

A pig and a tale of several brass bands

Gavin Holman, 1 February 2021

A tale is told, anecdotally, in the annals of several brass bands, of a pig that was placed on a wall to listen to the music, and sometimes pass judgement on the quality of the sound. Another story, that of the band that took its boots off, as it marched playing through its home village on returning triumphant from a contest, so as to make less noise –has also been attached to several bands. There are several other tales of the things bands and bandsmen have got up to over the years that have been attributed to more than one band – such as the band failing to recognise that the house they were playing carols in front of, to take up a collection, was in fact a hay rick [attributed variously to Potterspury Excelsior, Stinchcombe, and Woodchurch bands].



Dawley Brass Band, Shropshire

Back to the pig. The first instance is the Dawley Brass Band, from Shropshire. An old tradition in Dawley was that a pig would be placed on a wall in the town to watch the old Dawley band marching by. A postcard was issued around 1909, commemorating the first ever cross-channel swim by Captain Webb, of Dawley, in 1875. It announced, “*Who put the pig on the wall to see Captain Webb’s procession pass?*” If this is the origin of the Dawley version, then it was probably the first Dawley Brass Band, which was active in the 1850’s to 1870’s, rather than its successor which ran from the mid-1890’s to the mid-1950’s.





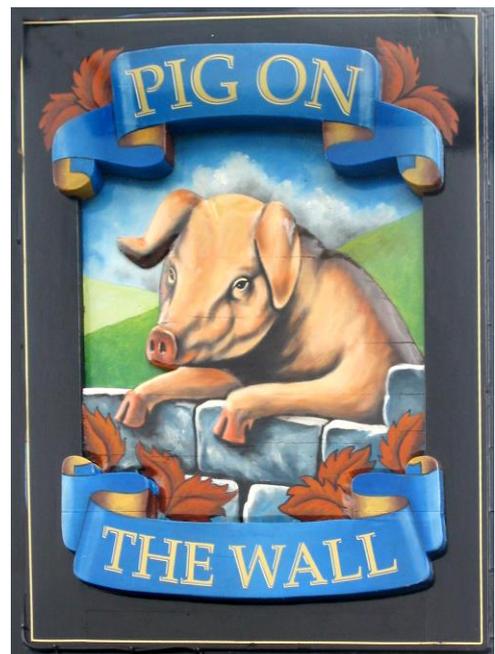
Dawley Town Silver Band, c. 1920

Gornal, Staffordshire

A spoof postcard was later issued in Gornal, Staffordshire, based on the Dawley one, but without the reference to Captain Webb, which read: *"Who put the pig on the wall at Gornal to see the band go by? Was it Billy the Boy, Jimmy the Go, Clockweight, Billy on Tho'b, the Pokey Mon, or Jacko, Tasso, Cogger, Blossom, Jackery? No, it was Johnny Longstomach."* Local legend links the story to a procession of Primitive Methodists through the village, led by a band that had a diminutive bass drum player. When the procession turned left, into Church Street, the drummer carried straight on down Humphrey Street where he was spotted by one of the householders there, who ran down the garden to his pig sty, brought his prize pig up, and propped his forelegs up on the wall, saying to the pig *"Theer mah mon, yoh woh see a band like that agin, ah'll warrant."*

Droylsden, Tameside

The "Pig on the Wall" pub in the town is based on a popular local legend about some drunken men who had a pig with them, stopping on a crowded street to watch a passing parade. The men could see what was going on easily enough, but they felt sorry that the pig could not see properly, so they picked it up and put it on a high wall so it could see the parade over everyone's heads.



