

# A MEDAL FOR BRASS

**MANY MEMBERS** of the Worshipful Company will perhaps not be aware of the history and great importance of the Iles Medal awarded annually for services to Brass Bands.

Inaugurated in 1953, a century after the first brass band contest at Belle Vue, Manchester, in our movement it is the oldest contest which has continued and flourished through two World Wars as an annual event looked forward to by countless band enthusiasts and for many years under the gracious patronage of H.M. The Queen. The Medal commemorates the involvement of a Past Master of the Company, John Henry Iles, OBE with the brass band movement over a period of more than fifty years.

The great impresario certainly put brass bands on the musical map, starting with a prestigious concert at the Royal Albert Hall in 1900. Then massed bands combined under guest-conductor Sir Arthur Sullivan to present a charity concert for wives and families of soldiers involved in the Boer War. Mr. Iles then started a National Brass Band Contest at the old Crystal Palace - sadly burned down in 1937 - which has continued in various London venues (with breaks during the two World Wars). In 1925 he became Managing Director of Belle Vue, Manchester, thus becoming controller of both the major contests in the country. The Belle Vue Contests have continued to prosper - although now known as The British Open - even though the old Belle Vue site has long been demolished, and we now play in the less cavernous Free Trade Hall in Manchester, a few miles down the road.

Mr. Iles died in 1951, and his Medal is a most suitable memorial to a long involvement with -- and indeed passion for brass bands. I was the first proud recipient of the Medal in 1953, not least because I had always regarded him with awe and respect since the day in 1910 when as a small boy of eight I was brought by my father from our home at Luton to purchase a new instrument in London. I still own this particular cornet - a beautifully engraved instrument in a brown leather, blue velvet-lined case, a constant reminder of that great day in my life, which also included a visit to John Henry Iles office at 210 Strand. Already very active in the brass band world, he was a colourful figure in a large homburg hat and overcoat with a splendid fur collar! No wonder he made such an impression on a small boy "up from the country".

Over the years, I got to know him exceptionally well and long after I had out-grown my short trousers, he always addressed me as "my boy". It is always a good thing to remember that he organised brass bands from what he sometimes described as "work-ing-class musicians" into a movement which

**By the late Harry Mortimer  
-- Liveryman**

now flourishes in the world of music generally. From being an amateur movement, full of enthusiasm but lacking in organisation, its always talented instrumentalists have now become part of a highly respected and admired musical medium, which while remaining an amateur pastime these days comprises highly intelligent and musical players whose dress and deportment is something we are also proud of.



*Photo: D. Hussey & the British Bandsman*

During John Henry's reign, he achieved another aim which changed the face of brass bands. He was able to persuade many celebrated British composers to write music especially for the brass band medium. After a few years of listening to the old arrangements of overtures, operatic selections and musical comedy pot-pourris, he decided that these orchestral arrangements, which comprised the bulk of the brass band repertoires, should be augmented with music written by famous contemporary composers. The first "pioneer" from the orchestra was Percy Fletcher (well known for his splendid light music works) in 1913. He gave the brass bands music with a completely new look and sound. Other composers worked on from this.

After a lull during the 1914-1918 War, such composers as Granville Bantock, John Ireland, Sir Arthur Bliss and Herbert Howells all contributed to our repertoire in the 1920s

and 1930s. But John Henry's greatest "scoop" was to persuade Sir Edward Elgar to write a special piece for brass bands, and in 1930 his "Severn Suite" caused a musical sensation. This beautiful Suite is still regarded as a classic, and paved the way for a succession of contemporary composers - Vaughan Williams, Eric Cundell, Malcolm Arnold, Joseph Horowitz and Robert Simpson, to name but a few - who over the years have contributed pieces for brass bands which have enriched our long traditions. It has also encouraged composers from our own movement to write specially for the medium - Eric Bell being a prime example of imaginative and sensitive music which is appreciated by all brass band lovers.

From the mid-20s, therefore, there was a gradual breaking-down of the rather "snobbish" attitude to brass bands, and in my Halle Orchestra days I was able to persuade Sir Granville Bantock to come and conduct three brass bands, which we called a "brass orchestra" in a major concert hall. This was the beginning of a long line of orchestral conductors - Sir Malcolm Sargent, Sir Arthur Bliss, Sir John Barbirolli, for example - who conducted our bands at concerts. One of the first of these to accept invitations to conduct bands was Sir Adrian Boult, who was always so encouraging to us, and was the first President of the National Youth Brass Band of Great Britain when it was formed by Dr. Denis Wright in 1952.

Many members of the Worshipful Company have also helped the progress of brass bands - notably a Past Master, the Late Frank Wright, who wrote and arranged a large amount of splendid music for brass; Edwin Vaughan Morris (now in Australia) who took over the management of the National Contest in London from John Henry; and, of course, Sir Vivian Dunn, who has frequently conducted and adjudicated at our competitions.

I, for one, am proud to belong to this great movement, which has been my life for the past eighty-two years - I started to play at the age of seven!; and I know that every recipient of the Iles Medal over the years has been particularly proud to receive it, for services to brass bands, whose cause was nurtured and brought to the notice of the general public by John Henry after whom this Medal is named.

**The passing of Harry Mortimer at the age of 89 marks the end of an era wherein this remarkable man raised the standard of British brass band playing from its somewhat parochial and industrial environment to the highly professional excellence now recognised worldwide.**

**As well as fine musicianship and a marvellous ability as a conductor, he possessed a keen sense of humour. I recall when he was elevated from OBE to CBE he said - "It's nice to be transposed up a tone!"**

**Pastmaster Sir Vivian Dunn KCVO OBE FRAM FRSA**