

WHEN THE BAND BEGAN TO PLAY

This article by Colleen O'Sullivan appeared in the *Mudgee Guardian*, 30 June 2014.

Kandos got its first brass band in July 1918 and four months later, after many practice sessions and a few public performances, there came an opportune time to demonstrate its real worth.

Shortly after midnight on 12 November the shrill sounds of the cement works' siren alerted the town that peace with Germany had been signed. For twenty minutes it hooted and tooted until it ran out of steam, literally. By then the town was awake. Bursting with joy and relief they gathered in the streets, hugging, cheering, hurrahing, laughing. At long last war had ended.

Suddenly through the night air came the thrilling sounds of a brass band "marching in from the back blocks". It drew crowds to the main street. It drew children with their own tin-can band, which though "not remarkable for its melody...did justice to the occasion". And in White Crescent Reserve the Kandos Town Band lifted the town's spirits even more, with their marches and songs of praise.

From there to Mr Hansen's pub, to celebrate in "a worthy manner", the band being suitably acknowledged with refreshments provided by the publican. Then they marched over to the cement works "to enliven those men who had the misfortune to be at the post of duty". I imagine not many people slept that night and all would remember that significant occasion for the rest of their lives.

There is something about a brass band that perks us up, gets us foot-tapping, marching even, if we are not too self-conscious. At the very least we lean towards that stirring music, feeling I think, a magnetic attraction. And when the musicians put away their instruments and melt into the crowd, we are left feeling spiritually uplifted, yes, but also a little low, as if our best friend has left us.

Brass bands evolved at the time brass instruments appeared, in the mid-nineteenth century, when the industrial revolution was in full swing. It is appropriate that Kandos' first band was a brass band, a band long associated with industrial towns full of colliery and factory workers. Perhaps workers were attracted to the hard shiny metal surface of brass instruments, their lusty sound and their industrial strength.

Company managers encouraged and supported the formation of a brass band. It was good for morale and company loyalty. In the early years most Kandos company workers made fortnightly contributions to the band; and the cement company no doubt made a contribution towards the cost of instruments.

A town band needs a bandstand and White Crescent reserve was the obvious place for one. It belonged to the company and the question was asked: Would they dedicate it to the people of Kandos? While that question was considered, steps were taken to improve the reserve. Ten garden seats were placed there in 1920 and in 1922 the company offered to draw up plans for a rotunda and provide the cement for its construction. It was 1926 however before White Crescent reserve was dedicated to Rylstone Shire Council by Hunter White; and 1930 before

the band played their first recital under the domed roof of the Rotunda and read their sheet music under electric lighting.

Who do we thank most for the Kandos Town Band? We could say the hundreds of players who, over the years, met twice weekly to learn their instruments and practise their compositions; and who then appeared at numerous events locally and away: at openings, festivals, celebrations, sporting events, or simply a Sunday afternoon concert at the Rotunda. Always the brass band elevated the occasion and lifted the pride and joie de vivre of the assembled crowd with its vigorous and harmonious sounds.

There is no doubt the bandmaster played an important role. He was in turn mentor, disciplinarian, teacher, selector of music and leader. He held the baton. However, it seems a long-term bandmaster was not crucial to the success of a town band.

Mr Peters, chemist at the works, first introduced the idea of a Kandos town band in February 1918 but he left Kandos in May and Ed Farley became the first bandmaster. At the opening of the Methodist Church in September 1919 it was S J Blackwell holding the baton and before another year had passed J Thomas. W H Ford took over in June 1920, remained till November 1923, was succeeded temporarily by his brother Hector Ford, who was then displaced by E H Pitcher.

That was a situation that caused some upheaval. But let me backtrack. In October 1921 the Kandos Town Band came under new management with a committee of twelve: three representatives of the Progress Association, three from the Miners, three from the Australian Workers Union and three from the band. They drew up a set of rules for the governance of the band and when W H Ford resigned they called for applications and duly elected E H Pitcher of Moss Vale, a musician with impressive credentials.

Band members wanted the man they knew, Hector Ford, so they resigned en masse, taking the instruments they owned with them, and formed the Kandos Pioneer Band. While they performed in venues in both towns and particularly in a series of fund-raisers, Mr Pitcher trained up the Kandos Town Band with new young members who gave their first performance six months later in June 1924. Within weeks the Pioneer Town Band had folded and rejoined Kandos Town Band. A familiar country town story.

What it shows is the importance of funds for a successful small town band: for instruments, music, uniforms, travel, accommodation, practice venue, and (in some cases) for the bandmaster. Over the years fundraisers included dances, raffles and “pass around the box”. Sponsorship for the big-ticket items usually came from the companies and the shire because they knew the value of a town band. More important than a football team in the early days!

Sometime in the 1930s, when balls were at their zenith, the brass band gave way to the orchestra, of which there were many in Kandos, for example Junge’s, Baistow’s, The Melody Makers, Mrs Muller’s Jazz and Goodacre’s. In 1938 Bandmaster Fletcher reformed the Kandos Town Band and, though it stumbled along during the war, it was soon led into the fabulous Band Festivals of the fifties and sixties by long-term Bandmaster Colin Byrnes. It is fitting to remember that during these years the Salvation Army also provided uplifting band music for the town on Sunday evenings.

Sunday 3 October 1954 was a day of perfect weather so we can imagine the enthusiastic crowds lining Angus Avenue at 11am to watch bands from Rockdale, Mudgee, Portland, Orange, Kandos and Bathurst (two!), marching in mass formation along Angus Avenue. After a welcome by Shire President Norm Saville and dedication of the Memorial obelisk, the massed band appropriately and harmoniously rendered “The Recessional” and “National Anthem”. Lunch in the Returned Soldiers’ Hall was followed by a march to the sports ground, with a brief stop at the Rotunda by each band while their bandmaster planted a tree to commemorate their visit.

On the sportsground, in the open air, under a cloudless sky, visitors and townspeople enjoyed a mixed program of popular and classical marches, airs and hymns; Noel Coward’s “Cavalcade”, Verdi’s “Rigoletto”, “Happy Wanderer”, “Bright Gems of Melody” and “Bless This House”, to name just a few. And when it was time to go home the crowds joined hands for “Auld Lang Syne”.

The Kandos Town Band has now marched into the past but its uniquely glorious and uplifting sounds still echo beneath Coomber Melon Mountain.

Note: Information about Kandos Town Bands came from early editions of the *Mudgee Guardian* and *The Lithgow Mercury*, Bev Robbins, and Glen and Rose Evans.