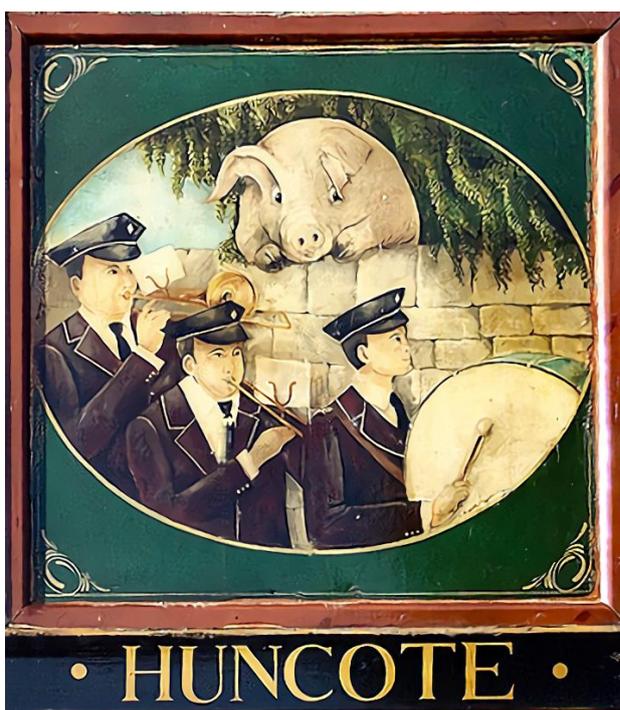
Hinchliffe Mill Brass Band, Holmfirth

This band was formed in 1872, with family ties being an important feature of its early days, with five brothers joining, following their resignation from nearby Holme Silver Band. Legend has it that in the early days a pig used to be borrowed from a farmer and placed on a wall to listen during rehearsals. If the pig remained quiet and contented the bandsmen took it that they would do well at their forthcoming contest. Grunting was a sign that the chances of winning a prize were not good at all.



Huncote, Leicestershire

“Huncote on a Pig” – is a phrase that comes from the fact that the locals of Huncote once put a pig on a wall as they watched a marching band go past to celebrate the yearly feast. Apparently, the pig looked on in trepidation, as the locals from Huncote would later slaughter that same pig for the feast. It features on the village sign.



Moira, Leicestershire

The expression of putting “*a pig on a wall to watch the band go by*”, i.e. to make a big fuss about, or celebrate, something, allegedly comes from around Moira, where they also used to put a pig on the wall.

Ribchester, Lancashire

The fable of the ‘*pig on t’ wall*’ is well known in the village. There are several versions to the story. One is of a marching band that visited the village, where one local was so impressed that he lifted the pig on to the wall, either Black Bull or Dam End, to see the band go by. Another is of a promise made to a soldier that his family would celebrate his survival by placing a pig on a wall. But the one that perhaps fits the story best, and for which there is apparently some photographic evidence, is the one which relates that if Ribchester beat Longridge in a cup match it was traditional to put a live pig on the wall by Dam End.

Wigan, Lancashire

The Wigan area has perhaps the largest number of ‘pig on the wall’ references. Some point out that “*T’pig on’t was was in Orrell, watchin’ t’brass band go past.*” Several different ‘memories’ from the Wigan area relate to the pig – the Carter family from Fleet Street; Thomas Heaton of Fleet Street put next door’s farm pig on the wall; someone from Lamberhead Green, and so on.

