

# The North of Ireland Bands' Association

## The Beginnings

Prior to the year 1907, the fortunes of our Flute Bands were controlled to what in these days seems a surprising extent by one or two of their brethren of the brass and brass and reed family. This latter assuming the role of patron made themselves responsible for the organisation of contests for the Flute Bands, a work which though laudable in itself and undeniably useful in its results, was nevertheless bound to be regarding in time as a work of superogation.

It was inevitable that so healthy and vigorous a fraternity as the Flute Bands of that period would sooner or later in the natural order of things discover a will and a way of its own, and demand a larger say in its own affairs.

So in the year in question we find a suggestion being put forward for an Association, and taken up enthusiastically by many bandsmen, with the result that a meeting was called to give concrete form to the proposal. This historic meeting, convened by Mr John Murdie, then, as now, one of the Province's leading conductors, was held on 7<sup>th</sup> March 1907, in Mandeville Band room, and here the new Association first saw the light of day. The new organisation was named "The North of Ireland Flute Band Association".

The first officers to be appointed were – Chairman, Mr Robert Symington (Dundonald); Treasurer, Mr Wm. Cunningham (Ulster Amateurs); Secretary, Mr John Murdie (Argyle); Executive – Messrs. Jas. Boyle (Mandeville), Geo. Whitley (Ulster Amateurs), Geo. Simpson (Ravenhill Temperance), T. Sloan (Kitchener's Apprentice Boys), and J. Patton (14<sup>th</sup> Old Boys).

The election of President was deferred pending the report of a deputation appointed to wait on Sir Charles Brett, then identified with the Belfast Philharmonic Society, and wisely acclaimed by the meeting as a personage who possessed all the attributes which a President of a body such as theirs should have.

Sir Charles met the proposal with characteristic prudence, and expressed the desire to hear the bands play, before accepting the honour tendered to him. Accordingly a rehearsal was arranged by Mandeville and St. Mary's bands, then the premier bands of the Province, and this took place in the City Y.M.C.A. Hall, secured for the occasion through the good offices of Mr Robert Symington.

Sir Charles Brett was present, and gave an attentive ear to the performance.

When asked at the close for his decision, he replied that he would be delighted to become President of the new Association.

The first business of importance undertaken by the Committee was to study ways and means of enlisting as many bands as possible, and after much hard work, a total membership of thirteen bands was registered.

So far so good. But the Committee had a much larger membership in view, and knowing the uses of advertising, they decided to hold a parade of bands, after the manner of an Army recruiting March.

The parade duly took place on the 29<sup>th</sup> June 1907, the rendezvous being the Ormeau Park, the following bands taking part – Mandeville, St. Mary's, Ulster Amateurs, Ravenhill Temperance, 14<sup>th</sup> Old Boys, Argyle Temperance, Dundonald, St. Michael's, Wellington, St. Saviour, Kitchener Apprentice Boys, Carrickfergus Amateurs and Victoria Temperance, the route traversed being Carlisle Circus, Donegall Street, Royal Avenue, High Street, Victoria Street, Ann Street, Queen's Bridge, Newtownards Road, Templemore Avenue, Euston Street, Willowfield Street, My Lady's Road, Ormeau Park, returning via Ormeau Road, Donegall Pass, Great Victoria Street, Wellington Place, and disbanding at the City Hall.

Messrs. Harry Gibson (Argyle), bass drummer, and Joseph Mulholland (Ulster Amateurs), side drummer, was chosen to play in the massed bands which performed in the Park. This interesting parade brought the Association into prominence with the public, and created a favourable impression, also acted as a splendid advertisement for the approaching Contest. On 5<sup>th</sup> September 1907, the Association transferred their Headquarters to more central premises in Crown Chambers, Royal Avenue, Belfast. About this time Mr James Cunningham (St. Mary's), who was acting as Secretary, resigned, and the vacancy was filled by Mr. N. Cush.

The Association held their first Contest on 27<sup>th</sup> March 1908, the adjudicator being Mr W. Rafter, of Dublin.

The test pieces were – Section 1, Senior Flute Bands, "Madame Favart"; Section 2, "Popular Operas"; Section 2, March, "Bellarado."

