

# George Whittingham with Philip Biggs

**PB** George, it's a huge pleasure to welcome you to *The Brass Herald*.

**GW** Many thanks for introducing me into your excellent brass magazine. My enthusiasm is nearly always positive and exploring when entering into the world of brass banding. I have the feeling that brass band blood flows through my veins.

**PB** It always gives me great pleasure to see you and share your company at the major contests. You are always so positive and full of joy and enthusiasm. You are ninety years young next year - what makes you tick so well?

**GW** I still maintain a very positive approach to life. You will probably laugh when I say that every morning when I awake after sleeping solidly for six hours, I slip my legs over the side of the bed, sit upright and then sing "New every morning is Thy love, my wakening and uprising prove". I begin each new day with singing. I was married for 61 years to a Yorkshire lass who also had a love for music, especially the sound of a brass band. This marriage brought me great joy and fulfilment.

**PB** When we were chatting at the Royal Albert Hall in London last year, you told me you first played at the National Championships in 1946 with Carlton Main Frickley Colliery Band. You recalled that Brighouse & Rastrick Band won the contest that day, conducted by Eric Ball, playing Henry Gheel's *Oliver Cromwell*.

**GW** Yes, I think Carlton Main must have done reasonably well to get to London. I



George Whittingham.

seem to remember that the area contest was an organ fugue transcribed for band by Dr Denis Wright, but I may be wrong. I do remember the evening concert in the Royal Albert Hall, playing in massed bands and being conducted by Sir Adrian Boult.

**PB** So, where and when did you start playing?

**GW** When I reached my seventh birthday, I held a battered old cornet in my hands, held together by black tape.

**PB** Who were your teachers?

**GW** My one and only teacher was my dearly loved father; a coal miner at Hemsworth Colliery. He was a member of the local Primitive Methodist Church, met my mother at some religious event, fell in love and in no time was playing trombone in the local Salvation Army band.

He would come home to our miner's cottage from work, his face unrecognisable, being covered in coal dust, his "snap tin" hanging from his belt together with his water bottle. Before eating, he would take a four foot zinc bath which was hanging from an outside wall and place it on a homemade pegged rug in front of a large coal fire. Hot water came from a well at the side of a black leaded fireplace. I vividly remember peeping round the living room door on one occasion and seeing my Mam gently sponging his back, revealing large deep scratches. Then, after his meal, he would take me through the scales, long - very long - notes, then hymn tunes. When I reached my eighth birthday, I was playing solos with variations, two of which my Dad had composed.

**PB** Do you hail from South Yorkshire?

**GW** I was born in a very small village called Hemsworth, four miles from Carlton Main, five miles from Grimethorpe and 15 miles from Black Dyke. Nearly every village in the area had a brass band and nearly every village had a quickly growing Salvation Army band.

**PB** When did you start playing with Carlton Main?

**GW** I now regret not keeping a diary for I find it hard to pinpoint the date. I am pretty sure it was in my late teens. However, I do remember my audition.

Albert Badrick had been appointed conductor when coal mines were under private enterprise. He moved North from Calendars Band (London) to Carlton Main on the invitation of Mr Tagg, who was Managing Director. The same bandroom that I nervously entered 71 years ago is still being used today. A tenor horn was lying across a chair, complete with mouthpiece; music was placed before me that I managed to play, resulting in me being asked to stay for rehearsal.

This was a healthy period of learning for me, sitting under the baton of brass band giants, including Eric Ball, Harry Mortimer and James Hickman. Mr Badrick used a thick, heavy ebony baton, Eric and Harry used 15 inch white batons, James (Jim) used a pencil.



Young George with his Aunty.



George, on the march with The International Staff Band.



L-R, Arthur Rolls, Brian Cooper, George, John Cobb and Cy Busley. Taken in 1957 during the ISB North American Tour.

I developed friendships with Dick Stevens (soprano), George Dunne (solo cornet), Graham Johnson (solo horn), Benny Lowery (solo euphonium) and Jack Pinches (solo trombone). Jack joined Carlton Main from Black Dyke on becoming a Bevin Boy. He joined Billy Wesson and father Jack on the trombone section. About once a quarter, I would travel with Dick Stevens to help Sankeys Castle Works Band in their regular broadcasts.

**PB** Were you a miner and did you work at the Colliery?

**GW** All the members of the band worked underground at the colliery. I worked in the stores and Jack Pinches worked in what was known as the "Pit Bottom", loading tubs of coal onto the pit cage. I later became a coal cutter manipulating an electric machine cutting deep into the coal face. The electrician who serviced this machine was none other than our mutual friend, David Read.