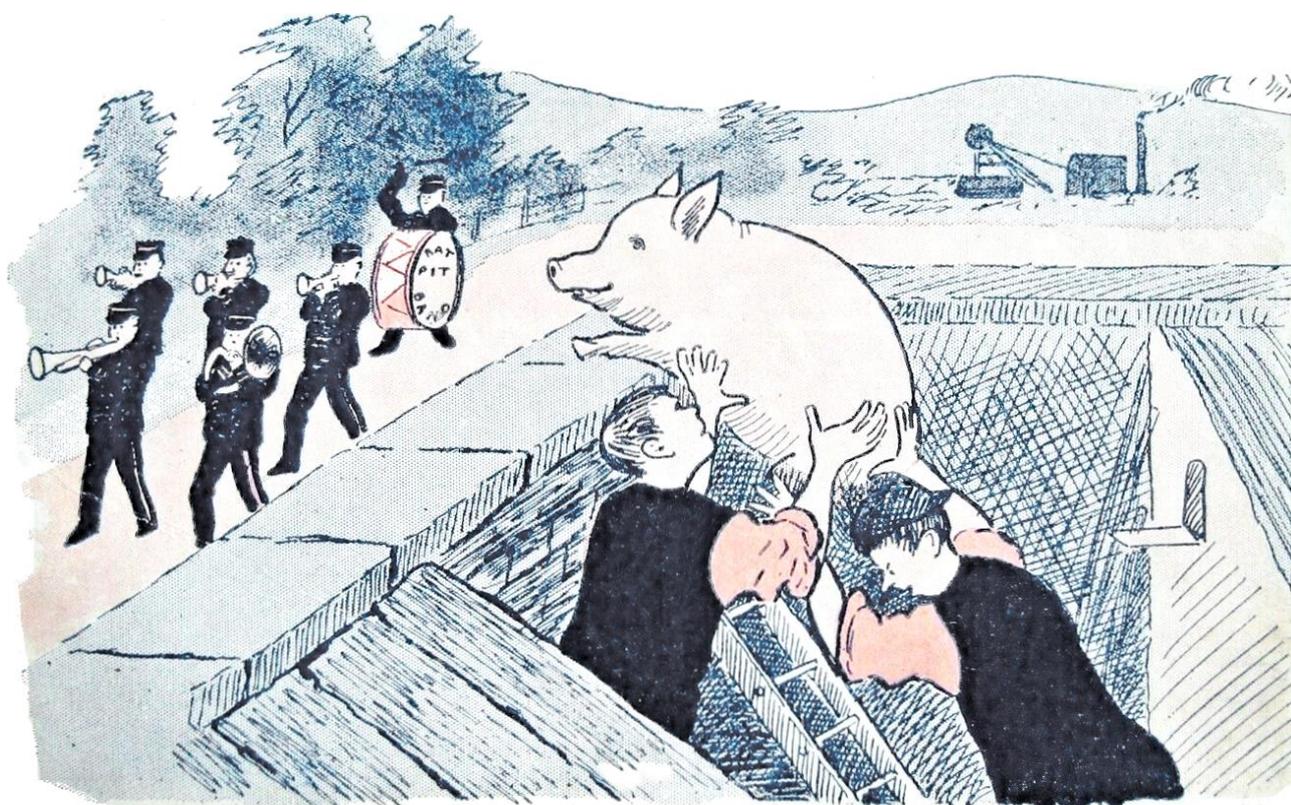
Westhoughton Old Brass Band, was thought to be one of the inspirations for the story, but there is little evidence to support this. The band did once offer a fat pig in a prize draw, in 1869, to raise funds for new uniforms – other prizes included a harmonium, a sack of flour, a cheese, an iron bedstead and a live fat duck. Another anecdote for this band relates to the occasion when, after the old Westhoughton factory was burned down by incendiaries and a new factory was built on the site, and it boasted a high new chimney. When the mill was opened the band played on top of the chimney to celebrate the event. There is said to have been one ‘chicken hearted’ player who refused this particular opportunity.



Pemberton Old Brass Band

Which brings us nicely to the Pemberton Old Band. It was formed in 1890, and was originally known as the 'Blue Jackets'. It was also known as 'The Rappit', which is possibly a corruption of 'The Rat Pit'. This is one of the bands that lays claim to the story of the 'stocking'd feet (another being Scapegoat Hill Brass Band) – after winning the British Open contest at Belle Vue, Manchester, in 1903, it is said that it was late at night when the band finally returned, and the whole band was in a celebratory mood. As they marched along Wallgate, playing the Triumphal March, someone told them to make less noise. Being obliging, they all took off their shoes and continued their Triumphal March in stocking feet.

The band features on a postcard which shows the pig being hoisted onto the wall to watch the 'Rat Pit' band pass by, with the comment: "*Pur'in t'pig on't wa' 'ut Green for't watch benda go past.*"



Pur'in t'pig on't wa' 'ut Green for't watch benda go past.

Will Smith's Series, Wigan

I suspect we will never know the true origin of the tale, or the sayings that it engendered, but it is nonetheless a nice glimpse into the local folklore of some villages and bands.