

Brass, coal, banners, marching and music: colliery bands and the Durham Miners' Gala or "Big Meeting"

Gavin Holman, October 2019

Of the 762 brass bands I have records of from County Durham, around 130 were colliery bands (and more of them would have been directly connected to the local colliery, even if not specifically named after the mine or mining company).

The coal mining industry that was a major employer in the North East of England, as well as in a number of other coalfield locations across Britain, fuelled the industrial revolution and established hundreds of new communities supporting the mines and their workers. From the middle of the 19th century onwards brass bands were founded in these mining towns and villages, often sponsored and supported by the local colliery owners. These bands became focal points for the culture and entertainment of their communities and were often used in the various celebrations, feasts, galas and marches that took place during the year.



A major gathering and celebration of the miners across County Durham was the Durham Miners' Gala, also known as the "Big Meeting". This probably had its origins in a massive meeting of miners held in 1831 at Black Fell between Washington and Eighton Banks. The Durham Miners Association was formed in 1869, and the first official Durham Miners' Gala was held at Wharton Park in 1871. Since that date the Gala has been held every year, only being halted by major strikes and the two World Wars.

At its peak over a hundred banners from the various miners' lodges would be paraded through the streets of Durham, led by their local brass band and followed by the miners, their families and supporters. They would start their parades at various points on the edge of the city centre and converge on Old Elvet, marching onward from there to congregate at the racecourse field, partake in the various entertainments, sideshows, exhibitions and refreshments in the tents and marquees, and listen to the various trade union and political speakers. The lodge and union banners are strapped to the fences surrounding the field while the marchers and bands rest before the return journey.



After the speeches were finished the lodges would parade back through the city and make their way back to their home communities. During the march through the city in the morning, the bands and marchers would pass the County Hotel, upon which balcony various VIPs (union leaders, invited guests and local dignitaries) would stand to view the passing parade. At its peak some 300,000 people attended the Gala each year, enjoying the day out, its spectacle, the musical entertainments and the political speeches.





The coal industry was nationalised in 1947 and by the 1960s the production of coal from the inland pits had declined. Pit closures escalated and by 1974 production was concentrated in 30 pits. In 1994 the last deep mine in the country was closed, at Wearmouth. Along with the mine closures the Gala diminished in size.

In recent years there has been a resurgence in the popularity of the Gala. Although the mines have closed, the mining communities are still in existence, the lodges associated with the collieries are active, supporting the retired and ex-miners. The Gala now attracts other trade unions in the parade through Durham city, providing a celebration of the heritage of the mining industry and remembering the brave miners who lost

their lives in the mines. In the afternoon a service is held in Durham Cathedral, which includes the blessing of any new banners that have been created that year.

The hymn tune *Gresford* is played many times throughout the day, at numerous locations in the city of Durham and in the colliery towns and villages. This hymn has been adopted by the miners as their own - it was written by Robert Saint to commemorate the Gresford pit disaster in 1934, where 266 men lost their lives in an underground explosion and fire. Today it is a poignant reminder to all that hear it of the sacrifices made by miners over the years.

The colliery bands are largely gone also [see the list below], but the music lives on – bands from wider afield are now engaged by the various miners’ lodges to lead their parades, initially in their local communities first thing in the morning, and then through the streets of Durham to the Big Meeting itself. By 2019 the number of people taking part in the Gala throughout the city of Durham reached nearly 200,000.



Harrogate Band and the Durham Miners’ Gala - a perspective from one of the non-colliery bands to support the Gala in recent years.



In 2005 Harrogate Band were asked if they could deputise for the Reg Vardy Band at the Gala, who were attending the World Music Contest and could not fulfil their engagement with the Trimdon Grange Lodge. Harrogate has no links with mining or even heavy industry, being a “genteel” spa town in North Yorkshire, but its brass band is equal to most in the North East and it welcomed the opportunity to take part in this unique event.

A splendid day of marching and music was enjoyed and both parties were impressed with each other. The Band was invited back the following year, but a scheduling conflict led to Harrogate Band appearing with the Sacriston Lodge in 2006. However, since 2007 the Band has returned every year to Trimdon Grange and the friends they have made there over the last decade. The people of Trimdon Grange are marvellous hosts for the Band, and the Band are privileged to lead the lodge banner with musical marches, as well as putting on a “party piece” of music for the assembled crowds in Durham, providing great entertainment and recognition for the Trimdon Grange banner and lodge.



In July 2015, at the Gala, the Harrogate Band and Trimdon Grange lodge were accompanied by Grayson Perry, who was filming a documentary on the theme of masculinity in the context of the role of the men of the North East. He was interested in folk art, particularly the huge woven mineworkers' banners. His work culminated in a service and presentation in Durham Cathedral in March 2016, with Harrogate Band and the Trimdon Grange lodge, which included the unveiling of a new banner he had created to represent the mining communities, entitled "Death of a Working Hero". The documentary was broadcast later in 2016 on Channel 4.