At the Annual Meeting held during this year, Mr Robert Symington resigned the Chairmanship of the Association, but at the request of the delegates accepted the duties of Honorary Secretary; Mr Robert White (Wellington) being appointed Chairman. Owing to the enforced absence of the Chairman during 1908, the chair was occupied in turn by Messrs. W. Gracey, Geo. Simpson, Robert Leggett, Geo. Whitley, Thomas McMillen, J. Laverty, and Wm. Cunningham.

At the beginning of the year 1909, there was much speculation regarding the possibility of improving the flute band instrumentation and a step in this direction was taken at the meeting held on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1909, when the following decision was arrived at – “That Mr John Murdie and Mr Robert Symington be asked to communicate with Mr J. Ord. Hume, and ask him what additional instruments he would suggest.” The latter, whose enthusiasm on the subject of flute bands is well known, replied promptly, giving in detail some valuable suggestions for an improved instrumentation.

A vote of thanks was passed to Mr J.O. Hume, as the Association meeting of the 21<sup>st</sup> January 1909, and a recommendation made to the Executive for the publication of this letter in the local Press. This was duly effected.

In this year Mr John Sinclair became the President of the Association, and his period of office was marked by further progress. A leading citizen (with many claims on his time), Mr Sinclair, nevertheless, took a keen interest in the work, an interest that continued without flagging until his death.

His memory survives in the “Sinclair Cup” which was his gift during his Presidency, and is still competed for annually at the Championship Contest.

Early in the same year (1909), a momentous decision was taken by the Association. Many expressions of opinion had previously been registered by members regarding the advisability of securing the co-operation of the brass and brass and reed bands, and now a definite step was taken to encompass this end. A Press notice was published inviting the bands to join the Association, and requesting those interested to attend a meeting on the 11<sup>th</sup> February.

The brass bands were fairly well represented at the meeting, and a decision to affiliate was taken. It was on this occasion that Mr Charles Rollins, who was destined to play no small part in the future councils of that body, made his first appearance at an Association meeting, though already known to many present in his capacity of Contest Secretary for the I.O.R. Rescue Tent Brass Band, which previously organised periodical Contests for the flute bands.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> April 1910, Mr Rollins was appointed to the Chairmanship of the Association, and held that position continuously until 19<sup>th</sup> September 1919, when owing to the regrettable illness of Mr Robert Symington, he vacated the chair to assume his role as Secretary.

It frequently happens that the history of a movement is epitomised in the history of a few individuals, and if we had time to trace the activities of Messrs. Robert Symington and Charles Rollins, from 1910 onwards, we should probably find ourselves with the history of the Association complete in all its details. Both men were imbued with the missionary spirit, and one of their first ventures was to make a pilgrimage of Belfast and district, visiting every band room and laying the

claims of the Association before each band. This involved an amount of typographical research far beyond their expectations, as many of the bands then occupied make-shift premises, some in barns, some in tenantless houses, others in small Mission Hall, and still others more fortunate in comfortable well-lighted school rooms.

One is tempted to pause here to point the moral that, given enthusiasm for a cause, environment is never a fatal bar to success, that harmony, whether cradled in a stable or a Cathedral, is finally judged by its power to charm the human breast; and that if the spinet in the attic had been denied to the infant Handel, we might never have had the Hallelujah Chorus! But we must hasten after our two pilgrims to the dark unlovely street where the sound of concerted music guides their steps to the object of their search. Here they are well received (for music is an open séance to many doors) and after presenting their case and extracting a promise of careful consideration, they wend their way to the next humble seat of culture, where the same performance is repeated. By this sane, though laborious and elf-sacrificing method of personal touch Messrs. Symington and Rollins were in course of time instrumental in bringing the membership of the Association from a total of eleven bands to a handsome aggregate of 94 bands, the highest figures reached so far.

In addition to this work, these two officials worked strenuously to secure prizes for the various Contests.

That their zeal impressed their hearers and enlisted sympathy in influential circles is clearly evidenced by the phot of assembled trophies displayed below.



