

THE UCKFIELD BAND

The following notes were written by Mr. D. Shepherd, a member of the band, for an O.N.C. in Public Administration, in April 1973.

The Uckfield Band is a Brass band of amateur status. At present there are 34 members, 14 being senior members, and 20 junior members. Many of the junior members attend the Ringmer County Secondary School and therefore live in either Ringmer or Lewes. This presented difficulties with transport so the Band decided to rehearse in Ringmer.

The Band was formed so that local musicians could have the opportunity to play in an organised and co-ordinated group. This would not only give pleasure to themselves but to the public and when possible numerous charitable causes.

The present Uckfield Band was founded in 1957 but through research I found that this is not the first Band that Uckfield has had. Father Fletchers Band is the earliest traceable band and this flourished in the Victorian era. Following this there was an Uckfield Town Band which was operating from about 19¹⁸⁸⁸10 to 1930 and the Uckfield Salvation Army Band which also existed at this time. In the late 19^{1930's}40's there was an Uckfield British Legion Band also.

The first inspiration for a Band after this period came from retired Bandmaster, Mr. A.F. Martin, who strongly thought that Uckfield needed a Band. He obtained the support of several influential local people and as a result a Public Meeting was held in 1957 at which the decision was taken to form a public subscription band. Lord Rupert Nevill accepted the office of President and lent his name to the fund-raising appeal which was circulated throughout the area while Mr. Martin organised a house to house collection in the town and is believed to have visited almost every house in Uckfield personally.

Within three months funds had mounted to over £300 of which a third had been contributed by the house to house collection and with this encouraging start a committee embarked on a series of fund-raising projects in which they were materially assisted by the newly formed Ladies Supporting Committee. By April 1958, with £400 available towards the purchase of instruments, an order was placed with Barratts of Manchester Ltd. for a set of 20 reconditioned instruments together with 20 music stands costing £600 over all with two years interest-free credit. Although this huge sum was spent on instruments the Band could only afford to buy reconditioned instruments instead of new ones. There is a considerable difference between them because reconditioned instruments are adequate but the workings well worn. In fact the

instruments with which the Band started its career had already seen some fifty years service.

From here the band built up a collection of instruments, music and equipment and was able to accept engagements thus establishing a source of income for Band funds.

Traditionally the Bandmaster of a Brass Band is not merely the conductor of the Band at rehearsals and engagements but is also responsible for individual tuition from novice standards upwards and as a member of the Band's executive plays an active part in the administration. In addition a Band may be fortunate enough to obtain the services of a professional teacher or musical adviser either on a permanent basis or for a shorter period for example in preparation for a contest.

Mr. A.F. Martin, prime-mover in the Band's foundation, was its first Bandmaster and was succeeded on his retirement in 1963 by one of his own pupils, Mr. A.J. Barton.

Mr. Barton, after four years, was succeeded in 1967 by Mr. P.H. Bowles, who commenced a regrettably short tenure of office retiring through ill-health two years later. Fortunately the Band is still able to benefit from his experience in his present capacity of Musical Director.

His successor, Mr. M.R. Fairhurst brought to the post not only the enthusiasm common to all the previous Bandmasters but also professional teaching ability and musical knowledge. As head of the music department at a local Secondary School he had already raised a highly successful Brass band within the school and it was this professional approach which influenced the Band's progress over the next three years. Increasing commitments due to the expansion of the school compelled his resignation to be succeeded by Mr. S.C. Johnson who has already, in a very short time, demonstrated his ability and ambition.

In the past the Band's activities were typical of the local village Band with its parochial outlook. Most of the engagements revolved around local festivities where the Band was required only to provide background music for such functions as Flower Shows and Gymkhanas. Since its early days the Band has broadened its outlook and is engaged in many activities throughout the year encompassing a large area.

Although the Band is active all the year round it is at its busiest during the summer months due to the heavy demand for a Band which results in an engagement most weekends. However the Band must earn an income and for this purpose afternoon and evening concerts are given at various seaside resorts and towns throughout the county.

During the month's of October and November the Band participates in the local Guy Fawkes celebrations. These usually entail a long march, which is extremely tiring both physically and mentally, under most unpleasant conditions as the Band has to contend with rough, muddy tracks, cold and wet weather, fumes and smoke from torches and sulphur flares, and poor lighting by which to read the music. It is usually a chaotic affair with little organisation or direction and in view of these circumstances it is extremely difficult to provide a Band of sufficient number for these engagements. However, this problem has to be overcome because in view of the poor conditions, the fee is very high and the Band cannot afford to do without it.

At one of its 1972 concerts the band was fortunate enough to secure the services of Sir Vivian Dunn, former Principal Music Director of the Royal Marines, as guest conductor, and the programme included several of his own compositions.