Further information:

- Anon - *Banners and Brass - Images of Durham Miners' Gala* - County Durham Books, 2006, ISBN: 1897585926
- Armstrong, Keith (ed.) - *The Big Meeting: Peoples View of the Durham Miners' Gala* - Index Books, 1994. ISBN: 1871518105
- Bean, David – *The Big Meeting* – the author, 1967
- Evans, V. - *Durham County Brass Band League Golden Jubilee 1940-1990* - County Durham Books, 1992 - ISBN: 1897585004
- Gillum, Derek - *Banners of Pride: Memories of the Durham Miners' Gala* - Summerhill Books, 2009. ISBN: 1906721106
- Richardson, Michael - *The Durham Miners' Gala 1935-1960* - Breedon Books Publishing, Derby, 2001. ISBN: 1859832385
- Smith, Ken & Smith, Jean - *Splendour of the Gala: The Durham Miners' Gala and the Northumberland Miners' Picnic* - Ergo Press, 2009. ISBN: 0955751071
- Temple, David - *The Big Meeting: A History of the Durham Miners' Gala* – TUPS Books, 2011. ISBN: 1901237389
- Taylor, Dennis - *The Heritage of the North East Brass Band Movement* - the author, 2008
- *Durham Miner* is the official newsletter of the Durham Miners' Association - www.durhamminers.org

Some websites that provide more detail on the collieries of County Durham

- Northern Mine Research Society - <https://www.nmrs.org.uk>
- Durham Mining Museum - <http://www.dmm.org.uk>
- Durham Miner - http://www.durhamintime.org.uk/Durham_Miner/

County Durham colliery brass bands

Further details on these bands can be found in *Brass Bands of the British Isles 1800-2018 - a historical directory*, available from <http://gavinholman.academia.edu/research>

Current bands [founded]

Bearpark and Esh Colliery Band [1950]
Craghead Colliery Band (2) [1967]
Durham Miners' Association Band [2009]
Easington Colliery Band (2) [1956]
Westoe Brass Band [1890]

Extinct bands

Alma Colliery Band
Annfield Plain Colliery Band
Arnghyll and Cowley Colliery Band
Auckland Park Colliery Band
Axwell Park Colliery Band
Beamish Colliery Band
Bearpark Colliery Band (2)
Bitchburn Colliery Band
Black Boy Colliery Brass Band
Blackhall Colliery Brass Band
Baldon Colliery Brass Band (1)
Baldon Colliery Brass Band (2)
Brancepeth Colliery Institute Brass Band
Brandon Colliery Silver Prize Band
Browney Colliery Band
Burnhope Colliery Band
Burnopfield Colliery Band
Castle Eden Colliery Band (1)
Castle Eden Colliery Band (2)
Chilton Colliery Brass Band
Chopwell Colliery Band
Consett Colliery Band
Cornsay Colliery Band
Crookhall Colliery Band
Deaf Hill Colliery Band
Dean and Chapter Colliery Band
Dipton Colliery Brass Band
Dunston Colliery Band
Easington Colliery Band (1)
East Howle Colliery Band
Eden Colliery Welfare Band
Eldon Colliery Band
Elemore Colliery Band
Emma Colliery Band
Eppleton Colliery Brass Band
Evenwood Colliery Band
Follingsby Colliery Brass Band
Framwellgate Moor Colliery Band
Hamsteels Colliery Band (1)
Hamsteels Colliery Band (2)

Hamsterley Colliery Brass Band
Handen Hold Colliery Band
Harperley Colliery Band
Harraton Colliery Brass Band (1)
Harraton Colliery Brass Band (2)
Harton Colliery Band (1)
Harton Colliery Band (2)
Haswell Colliery Band
Hebburn Colliery Band (2)
Hebburn Colliery Model Brass Band
Hebburn Colliery Temperance Band
Herrington Colliery Band
Hetton Colliery Band
Hetton-le-Hole Colliery Brass Band
High Spen Colliery Band
Hobson Colliery Band
Holywell Colliery Band
Houghton Colliery Band
Howden Colliery Band
Hunwick Colliery Band
Hylton Colliery Brass Band (1)
Hylton Colliery Brass Band (2)
Kibblesworth Colliery Brass Band (1)
Kibblesworth Colliery Brass Band (2)
Leasingthorne Colliery Prize Band
Little Chilton Colliery Band
Lumley and New Lambton Colliery
Lumley Colliery Brass Band (1)
Lumley Colliery Brass Band (2)
Marsden Colliery Band
Monkwearmouth Colliery Brass Band
Murton Colliery Brass Band
New Brancepeth Colliery Band (1)
New Herrington Colliery Band
Newbottle Colliery Band
North Biddick Colliery Band
Oakenshaw Colliery Band
Ouston Colliery Band
Pease West Colliery Band (2)
Pelton Colliery Brass Band
Penshaw Colliery Brass Band (1)
Penshaw Colliery Brass Band (2)
Philadelphia Colliery Band
Ravensworth Colliery Band
Redheugh Colliery Band
Rough Lea Colliery Band
Ryhope Colliery Brass Band (1)
Ryhope Colliery Brass Band (2)
Sacriston Colliery Band (1)
Seaham Colliery Band

Sherburn Hill Colliery Band
Shotton Colliery Band (1)
Shotton Colliery Band (2)
Shotton Colliery Band (3)
Silksworth Colliery Band (1)
Sleetburn Colliery Band
South Medomsley Colliery Band
South Moor Colliery Silver Band
South Pelaw Colliery Band
St Hilda Colliery Band
St Hilda Colliery Band (2)
St Hilda Colliery Juvenile Band
Stanley Colliery Band
Sunniside Colliery Band
Sunnybrow Colliery Band
Tanfield Lea Colliery Band
Tow Law Colliery Band
Trimdon Colliery Brass Band
Tudhoe Colliery Brass Band

Twizwell Colliery Band
Urpeth Colliery Band
Ushaw Moor Colliery Band
Usworth Colliery Band (1)
Usworth Colliery Band (2)
Wardley Colliery Brass Band
Washington Brotherhood Band
Washington Colliery Brass Band (1)
Wearmouth Colliery Band (1)
West Pelton Colliery Band
Westwood Colliery Band
Wheatley Hill Colliery Band
Whitburn Colliery Band
White Leas Colliery Brass Band
Whitworth Park Colliery Band
Willington Temperance Band
Windlestone Colliery Band
Woodland Colliery Band
Wooley Colliery Band