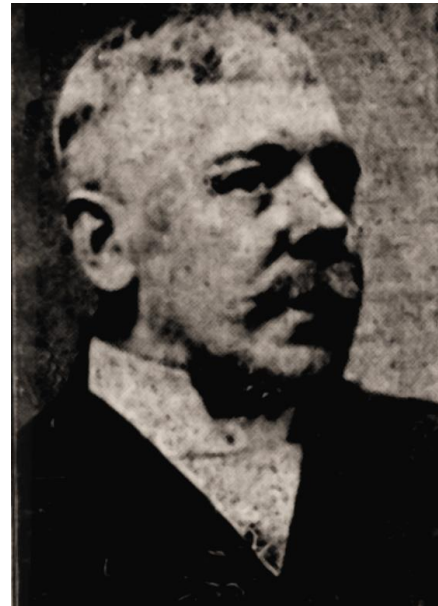


## A L.N.W.R. Band and a 48-hour piano marathon (with two pianos and some elephants)

Gavin Holman, 12 December 2021

How many bands have undertaken a playing 'marathon' or 'playathon' for a ridiculous number of hours, to raise money for their own funds or for charity? It is hard work, particularly if the audience drifts away! However, it is much better to have someone do all the hard work for you - witness this example from 115 years ago.

In October 1906, Mr. Napoleon Bird (right), a 50-year old pianist from Stockport, planned to play the piano for 48 consecutive hours, raising money for the instrument fund of the local London & North Western Railway Employees Brass Band (Stockport). It is not known if he was approached by the band, based on his previous record-breaking history, or if he volunteered his efforts on their behalf. Also, we do not know what his connection was, if any, to the band.



Napoleon Bird had quite a track record of endurance piano performances. He had five previous feats to his name, ranging from a paltry 35 hours to his previous world record of 45¼ hours, at Manchester in November 1895.

His training consisted of walking exercises and rubbing his hands and arms with embrocation. The muscles of his hands were abnormally developed, and he said that his fingers never tired, except that his left hand had a slight tendency to become stiff with continuous stretching of octaves. His most dangerous foe was the desire to sleep, and to this end his wife Elizabeth and son Henry, who were to attend him during the performance, would place cloths saturated with methylated spirits on his head, as an antidote to drowsiness.

When asked how these peculiar performances began, Mr Bird stated, *"It first arose over a bet. In 1887 a military man in Calcutta played 24 hours consecutively, but was allowed to feed himself with one hand. I beat that, [for a bet of £10, in June 1887, with 25 hours] but curiously enough it was harder than my longer ordeals since. I am now to play continuously with both hands."*

He followed that with a performance of 36¼ hours at the Mechanics' Institute, in October 1887. Had had originally arranged to play for 25 hours in Manchester, but at the last moment those arrangements fell through, and he took the Mechanics' Institute and billed himself to do 26 hours. Someone pointed out that a man in Australia had done 36 hours, so Mr Bird set out to beat that record. He played for 40 hours at the Stockport Armory in 1894, followed by 40¼ at St James Hall, Manchester, in 1895, before his 45¼ hour achievement in November that year.

Bird was born in London, in 1855, and was educated at the London Academy of Music. He joined a Japanese music troupe at the age of 18, and was their musical director for 14 years. It was on a visit to the Mechanics Institute that he met his future wife, Elizabeth Bramwell.

He played on a grand piano situated in the Stockport Armory. A special licence had to be obtained from the Stockport Magistrates to allow the performance outside the normal hours. This was granted with the stipulation that between the hours of 12 midnight and 6 in the morning, the public would not be admitted, and Mr Bird would play only to his family, six other persons and a police constable. During the two days of playing, he estimated that he would play some 1,500 pieces of music, varying from grand opera to the latest music hall ditties, most of which would be played from memory.



MR. NAPOLEON BIRD performing his record feat of playing the Piano for 48 consecutive hours, October 2nd, 3rd, and 4th, 1906, for the benefit of the L. & N. W. Employees' Brass Band.

