

The Lads of Kent Boys' Brass Band – training for the forces and touring in Edwardian England

Gavin Holman, May 2020

In 1896 Henry W. Allen, then being associated with the Salvation Army, established the New Brompton Boys' Orphanage Home, at 159 Gillingham Road, as a training institution for naval and military bands.

Many of the orphanages, industrial schools and workhouses, across the country, in the later 1800's and early 1900's established bands to help develop skills, provide discipline and train boys for future careers as musicians, usually in the military.

New Brompton eventually became part of the current town of Gillingham, in Kent. Situated next to the dockyard at Chatham, much of the population were employed in the ship building industry there. Sailors were common residents and even the army had a presence, at forts guarding the dockyards.



Brompton Boys' Band, c. 1900

In its early years the Brompton Boys' Institute Band, or Brompton Boys' Band, as it was generally known, was built up to around 40 players. Henry Allen gave up his 33s. a week job at the Chatham Dockyard and devoted his time to the Band. He also had been a wholesale paper merchant and stationer. Although the enterprise clearly started out with charitable and social aims to better the lives of the boys, it appears that, over the years, the emphasis changed, as will be seen in some of the following reports.



BOYS' BAND, GILLINGHAM, KENT.

Brompton Boys' Band, c. 1903

The Band began to perform locally and then went on tour to various locations around England. As was the case with a number of similar bands of the time, the band would raise money through these performances, via collections and donations, which helped to fund the organisation and operation of the Home.



Brompton Boys' Institute Band, c. 1905

Its engagements included:

- August 6th 1906 Calverley Park, Tunbridge Wells
January 1907 Alexandra Hall, Blyth, performing with the Edison Animated Picture Company
August 1907 Grays Cycling Club's Athletic Sports at Grays, Essex



THE BROMPTON BOYS' BAND, 1907-8.

By 1909 it had 65 members, been renamed the “Lads of Kent Brass Band” and travelled more than 10,000 miles a year in its tours throughout England. The Band had been split into four companies (A, B, C, and D). Three companies started periodically on a six month tour and the fourth covered the home district. The tours cost more than £1,000 in railway fares and £1,200 in lodgings. So popular were these little musicians, that they obtained a large number of engagements, and the proceeds not only covered the expenses, but all the boys earned a living and put money in the bank. Many of the Lads later went on to obtain good positions in the British Army and Navy.

One report covers one of the Band companies (it is not known which one) in its visit to the south coast:

“They arrived in Hastings by motor-car in February 1909, under the baton of F. Hartfield, spending a week playing selections in the various places of the town, taking collections at each opportunity. F. Hartfield was, in 1898, an employee of the local Corporation Yard at Rock-a-Nore, Hastings, prior to which he belonged to the Border (North of England) Regiment. One of his sons, Tommy, is a left-handed side drummer in the band, and another son, Victor, is a solo cornetist with the home band in Gillingham.”



One Band company visited Midhurst, Sussex in February 1910, while another was at Starcross, Devon in March 1910, one (with 15 players) at Sunningdale, Berkshire in November 1910.



THE LADS OF KENT BAND. A Company.



However, while the Band was very popular, and clearly a success both with the audiences and as a fund-raising business, it was not without its problems.



In May 1909, one of the Band companies was marching in Newport, Isle of Wight, when a pony and trap met them. As the trap passed the band a young boy, Frederick Daish, ran out of the crowd and fell under the hooves of the pony, sadly suffering fatal injuries.



THE LADS OF KENT BRASS BAND. C Company.

In December 1909, one of the Band companies was playing on the corner of Bridge Street and Church Road, Caversham, Berkshire, when a horse pulling a brougham was startled, bolting away. The brougham collided with a carrier's van, causing the landau to overturn. The passenger, W. Dyke was unhurt and had to be rescued from the brougham by police, and the driver, who was thrown into the road, escaped with a few bruises.



In 1912 there appeared the first direct evidence that all was perhaps not well at the Home and with the band boys.

In April 1912, York magistrates fined Henry Allen 20s. and Louis Sartin 5s. and costs for the alleged ill-treatment of some of the boys in the Lads of Kent Band (of which Allen was the proprietor and Sartin the manager). One of the boys was seen to be in a very dirty and neglected condition, and the Bench "*deprecated in the strongest possible manner the taking of young boys from the custody of their parents and causing them to perambulate the country, to be trained practically in mendicancy.*"

The "Truth" journal picked up on this court case and gave a longer explanation of the background to the incidents and the treatment of the boys.

