

Village Echoes

Nowadays music is readily accessible wherever one is, but until the invention of records towards the end of the 19th century, if 'the man in the street' wanted to hear popular music, then generally the only way would be for him to play an instrument himself or listen to a local or travelling band. One example of a travelling band was the 'German' band that used to march from village to village and came to Goudhurst two or three times a year. Although nothing more is known of it, the members were probably immigrants from Germany, under the control of a bandmaster.

In centuries gone by, the principal setting for formal music in Goudhurst was St. Mary's Church. Before the installation of an organ in 1854, a group of local amateur musicians known as the "Church Orchestra" accompanied the singing from the gallery which had been installed in 1770 at the western end of the Church. Churchwardens' accounts give some detail about the instruments and musicians, which included a bass viol (or 'cello) and various singers who possibly also played instruments, as was then the tradition in churches.

The arrival of the organ made the Church Orchestra redundant, including a Mr. Luck who played the serpent and Mr Payne (flute); some members then moved to the Methodist chapel where they continued to play. This turn of events may also account for the growth of music-making outside the church: for example, the Rootes' Band appears to have come into existence in the 1860s, first as a fife and drum band and latterly as a brass band. This was very much a family affair, consisting of James Rootes and his five sons – Edward, Jim, Caleb, William and Sam. James composed the music for the words written by Caleb, whilst Edward copied the music and arranged parts for the band. William's daughters were not left out of the picture, as they had to sing the music for their father as he composed it. The band was known for playing sacred music on The Plain every Sunday evening during the summer months. In 1872 it entered a contest at Eastwell Park, near Ashford, then home of The Duke of Edinburgh, and won first prize. As a result, the Duke permitted the band to call him their patron and to take the title of Rootes' Royal Goudhurst Band.

In Goudhurst and Kilndown a number of bands existed until well into the 20th century, with perhaps the most well-known being The Goudhurst Prize Brass Band – originally known as the Kilndown & Goudhurst Brass Band. The band is believed to have started life in 1887 in Kilndown where, at one time, band practices were held at Riseden Infants' School. Clearly the band was much appreciated and called upon to perform at times of national celebration, such as The Relief of Mafeking in 1900, and for local events such as flower shows and sports days. Its bandmaster for many years till 1914, George Reeves, had also led the Drum and Fife Band of the 41st Rifle Volunteers. The subsequent brass band entered annual contests held at Tunbridge Wells where they regularly won second and third place and, in 1932, the coveted Besson Challenge Cup for first prize.

At some time between 1900 and 1915 the Kilndown and Goudhurst Brass Band became just Goudhurst Brass Band; photographs taken between 1900 and 1935 show it numbering between 13 and 20 players. We know, from Alfred Tiffin's Coronation Book, that the band was still going strong in 1937, when it was in demand for the celebrations of George VI's

coronation; however, nothing has been written about later years and it is supposed that the band ceased to exist at the outbreak of war in 1939.

Although our forebears did not have access to the volume and variety of music that so many of us take for granted today, there is little doubt that they gained much enjoyment from the bands that existed locally and acted as a source of pleasure and relaxation in what was often a very hard-working life.

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