

# Morpeth Band Festival 1895 – almost the end of a great tradition

Gavin Holman – June 2019

From 1861 through to the mid-1870s Morpeth had held a series of non-competitive annual band festivals known as the “Monstre Band Festival” after the “monster” massed bands that were a feature of the events. The early events were held in the Old Brewery Field (now built up as the area around Olympia Gardens). Between 8 and 15 bands took part with 200 to 500 performers. Audiences ranged from 4,000 to 8,000. These were major events for the town, with hundreds of visitors arriving by coach and special excursion trains. The entrance fee was around 6 pence, and each bandsman received around 5 shillings, the bands themselves offering their services gratis.

The first festival, held on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1861 had around 180 performers from the following bands: The Artillery Band (Alnwick), The Rifle Volunteer Band (Alnwick), The Felton Band, Mr Smith's Band (Morpeth), The Scremerston Band (Berwick), The Militia Band (Alnwick), The Barrington Band, The Longhirst Band, St James' Band (Morpeth), Shank House Band (Cramlington). Special excursion trains ran from all the stations on the North Eastern and Blyth and Tyne Railways between Alnwick, Newcastle, South Shields and Tynemouth – at low fares! The musical arrangements were under the direction of J. Millar, Bandmaster of the Alnwick Militia Depot, with performances commencing at 2pm.

On the first festival day:

*... flags were displayed from the windows of most of the inns, and also from the summit of the Clock Tower, the bells in which rang merry peals, while the quiet little town was all bustle and animation. The trains began to arrive, and immense numbers of people poured into the streets. The Scremerston Band was the first to arrive, and they played from the Station to the Black Bull Inn. In quick succession came the Barrington, Percy Main, Artillery, Rifle and Percy Drum and Fife Band. The children belonging to St. Hilda's School, South Shields, about 350 in number, arrived at the Morpeth Station a little before ten o'clock, and were there met and escorted. The Bands assembled at the Black Bull Inn at 12 o'clock and from thence proceeded to the Council Chamber, where an excellent dinner was provided for them. The following is a list of the Bands and number of performers:*

<i>Alnwick Artillery Band</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Alnwick Militia Band</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Alnwick Rifle Band</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Percy Drum &amp; Fife</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Barrington Band</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Felton Band</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Longhirst Band</i>	<i>8</i>

<i>Morpeth St. James's Band</i>	16
<i>Morpeth Mr. Smith's Band</i>	9
<i>Percy Main Brass Band</i>	20
<i>Scramerston Band</i>	28
<i>Shankhouse</i>	23



*A later picture of Barrington Colliery Band – c. 1900*

*The route was up Bridge Street, through the Market Place, by Newgate Street, down the Copper Chare. The bands were despatched in the following order, each playing as they marched onward: Artillery and Rifle Bands united, "Auld Lang Syne", Scramerston Band "Susanna", Mr. Smith's Band, "The Butterfly Quick Step", Percy Main Band, "I Would be a Daisy", Percy Drum and Fife Band, "Home, Sweet Home", Felton Band, "Mary Blane", St. James's and Longhirst Bands united "Don Juan", Barrington Band, "Quick Step", Shank House Band, "My Erin Oh", Militia Band, "The British Lion".*

*The place of rendezvous where the great musical entertainment was held, was a large field opposite Howard Terrace, which was kindly granted for the occasion by Mr. Laws, brewer, who has recently become occupier of the "New Brewery". On their arrival the field, they took their positions as arranged, and the music was dispensed in the following order:*

<b>Band</b>	<b>Music</b>	<b>Leader</b>
Monster (209)	Grand March	Millar
Militia	Grand Selection (Martha)	Millar
Artillery	Rifle Galop	Rennison
Barrington	Finale (La Sonnambula)	Bolam
Scremerston	Royal Scotch Quadrille	Balmer
St. James's	Valse (Henrietta)	Lazenby
Mr. Smith's	Selection (Martha)	Smith
Shankhouse	Quadrille	Gillis
Rifle	Valse (The Fair Girl)	Stanley
Felton	Aria (Maritani)	Jeffrey
Monster (209)	Pas Redouble	Millar
Barrington	Selection (Lucrezia)	Bolam
Artillery	Grand March	Rennison
Scremerston	Polka	Balmer
Militia	Selection (Puritani)	Millar
Felton	March	Jeffrey
Percy Mn.Br.	March (Rhein Wine)	Oxlev
Rifle	March (The Return)	Stanley
Percy Drum & Fife	Quick Step	Thompson
Monster (209)	God save the Queen	Millar

After a hiatus the event was revived around 1890. Following the successful 1891 Festival, it was transferred to the Grange House Field in 1892, where it suffered a loss due to the torrential rain. Another year it was held in the Victoria Pleasure Gardens, without much success.

