

# Boys' bands in children's homes: a fragment of history

Roy Parker

Roy Parker is Emeritus  
Professor at the University of  
Bristol, Bristol, UK.

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purposes of this paper are threefold. First, to draw attention to an overlooked feature of children's institutions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; namely, the widespread existence of boys' brass bands. The second purpose is to explain why these were created and the third is to consider what implications membership of a band had for a boy's subsequent life.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper relies upon archival and secondary sources.

**Findings** – The study traces the influences that led to the formation of so many boys' bands. These included the background of brass bands in popular culture; the belief in the power of music as an agent of social reform; the money-spinning value of a band that gave public performances, and the opportunity for a band-boy to join a military band, thereby securing a foothold in the juvenile labour market. Over and above these findings is the fact that so many boys from deprived backgrounds could be taught to play a musical instrument to a competent standard.

**Originality/value** – As far as the author knows this is the only study of children's homes' bands. Its value lies in emphasising the fact that some of the most disadvantaged children are likely to have latent aptitudes and talents that can be discovered and developed. That is the message for today.

**Keywords** Institutions, History, Music, Lessons, Children, Bands

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

"In almost every school there is a band". Report of the Committee on the Education [...] of Pauper Children in the Metropolis (1896, p. 47).

The unremarked but widespread existence of boys' bands in nineteenth and early twentieth century institutions for children in Britain is, in fact, more than a detached fragment of history. In the first place, because it sheds light on how political, social and cultural forces have shaped the character of services for vulnerable children and, in the second, because it offers an important message for today. This message, to which we shall return at the end, is that some of society's most disadvantaged children are likely to possess undiscovered aptitudes that can and should be nurtured: in this example the mastery of a musical instrument in a collective setting. But the message is not just about music and musicianship. It is about the cultivation of children's capacities, especially the capacities of those amongst whom these are least likely to be recognised and developed.

There are three questions about the emergence of bands in children's institutions that warrant exploration. First, how did they come to be promoted, by whom and with what aims in mind? Second, what were the preconditions for their formation? Lastly, how did membership of a band affect a boy's subsequent life?

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## Why create a band?

There was a widespread brass band "movement" in Britain throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. Although that movement originated in Lancashire, it spread rapidly to other parts of the North of England, to South Wales, to Scotland and to the South of England. Indeed, by the 1880s it was estimated that there were around 20,000 such bands whose members were mostly working class men (Russell, 1991, p. 58). Brass bands were also common in most European countries, in the USA and elsewhere in the world.

There was no single reason for the emergence of this movement in Britain although, as Trevor Herbert (1991, p. 11) has pointed out, there was a legacy of army bands, militia bands, village bands and the church bands that preceded the use of organs. It is against the background of this movement that the formation of boys' bands in so many institutions for children and older adolescents has to be seen.

One reason for the countrywide increase in brass bands was middle and upper class sponsorship. On the one hand there were certain industrialists who "took a great pride in having their works' band play at garden parties and other social occasions for the well heeled" (Herbert, 1991, p. 15). But such sponsorship was also encouraged by the conviction that music was "a moral and positive good among working people" (Herbert, 1991, p. 21) keeping them away from the public houses and promoting habits of discipline, application, pride in achievement and attachment to the company, all of which was thought to reflect well on industrial harmony and productivity.

In some cases brass bands were also sponsored by the commanding officers (usually local gentry) of the volunteer militias, militias that, as Herbert has pointed out, were re-established by the Militia Act of 1852 in response to heightened Franco-British tensions. Drill and marching were important means of maintaining a militia's discipline and a band did much to relieve the tedium of such activities as well as keeping up morale.

However, there were other bands that did not depend upon external sponsorship. These were those formed by local groups and financed by subscription. As the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* points out they included "temperance societies, missions and other religious organisations, mechanics institutes and similar bodies" all of which recognised the potential of a band for attracting membership (Sadie, 1980, p. 210). There were considered to be other benefits as well. For example, the Salvation Army's bands (the first of which was formed in 1878) were "valued because they drew a crowd and [furthermore] effectively drowned out the shouts and ridicule with (sic) religious music" (Walker, 1960, p. 192)[1].

Thus, particularly from the middle years of the nineteenth century, the number of bands, especially brass bands, grew apace. They were an integral part of popular culture and would have been familiar to many of the boys living in children's institutions. The managers and benefactors of these institutions would have been similarly aware of the brass band culture and would have been conscious of the potential value of a band in promoting discipline and enhancing a boy's chances in life. Furthermore, music, as David Russell (1987) has explained, "was always a particularly popular component in the various schemes whereby reformers sought social and moral regeneration" (p. 18).