In this and other respected it is not too much to say that Mr R. Symington was the greatest asset the bands of the Province ever had, his powerful personal

influence being ever at their service. These trophies are a lasting tribute to his memory. During the summer of 1910, the Association was successful in securing for some of the flute bands engagements in the Parks, a privilege which had hitherto been accorded to brass and military bands.

Each of the six bands appointed received one engagement at a fee of £2. This step forward was the result of representations made to the Parks' Committee by a deputation from the Association, consisting of Messrs. Robert Symington, John Murdie, and Charles Rollins, who, needless to say, when they made their report, were warmly congratulated and thanked by the Senior Flute Bands and the assembled delegates.

The advent of the new instrumentation for flute bands, foreshadowed earlier in this chronicle, created a difficulty not entirely unforeseen, yet not easy to provide against in advance.

This was the fact that no suitable arrangement of music was available for the new instrumentation.

Mr John Murdie favoured the publication of a musical journal for the especial use of Association flute bands, and possibly this practical suggestion would have been adopted had not the question of expense acted as a deterrent. The problem persisted for about a twelvemonth, when it was satisfactorily solved by Mr Adam Hamilton (Wellington), who, assuming the onerous task of copying, carried it out with such skill and artistry as to win the unstinted praise of all concerned.

In June 1910, an entirely new and agreeable feature was introduced in the meetings. This was the reading of papers by members; Mr John Murdie starting the series with an admirable and instructive paper entitled "Hints to Bandsmen," which was followed by questions from bandsmen and delegates.

This practice was continued by Mr J.O. Hume, who gave a report of the Contest, providing much pleasure and enlightenment.

Always moving with the times, the Association in May 1911, decided on something new in the way of Contests. This was a March Contest, the idea being borrowed from Australia.

The Linfield Football Club, with true sportsmanship, responded to the appeal of the deputation sent by the Association, and granted the use of their enclosure gratis. The Contest, which was held on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1911, was an unqualified success, and more than justified the expectations of its promoters.

It is worthy of record that the prizes for this occasion were all secured through the efforts of Messrs. R. Symington, James Waring and Charles Rollins, who had been appointed by the Association for that purpose.

This chronicler must here pause to deliver himself of the opinion of not the least of the services rendered by the Association to their members is the public interest in bands which those in office have aroused by means of their personal visit on Association business to influential citizens on such occasion as the one referred to.

Those who take themselves and their cause seriously ultimately compel others to accept them at their own valuation, and this trait, in a negotiant, is a solid asset to the cause he represents.

At the Annual Meeting held in 1911, Mr Wm. Cunningham (Ulster Amateurs), who had rendered much useful service as Treasurer, was obliged to resign owing to business claims, and Mr John McMinn (Ulster Amateurs), at the request of the delegates took over that important office.

This year also, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1911, a deputation from the pipe bands attended the Association meeting, and presented a request that a section for pipe bands be opened at future Contests. The request was granted.

As a result of the Windsor Part Contest, a long felt want was satisfied in the provision of a new cup to be competed for at the Championship Contest for Senior Flute Bands in Ulster Hall. This cup, which was named "N.I.B.A. Cup", was purchased in June 1911. As Argyle Temperance Band had won the previous Championship Contest, and were without a cup to celebrate the occasion, the new and magnificent trophy was handed over to their keeping some time after their victory.

At the meeting of 6<sup>th</sup> July 1911, the Association had the pleasure of congratulating Ulster Amateur Flute Band and Mr John Murdie, upon their success in the Open International Championship Flute Band Contest, held at the White City, Manchester, the band having won 1<sup>st</sup> Place out of a large entry of bands from England, Wales and Ireland - a very notable achievement.

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1912, it was unanimously agreed to allow the Intermediate Flute Section to use the new instrumentation.

In the year 1914, the Association removed from Crown Chambers to Central Hall, where the meetings continued.

With the outbreak of war our activities were suspended from 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1915, until 6<sup>th</sup> March 1919. Many of our bandsmen answered the call of King and Country, including officials of the Association and the bands belonging to the Association.

Mr Symington designed a certificate of merit for bandsmen at Contests. These were much appreciated by the competitors and many bands are proud possessors of this work of art.

One of the most important and beneficial steps ever taken by the council was decided upon at the meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1919, when the delegates decided to register all bandsmen for contesting purposes. This involved a considerable amount of work, and in this connection Mr James Mellon (Sirocco) did a tremendous amount of useful work.

At this time Mr Robert Symington was in ill-health, and Mr Charles Rollins was requested by the delegates to vacate the chair and act as Secretary in order to relieve Mr Symington of the duties attached to the office.

Mr Thomas Speers (Argyle) was appointed to the vacated Chairmanship.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> January 1920, a protest meeting was held in Grosvenor Hall, relative to the Parks' engagement, a large number of leading citizens taking the side of the bands as indicated by their presence on the platform, and a successful meeting was held. Much praise was given to Councillor Wm. Addis for his interest and practical support in obtaining a higher remuneration for the bands; also to Councillor B. Lennox, who secured two beautiful cups for competitions, i.e., McConnell and McCullagh Cups.

In the year 1922 the Association was in debt £150. This was a great hindrance to our work. By careful handling and economic working, and the assistance of a ballot organised by Mr C. Rollins, more than half the amount was raised in this term. Mr David Hare, who had rendered useful services as Treasurer, resigned. On 9<sup>th</sup> February 1923, the Association sustained its severest and saddest blow in the sudden death of their revered President and beloved friend, Mr Robert Symington.



Mr Robert Symington

It is difficult, even after this lapse of time, to write concerning our late leader without emotion. Only those who know him most intimately can be aware for the full extent of his love and devotion to the cause of banding; or his unshakeable faith in the young men with whom his self-imposed duties brought him into such close association. These, and music, were the ruling passions of a life that was noble, unselfish, and spent without stint in the service of others. His was indeed the character of Wordsworth's "Happy Warrior".

The Association are the poorer since the withdrawal of that "constant influence" that "peculiar grace" but the name of Robert Symington will ever remain enshrined in the annals of the Association he did so much to fashion, and his memory in the hearts of those who were privileged to call him friend and brother.

The funeral procession to Balmoral which was one of the most impressive of recent years, was largely attended by members of the bands comprising the Association; also by many influential citizens, for the deceased was as well-known and as highly respected outside the Association as within. Each year since his death a Memorial Service has been held to perpetuate his memory.

The Association were most fortunate in procuring Captain E.J.L. Turner as President in succession to Mr Symington. His interest in the working men and for better bands endeared him to the hearts of all bandsmen.

In an endeavour to discover some of the hidden local talents the Executive advertised for musicians to submit test pieces, cash prizes being offered. Several competitors took part, and Messrs. Captain E.J. Brennan, Mus. Bac., John Vine, F.R.C.O., E. Grayson F.R.C.O., acted as adjudicators. Mr James Bell won both prizes for his arrangements of "Ernani" and "Italiano in Algeria".

With the advent of the wireless, the B.B.C. invited several of the flute bands to give programmes. These were heartily accepted, and the performances were much enjoyed by band and wireless enthusiasts.

Argyle Flute Band further increased the limitations of instrumentation by introducing a new F bass flute, and an application to use them at future Contests on 13th November 1924, was agreed to.

Death removed from our midst several useful workers – Captain J. McMinn (Treasurer), Robert Leathem (Lisburn), Wm. McKnight (Colonel Eagar), Alex Noble (Edenderry), and Russell Scott (Duncairn).

Messrs. David Hare, Henry Reynolds, J. Bunting, have in turn rendered valuable service as Treasurer.

A further advancement was made in the brass band side of the Association by the introduction of a Junior Brass Band Section at Contests. This was

instrumental in unearthing six clever bands which we hope will be competitors in the Senior Class in the very near future.

Our chronicle is thus brought up-to-date, and to the historian of the future is left the agreeable task of constructing a solid edifice from the raw material here presented to him (it may serve as a foundation), and from the further supplies which the coming years will furnish. After all we are still a very young organisation, and while we have already accomplished much, it does not yet appear what we shall be. Our future is in the hands of the young generation of bandsmen, and we look with confidence to these to carry on the good work, and see that the torch of progress is kept aflame as it passes from hand to hand.