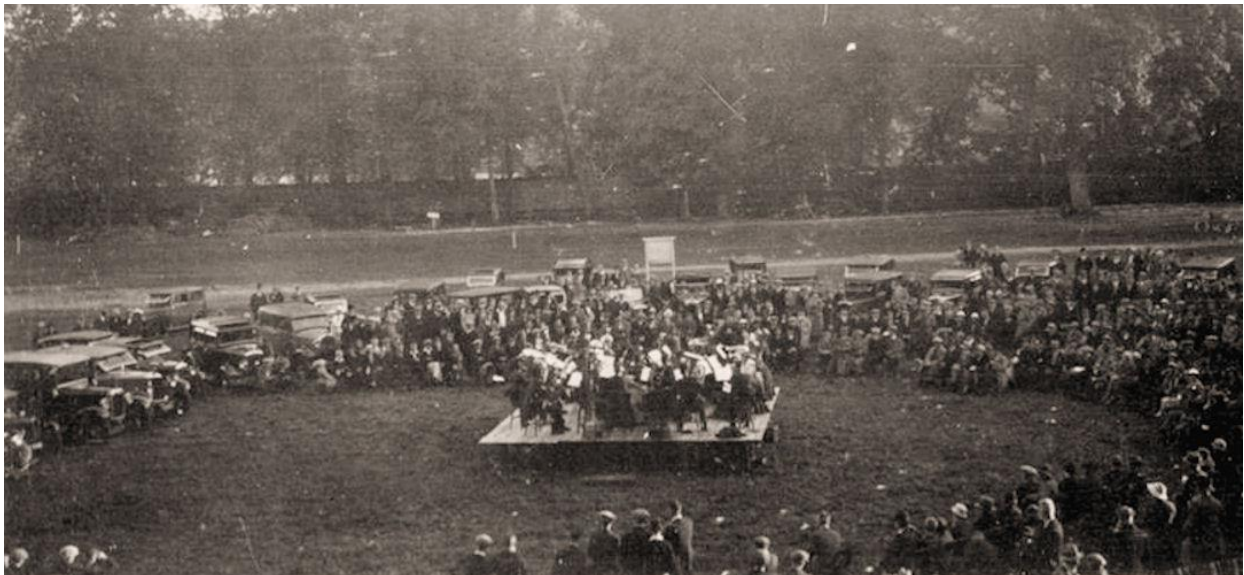
*St Hilda's Band – c. 1930*

1931. St. Hilda's Band of 26 artistes was the guest band at the Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto. When St. Hilda's set sail for Canada they set out with a full determination to maintain their reputation as the premier band of the British Empire, and to uphold the prestige and honour of British brass bands. How well they succeeded is now a matter of history. Right from their opening programme until their final performance, it was one glorious march of success, never before had vast audiences been roused to such enthusiasm. The whole-hearted playing of the band made people wonder at the possibilities of a real brass band. Musical critics, conductors, the press etc., were eulogistic in singing the praise of St. Hilda's. Whether playing a programme, or accompanying the wonderful Exhibition Chorus of 2,500 voices, the band always gave of their best.



*St Hilda's Band during their Canadian tour, 1931*

During their short tour (apart from the 14 days at the Exhibition at Toronto), they visited Montreal, Ottawa, Peterboro', St. Catherine's, Brookville, Niagara Falls, Belle Ville, Perth, Kingston, and returned to the Massey Hall, Toronto, for a farewell concert, a most memorable night that will be hard to erase from the minds of those who were privileged to be there.



*St Hilda's Band at Stanhope, 1934*

During the following years continuous tours were arranged, but circumstances over which we had no control, such as unemployment, the popularity of wireless, and cinemas, combined with weather conditions, began to make my task a most difficult one, so that I was unable to obtain more than 20 weeks' work for the past three years. The shortage of corporation engagements during the summer, the difficulty of obtaining first-class players for so short a period, and the lack of interest shown by the crowd at sporting events, have combined to make my task increasingly difficult, and the financial responsibility has grown too great.