Together with these convictions the heads of children's homes and their parent organisations realised that a competent band could show that the institution was succeeding in equipping children with skills that had a recognised social value at a time before radio or recorded music. Indeed, where brass bands were commonplace it would have seemed only logical for a home to have one as well, added to which a band that marched in the streets and that gave public performances could raise the profile of its home and thereby, it was hoped, increase its income. For example, this is how, in the latter part of the twentieth century, that aspect of the Brixham British Seamen's Boys' Home band was described:

The Home's drum and bugle band was legendary [...] Apart from the inevitable Sunday morning church parades, there were regular trips [...] to play before the Torquay United games and again at half time; some at Plymouth Argyle and occasionally at Exeter City. Then there were the carnivals, fetes and garden parties "that kept the Home's profile so much in the public eye" (emphasis added) (Potts and Wilson, 2006, p. 71).

The importance attached to marching in the Stepney boys' home was described by June Rose (1987) in her history of Barnardos. She recounted how "once or twice a week 400 boys in uniform, headed by their band, marched through the East End" (p. 152). These, and similar occasions, were likely to have given the band-boys a sense of pride and confirmed a status and confidence not shared by other home children. They did, after all, experience public acclaim and undertook journeys that were likely to have widened their horizons. In some cases, their performances led to pocket money or being given special "treats", paid for by the donations that were collected.

Almost all the bands were dressed in distinctive uniforms, and these served to draw public attention to the homes from which the boys came, no doubt adding to their sense of being special. Indeed, considerable importance was attached to the uniforms, many of which resembled those of regimental bands, except that boys sent to the ship schools wore naval uniform. However, it should be borne in mind that in many homes all the children wore uniform clothes, but clothes that were not as flamboyant as those of the band. Uniforms reflected the regimentation found in institutions as well as advertising the fact that a child lived in a home. It marked them out and conferred an identity.

Returning to the assumptions that were made about the value of bands, it should be noted that it was not only the young bandsmen who were considered to benefit; other children in the homes were also believed to profit from its playing and from involvement in other musical activities such as singing and hand-bell ringing. It was common for children to have to undertake "drill" (both boys and girls); that is, to go through set physical exercises in serried ranks and to march and, as we have seen, the marching was commonly led by the band. Bands were also used to mark important happenings in a home's activity; for example, the departure of the children who were being sent overseas. This is how one such event was described in 1885 by Fegan's Boys' Home in its house journal. In Deptford, it reported, the inhabitants:

[...] were roused by the stirring tones of the Drum and Fife Band [...] as, at the head of a hundred young emigrants, it marched steadily on to the New Cross Public Hall, where all interested in the welfare of the lads were invited that they might finally bid "God-Speed" to the youthful pioneers (Anon, 1885, pp. 2-3).

Similarly, in Barnardo's (1889) book *Something Attempted – Something Done* a band is depicted saying farewell to some of his homes' children who were being sent to Canada, the band having accompanied them to Euston railway station as they headed for embarkation at Liverpool (p. 186).

But the bands could also be involved in supporting campaigns of social reform and missionary work. For example, the band of the National Children's Home's establishment at Bonner Road in London was used to "beat up" attendance at missionary meetings. It also combined with temperance society brass bands on "temperance Sunday" processions, processions in which all the children from the home took part (Homer, 1919, pp. 103-4). As well as these and other public performances bands also played within the homes. In the Central London District School at Hanwell[2] (and probably elsewhere) the band played at mealtimes; and, of course, there were regular band practices that required a certain discipline but which were also capable of creating a sense of achievement when progress was made.

Thus, there was a belief in the "reformative" power of music, best summed up by Barnardo in his long article in the *Musical Herald* (reproduced in full in Barnardo and Marchant, 1907, pp. 134-6). In it he listed five reasons for "using music". First, he saw it as "a means of culture", opening "the gates of intelligence, of ideality, of emotion". Second, he regarded it as "invaluable as a means of drill", and drill to music, he believed, made discipline easier. Third, he promoted music, he wrote, "because of the pleasure it gives". Fourth, music was regarded as an essential "handmaiden of religion", especially in hymn singing. Finally, he argued that his homes used music because "they cannot do without it". Music gave the children "a priceless heritage of beauty, of culture, of abiding spiritual possession". Others may not have described the merits of music in such grandiose terms, but many shared his conviction that music, whether played in a band or sung, could have an "improving" effect. Furthermore, its band was regarded by many

homes as the jewel in the crown of their achievements. This is how the inspector of workhouse schools in London described the bands in 1876:

Of the musical skill attained in these schools to which a bandmaster is attached I cannot speak too highly; indeed the finish and delicacy of playing in the St. Mary-le-bone and in the Strand schools are quite exceptional for such young performers[3].

This enthusiasm was still evident 20 years later in what the witnesses to the 1896 committee on the education of pauper children in London had to say about their bands; for instance, the head of the poor law district school at Banstead was eager to tell the committee how good its band was, claiming that he "did not know of any other boys' band that is better"[4].

