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:

- Bean, David – The Big Meeting – the author, 1967
- 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

- Durham Mining Museum - http://www.dmm.org.uk
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
- Arngyll 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
- Boldon Colliery Brass Band (1)
- Boldon 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
- Dibton 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
- Appleton 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)
- Leasingthorpe 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 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
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