

The Jarrow Navvies Band - musical cyclists who played for fun and charity

Gavin Holman, 4 July 2021

The Congo Cycling Club of Jarrow was founded in late 1898 or early 1899, one of a large number of similar clubs throughout England that held various events – rides, races, and meets, with and against the other clubs in their area. Although many of these Victorian cycling clubs were men only, there were also ladies cycling clubs and, towards the end of the century, mixed clubs – of which the Congos were one.



Members of a cycling club from Nottinghamshire, c. 1904

In addition to their athletic cycling pursuits, the clubs also took part in various parades, processions and demonstrations – sometimes providing a display and often appearing in costume or fancy dress. This was also the case on occasion at the cycle meets, where the individual clubs would set up their “headquarters” and have it decorated in some fashion relating the theme of their topic or dress.

The Congo Cycling Club took part in the Northern Cyclist’s Meet at Alwick on Monday 1 August 1905. They were dressed as navvies and were awarded the individual first and second costumed prizes (going to Mr Bailey and Mr Foggan), and also for the best decorated headquarters. Another prize was awarded to them for the best collective entertainment on the cricket field, and a final prize for the best individual novelty as the “Jarrow Navvies”. This was to be the start of a successful alter ego for the club over the following years.

Following the Club’s fifth annual meeting, in November 1904, where the Captain – G. Jackson, and the secretary, A.E. Scott, were re-elected, the Club established a musical band from its members, who utilised a combination of old and found brass instruments and the occasional kazoo or zobo horn. Their musical rehearsals during the winter months were evidently successful, as the resulting band’s music was to be much appreciated on the “Navvies” musical debut at the Barnard Castle Cycle Meet on Tuesday 13 June 1905.

Their next appearance after Barnard Castle was in the Newcastle Lifeboat Saturday procession, on 17 June 1905. This was a much-celebrated annual event organised to raise funds for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, in Newcastle and also in other major towns and cities across the country. The parade was headed by a 'normal' brass band - the Gateshead Borough Band. Also included with the cyclists was the Jarrow Congo Navvies' Band, which was:

"... headed by a 'drum major' wielding with graceful skill and perfect time, a specially made representation of a navy's 'rammer'. These burlesqued bandsmen were all dressed in moleskin and represented bricklayers' labourers to the life. Their passage was greeted with continued bursts of laughter."



Lifeboat Saturday Demonstrations had started in 1891, in Manchester, following the loss of two lifeboats and 27 men in 1886 in their attempt to rescue the crew of the German ship 'Mexico' off the coast of Southport. Sir Charles Macara, who had witnessed the rescue operation, promoted the event in Manchester as a 'grand cavalcade to make the public at large aware of the service provided by the brave volunteer lifeboat men and the need for widespread financial support'. This was also the first occasion to use buckets and sacks to collect contributions for charity from the assembled crowds.



Participants in the first Lifeboat Demonstration, Manchester, 1891

The band next appeared at the Tynemouth Carnival at North Shields on 8 July 1905. This was promoted by the local cycling and athletic clubs to raise money for the Tynemouth Victoria Jubilee Infirmary. The Jarrow Congo Cycling Club was one of twenty cycle groups, with over 800 cyclists,

which included the Jarrow Ramblers, South Shields West End Ramblers, Willington, South Shields Primitives, Sunderland Excelsior, St Anthony's Temperance, St Andrews and Heaton Temperance. The full parade was led by the boys' band of the Wellesley Training Ship, and the Jarrow Navvies' Band led the fancy dress cycle parade. Some of the fancy dress was quite elaborate – one competitor had a miniature blacksmith's shop, fully equipped and in working order, built over the handlebars of his bicycle.



The Jarrow Congo Navvies' Band, 1905

The Navvies' Band stole the show with their performances on the march:

“Their turn-out was irresistibly funny, and in their progress along the line of route, led by a drum-major swinging a paviour's ram, and emitting the most discordant music from their rusty instruments, they created much amusement.”

“Their make-up was capital, and the instruments, well, they baffled description. They had been brass at one time, but now they were black with age and battered almost beyond recognition. The drum-major introduced his band by displaying a notice to the effect that “Amers Couldn't Get”, after which they played, or rather murdered, a selection which sounded something like “The Bull and Bush”, but which was styled on the music “Gems of Meddlesome”. “The Cock o' the North” (Amers' test piece) shared a similar fate, and the vast assembly outside the ground could scarcely contain themselves with laughter at the performance. Meanwhile the judging was proceeding, and the entertainment provided by the band filled in the interval most agreeably.”

