

REFLECTIONS ON THE LAST 50 YEARS.

The last 50 years playing in brass bands have given me many hours of pleasure and allowed me to make many friends.

It all started one Friday evening in May 1956 when Basil Tustain, G trombone player with Royal Leamington Spa Silver Band, came to see my parents. I was leaving for choir practice at All Saints Church when Basil asked me if I had ever thought about joining a brass band and invited me to their rehearsal the following Tuesday. On the Tuesday evening, after choir practice, I went along to the Palace Inn, Satchwell Street where I was met by Basil and introduced to Arthur Frodsham, from Kenilworth, who would be my mentor and friend until his death in 2003. Arthur taught me the basics of producing a note on a cornet, wrote out a fingering guide on a piece of manuscript and, at the end of the rehearsal, I went home with a brass cornet in a mahogany case with brass fittings – all the other cases were leather!!! The following Tuesday I went to choir practice as usual, but, this time with my cornet. Paul Russell was also in the choir and was keen to learn the contents of the mahogany case and, on seeing the cornet, asked if he could come along and join the band so we both went to the Palace Inn after choir practice – our tippie was Vimto, nothing stronger. We were soon joined by John Ward and Les Cleaver on cornet and Royston Frodsham on percussion. The conductor was John Buberle and the secretary was Ken Bowers, the driving force who had started the band the previous year with members from Kenilworth, Cubbington, and Bishops Itchington bands.

In October 1956, after six months ‘playing’, we took part in the first of many contests; it was at Cadburys, Bourneville for the West Midlands Brass Band Association’s annual contest where the set 4th section test piece was Eric Ball’s Indian Summer; we were placed in a very strong position supporting all the other bands in the section – bandsmen will know what I mean. Apart from supporting the local association contests we have contested from Rhyl to Leeds to London to Weston Super Mare and all points in between. These included the 3rd Section National Finals playing Gilbert Vinter’s Vizcaya in 1981 in London where we had a great weekend staying at the Rembrandt Hotel and the 1st Joshua Tetley Open in Leeds 1982. The late ‘70s and ‘80s were Leamington’s finest contesting years winning many and being placed in the majority of others. During these years a group of us went to the Albert Hall for the National Finals every year staying overnight at the Rembrandt Hotel and to Manchester for the British Open Championships at Belle Vue and, later, the Granada Band of the Year Contest.

In 1957 Norman Knight, who had taken over as conductor in April 1956, asked me to take over as librarian and re-organise the library. It was changed to the system which is still in use today using a numeric folder system rather than alphabetical in old manila envelopes. I am still librarian today – where did I go wrong? It was in late 1957 that I changed from playing cornet to tenorhorn.

In 1958 Coventry Festival Band, conducted by Jack Major, helped Leamington out on a couple of occasions and a few of us younger members went over and joined them as a result. We were now playing with two bands. I also took over re-organising “Festival’s” library to the same standard as at Leamington.

In September 1959 I joined the Royal Navy and banding went into the doldrums for the next nine years as I could only get to rehearsals when I was on leave, but it kept me in touch with what was going on. I also managed a couple of weeks with the City of Hamilton Band in Victoria, Australia.

In the late '60s Leamington was virtually defunct with only a handful of members practicing quartets etc. In 1970 the band folded and all unwanted instruments were donated to Campion Boys School. The band members went over to Alcester with Paul, who had recently taken over as conductor of Alcester Victoria Silver Band, and I went to evening classes to get HNC Engineering.

From 1969 to 1988 we enjoyed twenty years of running the town's own Annual Band Festival (contest). The first three years were in the old Jephson Gardens Pavilion before we transferred to the "luxurious" surroundings of the new Royal Spa Centre. We had many of the best adjudicators of the day and their bands played for the evening concert; among them George Thompson with Grimethorpe and Trevor Walmsley with Yorkshire Imperial. In 1974 the RLSSB donated the Norman Knight Memorial Challenge Cup as 2nd prize in the Open Section and it was first awarded to Yorkley Onward conducted by B.Howerd playing Gilbert Vinter's "Entertainments". Norman had been assistant conductor of RLSSB in 1955/6 and conductor from April 1956 to October 1958 when his work was transferred to Bolton. Norman later returned to the area living in Rugby and conducting Bilton Silver Band. He was killed in a car accident and his wife, Maureen, was badly injured when returning home after taking a band practice of RLSSB which Paul was unable to take. I still keep in touch with Maureen who attended both our concerts at Symphony Hall in 2000 and 2002 with Norman's sister Sally. The Festival ended because WMBBA had transferred their annual contest from Solihull to Leamington and, with only a couple of weeks between contests, Leamington's entries fell dramatically.