**PB** Wow, David! How long were you a member of this famous band?

**GW** I can't really remember how long, but long enough to create a warm friendship with Benny Lowery, his younger brother Ralph and Bill Wesson. When I left the band it was because I had entered into marriage and to pursue my studies to become ordained as a Salvation Army officer.

**PB** Have you been a lifelong Salvationist?

**GW** I am quite proud of the fact that I am a fourth generation Salvationist on my Mother's side. My Great Grandmother Coley was one of the first members of the Attercliffe Corps (church). An account has been handed down that when the Founder of the SA, William Booth, made his first visit to Sheffield, he paraded all attending members, headed by brass

bands, through the streets of Sheffield. They were attacked by members of the "Skeleton Army" and my Great Grandmother Coley suffered a severe head injury through someone throwing a large brick.

The name Salvation Army has a military connotation and, as such, still retains military ranks. The conductor of an SA brass band is known as a Bandmaster; his assistant is called a Deputy Bandmaster and SA bands still retain the military rank of Band Sergeant. Many years ago when I was ordained as a minister in the SA we still retained

For instance, it was strictly forbidden for any SA band to play any type of manuscript music in concerts, or even at their church, without permission from the International Music Board. No SA band could make a cassette or LP recording without permission being obtained from the above. If permission was granted, no more than 50 copies could be pressed and no manuscript music recorded.

Terry Camsey was my principal cornet in Upper Norwood Band. He composed a cornet solo, *Life's Pageant* and asked me to give it a run through in our next concert before submitting it to the IMB. I did. The following Wednesday morning I received in the post the most serious reprimand from the Secretary to the IMB strictly forbidding me to use it again. If an SA band undertook an overseas tour, only one manuscript piece was granted for use and this had to have the IMB's approval.

I think in pre-war days only instruments manufactured in the SA instrument factory at St. Albans were to be used, the brand name being "Triumphonic". When Leslie Condon and I premiered the bass duet *Radiant Pathway* on a tour of Australia and New Zealand, I am pretty sure we were still playing "Triumphonic" three-valve basses.

I succeeded Ray Bowes as Manager of the Music Department (SP&S), Recording Manager and Manager of the Instrument Factory at St. Albans, where we were still manufacturing "Bandmaster" cornets and "Triumphonic" tenor horns.

You may be interested in this story. I remember a young man knocking on my office door at SP&S Ltd. and introducing himself. He wanted to make a career in the recording industry, especially in SA circles. At this particular time the SA had a recording contract with EMI, but they were not interested



George and Grace Whittingham.

the rank system according to length of service - 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant - 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant - Captain - Senior Captain - Adjutant - Major - Senior Major - Brigadier - Lieut. Colonel - Colonel - Lieut. Commissioner - Commissioner General. I became a Major after fourteen years' service.

**PB** Of course back in the 1940s and 1950s things were very different regarding banding in the SA and non SA - did this cause you any problems?

**GW** Yes, I found as a Bandmaster that in the 1960s and 1970s authority went overboard and imposed regulations that just didn't make sense.



Major Ray Bowes (ISB Deputy Bandmaster) and Major George Whittingham.

in cassettes. It was agreed that he would visit Butlin's at Bognor Regis and record a late night session of community singing. After recording we stayed up all night editing the tapes and then he left immediately for London to have 1000 cassettes made. He returned in the evening and within one half hour, all the cassettes were sold. His name - Brian Hillson, an outstanding recording engineer for World of Brass.

**PB** You were a member of the International Staff Band for 23 years and during this period you were also Deputy Bandmaster. Could you please tell readers about this period.

**GW** How does one condense an exciting, adventurous, ground breaking 20 plus years into a few paragraphs! When entering into the SA International Training College, together with 70 other men students, tradition has it that a brass band is formed. On your application forms you state what brass instrument you played. I typed "euphonium" and so did 17 other cadets. When the band list was posted, I found opposite my name - bass trombone. I had never played a trombone before (only when Dad was not around) and I had seven days to learn to play before our first public performance. Two years later found me walking into the ISB band room situated in the remaining part of International Headquarters that had not been bombed, handed a bass trombone (with handle) and no audition!! Here was this lad from Yorkshire shaking hands with the likes of Bernard Adams (Conductor), Ray Bowes, John and Roland Cobb, to name a few. I soon came down to earth when the Secretary informed me that the ISB within the next nine months would be undertaking its first five week tour of North America!