“The get-up of the ‘navvies’ was remarkably life-like, their instruments displaying the appearance of having lain for years in the lumber-room, while the music was of a particularly harrowing description. One of the bandsmen carried a board stating that ‘Amers can't get.’”

“They were, of course, the feature of the parade. Nothing funnier and more attractive in the collective novelty line than their show could well be imagined. And if the committee who are endeavouring to boom Tynemouth are open to take a wrinkle, and if at any time ‘Amers’ or any other band ‘cannot get’, well, the Jarrow Congo's pen-wielder's address may be had on

application. The al fresco concert at Tynemouth proved a huge success. Here again the famous 'navvies' band were in attendance. Having won the prizes they were called upon for a tune, and responded with one or two selections, given in their own inimitable style. The Congos took first prize for collective novelty and first for largest attendance in costume. The crowd reached enormous dimensions, and seldom has the 'green' borne a more animated and picturesque appearance."

Harry Amers, who was a leading band conductor in the North in those days, gave the Jarrow men permission to use his name in this way after hearing one of their performances in Newcastle.



Lifeboat Saturday Parade, Carlisle

Saturday 22 July 1905 was the occasion of the Jarrow Lifeboat Demonstration, with hundreds of people in the procession, many in costume. Musical entertainment during the afternoon was provided by the band of the 1st Durham Royal Engineer Volunteers (conducted by T.F. Hope), Jarrow Borough Band, Mr H.C. Pape's Boys' Band and, of course, the Jarrow Congo Navy Band. This was the first time this 'mirth provoking combination' had been seen in Jarrow, where it was formed, and their appearance contributed materially to the hilarity of the proceedings. The band did not compete for prizes on this occasion, contenting themselves with doing all they could to make the demonstration a success and collect money for the charities. After the awards presentation, the 'Navvies' took part in a comic football match, being pitted against the rest of the world. In the evening the 'Navvies Band' appeared at the Theatre Royal, Jarrow, where they played their selection "Gems of Jarrow" on the stage, which was greatly enjoyed by the crowded audience.



Typical medals awarded at the Lifeboat Saturday Demonstrations

The next outing for the Jarrow Congo Cycling Club and their band would be the Alnwick Cyclist Meet on Monday 7 August 1905. Their band instruments and costumes were sent on in advance of their appearance. Mr E.P. Johnstone, of the Jarrow Congo Cycling Club, was the president of the Alnwick Meet in 1905 – he was one of the founders of the Navvies' Band. The parade started in Alnwick Market Place before proceeding to the Banker's Field, led by the Navvies' Band – which consisted of thirty or forty cyclists dressed as navvies, led by their director Mr A. Harvey. After the procession and prizes, a dinner was provided to the inmates of the local workhouse at which the Navvies' Band played selections and sang one of their original songs. A dozen of the Congo cyclists attended the inmates, dressed as chefs.



Fancy-dress cyclists at a cycle meet parade

The Jarrow cyclists were at Hebburn, on Saturday 12 August 1905, for their cycle parade in aid of Hebburn Hall Accident Infirmary. Many groups and organisations were represented, and the Hebburn Town Temperance Band led the parade through the streets, together with Pape' Boys' Band. The Jarrow Congos again entertained the crowd with their antics and music. In the evening a concert was held at the Hebburn Theatre, at which the Jarrow Navvies' Band opened the proceedings with one of their selections, causing the 'utmost hilarity'.

On Saturday 26 August 1905, a special concert was held in the Borough Theatre, Tynemouth, with the Lyric Union Choir from Newcastle. This was to have been the concluding event of the Tynemouth Lifeboat Saturday Demonstration, but that had to be postponed for a week due to the inclement weather. The Jarrow Navvies' Band, as a 'special orchestra' provided various selections during the intervals of the choir's performance. These included their famous test piece "*Gems of Meddlesome*", specially selected "*Broken Melodies*" (very much broken), and the "*Caterwaulong*" Midnight Serenade. The Band also gave an acrobatic exhibition on the stage, which created much amusement.

The Tynemouth Lifeboat Demonstration did go ahead the following week, on Saturday 2 September 1905, with the Jarrow Congos playing their usual comic roles along the way. The procession was led by the Tyne Division Royal Engineer Volunteers Band.

Saturday 23 September 1905 was the date of the Sunderland Lifeboat Demonstration. The Jarrow Congos were met at the train station by two motor waggons to take them to the field. The main contributors to the parade were the various cyclists, on wheels and on foot. The Jarrow Congos, together with their band, were awarded first prize for the largest muster, and second prize for the

best novelty. The musical accompaniment to the procession was provided by the Shotton Colliery Silver Medal Band and the Sunderland Orphan Asylum Band, in addition to the Jarrow Navvies' Band. The Navvies drum-major on this occasion was Charles Jennings.



Cycle parade in Belfast

The Club's sixth annual meeting was held on Tuesday 28 November 1905, at the Congregational Hall, Sheldon Street, Jarrow, with G. Jackson again being elected Captain. Mr E.P. Johnson, the former leader of the Navvies' Band, later appeared in a sketch, featuring his light comedy, tragedy and quick-change talents, for the inhabitants of the Harton Workhouse in December.

As with other successful and celebrated organisations, the Jarrow Congo Club's achievements over the year generated some envy from competitors. Some decided to promote themselves as the Jarrow Congo Combination Party for a 'Pleasant Saturday Evening' event. This was nothing to do with the real Jarrow Congos Cycling Club and Navvies' Band, and the public were quickly informed of this in the local press.



Members of the Jarrow Congo Cycle Club, in Jarrow, 1902

On Tuesday 19 December 1905, the Jarrow Congo Cycle Club and its Navvies' Band, together with some other performers, gave a concert in the Royal Assembly Hall, South Shields, in aid of the South Shields Aged and Poor Children's Fund. One of the selections played by the band was called "Children's Voices". It was suggested that the Navvies' Band would pay a visit to Manchester in the coming year, 1906, to take part in the lifeboat demonstration there. The Congos ended the year with their annual social and dance, at the Congregational Hall, on Wednesday 27 December.

Despite the success of the Band's first full year's activities - when it turned out 18 times, winning 16 first prizes and various minor ones - it did not appear the following year, the Club choosing instead to appear as a 'fire brigade' in the various cycle meets and processions.

The Navvies' Band next appears on Saturday 6 June 1908, when they turned out to visit Wardley and Washington to make collections in aid of the Jarrow Distress Fund. The following Saturday they visited Boldon, Cleadon and Westoe on the same mission. It was hoped that:

"... some time since the Navvies' were last seen, and no doubt when they once more march in the open with military bearing and precision the old interest and humorous enthusiasm will be aroused to the highest degree, and as a result of their noble and laudable purpose generous collections are certain to follow."

In fact, the Jarrow Navvies' Band was much appreciated and enjoyed in all the locations where they sought support, raising £2 15s the first week, and over £5 and 17 loaves of bread the second week. The Band also gave a concert in Jarrow Park, in aid of the Mayor's Children's Meals Fund, which raised £4. The Band's drummer on these occasions was Mr D. Morrison, and it is said that he felt rather fatigued when he eventually returned home.

The Cycle Club attended various meets during 1908, including the South Shields Parade in fancy dress, but the Navvies' Band only appeared for the Distress Fund collections. It was a similar situation in 1909, with the Club making good use of its cycling events, but giving the Navvies' Band a rest.



The Jarrow Congo Navvies' Band, c. 1906

The Northern Cyclists' August Meet was held at Morpeth on Monday 1 August 1910. The Jarrow Congo Club was in attendance, winning the prize for the best overall entertainment. The Navvies' Band made a distinct and amusing contribution to the procession through the town to the cricket field at Stobhill.

A great cycling carnival was held at South Shields, on Saturday 20 August 1910, in aid of the Ingham Infirmary. The Jarrow Congo Navvies' Band took part.



Cycle parade through Heywood, 1906

The coronation of King George V was a cause for celebration throughout the country, with towns and villages arranging various activities to mark the day. At Jarrow one of the events was a grand cycle parade through the town, with participants in fancy dress. Various prizes for best costumes and other criteria were awarded, including 'best collective novelty' to the Navvies' Band. Another attraction in the procession was Charlie Makepeace with his aeroplane, with which he had to make a flight on the Saltgrass, near Bede's monastery. At half-past nine the cyclists met at the Pine Street entrance to Jarrow Park and paraded around the walks of the park with their machines illuminated.

On Friday 7 July 1911, a benefit concert was held in the Gem Picture Theatre, North Street, Jarrow, in aid of the artistes, staff and others who suffered losses due to the fire at the Palace Theatre, Pit Heap, Jarrow on 10 June. Included in an excellent and varied programme was the Navvies' Band, who discoursed their latest musical programme to great amusement from the audience. Mr A. Scott, leader of the Navvies' Band, was presented with a Gem Souvenir Coronation Mug.

The Band's next appearance was at the charity fête organised by the Shop Assistants' Union at the Kino, Grange Road, Jarrow, on Wednesday 1 May 1912. This was proclaimed to be the beginning in England of a loyal half-holiday for shop assistants. In addition to performing various selections

at the evening concert, the Band paraded round the town, led by Mr A. Jackson, making a collection for the *Titanic* disaster fund, raising £4 1s 4d.

The Northern Cyclists organised a cyclists' and confetti carnival at Whitley Bay on Wednesday 24 July 1912. Eleven cycle clubs took part in the parade, which was headed by the 1st Elswick Scouts Band. The Jarrow Congos Navvies' Band brought up the rear of the procession and caused much merriment amongst the spectators. The Jarrow Congos once more came away with various prizes.

The Jarrow shop assistants held a demonstration, in the Kino in Jarrow, on Wednesday 30 April 1913. They invited the Navvies' Band to attend and it played a specially selected programme of music. Once again, the Band had paraded the town before the assistants' gala, making a street collection in aid of the Royal Infirmary at Newcastle.

Back on the bicycles, the Club attended the North-Eastern Cyclists' Meet at Barnard Castle on 3-4 May 1913. The entertainments were held in the Victoria Hall, Newgate, due to the rain, rather than the original location of the Inner Bailey. The Navvies' Band once more thrilled the crowds with their performances, taking home the John Dry cup for the best novelty and a prize for the club creating the most fun in the procession. A counter-attraction in the afternoon was the band of the 1st Yorkshire Battalion, performing in Bowes Park, but I suspect the Navvies' Band had the audiences' hearts.

The following Saturday, 10 May 1913, saw a group of the Jarrow Navvies' take part in a cycle parade in Jarrow to raise funds for the upkeep of the Jarrow Ambulance Van, which had recently been purchased for the town by public subscription. The van now meant that patients could be quickly removed to the Newcastle Infirmary, without having to suffer the journey via train or wagon.

The Navvies' Band was next seen at the Whitley Bay Carnival, on Wednesday 23 July 1913, as part of the cyclists' parade, which was promoted by the proprietors of the 'Spanish City'. Parading through the streets of the town they attracted great interest and amusement. The procession was headed by the band of the Wellesley Training Ship and also included the Scoutmasters' Band from Newcastle.



Ladies at a cycle meet, lining up for judging, 1905

The Northern Cyclists' August Meet was held at Durham on Monday 4 August 1913. In addition to the normal cycling pursuits, the fancy dress antics were much appreciated by the crowds. Each

cycle club put on a short entertainment show in the New Markets. The Jarrow Congos took second prize of one guinea with their "*Trial by Brewery – a court scene of the future*". The Navvies' Band was also there in force, entertaining the crowds, and helping their Club to gain the prize for the largest muster in the parade (45 people), and second prize for the 'most fun'.

The Jarrow Congo Cycling Club held its annual dance in the Mechanics Institute on Wednesday 11 February 1914. The Navvies' Band did not make an appearance, the music for dancing being provided by White's Orchestra. It held its annual meeting on Tuesday 3 March, where it was reported that the Club had income of over £59 for the previous year, and won prizes to the value of £17 10s. Mr E. Stainthorpe was elected captain.

The Navvies' Band dusted off their instruments once more at the Barnard Castle cyclists' meet and fête, on 1 June 1914, giving their trademark performances, and winning the 'most fun' prize.

The second annual Jarrow Ambulance Van Carnival was held at the Drewett Playing Field, on Saturday 25 July 1914. A grand procession of cyclists, tableaux and character groups in fancy dress wended its way from the Drill Hall to the field, where the Navvies' Band had to content themselves with second place in the 'most fun' category, despite the many plaudits of the appreciative audience for its musical endeavours during the afternoon.



The Navvies' Band may have been losing their musical or comedy edge slightly, as they only managed to achieve a 3rd place for collective novelty at the Durham Northern Cyclists' Meet and gala on Saturday 1 August 1914.

The Navvies' Band took part in the parade for the French Red Cross Day in Hebburn, on 5 June 1915. The procession was headed by the Tyneside Scottish Military Band and, in addition to the Navvies' Band, there was also the Wellesley Training Ship Band. £265 was raised in total by all the collectors and events, with the Jarrow Congos collecting £1 17s 6d.

The Jarrow Congos Cycling Club held a Flag Day in the town on Saturday 19 June. They were attempting to raise £100 to defray the costs on a "Jarrow bed" for the wounded soldiers at the St John Ambulance Base Hospital in France. The Navvies' Band, of course, made an appearance to help the cause.

The Usworth Flag Day was held on Saturday 2 July 1915, and the Jarrow Navvies' Band, together with the Abbott Memorial School Band, led the fancy dress procession round New Washington, Usworth Colliery, High Usworth and Springwell.

Tens of thousands of people lined the route of the grand procession through North Shields and Tynemouth, on Saturday 10 July 1915, to raise money for the Motor Ambulance and Red Cross Fund.

"What a debt the borough owes to the Jarrow Congos C.C. Navvies' Band ('Amers couldn't get') who have lent their help to charitable efforts in Tynemouth for ten years past, and never failed to arouse merriment by their extremely funny get up. On Saturday they were a most popular feature in the procession. They led the array of comic and fancy tableaux. One of the most

beautiful of these was a group of children representing 'Haymaking' Another fine one was 'Indian Princes'. There was a young Red Indian woman on horseback and a 'Cowboy Girl' on horseback, and a R.A.M.C. van. The popularity of Charlie Chaplin, the hero of picture-comedy, was attested to by the number of youths attired to represent the famous comedian."

The Club organised a concert at the Alexandra Theatre, Washington, on Wednesday 25 August 1915, in aid of a fund for the benefit of local soldiers who were on active service. The Navvies' Band fulfilled part of the programme under the leadership of Mr T. McAvoy. The Band marched through the district to the theatre before their performance on stage.

On Saturday 4 September 1915, the Navvies's Band took part in the Belgian Flag Day procession and gala in Jarrow to raise money for the Belgian Fund.



Hanslope Cycle Parade, 1909

The Band's next charity excursion was to Newcastle, taking part in the Red Cross Day on Saturday 9 October 1915. The Navvies' Band proceeded from the Central Station to Byker, collecting money for the Fund on the way. In the meantime the Band of the Royal Field Artillery played selections at the War Memorial, and the Band of the 1st Northumberland Fusiliers performed at Cowen's Monument, on Westgate Road. Flags and shields were sold by thirty miniature nurses during the day.

The following weekend, the Navvies' Band once more tramped the streets, this time in Gateshead for their Local Red Cross Day, collecting money for this good cause. This was their last appearance in 1915.

The Hebburn demonstration, cycle parade, horse procession and sports, in aid of the local fund for disabled soldiers and sailors and their dependents, took place on Saturday 13 May 1916. The Jarrow Navvies' Band played their unique and inimitable part in the proceedings and were greatly appreciated. The other bands in the large procession were Hebburn Colliery Band, the Wellesley Training Ship Boys' Band, and St Aloysius' Drum and Fife Band.

Saturday 4 August 1917 saw the Jarrow Navvies' Band attend the Chester-le-Street Welcome Home Fund Sports Carnival. There was a grand horse parade through the town, led by the Navvies' Band, collecting £10 15s. for the Fund, with the assistance of some Jarrow ladies who were staying in Chester-le-Street. The Band later performed at both houses of the Empire Picture

Theatre in Chester-le-Street – they stated that they were ‘always willing to render assistance for any good object.’

The Navvies’s Band made just two more (known) appearances. On Saturday 1 July 1922, at the Newcastle Cyclists’ Union rally at Ryton Willows. The Band led the costume parade from Crawbrook to Ryton Willows:

“The parade, the primary object of which was to amuse the people, prizes being offered with this object in view, was one of the best witnessed in this district Almost every conceivable character was represented in the gorgeous procession. A batch of ‘convicts’ in charge of a burly warder were responsible for considerable amusement, and when some of them bolted for the Cross Inn, with their warder in hot pursuit, the laughter was general.”



Cyclists in fancy dress

Finally, on Wednesday 29 July 1925, the Navvies’ Band appeared at the Jarrow Carnival which was celebrating the jubilee of the borough’s incorporation. Despite a ‘motor car load of Glaxo Babies’ which attracted considerable attention, and the presence of the Submarine Band (from Middlesbrough) which also provided music for the parade, the Navvies’ were especially welcomed by the masses of people who crowded the streets and later, in the park.

Over the twenty years of their ad hoc existence, as an adjunct to the main Jarrow Congo Cycle Club, the Jarrow Navvies’ Band had raised significant sums for charity and provided great fun and entertainment to thousands of people across the North-East. A fine legacy indeed for this group of musical cyclists.

Further information:

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