In 1895 the following letter requested a return to the Grange House Field:

*Morpeth Brass & Reed Band Festival Committee*

*May 13<sup>th</sup> 1895*

*Messers Dickson, Archer & Sharp*

*Gentlemen, I am desired by the committee of the above to solicit you for the use of the field (which you so kindly granted last year) to hold a Brass & Reed Band Festival Aug 5<sup>th</sup> 1895 Bank Holiday, upon what conditions etc. Trusting your most generous favours*

*Your truly*

*Jno. Dunsmore, Hon. Sec., Barrington Colliery, Bedlington*

Morpeth Brass & Reed  
Band Festival  
Committee

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Yours Truly

Thos. Dunsmore Hon Sec  
Barrington Colliery  
Bedlington.

Advertisements appeared in the local and regional newspapers:

*MORPETH MONSTRE BRASS AND REED Band Festival (400 PERFORMERS)  
To be held in the GRANGE HOUSE FIELD (Kindly granted for the  
occasion), on Bank Holiday, Monday August 5th 1895, First Monstre by the  
Bands, combined, at 2 p m. Conductor, Mr. John Nichol. Admission to Full,  
6d each. Children, Half-price. Open from 1pm. Refreshments of all kinds  
will be supplied on the grounds at moderate charge. See Railway Bill for  
Specials etc. - JOHN DUNSMORE, Hon. Sec.*

Sadly, the day was not a success – the weather again turning against the organisers:



*Grange House Field, Morpeth – also used for the Morpeth Olympic Games*

*Morpeth Band Festival - For some time back the masters and members of brass bands in the district around Morpeth have had in contemplation the revival of Morpeth Band Festival. The matter was taken up by a representative committee from various bands in the town and neighbourhood. After one or two somewhat disappointing experiences from unpropitious weather, the committee held another festival yesterday. The bands arrived in the forenoon, and marched to the Grange House Field.*

*The following bands took part: Blyth and Cowpen Operatic, Ashington Silver Model, Morpeth Borough, Seaton Delaval Silver, Cramlington Village C.8., Barrington Colliery Dudley U.M.F.C, Burradon Collieries, Cramlington Collieries, Morpeth Volunteer, and Bedlington Reed.*

[... the music played by the bands on the march was: Blyth, leader J.R. Mason "Viva Pettee"; Ashington, leader R. Taylor "Artillery"; Morpeth Borough, leader J. Nichol "Le Grenadier"; Seaton, leader James Neil "Viva Pettee"; Cramlington Village, leader A. Briggs "Euston"; Barrington, leader R. Taylor "Washington Greys"; Dudley, leader W. Beswick "Elmville"; Burradon, leader J. Dunn "Taken by Storm"; Cramlington Collieries, leader A. Corbett "Le Grenadier"; Morpeth Volunteer, leader W. Allen "When You and I Were Young Maggie"; Bedlington, leader J. Fornear "Wide-awake"...]

*The concert began with a "monstre", J. Bailey's "Wide-Awake" by the combined bands, the conductor being Mr J. Nichol, leader of Morpeth Borough Band.*

*When the Blyth and Cowpen Operatic Band commenced to play the first piece in the programme, it began to rain, and before they were finished it was a perfect downpour. At the end of the piece there was a regular stampede to the exit gates for the sheds and out-houses attached to the Grange House Farm and any other shelter that could found. The sound of thunder dispelled all hopes of the weather permitting the festival to proceed any further, and the people came away to the town.*

[... the programme that should have been performed was: Monstre "Wide-Awake", Blyth "Lohengrin", Ashington "Bellini", Morpeth Borough "Valley of Ferns", Seaton "Torquato Tasso", Cramlington Village "Sunshine and Shadow", Barrington "Schubert", Monstre "The Cornet", Dudley "The Cross of Honour", Burradon "Travatore", Cramlington Collieries "Bohemian Girl", Morpeth Volunteer "Echoes of Killarney", Bedlington "Charnwood", Broomhill Colliery "Charnwood" – this last band did not appear...]

*At 5 o'clock the weather improved, and the combined band assembled in the Market Place and played the two "monster" pieces on the programme, "Wideawake" and "The Cornet" J. Nichols conducting. Afterwards Mr J. Farrell, president of the festival committee, presented to Mr Nichol a handsome baton for conducting the "monsters".*

This somewhat dampened the enthusiasm of the crowds and the organisers, and a final attempt in 1898 to keep this annual festival going was also unsuccessful and the Monstre Festival was no more.