Yet, such enthusiasms were fuelled by reasons other than the direct improvement of the boys or the aim of bringing the work of a home to public attention. There were two additional considerations that encouraged those who ran the homes to set up bands. One was their money-spinning potential. They gave concerts at which collections were made. Likewise, when they marched through the streets at the head of a column of their fellow home children there were collecting boxes at the ready. A nice illustration of the part that music played in raising money can be seen in a photograph of the young bandmen of the Sailors' Children's Society, taken around the turn of the nineteenth century, which was entitled: "they played for their supper" (Mitchell, 1961, p. 44). Some institutions, such as the industrial ship school "Wellesley" at North Shields, advertised that its band could be hired for a fee. Indeed, the Wellesley's band played at venues across the North, travelling by train at preferential rates[5].

Barnardos' history also provides evidence of the importance of the fund-raising activities of a band. In the 1890s, for example, his "musical boys", accompanied by two clergymen, toured Australia and New Zealand, a tour that, as Rose (1987) pointed out, was "an outstanding success at a time of deepening financial crisis" (p. 226). Indeed, Gillian Wagner (1979) recounts that "they travelled extensively and succeeded [...] in raising more than £10,000 for the institutions" (p. 260), the expedition costing some £2,000. Afterwards each boy was given a watch and a letter of commendation.

However, these were not the only musical tours that were arranged for Barnardos' bands. In 1930 it was claimed that "people all over the Empire have been thrilled by the concerts of Barnardo's protégés", particularly those from the Musical Home for Boys at Clapham that trained some 150 promising young musicians (Bready, 1930, p. 43). "Nearer home", Wagner (1979) tells us, "performances by the 'musical boys' became a regular feature of the fund-raising calendar" (p. 260).

Together with their money-raising activities there was another reason for the support that the bands enjoyed. This lay in the fact that their members could join the army and marines as band-boys, thereby providing an assured employment when they left the homes, an employment that could be taken up as young as 14, albeit that the normal minimum age for enlistment was 15. They were able, therefore, to fill a niche in the juvenile labour market in which there was a strong demand for well-trained young musicians. For example, in the annual report of the Local Government Board for 1876-1877 the inspector for the Midland and Eastern district wrote "that military music is [...] invaluable [...] if taught tolerably well, as the demand for musicians in the army appears to be inexhaustible"[6]. This was confirmed by his colleague in the Western district who reported that regimental bandmasters were so eager to recruit band-boys that "the greater part of the boys [...] have been snapped up" before the official War Office list of those available had been published[7]. There were, indeed, many competing regimental bands. In 1914, there were some 150 British regiments, each with its band. Moreover, the larger naval vessels would have had a marine band numbered amongst their crews[8]. The main obstacle that faced a competent band-boy joining a military band was in meeting the height and chest measurements that were required. Some failed to do so.

Nonetheless, the Local Government Board continued to report that a considerable number of boys leaving poor law schools in London enlisted in military bands. In 1882-1883, there were 151 out of 746, or 20 per cent[9]. In 1886-1887 the proportion was 22 per cent[10], but falling back to 17 per cent the following year[11]. The proportion was larger in 1900-1901 when 28 per cent (227 of 810) left to join a military band[12]. However, by the 1930s the proportions

had fallen, probably because there were fewer bands, a decline attributable to the fact that homes were becoming smaller and because more of their children attended elementary schools instead of being taught on the premises. At the beginning of 1907, for example, 35 per cent of children in poor law establishments made the daily journey to a local school, a proportion that grew steadily thereafter[13]. Nevertheless, fewer children in the voluntary homes went out for their education and, of course, those committed to reformatories and industrial schools continued to be instructed within the institutions.

### The preconditions for the development of bands

One important factor that enabled bands (mainly brass bands) to be formed in children's homes was their size. Larger homes began to emerge in the 1840s. The first arose from the gradual removal of children from workhouses to separate accommodation, for which the principal arguments were that without such a move they would remain brutalised, their education and training ignored and the cycle of pauperism perpetuated. The need for separate provision for children had been clearly acknowledged and strongly recommended in the 1834 report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Poor Laws[14]. Children were no longer to live in general mixed workhouses. However, the Poor Law Commissioners, to whom responsibility for implementing the policy fell, failed to ensure that this happened as widely as was intended.

Despite this back-peddling there were those amongst the assistant commissioners (civil servants) who maintained that the only way that a better education for poor law children could be secured was by gathering them together in buildings quite separate from the general mixed workhouse. Two assistant commissioners, in particular (Edward Tufnell and James Kay), pressed for the creation of "district schools", each accommodating some 450 children[15], to which a number of poor law unions could send children, thereby also resolving many of the deficiencies that were to be found in the small local poor law schools.

This became more possible when the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1844 gave the Commissioners the power to combine parishes and unions for various purposes. As a result, by 1849 six large district schools had been established[16], but there were never to be many more, partly because they fell prey to much criticism as being barrack-like and liable to the spread of disease. Nevertheless, they continued to be defended by people like Tufnell, one of whose arguments was that only a large poor law school could support a band. This is how he explained his conviction in 1869:

One of the best occupations to which boys can be brought up is [...] that of band-boys, to supply the demand for musicians in the army and navy. The boys so trained invariably turn out well [...] however I find it difficult to maintain a band unless there are at least 150 boys to choose from, and this implies a school, including girls and infants, of 400 or 500 children[17].

Other institutions for children began to emerge once the 1854 Reformatory Schools Act, and then the Industrial Schools Act three years later, encouraged a variety of philanthropic organisations to set up such institutions with the help of generous government grants. The schools grew apace. In Britain by 1873 there were already 65 reformatories and 104 industrial schools. Between them they held some 17,500 children and by 188,325,350[18]. However, the size of these institutions varied, as did the ages of the children they accommodated. Both had a bearing upon the likelihood of a band being formed. Of the 43 boys' reformatories 25 (58 per cent) had no more than 75 places. The industrial schools were somewhat larger. Even so, of the 66 that catered for boys 20 had places for fewer than 75 (30 per cent). On the other hand, there were some institutions that dealt with large numbers of boys. The largest was the Feltham industrial school that, in July 1883, had 753 boys in its charge and boasted two bands under the direction of an ex-cavalry band musician[19]. However, there were 14 other industrial schools that accommodated more than 200 boys, all of which had bands[20]. There were also a few large reformatories, notably the Philanthropic Farm School at Redhill with 285 boys and which, by the 1880s, maintained two bands with a mixture of brass and wind instruments[21].

During the 1880s and 1990s the number of institutions with bands increased. By the end of 1884, for example, I have been able to establish that at least ten of the 33 boys' reformatories had

bands and at least 43 of the 80 industrial schools (excluding truant schools and day schools). Almost all the bands were brass but four of those in the industrial schools were fife and drum bands[22].

Although it was the largest homes in which bands were most commonly found it was possible to establish them in smaller homes if boys were retained for long periods, as they were when committed to an industrial school or a reformatory. For example, a band existed in the Dorset County industrial school at Blandford that had just 51 boys in 1883 and at the one in Chester that had 81 in the same year[23].

By the mid-1870s other developments were also bringing numerous children together on one site. From the 1870s onwards various voluntary children's organisations emerged that, although beginning in a modest way, came to rely upon large homes. For example, by the end of the 1880s Barnardo's Stepney boys' home was able to accommodate between 300 and 450 lads over 13 whose average stay was about a year (Barnardo, 1889, p. 29). In another of his London homes for 10-13 year-olds (Leopold House) there were about 420 boys who stayed between two and three years. Both homes supported bands, the latter also having a hand-bell ringing team and a small group of bagpipers (Barnardo, 1889, pp. 52-4)[24]. In Bristol the Müller orphanage was an exception, having no bands even though, by 1905, it accommodated over 1,500 children. Indeed, no musical instruments were kept, Müller arguing that their purchase was not a justifiable use of donors' money. However, the children were taught singing in "the church style" (a cappella) using the tonic sol-fa system (Bergin, 1929, p. 693)[25].

Although homes gradually became smaller many large homes continued to be used, both by boards of guardians and by voluntary organisations, thereby continuing to make it possible for a band to be formed. (Even so, there had to be someone in charge who was both able and keen enough to establish and maintain it.) Not only did homes begin to be smaller but also to be divided up into cottages, albeit on the same site. This seems to have reduced the likelihood of a band being kept; but that probably depended upon the degree to which activities were decentralised. At the very least there had to be somewhere for a band to practice and to store their instruments; there would hardly be room in one of the cottages.

Thus, two practical considerations facilitated the creation of a band. One was that the homes had to contain enough boys (boys-only homes could afford to be smaller) to draw upon. The other was that there needed to be a relatively slow turnover to enable the bands to have a reasonably stable membership. Nevertheless, there was the constant need to find new boys to replace those who had left and therefore to have ongoing musical instruction. As Barnardo (1889) explained, the two bands (junior and senior) at his Stepney boys' home were "constantly maintained at their full strength" despite "the necessarily frequent changes in the personnel of the Bands [which] interfere [...] to some extent with their efficiency" adding, however, that "the results attained by the young bandsmen are in a very high degree creditable" (p. 43).

Apart from the need to have enough boys at any one time from whom a band could be formed there were some other factors that made this more likely. The growing number of brass bands throughout the country produced a lively market for brass instruments. The scale of their manufacture in Britain grew accordingly, with the result that their cost fell, especially from the middle years of the nineteenth century. The fall in prices was also influenced by the growing availability of cheaper instruments imported from France and Germany (Myers, 1991, p. 181). For example, in 1873 an ordinary cornet imported from France and sold by Boosey & Co cost £1.5s whereas the firm sold a British-made model for three guineas (Myers, 1991, p. 182). Furthermore, certain technical developments made brass instruments easier to play and therefore easier to master, added to which they became more durable, thereby requiring less frequent replacement.

Nonetheless, the cost of setting up a band was considerable. For instance, in the early 1900s the 29-strong Castle Howard reformatory band was photographed holding their instruments and these included ten cornets/trumpets, eight euphoniums, four flugel horns/clarinets, three trombones and one each of a sousaphone/bombardon, tuba, side drum and bass drum[26]. At contemporary prices the total cost of these instruments would have been about £200 depending on their quality or perhaps £10,000 at today's prices (and a good deal more if one uses changes in the retail price indices as a basis for calculation) (Myers, 1991, p. 188)[27].

Typically, bands numbered around 30 boys; but some had as many as 50 players, in which case the cost could have been around £300. In addition to these expenses there was usually the salary of a bandmaster and the cost of the uniforms[28]. As we have seen, many of these resembled those of the military bands and were both detailed and colourful. Were they made (or repaired) in a school's tailoring workshop[29]? Alternatively, were local tailors engaged to make the uniforms? Or did the homes purchase ready-made bandsmen's uniforms from one of the specialist suppliers that had sprung up by the 1860s? (Russell, 1987, p. 141).

So, the expense of forming a band, and keeping it going, was considerable, even when the price of instruments fell. However, costs were sometimes offset by the donation of instruments (or of the money to buy them) and perhaps by the income that the bands were able to earn. Nonetheless, equipping a band was no small investment, but an investment that gives some idea of the enthusiasm with which bands were regarded.

One key requirement for the formation of a band was, of course, that a home contained a sufficient number of boys who could be taught to master the relevant instruments. Given that it was unlikely that lads would have played an instrument before (and that most would have experienced a depriving upbringing) their acquisition of musical skills stands as a testament to their talent. Nevertheless, how were those suitable to become band-boys selected? Once selected, how were they taught? Did they read music? Bandmasters (sometimes part-time) are frequently mentioned; but little is known about their backgrounds although it is probable that many were retired military musicians.

#### What lay in store for the homes' band-boys?

It is not possible to discover what happened to band-boys once they had left their respective homes, although the careers of individuals can sometimes be traced. Even when there is information about the boys' first "placements" there is rarely anything that indicates how long these lasted and what followed next. We know that many joined military bands; but those band-boys who did not are not distinguishable from all the other boys who left the homes. So, we have to be satisfied with considering what might have happened to those who did become members of a military band and then to compare this with what might have happened to other boys and girls from the various institutions.

As we have seen the band-boys who went on to play in military bands had two apparent advantages. One was that they were assured an employment that also fed, housed and clothed them. Another was that it lasted well into adulthood, depending upon the duration of their enlistment. Furthermore, their musical skills were likely to improve over time. It was also claimed, for example, by the chairman of the Forest Gate poor law district school in his 1896 evidence to the committee on the education of pauper children, that the military band-boys "were well looked after and their education continued", adding that "it was a very good opening indeed"[30]. Whether or not this was the case we cannot know; but it was commonly believed to be so by those who ran the various homes. Entry to a military band was regarded as a good "disposal".

However, some sounded a note of caution. In their general report, for example, the commissioners of the 1896 inquiry were concerned that the boys who became members of a home's band received little other "industrial training", playing in a band being regarded as training in its own right. This is what they concluded: "there is a danger under the present system that boys with some aptitude for music will be deprived of the industrial discipline which would develop their faculties and fit them to fill a place in life". Furthermore, the commissioners added that it had to be:

[...] remembered that for many boys the army band does not provide a lifelong occupation; and the forlorn condition of men who leave the army without possessing the knowledge of a trade is unfortunately too well known to masters of workhouses and superintendents of casual wards[31].

Some, it was intimated, became street musicians, effectively begging for a living.

So, although there were pros and cons, the advantages of a bandsman's career were generally considered to outweigh the disadvantages. That being so it is likely that band-boys were given strong encouragement to enlist. From the point of view of the poor law administrators being a

military band-boy avoided the casual or uncertain jobs that others were obliged to take and therefore reduced the likelihood that they would return to the poor law. In short, it was believed to break the habit of dependence and thus prevent the development of "pauper careers".

What might have happened to boys had they not joined a military band? The Local Government Board's annual report for 1900-1901 lists the first employment of all children leaving pauper schools in the Metropolis. In fact, the most common destination for boys was a military band (28 per cent). The two next most frequent "disposals" were a transfer to a working-boys' home or hostel (18 per cent) and entry into the merchant navy (15 per cent). A further 7 per cent went to the navy, but not as band-boys. The rest were found jobs in a variety of occupations that were described, for example, as "baker", "shoemaker" or "tailor"; but this usually meant no more than that they were employed in these trades as helpers, although sometimes as apprentices. There were also some who became "office boys" or "errand boys". Surprisingly, none were recorded as being unemployed[32]. Even so, the prospects for a boy who joined a military band would seem to have been as good as those of other leavers and, in some respects, better. Indeed, a few became bandmasters, both during their service and after.

Of course, band-boys were also soldiers or marines and were likely to be sent to war, first to the Boer War and later to the 1914-1918 ordeal[33]. However, bandsmen were not expected to bear arms; but, especially in the second of these conflicts, they frequently performed the duties of stretcher bearers, a role that was as dangerous as that of the front-line infantry. For example, in his account of being a stretcher-bearer Patrick MacGill (1916/1984) (not a former bandsman) describes going "over the top" with his comrades: "stretcher bearers", he wrote, "had to cross with their companies; none of the attacking party must deal with the men who fell [...]" (p. 48). Wearing a red-cross armband did not protect them from shellfire or raking machine guns and rarely from rifle fire. However, some bandsmen were kept in the rear in order that their playing might boost the morale of those marching to the front or to entertain headquarters staff whilst they dined or when dignitaries visited.

Unlike the boys leaving homes for their first employment almost all the girls faced just one option: domestic service. This was what happened to 504 of the 519 (97 per cent) girls who left poor law schools in London in 1900-1901[34]. Some were fortunate in getting a good placement; but most were employed at the lowest level of the domestic service hierarchy. A few went into laundry work or dressmaking, but the latter could mean little more than picking up discarded cottons from the floor or being sent out to deliver the finished dresses[35]. Despite the rigours of military life the band-boys probably led a more congenial life than many of the girls from the homes. They certainly had the prospect of the comradeship of other boys, a companionship that was so often denied lonely young girls in domestic service.

The band-boys also probably "did better" than the majority of working class boys who left school at 14, many taking dead-end jobs. The 1909 royal commission on the poor laws estimated that 40 per cent became errand boys, van or boat boys or were engaged in street trading. In the manufacturing areas they became "loom boys, doffers, shifters in the cotton and woollen trades [...] rivet boys in shipbuilding, drawers off in sawmills, packers in soap works etc.". Overall, the commission estimated that between 70 and 80 per cent of boys leaving elementary schools in the early years of the twentieth century entered unskilled occupations[36]. Even when they did obtain jobs within a trade these were often lost as they grew older and warranted men's wages. Furthermore, because apprenticeships typically started at 16 the 14-year-old school leavers who aspired to be an apprentice had two years to wait, during which time they had to find other work. It was not only that many boys obtained only unskilled or casual work but that others became unemployed or were in and out of work. There was, as numerous reports in the early part of the twentieth century bore witness, a problem of "boy employment", a problem that was not considered to be as pressing when it came to the girls because, even at 14, they were readily taken on as domestic servants, although for many this was as much a "dead-end" occupation as those to which boys were consigned.

### The wider context

It is evident that the formation of homes' bands reflected a much wider "brass band movement". But, as we have seen, the homes had additional reasons for promoting bands, foremost amongst



which was a belief in the reformative virtues of a child mastering an instrument and being part of a collective activity. Bands, marching, regimented drill and distinctive uniforms all emphasised a desire to impose order and discipline. This, in its turn, was at one with the political quest to secure a disciplined workforce, a disciplined education system and a disciplined army and navy. Indeed, the imposition of greater discipline was regarded as an answer to drunkenness, irreligion (unbelief), criminality, pauperism and a variety of other threats to the prevailing social order, an order that was imperial as well as domestic.

That imperial order depended (amongst other things) upon the cultivation of popular Empire sentiments at home, sentiments that martial music (as well as music hall songs) could help to arouse and sustain[37]. Bands that paraded publicly and marched through the streets have always had a magnetic effect, especially upon children who, if they could, fell into step alongside. There seems to be no reason why homes' children should not have been equally affected by the sounds of a band, particularly a brass band. Hence, although the homes' bands served several purposes their formation also fed into a more general popular patriotism and pride in Empire, as did other youth organisations of the time.

The inter-denominational Boys' Brigade, for example, was formed in 1881 and was characterised by its founder (William Smith) as a "religious movement, using military methods". It recruited churchgoing youths between the ages of 12 and 17. There were uniforms, dummy rifles, drill, parades, camps, bible classes and, of course, almost all "companies" had their brass band. The emphasis was upon patriotic duty, Christian observance and moral rectitude (McFarlan, 1982). The Church Lads' Brigade was a similar organisation, formed ten years later but specifically Anglican. It too had its military trappings and its battalion bands[38]. Then there was the breakaway Boys' Life Brigade that eschewed the use of weapons, even though they were dummies; but it kept its bands[39].

Thus, particularly during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, many organisations for boys emerged that fused military-style practices, religious adherence and imperial enthusiasms, all underpinned by their own brass band music. There were, as we have seen, also drum and fife bands; but these were less common, except amongst some of the boys' clubs (Dawes, 1975)[40]. It follows that if we are to understand the rise of boys' bands in children's homes, it is not only the brass band movement that formed a backcloth but also the numerous youth and cadet movements that relied on music, particularly marching music, to instill the discipline and patriotic commitment that they sought. Indeed, "the panoply of uniforms, arms, marching [...] drum beating [and] brass sounding bands had an irrepressible appeal" (Dawes, 1975, p. 59) for many boys, including, it may be assumed, those in the various children's institutions.

Of course, not all brass band music had these patriotic and imperial overtones (overtones that Hobsbawm (1999, p. 112) has termed the "sub-political" influences). The brass bands of the pit villages and the mill towns may have played some military-style music that lent itself to marching (for galas, political rallies and celebrations) but this was not their primary purpose. There was no obvious wish to extol British imperial exploits. In the case of the homes' boys' bands there was a closer connection. In particular, the voluntary children's societies regarded the cultivation of national and imperial pride as one of their responsibilities. In the wider context, of course, there is a long history of bands being employed as instruments of political mobilisation – both for good and bad.

The history of boys' bands in children's homes prompts a number of questions and at least one observation. If so many boys from undoubtedly deprived backgrounds could be taught to play musical instruments to a proficient standard what other skills might have lain dormant amongst them? Are there lessons to be drawn from these musical successes that might apply in our current children's services? Most of today's children and young people are deeply involved in their musical "scenes" and many aspire to be in a band, albeit not a brass band. In this context one might ask if and how instrumentalism should be encouraged in order to enhance the care and development of those children for whom the children's services bear some responsibility. Does music-making (especially together with others) have those "restorative" powers of which the leaders of yesterdays' homes were so convinced? And were these "powers" dependent upon the existence of homes that brought a large number of children together in one place or could there be other contexts in which they might be developed?

One final observation warrants consideration; namely, the emergence of children's brass bands in orphanages and in deprived and impoverished communities in Africa. The charity "Brass for Africa" has, and is, playing an important part. Children's and youth bands now exist in at least four countries: Uganda, South Africa, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. "Brass for Africa" makes the case for their development on the grounds that learning "to play music with others gives children and young people self-belief, self-worth, confidence, a voice and renewed hope for the future"[41]. Therefore, as well as asking whether we have anything to learn from our past perhaps we should also look towards what seems to be happening in Africa today.

## Notes

1. But note that "tambourines were played by women, and concertinas and percussion and brass instruments were played by both men and women" (Walker, 1960, p. 102).
2. See [www.workhouses.org.uk/CentralLondonSD](http://www.workhouses.org.uk/CentralLondonSD)
3. *Sixth Annual Report (AR) of the Local Government Board (LGB), 1876-7 (1877)*, c 1865, report 31, Eyre & Spottiswood, London, p. 91.
4. *Report of the Committee on the Education ... of Pauper Children in the Metropolis (1896)*, c 8032, HMSO, London, p. 33.
5. See [www.childrenshomes.org.uk/TSWellesley](http://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/TSWellesley)
6. *Sixth AR of the LGB, 1876-7 (1877)*, c 1865, report 31, Eyre & Spottiswood, London, p. 71.
7. *Sixth AR of the LGB, 1876-7 (1877)*, c 1865, report 31, Eyre & Spottiswood, London, p. 91.
8. Marine bandmen on board a ship in action were allocated specific tasks, often in dangerous parts of the vessel. For example, in C.S. Forester's (1949) Second World War novel *The Ship* the bandmen on a light cruiser manned the "transmission room" deep below that processed information before relaying it to the gun crews (pp. 114-5).
9. *Twelfth AR of the LGB, 1882-3 (1883)*, c 3778, HMSO, London, p. 277.
10. *Sixteenth AR of the LGB, 1886-7 (1887)*, c 5131, HMSO, London, p. xliii.
11. *Seventeenth AR of the LGB, 1887-8 (1888)*, c 6141, HMSO, London, p. lxxxi.
12. *Thirtieth AR of the LGB, 1900-1 (1901)*, cd 746, HMSO, London, p. 461.
13. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and the Relief of Distress, vol I (1909)*, cd 4499, HMSO, London, p. 255.
14. *Report of His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws (1834)*.
15. See *Fourth & Fifth ARs of the Poor Law Commissioners (1839)*. These include the first and second reports by Kay-Shuttleworth (1839) on "The Training of Pauper Children".
16. *Thirtieth AR of the LGB, 1900-1 (1901)*, cd 746, HMSO, London, p. 235.
17. *Twenty-second AR of the Poor Law Board, 1869-70 (1870)*, c 123, HMSO, London, p. 111.
18. These, and the figures that follow, are taken from *Reports of the Inspector of Reformatories and Industrial Schools of Great Britain*, HMSO, London (some hand counts).
19. *Twenty-seventh Report of the Inspector of Reformatories and Industrial Schools of Great Britain (1884)*, c 4147, HMSO, London, p. 200. For the bandmaster see 1881 census reproduced at [www.workhouses.org.uk](http://www.workhouses.org.uk)
20. *Twenty-seventh Report of the Inspector of Reformatories and Industrial Schools of Great Britain (1884)*, c 4147, HMSO, London, p. 200 (hand-counted figures).
21. [www.exploringsurreypast.org.uk/royal\\_philanthropic\\_society/](http://www.exploringsurreypast.org.uk/royal_philanthropic_society/). Also in Hyland (1993) *Yesterday's Answers: Development and Decline of Schools for Young Offenders* there is a photograph of one of the Royal Philanthropic's bands (before p. 10) which, as well as the brass instruments, also shows woodwinds. In terms of the range of instruments this was a rather sophisticated band. Thanks to Professor Roger Bullock for identifying the instruments in this photograph and others.

