

Behind the Baton

with Claire Costello

What links WW2, brass bands, the Salvation Army, and British Rail? The answer is Mr David Watson, Musical Director for Phoenix Brass Band.



The Phoenix band rehearses in Froxfield's village hall where David sat down with me to talk about the thread of music that runs through his long life.

David was born in Dovercourt a suburb of Harwich in Essex to a musical family. His grandfather played the cello and euphonium for a small Royal Marines band, while his mother was a singer with the Harwich Salvation Army. At age seven David was enrolled in the Salvation Army trainee band, and progressed to the main band aged nine! He played the cornet and on Sundays, in-between services and Sun-

day school, he played with the Band as they marched through the town and woe betide him if he tried to sneak off!

During the war years, his father served in the army. Harwich was an important harbour and suffered from the targeted bombings and hardships. David's house was destroyed during one such raid and the family moved in with his grandparents. At fifteen, he had to stop playing following an operation and moved to percussion instruments and then the drums, to add to his repertoire. By now, David was working as a

Porter for the railways and after two years National Service he re-joined British Rail in an age when 90% of the trains still ran on steam. A chance encounter with a taxi driver led him to resume playing the cornet with the Grange Brass Band where he learnt about conducting and band management. Eventually the Grange Brass Band became the Harwich Concert Band and David was the band secretary. He also began conducting the Harwich Accordion Orchestra, which went on to win 1st place in the advanced Orchestra section at the UK Accordion Championships.

The railways had undergone some upheaval after the war as the country rebuilt. Diesel and electric locomotives would replace steam in the newly nationalised British Rail, and then Dr Richard Beeching took his axe to British Rail in the 1960s.

David moved to Marlborough and became the BR representative to the MOD at Luggershall where his job was to ensure the safety of the heavy military armaments transported by train. He subsequently became the Southern Region YTS manager, based at Waterloo, before transferring to Euston as manager of British Rail's UK training scheme responsible for setting nation-wide industrial standards.

David retired from his long career with BR just as privatisation was being mooted. "When I look at all the hours that my generation put into running the railway and look at it now, I despair," he says.

During this time, David played for the Kennet Vale Brass Band, and conducted the youth band. Then the Hungerford Town Band offered David the Music Directorship and the chance to rebuild its band which was heavily in debt with neither instruments nor music! With support from locals, David started a learners' course and raised enough money to buy instruments and a library of music.

But then, David decided to do it all over again — and started a completely new brass band — with no

Phoenix Brass meets for rehearsal on Tuesday and Thursday evenings throughout the year from 7.30pm until 9.30pm and is always pleased to welcome players of all standards. The Training Section meets on Saturday morning. To join the Band or make a donation contact Mr Richard Fradgley, Secretary, on 01488 685004 or email: r.fradgley@btinternet.com

To find out where Phoenix Brass will play in December check their Diary on - www.phoenixbrassband.co.uk

music, no instruments, and no money! In 1993, with a £300 loan, David acquired second hand instruments, while a friend provided sheet music. Supported by a core of players from Hungerford, Phoenix Brass was born, based at Froxfield. The hall was in a poor state and for a while, the band decamped to Burbage, but decided to move back to Froxfield and to take on the challenge of revitalising the Memorial Hall. David and the band

members formed a Committee, then took over the lease, which stopped mooted redevelopment and secured the future of the hall for the village. They acquired a grant which was well invested in upgrading the hall's facilities. A lottery grant then helped buy new instruments and a music library, and the rest, as they say, is history!

Thank you David for a life in music, teaching, and service.