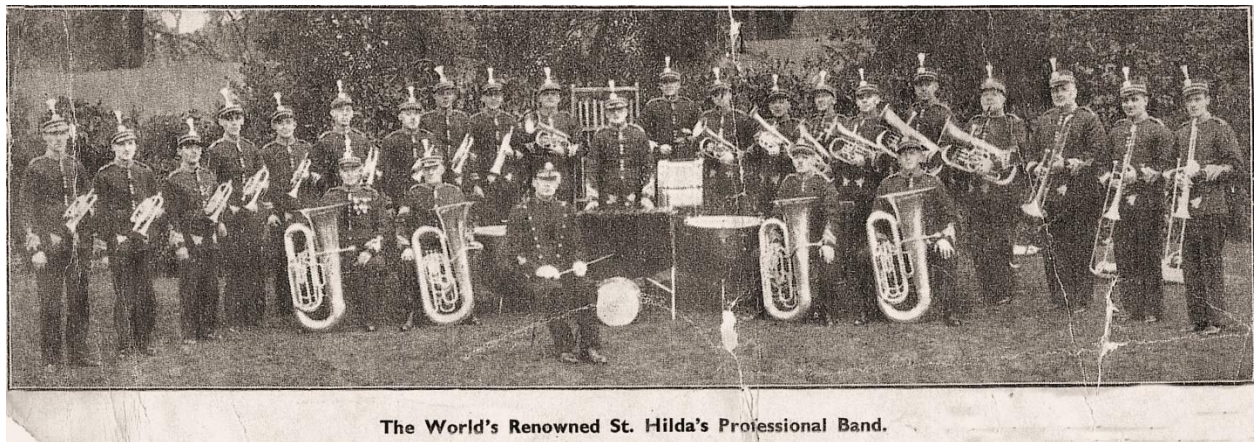
*St Hilda's Band, 1934*



*St Hilda's Band at Cardiff*

Now, I am reluctantly compelled to ring down the curtain after 27 years' service with this famous and world-renowned combination, the band with an untarnished reputation.

*James Southern, December 1937*



The World's Renowned St. Hilda's Professional Band.

## Postscript

Following the publication of this article by James Southern in December 1937, there appeared, in the same issue of the *Musical Progress & Mail*, the following advertisement, truly signaling the end of this great band.

<p><b>ST. HILDA'S BAND</b> DISBANDED INSTRUMENTS, MUSIC AND UNIFORMS FOR SALE WHAT OFFERS? TOGETHER OR SEPARATELY MUST BE SOLD Apply: JIMMY SOUTHERN, 15, Eleanor Road, Moreton, Wirral, Cheshire.</p>
--

## Further reading:

- Anon - Securing the Prize Band [St. Hilda Colliery Band] - *Vintage Light Music* - Spring 1993, pp. 2-3
- Helme, Chris - The legendary St Hilda Colliery Band - *British Bandsman* - (5739) 13-Oct 2012, pp. 28-29
- Hume, James Ord & Southern, James - *History of St Hilda's Band - It's Inception, Early Struggles, Development and Ultimate Record as World's Champions Five Times - 1928* (44pp)
- Hume, James Ord & Southern, James - *History of St Hilda's Band - It's Inception, Early Struggles, Development and Ultimate Record as World's Champions Five Times - 1931* (36pp)
- Hume, James Ord & Southern, James - *History of St Hilda's Band - It's Inception, Early Struggles, Development and Ultimate Record as World's Champions Five Times - 1932* (36pp)
- Hume, James Ord & Southern, James - *History of St Hilda's Band - It's Inception, Early Struggles, Development and Ultimate Record as World's Champions Five Times - 1935* (36pp)
- Mutum, Tim - The Pride of the North: England's Premier Band [St Hilda Colliery Band]- *British Bandsman* - (5960) December 2017, pp. 35-37
- Southern, James – The Curtain Falls - *Musical Progress & Mail* – December 1937, January 1938
- Southern, James - *St Hilda's Band - Premier Band of England - 1937*
- Southern, James - My Life Story - *Musical Progress & Mail* [various issues in 1935]
- Wright, Frank - Around England with St Hilda's - *Musical Progress and Mail* - January 1935