

## THE HISTORY OF ELLINGTON COLLIERY BAND



The History of Ellington Colliery Band mirrors the history of coalmining itself in this region. The band had its roots in the General Strike of 1926 when the colliers were locked out for over six months. It was with a background of strife and hardship that miners took up their instruments and attempted to blow away the bad times and herald in the good.

Our photo above shows what it was like in 'the good old days'. The post-war years were a time of prosperity for the miners. With the nationalisation of the pits in 1947, miners jumped to the top of the wages' league. And Ellington Colliery Band was on a crest of a wave here in Carlisle Park, Morpeth, in the late 1940s when the Band was victorious at the Miners' Picnic, an honour it was to claim five times in those heady days.

Ellington Colliery Band had grown up with the neighbouring village of Lynemouth when that new 'model pit village' was being built in the early 1920s. Work had begun in 1924 erecting 200 houses at Lynemouth to complement the three rows of colliery houses at Ellington. But it was to be another ten years before the first piece of coal was drawn out of a Lynemouth shaft.



Local Heritage *initiative*

And so it was that more Ellington Colliery workers occupied Lynemouth village, coming from all over the country: tin miners from Cornwall, lead miners from Cumberland, and itinerant pitmen from County Durham, eager to sink their roots in the coal dust of East Northumberland. And one of the first items on their agenda was to play Music with their own band.

Progress of the new town and band was charted in the 1926 edition of the Ashington Colliery Magazine when Captain Ledgerwood had this to say: 'We are pleased to mark an improvement of our town band on their recent perambulation of the streets. It is a big undertaking to run a new band. Ready-made players are not picked up anywhere, and there is a tremendous amount of drudgery requiring much patience on the part of everyone connected with a young band. When the band first made its appearance a few months ago, some of us felt proud of our own band as if it had been the famous St Hilda's.'

The coal industry at this time in 1926 was locked into a bitter struggle between men and management - a conflict that was to be repeated through the years. This particular stoppage brought great hardship to every mining community. Ellington and Lynemouth were no exception. The Magazine continued a couple of months later with:

'The gloom and depression inevitably attendant on such a period as we are passing through at present is beginning to bear witness of its presence among us. The happy carefree expressions have vanished. Instead, everyone is thoughtful almost to despair ... despite it all though, there is a community feeling of goodwill ... for some time the majority of our schoolchildren have been receiving a sound meal at school.'

It was at this crucial stage that Music began to play its part in the rehabilitation, as the writer continues:

'The Entertainments Committee, in conjunction with the Kitchen Fund, has done good work in providing concerts and a dance every week. Full House has been the rule, testifying to the popularity of good clean entertainment. Our town band provided a delightful evening in our Dene. They were to have repeated their performance, but the fickleness of Dame Nature caused its abandonment.'

Bill Johnstone who worked at Ellington Pit from 1922 - 29, had this to say of the divide that existed between men and masters:

'In the seven years I worked at Ellington, I saw the manager only once. He walked past me in company with another official. As for the coalowners, they lived on their vast estates, in their manor houses and castles, as far removed from their workmen as the stars in the sky.'

Ellington Betty Shaft sunk in 1909 was named after Betty Priestman, the coalowner's daughter. One year later, the first coals were drawn from the Yard Seam. By the 1980s, annual production was over 1M tons.



Ellington Colliery Band probably grew from this ensemble gathered in 1925 on Cresswell Village Green. Robert Tait is far right with young Alf Cowton 4th left, both of whom went on to play with the Ellington Band.

Some of the original musicians from this Ellington Band c1929 were: Herron, Johnson, Lockyer, Green, Shears, Morton, Crawford, Simpson, Cooper, Waddle and Ward.



The Miners' Picnic was transferred from Morpeth to Bedlington in 1952. Ellington Band made the Sun Inn their H/Q. Girls could join a brass band only if they had relatives who worked at that pit or played in the Band. Such as Winnie Cowton in centre and Margaret Teasdale on right who says that Sammy Bond wanted her to be the first female to play in 1954.