My first encounter with Eric Ball was on Wednesday evening when he called in at our evening rehearsal with manuscript music tucked under his arm. He said to Bernard Adams: "I think this will please you." Bernard replied: "Eric, you've written it and so I think you ought to conduct it." He handed the parts to Charles Skinner for distribution to the men. *Song of Courage* became one of our favourite concert pieces. There were a number of bars that were technically impossible to play on a handle G trombone. Eric quickly spotted this and after rehearsal he came to me and apologised, saying he would change it. In discussion with my dear friend Brian Cooper (2<sup>nd</sup> trombone) we figured out a solution and persuaded Eric not to make any changes. That was the beginning of a very long friendship.



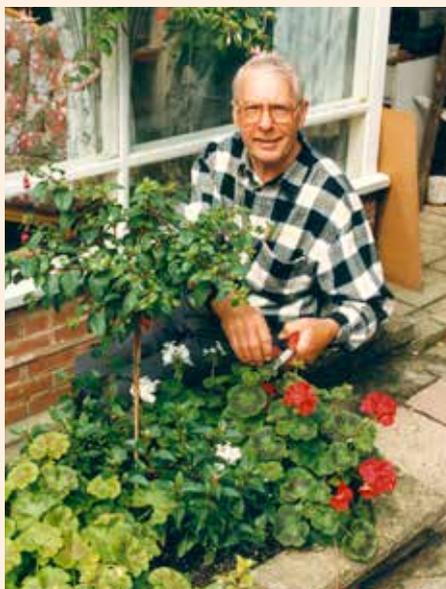
Major George Whittingham conducting Upper Norwood Band at Fairfield's Hall, Croydon in 1968.

It was the responsibility of the deputy bandmaster to audition would-be entrants into the ISB. Two stand out immediately, Dr Stephen Cobb and Derick Kane. Their long - over 40 years now - experience in the ISB speaks for itself, together with their allegiance to a church which revels in music making and opportunities.

**PB** You were the Bandmaster of Upper Norwood SA Band for many years. The band was one of the foremost SA Bands in the country and over a long period the band was regularly heard on BBC Radio.

**GW** Upper Norwood Band was the one and only band that I conducted in my long, active career and what a band! I had to work hard on youngsters such as Carl Nielsen, Wes Warren, Eric Tebbett and Ian Jones to name a few, but I inwardly recognised potential and heights they could reach. I cannot speak too highly of the late Terry Camsey and how he gave me, as Bandmaster, 100% in all ways.

We did our fair share of broadcasts, mostly from the Maida Vale studio. Alan Giles took on the position of BBC Producer of Brass and Military Bands from Harry Mortimer. He hated editing.



George tending his garden.

On entering the studio he would say to me: "Now George, remember, no staying late editing." I remember on one such occasion saying to him: "Alan, be reasonable, have you really seen what we are attempting to play?" (*The Present Age*, Cornet Solo *Clear Skies*, *Song of Courage*.) The only edit I can remember was a few bars in the cornet solo. Don't believe me? Ask any of the named "youngsters" above.

**PB** You formed and conducted the South London Fellowship Band.

**GW** I formed the South London Fellowship Band in May of 1994 and stepped down from

conducting about two years ago. I found great joy in coaxing men out of retirement and into activity again, back into their joy of brass banding.

**PB** George, may I invite you to share a golden moment with readers of *The Brass Herald*.

**GW** May I close by sharing with readers just one highlight of the many which stands out. About two years ago the band undertook a mini tour, presenting concerts in Sheringham, Derby and Sheffield. Thursday evening was free, so our band secretary arranged for the bandsmen to visit the home of Black Dyke Band and sit in at their rehearsal. We knew in advance that their new bandroom could only accommodate six visitors at a time and that we would have to rotate. Nick Childs was waiting to receive us and shared a little of Dyke's history before going downstairs to the new bandroom where we would gather in groups of six. To our utter amazement, the members of the band had placed 26 chairs in every available space which could be found in their bandroom and I found myself sitting between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> trombones. Towards the end of the two hour rehearsal, Nick Childs in addressing us all said: "There is only one way to end this special evening," lifted up his hand and the organ like sound of *Deep Harmony* filled the room. The Founder of the Salvation Army would have loved this precious moment. There was no sign of embarrassment as members of the SLFB, who had given 50, 60 and even 70 years of their lives to brass banding, allowed tears to slowly trickle down their cheeks as they married words to beautiful music.

**PB** George, Thanks so much for a great interview and sharing so much with us all. Wishing you a wonderful 90th birthday George.

**GW** Thank you very much for asking me, Philip. Looking forward to seeing you at the next contest or concert. I enjoy the chats we have.

**PB** Me too, George.