Truth – No. 1843, Wednesday 24 April 1912, pp. 1020

"A very useful exposure of the boys' band business carried on by Henry Allen, of Southsea House, Gillingham, Kent (No. 8, Timm Cautionary List), took place at York Police Court last week, where Allen and one of his managers, a man named Sartin, were charged with ill-treating and neglecting six boys under the age of sixteen years. The band came under the notice of the local officer of the N.S.P.C.C. on their return from a day's tour of the villages, in which they had tramped thirty miles. They were then nearly all lame, were badly shod and clad, while one boy, named Aspel, was in a state of collapse. Medical evidence showed that this lad was much emaciated. On one leg he had fourteen ulcers, and seven on the other, to which his clothing adhered, while, like several of his companions, he was suffering from itch. The magistrates considered that, though the case was proved it was not one for exemplary punishment, and Allen got off with a fine of 20s., and this manner with a fine of 5s. The magisterial leniency seems exceedingly ill-timed. Allen is the proprietor of five boot shops, besides a boot club and a printing business. In addition to this he has three bands of boys touring the country and collecting funds for the keep of the boys and for "the support of headquarters." Allen is the headquarters. Owing to exposure in TRUTH he had, as he admitted, changed the name of his troop from the British Boys' Touring Band to the Lads of Kent. Recruits were obtained through advertisements in local papers for boys just leaving school. Allen employed them for a short while as errand boys, and if they proved satisfactory he got their parents to apprentice them to him as brass band musicians, having printed indenture



forms for the purpose. In the case of Aspel the indenture was made when he was fourteen, and under it he was to receive 5s. a week, less ls. 6d. when on tour, for four years. When at home the parents were to provide for him, but when on the road Allen undertook to board, lodge, and provide him with medical attendance. How the condition was fulfilled may be gathered from the evidence of the medical man and the officer of the N.S.P.C.C. referred to above. All these facts appeared in evidence. What mitigating circumstance there is in them the Solons of York alone know."

It is hoped that matters improved from that point.

In November 1912, one of the Band companies performed at St Clears, Camarthenshire, where it was reported that *"their spirited movements and rousing marches if they did not raise the dead, at any rate brought to life the lazy and lethargic among our kinsmen."*

Another appearance was in January 1913, at Rugby.

The editor of the Truth journal was still obviously not a fan of Henry Allen, and wrote the following indictment of him and the Bands in 1914:

TRUTH – Volume 75, No. 1954, Wednesday 3 June 1914, pp. 1382-1383

"ALLEN'S BOY BANDS - On numerous occasions references have appeared in TRUTH to an enterprise carried on by H.W. Allen, of Gillingham, Kent. This individual is a tradesman whose activities find vent in various directions. He is proprietor of a number of boot shops, runs a printing business, and is principal of "The Universal Brass Band Supply Agency." It is in the latter capacity that he has come under my notice. As bandsman Allen gets hold of lads, gives them some sort of rudimentary instruction in the art of producing notes from brass instruments, and sends them on tour through the country as the "Lads of Kent Brass Band." At each town they visit they collect money, the balance, after expenses are paid, being remitted to Allen. Originally these collections were represented as being for the charitable object of supporting the home from which the juvenile bandsmen came, but latterly this pretext has been dropped and a vaguer plea for alms - to support the band - adopted. The appeal is, however, intended to awaken philanthropic sentiment, for Allen claims to be providing lads out of work with an occupation from which they proceed to join the Army, Navy, or Police Forces. A member of one of these bands has recently confided to me his experience, which throws some light on the value of Allen's philanthropic profession. He accepted the position of assistant manager at a weekly wage of 6s. a week with board and lodging. Whilst in Bolton he was compelled to take two days' holiday through tender feet, caused by tramping over the cobble stones. At the end of the week he found that there were no wages for him to draw. He complained to Allen, who explained to him that his wages were 17s. 8d. per week, made up of 1 ls. 8d. in board and lodging and 6s. in cash, and that 5s. 10d. represented his wages for the lost two days. As this did not suit him, he left the band and tramped home - all the way from Bolton to Tonbridge. A still more illuminating instance of Allen's attitude towards his boys occurred last Easter when the "Lads of Kent" visited Leigh,