Few bandsmen had their own cars just after the war so they relied on a coach to get them to their venue, whether it be a concert or competition. Band is seen leaving from the Lynemouth Hotel in the 1950s.



An important venue in London was for the National Championships. The band's secretary Wilf Richardson signs the register with Joe Graham, David Jefferson, Rosemorgan, Ray Lillis, Bob Morton, Norman Teasdale, Kenny Gibbons, Jim Baker and conductor Sammy Bond on left, c1952.

In Neil Taylor's *People's History of Lynemouth*, bandsman Joe Hogg recalls how he and the rest of the Ellington Colliery Band faced up to yet one more Miners' Picnic Competition in the 1950s:

'Picnic Day was special in the bandsmen's calendar. Pitmen, friends and family congregated to celebrate the solidarity of the coal industry. The band marched from Ellington Colliery to Lynemouth where we boarded the bus to the Red Lion at Bedlington and from there to lodge headquarters at the Sun Inn where women and children occupied the back room and made their own private party. Then came the March Contest and the main parade of bands, each one accompanied by the trade union officials.

'Banners flying proudly, we made our way to the Picnic Field (Attlee Park) where Labour Party speakers gave their opinions on the state of the coal industry. Then we were given the result of the band contest. It was then back to the Sun Inn to catch the bus home to Ellington Colliery.

'From there the band marched to the Lynemouth Hotel to relax and have a drink or two. By this time we were tired and weary, senses dulled with alcohol. Some instruments were played a little out of tune and feet marched slightly out of step, but no one minded - we were home at the end of a perfect day.'

It was worth getting up in the early hours on Picnic Day and travelling to Bedlington if the end result saw a jubilant Jackie Liddell holding aloft the coveted trophy. Conductor Sammy Bond carries a mac ... just in case.



Ellington Band provided the winners of the Bass Section at the Miners' Picnic on more than one occasion. Here the honours went to Kenny Gibbons, Jim Baker, Norman Teasdale and Wilf Richardson.



Ellington Band has continued to pick up major awards. This was the Bass Section that helped carry off the Roy Cartwright Memorial Shield in January 2003. From left, Fred Joicey, Keith Rowe, Richard Northey and Martin Joicey.

Because of circumstance, Ellington Band joined forces at one stage with Newbiggin and then Lynemouth. Yet their record of success is well documented. Joe Hogg says the band won five Miners' Picnic Competitions, were second seven times and gained third position ten times.

The Band was supported by Ellington miners until the pit's closure by British Coal in 1994. It is now self-funding and relies on making money through fund-raising events, as well as receiving fees and donations for the Band's services. It plays at numerous functions and charitable events throughout the year. In this way it contributes to the cultural life of Northumberland.

Following the loss of the miners' levy in 1994, Northumberland County Council agreed to support the Band with a grant of £4,000 per year. Due to cut-backs, that grant was subsequently halved then lost altogether in 1998.

In August 1997 the Band, with the help of NCC, were successful in obtaining a grant of £54,000 from the National Lottery Fund. New instruments and equipment were bought. This enabled the existing instruments to be handed over to the Youth Band, allowing them to perform in their own right, as well as providing a supply of additional players to the Senior Band and so ensuring the future of Ellington Colliery Band.

In November 2002, RJB Mining (now UK Coal) agreed to support the Band by making a donation of £2,000 per year for the next three years. This amounts to approximately one-third of the financial income required to run the Band annually.

Recent grants have been awarded from the Coalfield Regeneration Trust, Local Heritage Initiative and Nationwide Building Society, for which the Band is most grateful.

Free professional tuition and the free use of instruments, subject to availability, are provided to any interested youngsters, regardless of age, ability or degree of disability.

The Senior Band currently has 35 registered members and rehearses twice weekly; the Junior Section has 20 members and rehearses once a week, both bands using facilities provided by UK Coal.

*Mike Kirkup, January 2003*