

HERITAGE CIRCLE

David Cawdell, And The bands Played On

David Cawdell played tribute to town and village bands at the June meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. He explored the origins of brass bands and their links to the First World War.

Brass bands developed across Britain from the 1860s. At their height, there were about 30,000 town and village bands but this has declined to about 3,000 now. David Cawdell has identified 70 village brass bands in Suffolk and a further 80 in Norfolk in the early 20th Century.

The bands appear to have evolved from three possible sources. From medieval times there were Waits Bands formed by watchmen in towns who played at civic events. They were banned in 1834 because of the rowdiness associated with them but they demonstrate the long tradition of music in towns. A second source for brass bands was the military bands formed during the 19th Century. Fears of invasion at different times led to local militia groups being formed and musicians often played when soldiers were marching. However, David Cawdell thinks that the most likely origin of many brass bands was from church bands. He illustrated this point by reference to Thomas Hardy's novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, where the introduction of a church organ led to musicians joining the Methodist Church. These church bands became a key feature of village life and flourished. The Salvation Army was also influential in training young people as musicians in more urban areas.

David Cawdell explained that village bands tended to be undermined in the late 19th Century by the increasing mechanisation of agriculture, the expansion of industry in towns and the greater mobility offered to the population through the railways. However, they remained a feature of village life up to 1914. When war broke out the bands responded in two major ways. He cited examples of bandsmen volunteering for the army en masse. The Salvation Army bands of Halifax and Long Eaton were in Flanders very early in the war. He also displayed photographs of bands playing as volunteers marched off to war. One was from Southwold and is dated 13 June 1915, and the other was from Attleborough.

Inevitably there were casualties among the bandsmen. It is calculated that 20% of them were killed or wounded, with a large number missing as their bodies were never identified. Five bandsmen won the Victoria Cross, with a further 122 receiving other military honours. The bandsmen often had the role of stretcher bearers in the war.

Music often featured during quiet periods at the front. The Imperial War Museum has published the memoirs of many soldiers who comment on soldiers singing. One reminiscence from the summer of 1915 mentions 'Joe Cornet' who was a German soldier who played requests from the British troops in the opposite trench.

After the war former soldiers were often involved with music. Tramp Bands were formed by unemployed soldiers who often had little musical ability who made collections when marching around towns. Other more accomplished bands showed a reaction to the war by playing without wearing uniforms.

Finally, David Cawdell concluded his talk by explain the origin of some well-known soldier songs. Fred Godfrey wrote *Take Me back To Dear Old Blighty*. The term 'Blighty' meant home and was derived from the Hindi word 'bilati'. *Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kit Bag* was originally a waltz but the Powell brothers converted it into a marching song.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 23 July at Rickinghall Village Hall when Richard Smith will talk about the impact of the Black Death on Rickinghall from 1349-1500. New members and visitors are welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy