

La Pimposh Prize Band – a charitable comic band from Croydon

Gavin Holman, 16 October 2023

Aside from the traditional brass and military bands that commonly provided musical entertainment to crowds at public events during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were also the occasional ‘comic’ band.

These bands were formed primarily to entertain the public and raise money for charity, sometimes created ad hoc for galas and festivals, and rarely had a more long-term existence. Usually they consisted of kazoo-like instruments and drums, interspersed with home-made and “real” brass or woodwind instruments. “Ordinary” bands were also involved in the comedy business from time to time. For certain events they would dress up (or down, in tramp clothes), sometimes blacking their faces, appearing as clowns, or adopting women’s clothing. The usual brass instruments were used in the performances, but these were occasionally augmented or replaced by zobo/kazoo equivalents.



La Pimposh Prize Band first appears in September 1906, performing at the Cycle Carnival in aid of hospital funds at Thornton Heath. A large procession of decorated cycles and cyclists together with other floats paraded through the town, led by the Thornton Heath Town Band. The Croydon Mechanics Band followed later in the parade and, towards the rear, was La Pimposh Prize Band which ‘consisted of various persons with top hats, variegated costumes, and blacked faces’.¹

A later report stated that the Carnival had raised over £43 for the hospital, and a letter received from La Pimposh Band saying they were:

¹ Croydon Chronicle and East Surrey Advertiser, 22 September 1906

“...expressing the hope that they had given every satisfaction in the fulfilment of their first engagement, and stating that they would be pleased to give their services on a future occasion.”²

The instrumental make up of the band varies between the two photographs we have, and there are fewer players in the second picture. In both there are some brass instruments, tuba, trombones, cornets, the odd woodwind – flute/oboe, and various percussion and kazoo-like blowing pieces.

The members of the band are not definitely known, but their conductor was Mr A. Spencer. Solo contributors at their concerts leads us to assume that the following were among the members of the band: Percy Darbourne, Chris Peviritt, C. Watson, J. Holberg (Stolberg?), Tom McCloughton (McClouchlan?), the Walford brothers, Harry Willis, Messrs. Stocksbury (Stuchbery?), Cecil Coad, William Henry Darbourne, Frank Carey, W. Spencer, F. Spencer, H. Spencer, and Roger Darbourne. [Note: the difference in names is from conflicting newspaper reports.]

Unlike some other comic bands, which dressed themselves in ad hoc costumes befitting a rag-tag gathering of ne'er-do-wells, La Pimposh had matching military-style tunics, probably in bright colours, with striped trousers, top hats and blackened faces.

The band's next engagement was on Wednesday 24 October 1906, at the charity football match between Thornton Heath Wednesday FC and the 'Lady Madcap FC' – a team of character players, e.g. 'Rustic', 'Captain Harrington', 'Major Blatherswaite', 'Flunkey', 'Old Huntsman', and others. Various selection were played throughout the afternoon by the La Pimposh Band.³



² Croydon Express, 29 September 1906

³ Croydon Chronicle and East Surrey Advertiser, 27 October 1906

Wednesday 5 December 1906 saw the band giving a concert at the Croydon Public Hall to raise funds for the hospital. They opened the proceedings with 'musical' eccentricities and closed the evening with a police-court burlesque sketch, with many individual entertaining items in between.⁴ The concert made a profit of £1 9s 1d for the hospital funds.

500 poor children were given tea and entertainment at the Croydon Baths on Wednesday 2 January 1907, which included lantern and gramophone performances and music provided by La Pimposh Prize Band.⁵

On Wednesday 18 March 1908, La Pimposh Prize Band gave a concert for the inmates at the Croydon Workhouse. This included cornet, flute and other solos, gramophone selections and songs.⁶

The last known appearance of La Pimposh Prize Band is at the great Life-Boat Day parade and gala in Croydon, on Wednesday 22 July 1908, where the Eastbourne and Southend lifeboats were feted. Two contingents of the parade started from north and south of Croydon at Norwood and Purley. La Pimposh Band was part of the northern procession, starting at the Crystal Palace, parading through the streets to meet up with the southern contingent for the full parade.



A. Spencer (conductor)

Lifeboat days were common, in the early 1900s, as means to raise funds for the R.N.L.I. and also as excuses to have a good entertaining carnival. The first of these was in Manchester, in October 1891, following the disaster five years earlier when 27 lifeboatmen from Southport and St Annes lost their lives trying to save sailors from the ship *Mexico*. These Lifeboat Saturdays (and other days) became popular events and helped to establish the R.N.L.I. on a much sounder financial footing.

Images below portray some of the scenes from the 1908 Croydon event, sadly not showing La Pimposh Prize Band.

Further information:

- Holman, Gavin - *Comic Bands - Kazoo and Zobo*, 2019. Available from <https://gavinholman.academia.edu>
- Wharton, R. and Clarke, A. - *The Tommy Talker Bands of the West Riding: The History and Development of a working-class entertainment* - Bradford, 1979

⁴ Norwood News, 22 December 1906

⁵ Croydon Times, 9 January 1907

⁶ Croydon Express 21 March 1908





CROYDON LIFE BOAT CARNIVAL 1908.



Copyright.

W.H. Rogers

Croydon Life Boat Day. July 22nd 1908.

Decorated Car.

Croydon Life Boat Day
July 22nd 1908.
Illuminated Car.



W. H. Rogers.