

## Harwich Bands

Early band history in Harwich is sketchy but there must have been one for the town council, in 1909, to erect the bandstand, paid for by the local Co-operative Society.

The Dovercourt Council hired a band for the 1912 summer season.

Further evidence supports the existence of a band when, on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1854, the railway came to Harwich. The local paper reported that "the Mayor and other distinguished guests boarded the train at Dovercourt and at Harwich they were met by a huge crowd. The band played 'See the conquering hero comes' and the guns at the Redoubt fired a salute". This may have seemed an impressive journey but is actually only one stop up the line. Local papers of the time went to great lengths to include the most superfluous detail and I suspect that if it had been any band other than the local one it would have merited a mention of their name. From then onwards the railway played a very important part of the economy of Harwich with boat trains arriving twice a day at the quay and, in the early days, transferring lock, stock and buffet car straight onto the waiting train ferry.

Leonard Weaver, one time Mayor of Harwich, wrote in his book 'Harwich, Gateway to the Continent' that the Band of the Harwich Volunteers (probably a quasi military band with woodwind instruments) formed in 1859 regularly played at civic functions such as the Royal Harwich Yacht Club Regattas.

The Salvation Army band was formed in 1880 attracted large crowds every Saturday and Sunday at their Open Air meetings and also gave concerts in the wooden Park Bandstand erected in 1911 in the Cliff Park.

The Church Lads' Brigade at St Nicholas Church also ran a brass band and, in 1912, played at the fete at Edwardstowe Hall.

The old 1909 bandstand was not the largest bandstand and not the most cleverly located one either, especially when a brisk north-easter was blowing straight off the sea, which was often the case on this part of the coast. A few years later the Town Council erected a glass verandah to protect audience and performers.

In the 1930's this bandstand was replaced by a purpose built glass and iron 'Floral Pavillion' in roughly the same position. It was a popular place for concerts and I can remember a visit by a championship band to give a concert to a packed audience. The band ended its programme with the 1812 overture complete with loud canons for the climax. When the canons went off the whole audience was showered with rust from the iron girders. Worse still the Pavilion was home to many sparrows and starlings and the birds did what birds naturally do when they are frightened much to the annoyance of several members of the audience. The Floral Pavilion was demolished in 1972 due to subsidence.

In the 1950's there was a band run under the Essex County Council Adult Education Programme. The Grange Brass Band was called after the premises in which the evening class rehearsals were held in Fronks Road. The first conductor was a Royal Marines Bandsman and then was conducted by Royal (Nat) Wringe who ran a general store in the old part of Harwich near the lighthouse. On Nat's retirement it was conducted for six years by David Cawdell, an ex Irish Guards Bandsman.

Several Harwich Salvation Army bandsmen played with the Grange Band for a while in the personal belief that it wasn't a real 'outside band' as it did not give concerts but just an evening class where they were developing their skills in musicianship which would benefit the SA.. The Corps Officer took a different view and made the bandsmen choose between the SA or the Grange band. Several left the SA because of it. The 'rift' was to last for two decades before it was healed with the Grange Band being invited to give a concert in the SA hall. The conductor at the time (David Cawdell) was careful to choose a suitable programme, bridging the gulf between SA and 'outside' band music by choosing several Eric Ball pieces. Eric Ball, the famous brass band composer, was also in a similar personal dilemma, torn between the sacred and secular with spectacular success in both fields.

When educational cut-backs closed the Grange Centre the band became self-funding and for a time hired several rehearsal venues including Methodist churches and the back room of the Phoenix public house down on the sea front. They finally settled in the old drill hall during which time it was redecorated and used as a Community Centre.

The withdrawal of County Council support meant a change of name and the Harwich Concert Band was chosen. A change of uniform was also made from sombre black blazers to bright red tunics, as an act of confidence in the future. Like most local bands it took its place in many civic and national events. One comes to mind when a new war memorial was unveiled in Fronks Road. The landscaping had only just been finished in time for the big event with the turf being laid only the previous day. Chairs were set out for the band which sank into the soft earth immediately the bandsmen sat down causing them virtually to be playing on their knees for the whole ceremony. The Harwich Concert Band continued under that name for several years with a change of conductor in the 1990's when Tony Page took over. Financial problems, entirely unconnected with the new leadership, hit the band and numbers fell. The band struggled along until the British Legion took an interest and renamed them the Harwich Royal British Legion Band.

Band photographs are an excellent source of material for band historians. Many local bands had their pictures taken by a photographer called Wallis whose neat backwards sloping captions helpfully identified many of the

bands. Frederick Percy Wallis began his photographic business in Great Oakley in 1905. he then transferred to Little Oakley and in 1920 to a new studio in Upper Dovercourt. His early pictures were just signed Wallis or F. Wallis. When his daughter Winifred became a partner in 1918 he signed his pictures F.&W. Wallis, another clue to dating band photographs. He died in 1924, probably leaving Winifred (now Mrs Crees) to carry on the business. Wallis used to travel around the area on a motorcycle (Reg no.F 5190) carrying all his equipment in a sidecar. He had a large family of eight children.

Whilst recording the history of bands in Harwich we must not forget the Harwich Marine Workshops Band. Not strictly a brass band but a popular sight at the many carnivals in the area. They were accompanied by some non-playing members all wearing huge papier mache heads who were known as the 'Big Heads'. The 'band' itself comprised all sorts of weird home made instruments and the sound was produced by a kazoo in the mouthpiece. After the First World War, these type of bands were known as 'Tommy Talker Bands' because the kazoo was used by soldiers in the trenches to signal to one another. After the war employment was very hard to find and returning servicemen formed 'Tommy Talker Bands' busking round the towns to raise money for their families to live on.