22. *Twenty-seventh Report of the Inspector of Reformatories and Industrial Schools of Great Britain* (1884), c 4147, HMSO, London, p. 200.
23. *Twenty-seventh Report of the Inspector of Reformatories and Industrial Schools of Great Britain* (1884), c 4147, HMSO, London, p. 200.
24. For photographs of some of Barnardo's boys' bands, see: [www.barnardosbrass.org.uk/photo\\_archives\\_html](http://www.barnardosbrass.org.uk/photo_archives_html)
25. Müller, who was Prussian, seems to have been influenced by Franke's enormous Prussian orphan house in Halle. Confirmation that his Bristol home boasted no bands was provided by the Müller museum in Bristol. There is no evidence that boys were encouraged to enlist, perhaps because they were only kept in the home until they were 14 (girls until 17) and, not being band-boys, they could not join the armed forces until they were 15. They may have done so later.
26. For the photograph see: [www.childrenshomes.org.uk](http://www.childrenshomes.org.uk)
27. See Besson price list. For comparative money values see: [www.measuringworth.com](http://www.measuringworth.com)
28. Significantly, the role of bandmaster could be combined with that of drill-master.
29. For example, the inspector reported that in 1873 the clothes worn by the boys on the training ship Akbar were made in its tailoring shop (*Seventeenth Report of the Inspector of Reformatories and Industrial Schools of Great Britain for 1873* (1874), c 1058, HMSO, London, p. 54).
30. *Report of the Committee on the Education [...] of Pauper Children in the Metropolis* (1896), c 8032, HMSO, London, p. 65 (evidence).
31. *Report of the Committee on the Education [...] of Pauper Children in the Metropolis* (1896), c 8032, HMSO, London, pp. 47-8 (report).
32. *Thirtieth AR of the LGB, 1900-1* (1901), cd 746, HMSO, London, p. 461.
33. See, [guysboroughgreatwarveterans.blogspot.co.uk/stretcher\\_bearers](http://guysboroughgreatwarveterans.blogspot.co.uk/stretcher_bearers).
34. *Thirtieth AR of the LGB, 1900-1* (1901), cd 746, HMSO, London, p. 462.
35. This was my mother's experience after leaving the Leavesden poor law school in London in the early twentieth century.
36. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and the Relief of Distress, vol I* (1909), cd 4499, HMSO, London, pp. 416-7.
37. For an exploration of the association of popular music with such sentiments see chapter 7 "Patriotism, Jingoism and Imperialism" in Russell (1987), although this deals mainly with music hall songs and performances.
38. See [www.dlogb.org.uk](http://www.dlogb.org.uk)
39. Founded in 1899 but with a membership of about 40,000 by 1910, see: [www.histclo.com](http://www.histclo.com)
40. "Victorian boys' clubs had drum and fife bands, some of them had drill instructors and parades, but they had no uniform" (Dawes, 1975, p. 59).
41. See [www.brassforafrica.com/](http://www.brassforafrica.com/)

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#### About the author

Roy Parker is a Professor Emeritus of Social Policy at the University of Bristol. He worked formerly at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research has covered a wide range of subjects, including the elderly, children and the history and politics of social policy. His most recent book is *Change and Continuity in Children's Services* (Policy Press, 2015). Professor Roy Parker can be contacted at: [rparker@dartington.org.uk](mailto:rparker@dartington.org.uk)

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