The event opened with a promenade concert by the London & North Western Railway Employees Band. As the start hour approached, Napoleon Bird took to the stage, removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. At one minute to 10 p.m., on Tuesday 2 October 1906, the timekeeper shouted "Time." Bird started off with "*The National Anthem*", followed by Sousa's "*Stars and Stripes*" and a number of miscellaneous pieces, including waltzes and other dance music, which had dancers whirling at the other end of the hall.

As he played, he smoked – cigars and pipe alternately. He was fed by his friends and family with chicken, oysters, eggs, and bread, which was washed down with tea and brandy and lemonade. During his previous attempt, in Manchester in 1895, he consumed half a gallon of brandy, half a gallon of lemonade, two large roasted chickens, several dozen oysters, and more!

The public left at 12 midnight, leaving Bird and the committee, with his wife feeding him cold chicken and spoonfuls of brandy and lemonade. During the next day he also accompanied two concerts in the hall. After 24 hours, at 10 p.m. on the Wednesday, there were some 1,000 people present in the hall. On Thursday morning, after 37 hours, he complained about the piano, not being suitable for the purpose. Messrs Niedd's, of Underbank, supplied one of their best grand pianos, which was hoisted onto the platform and positioned so that Mr Bird could swing round on his seat without losing a note.



*Napoleon Bird, at the piano*

Around 2 p.m. on the Thursday, he had a bad turn, and had to be fanned and sprayed, but after ten minutes of desultory playing his vigour returned. At 2.30 p.m. Mr Johnson, of Waterloo, converted the stage into a barber's shop, and shaved Mr Bird, giving him a good brush up, while he continued playing. A good spray of eau-de-cologne and a freshly lit pipe saw Mr Bird into his final hours.

As he passed his previous record of 45 hours, around 7 p.m., he started playing the Hallelujah Chorus, his wife spraying him with eau-de-cologne and his daughter fanning him. This achievement was marked by rockets being sent from the Armory yard outside. His performances faltered at times, but various vocalists joined the fray to help his musical endeavour. By this time there was a great crowd outside the Armory and even more had pushed their way into the hall.

At a quarter to ten he had an exceedingly bad time. To revive himself, he was gently slapped on the side of the head and sprayed, while the audience sang “*Rule Britannia*” and “*Steady, Boys, Steady*”. At two minutes to ten he played the “*National Anthem*” and on the stroke of ten he struck up “*Auld Lang Syne*” to complete his record-breaking performance of 48 hours continuous playing.

After a brief speech, once the crowd allowed him to speak, he was assisted into a cab and was led off by the band, playing “*See the Conquering Hero Comes*”. Trams were stopped for a while to allow the procession to pass, with six police constables on hand to control the crowd of some 10,000 people.



*London & North Western Railway Band, 1912  
[possibly the Stockport branch, but this could be one of the ten or so other LNWR bands]*

Just after the band and Mr Bird’s cab had entered Sr Petersgate, off the High Street, three elephants appeared on the street and ran into the crowd, which scattered in all directions. These animals had been performing at the Empire Theatre and were on their way home. Happily, they were easily calmed, and the crowd once more followed the ‘hero’ home, where he was lifted from the cab and carried shoulder-high into his house.

His performance started at 10 p.m. on Tuesday, 2 October 1906, and continued until 10 p.m. on Thursday 4 October. With the exception of a tendency to drowsiness, a slight swelling of his fingers, and cramp in the legs, he suffered no other major inconvenience, and the following day he was reported to be ‘fit as a fiddle’.

The London & North Western Railway Employees Brass Band (Stockport) was active in the 1900’s and 1910’s, and was conducted by Mr Bullock in 1906, and J. Leigh in 1908. It was one of a number of brass bands associated with the LNWR. These included bands at depots at Abergavenny, Bescot, Birkenhead, Birmingham, Crewe, Crewe, Edge Hill, Garston, Manchester, Watford, and Wolverton. There have been over 240 bands associated with various railway companies over the last 170 years.