In 1973 Paul was asked to reform the Royal Leamington Spa Silver Band and be its conductor. With the nucleus of older players who had gone to Alcester and some of Paul's pupils from Emscote Lawn & Warwick Schools things started to take off and I changed from tenorhorn to trombone. In these early days we played at fetes, carnivals, and park concerts in the summer but, for the winter months, transferred to indoor venues such as the Community Rooms behind Spencer Street Congregational Church and the Nelson Working Men's Club in Warwick to earn funds for new instruments. We regularly played in carnivals at Leamington, Kenilworth, Harbury, and Southam on hot summer Saturday afternoons but nothing beats going up Abbey Hill, Kenilworth with the tar melting underfoot. Our main source of income was carol playing starting on the first Sunday in December. In a typical week the band would be out on Tuesday and Thursday with two groups round the streets 6:30-8:30; Friday night concert in a club; Saturday 2:00-4:00 on the Parade, 6:30-8:15 Lockheed bingo then 9:00-9:30 Granada bingo; Sunday two groups round the streets 10:30-12:30, 2:30-4:30, & 6:30-8:30 – we must have been mad!!! In 1981 we should have played at Tiddington Home Guard Club but the snow was so heavy we did not want our teenage inexperienced drivers going to Tiddington so we tramped round the streets of Whitnash in about 12" snow (300mm for those not in my age bracket) – we were mad!!! The band enjoyed many years of playing music to a very high standard averaging over 20 engagements per season and peaking with 34 in 1980 when the band played the premiere of the pop-cantata "David & Goliath" by Stuart Johnson

with children from Brailes Junior School. A couple of other highlights of 1980 were Wembley Contest, the first of many appearances on BBC Radio Birmingham, and the Poppy Concert. The Poppy concerts raised a great deal of money for the Royal British Legion Poppy Appeal and RLSSB received many certificates of thanks and a shield which is still proudly displayed in the Band Factory. In 1984 the RLSSB won the Horsley Cup, a trophy given annually to the non-legion organisation that has raised the most money for the Poppy Appeal. The band has played for many charitable organisations and is pleased to be associated with Myton Hospice and Helen Ley House. A septet also plays carols at the Olde Fourpenny Shop Hotel in Warwick every Christmas where a collection is made for MacMillan Nurses.

RLSSB is the only brass band to have played on stage during a performance at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford. Ok, it was Stratford Opera Group's production of Hello Dolly and not Shakespeare but no other band has played on stage there during a performance!!! That was in February 2007.

In 1979 the RLSSB played at the first of many twinning ceremonies at the Town Hall. Perhaps the main benefit of this has been the visits by the Max Ernst Gymnasium Big Band from Brühl, Germany in 1988 and 1991 when we all enjoyed an outdoor barbecue and pig roast in Dr Tansey's garden at Old Milverton. Dr Tansey's son, William, was one of our young percussionists. We should not forget our memorable visit to Brühl in 1989 and the party at the old Kaiserbahnhof hostelry after the final concert. I am still in touch with Elmar and spent a pleasant few days with him and his family in September 2005.

The 1990's saw many changes. In 1992 the Royal Leamington Spa Silver Band changed its name to Royal Spa Brass; a name which the town band had not used since the early 1900's. 1996 saw the start of the Brass 2000 Project under the driving force of Roy Kruze culminating in our concerts at Symphony Hall with Black Dyke in 2000 and Grimethorpe in 2002 but what happened to all the youngsters who enjoyed the experience??? We also had the pleasure of hosting youngsters from St. Hilda's & St. Hugh's School, New York for a week with them joining us for the concert in Symphony Hall in February 2000. 1996 was also the year that we started our association with the handicapped youngsters in the Drake Project and I transferred to baritone as we had plenty of trombonists but no baritones. April 1998 saw the floods which devastated our bandroom at the old mortuary with the loss of many instruments and a library that went back to the early 1920's (inherited from Kenilworth Town Band in 1955). In December 1999 we took over the old Peanee lingerie factory and a working party transformed it into the Band Factory with the first rehearsals taking place in January 2000. It is great to have your own home after starting at the Palace Inn and going through many homes including Denby Buildings, Riverside Buildings, Royal British Legion Club, Warwick Racecourse, the old Mortuary and the old School Rooms in Court Street.

For the last few years at Leamington, during August when the main band shuts down because of holiday commitments, I have had the pleasure of taking small group rehearsals in what has become known as "Ken's summer Brass". We have quite an extensive library of quartets, quintets, sextets and ten piece music and this enables members to play to a higher standard as they cannot hide behind anyone else – they all have to play their individual part. One year I shall have a full band – maybe.

Since the late 70's we have done many joint concerts with 7 brass bands, 8 big band/ensembles, 11 choirs, 4 singers, and 10 instrumental soloists (some now playing professionally) who have been a joy to listen to. It is impossible to choose a best from such an array of talent as they have all helped to promote live music in their own ways – but Symphony Hall does take some beating. All this has been in addition to all the fine soloists that RLSSB/RSB has produced over the years.

It has been hard to condense 50 years of enjoyment into these brief pages. If you enjoy your banding as much as I have you will enjoy a very rich life and make many new friends into the bargain.

My sincere thanks to you all for helping to make the last 50 years so memorable.

Kenneth Owen, June 2006.