in Lancashire. With a view to keeping a hold on his recruits Allen has them bound to him by apprenticeship indentures. One boy when in Leigh managed to get a job in a foundry at a good wage. One would reasonably suppose that a philanthropist whose ostensible object is to give lads a satisfactory start in life would have been delighted and given him every assistance. On the contrary, Allen wrote to the lad telling him that he had committed a serious breach of the law, and threatened to take legal action against him and his parents unless he returned to his peripatetic mode of existence. He informed him that he should claim £40 from the parents, and that as they could not afford this it would mean that their home would have to be sold up, for which result they would have him to thank. At the same time the lad received a tearful letter from his mother begging him not to ruin them, and he accordingly threw up the honest employment he had obtained and returned to the brass band and mendicancy. From the legal point of view neither the boy nor his parents had anything to fear. An apprenticeship contract which is not for the benefit of the infant, has been held to be void by high legal authorities, and there can be no question that Allen's brass band apprenticeships are not to the benefit of the apprentice. Even presuming that the musical training was of value, the other considerations are more than an offset to it. It cannot be for the benefit of the boys that they should tramp the country from lodging-house to lodging-house, dependent for their daily bread on what they can cadge from the public and getting an occasional half-holiday only when they remit £9 profit for the week to their master. This is a training in mendicancy not music. No court in the kingdom would enforce an indenture for such an object. But labouring people cannot be expected to know this, and so Allen is enabled to force his apprentices by bluster and threats to return to him even when they obtain a desirable billet elsewhere. One can easily understand that they frequently desire to get away. The sort of consideration and care they receive may be gathered from the fact that at York twelve months ago Allen was convicted by the magistrates of ill-treating and neglecting six of the lads whom he was thus exploiting. Even that conviction did not put a stop to his work. So long as this Gillingham bootmaker and bandmaster can get lads he sends them out to bamboozle the charitable public, and thus turns them into tramps and mendicants for his own personal profit, untroubled by scruples about their present or future welfare. There ought to be some means of stopping him."

This report did not go down well with Allen, for a fortnight later there was a follow up article in Truth.

TRUTH – Volume 75, No. 1954, Wednesday 17 June 1914, pp. 1511

"I received last week a visit from Mr. H.W. Allen, of Gillingham, Kent, the proprietor of the "Lads of Kent" Brass Band. Mr. Allen was exceedingly annoyed at the article dealing with his enterprise which appeared in TRUTH on June 3. I was not surprised at this, since the article was written with the object of doing something to put a stop to the exploitation of boys by sending them round the country to play brass instruments and cadge money from the public for doing so. Mr. Allen was of opinion that if I had

discussed the matter with him before writing the article, I should have formed a different impression. Being an intelligent man, he must now realise that he was mistaken in this belief, for though he urged his point of view with considerable vigour, he said nothing which would in the slightest degree alter my opinion, and ultimately he gave some signs of recognising the force of my arguments by informing me that it was his ultimate intention to abandon the tours and use the bands for fulfilling engagements. In the course of the interview Mr Allen mentioned a number of minor points, which he desired to correct as calculated to give a wrong impression - that he no longer owns a printing business, that he is the proprietor of only one establishment for the sale of boots instead of a number, and so forth. On all material points, however, he admitted that the facts upon which my criticism was founded were accurate. He was quite frank as to his band being a private business for the benefit of himself. At the same time, he honestly seems to believe that he is helping the lads who are apprenticed to him as peripatetic musicians. There are about thirty of these engaged with two bands at present touring the country. These boys have had a preliminary teaching from an old boy, who received his training from Allen himself, who used to play the cornet. Mr. Allen seems to think that this is a musical education of some value. I doubt if anyone else would, and even if it were, I do not consider it a justification for sending the boys out to tramp the country to get an additional training in mendicancy."



One of the Band companies is photographed advertising Bluebell Metal Polish

Following this public criticism, nothing more is heard of the Lads of Kent bands. The fate of the Brompton Home and the Lads of Kent Boys' Band is not clear. I suspect that both did not survive long once WW1 started.