At the last AGM a spirited appeal by the Musical Director resulted in an anonymous donation of £2000, which was possible the purchase of the most urgently needed instruments. The committee has been able to allocate £2,150 for the purchase of 11 new instruments, an interesting contrast to the original purchase of 20 instruments amounting to £580.

At the AGM in his report Mr. Bowles said that if the band were to continue their present rate of progress, they would have to consider the purchase of some new instruments. These he estimated would cost around £2000 but a target of £6000 must be set in order to complete the full set. Within two days of the meeting the chairman, Mr. W.A. Clark, was in receipt of an anonymous letter enclosing a cheque for £2000 to enable the band to purchase the most needed instruments. Donation was made by a local woman, and was described as a 'Godsend' just when the band needed to replace some of their instruments in a bid to qualify for the National Brass Band Championships the following year.

The Uckfield Band was comparatively unsuccessful at contesting for some time until the East Grinstead Arts Festival was held on 28th April, 1972. In this the Band was extremely successful. The Uckfield Band took first place in the Band Contest, the trombone section took first place in the Quartet Contest and Stephen Green from the trombone section won the under 18 individual contest. In short, the Band won everything it entered. In the following month the Tunbridge Wells Federation's first contest of 1972 was held, experimentally to a different formula from the established one. Bands were required to present a 15 minute programme of their own choice and the marking was

based on entertainment value as well as technique and ability. The Uckfield Band tied with Mayfield Band for first place in the second section.

In November, the second of the Federation's 1972 contests was held at Chatham Central Hall. This contest reverted to the standard procedure of playing just one item. The Band entered the second section, competing with four others. History was made on this occasion, as the Band won first prize, by an unusually wide margin, thereby achieving promotion to the first section for the first time.

Following this event, the Band had to prepare rapidly for a subsequent contest just one week later. This was at Reading and the Band entered the third section on National Grading. With the sweet taste of success still fresh we were confident of performing well.

However, this was not the case. The Band had worked so hard for the Chatham contest that Reading, with a different test piece, had been rather neglected. Even so, it was good experience meeting the class of opposition we shall now be encountering in the first section of the Federation and the forthcoming National Brass Band Championships of Great Britain.

The Band achieved 2nd place in the South Eastern Qualifying Round competing against some 19 bands and in the National Championship Finals at Hammersmith in October 1973, achieved third place. The Band then followed up these successes by finishing in third place in the first section of the Tunbridge Wells and District Federation at their first attempt in this section.

By tradition Brass Band uniforms were military style with shiny buttons and gold braid. Their style has altered since those days and a uniform resembling a dinner suit has replaced it.

In 1960 the Band purchased its first set of uniforms. They were of heavy material and black in colour with blue lapels on the tunics and a blue stripe running down the outside of the trouser legs. The only other decoration was a little braid on the sleeves of the tunic and a crest on the breast pocket. These uniforms served the band well and are still used on occasions, especially for marching.

However, in 1970, it was decided to purchase a complete set of new uniforms as the original set were no longer considered suitable for evening concerts and the more important engagements. The total cost of these uniforms was £700. The Band made an immediate payment of £150 and were able to secure an interest free loan of £550 which is now being repaid by installments. These were supplied by an Uckfield firm, but the first set had to be obtained from as far away as Leeds to secure reasonable terms.

The new uniforms are light-weight in contrast to the older ones and are similar to a dinner suit. They are more comfortable to play in and give the band some form of identity and a professional appearance which is vital to success.

The Uckfield Band has a very full programme of events throughout the year demanding both time and effort from every member. There is no personal financial reward, therefore the members participate purely for enjoyment and must be dedicated to be successful.

Whilst the Band is amateur, its constant aim is to show that this does not denote any deficiency in standard. This must be emphasised and must be shown to be apparent because of the availability of top-class entertainment provided through the mass-media.

It has taken the Band 17 years to reach its present position and now it is fully equipped with new uniforms and a number of new instruments the future looks encouraging. The Band is ambitious and with much hard work and dedication these ambitions may be realised.

Information for the above was obtained from: Mr. N.D. Edwards (past officer of the Band and a locally recognised authority on Brass Band procedure), Mr. D. Edwards (the first Uckfield Band Secretary), Mr. A.F. Martin (founder member and first Bandmaster) and Mr. G. Ball (present Business Manager).

Since April 1973 the Band has received two more £1000 donations towards the cost of new instruments and now only needs just over £1000 to complete the set for its 25 strong team. On top of that it will need new uniforms in the near future.

In March 1974 it won the London and Southern Counties Championships at Watford and qualified for the National Championships (Section 4) in October of this year.