

Music in The British Army – A Brief Summary

A Brief History of the Bandsman

Today, armed forces' music is well-known for its use in parades and ceremonies, such as Armistice Day or trooping the colour. But Army music also has a rich and varied past, and has played a major part in the everyday life of the British soldier over the centuries, whether on campaign or stationed in barracks.

Military Bands have existed for centuries. They originate from the ceremonial heralds and private musicians of monarchs and nobles who used a wide range of musical instruments and influences from different countries and cultures. The men who served in early military bands were volunteers, professionals and gentlemen, dedicated to the music they composed and played.

In 1763 the Royal Artillery established the first permanently-organised military band that went with the regiment on active service. Major changes took place through the 18th century until by the early 20th century the military band as we know it today had emerged.

The military band has always incorporated a variety of musical instruments, from drums to trumpets and hunting horns. During the 19th century a fascination with the East led to the cymbal also introduced and the introduction of a heavy cymbal tower nicknamed the *Jingling Jonny*. Due to the exotic nature of some of the instruments, up to the mid-19th century men of musical talent of African descent were in high demand. These men would have their own exotic variants of clothing worn during band duties.

Military bandsmen had the same pride in their regiments as the fighting soldiers of a regiment and demonstrated this pride with beautiful customised artwork and banners, painted on, or attached to, their instruments. The art related to the past glories and traditions of the regiment they belonged to. Due to their exotic nature and prestige, capturing military band instruments and equipment as war trophies was much encouraged.

Other instruments used by military bands included clarinets, brass horns, oboes and the famous (or infamous) bagpipes if the regiment was of Celtic origin. Military bands of the British Army also evolved their own unique ranking system, traditions and uniforms. From the late 17th century to the mid-19th century musicians' uniforms were more ornately decorated and of a much higher quality than the uniform of the standard soldier.

During battle, the military band focused on playing their music and they were only armed with swords for self-defence. The music they played on the battlefield not only lifted the morale of the marching and fighting men but along with the music of the fifers and drummers, signalled the orders of commanding officers to the fighting men above the noise of combat.

In 1854 during the Crimean War, in a victory parade at Scutari in Turkey, Prince George the Duke of Cambridge experienced a series of embarrassingly bad military musical performances and this led to the establishment of the Royal Military School of Music which was intended to improve standards. Since then, this school has taught generations of army bandsmen and is involved in educating the modern musicians of the armed forces.

During times of peace at home the Bandsmen of many regiments happily performed their music at public events, concert performances and parades for the Victorian state. They were still ornately attired in special uniforms, despite the decline of more ornate uniforms on the battlefield.

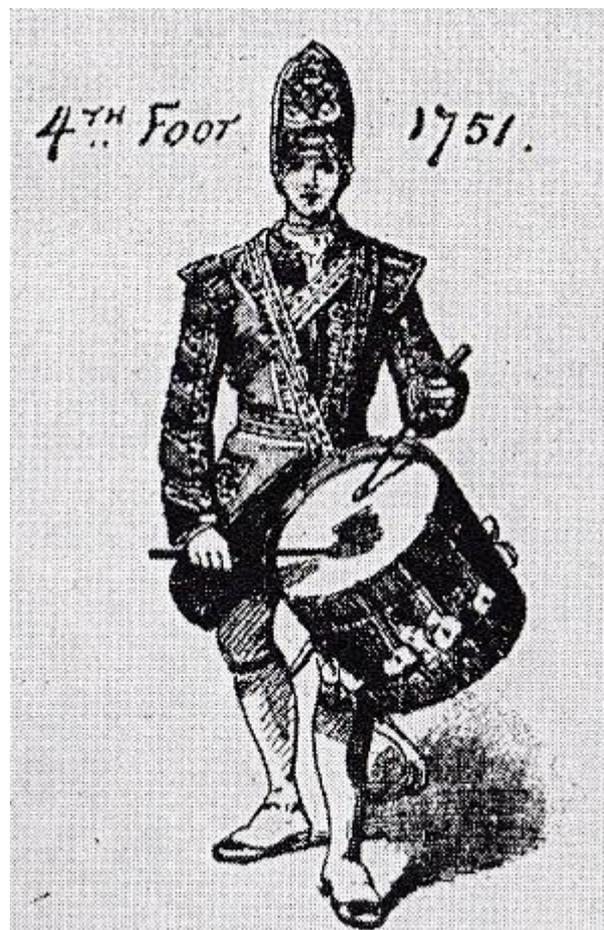


Fife & Drum

During the early years of the Army in the 17th century, the men who played the fife (a small flute) and the kettle drum were separate from the main military band. They were financed by the regiments and would have been in the thick of the fighting, relaying signals from the band to the fighting men. They were also responsible for escorting and dealing with the walking wounded. Despite the nickname of drummer boys, this position was occupied by both boys and men up to middle-age, some of whom had joined up as private musicians. The position of drum major which had been introduced a century previously became more important and prestigious as they managed and taught these new marching bands.

During the rule of King James II the fife briefly fell out of favour of the commanders and generals of the British army who thought the infantry should march to the sound of drums only but in 1747 it was once again established alongside the drummers by the Duke of Cumberland, Commander in Chief of the British Army. Each company of infantry had a pair of fifers and drummers who would assemble together at the start of a march on campaign, and march together at the front of the columns playing as they went to boost morale.

Shortly after this in 1751 a royal warrant was issued raising the standards of the drummers' uniforms to that of the Bandsmen. In 1768 King George the III issued his own warrant ensuring that the coloured uniform coats and the lace of the drummer and fifers uniforms were reversed.



This meant that the coat of a drummer would be white with the lace, lapels and ends of the jacket sleeves being red.

While on campaign, drummers and fifers also had many other tasks assigned to them. These ranged from ensuring that soldiers were billeted and not roaming the streets, to assisting in parades and even the infamously brutal displays of punishment when military law was broken.

When a soldier was discharged dishonourably from the army, they were 'drummed out' by the famous Rogue's March. Drummers were also used with much of the same theatre in recruitment parties to help entice volunteers into the army.

Drummers also played during the sombre funerals of their regimental comrades in the field and to announce victories back home outside their depots to the public.

The Bugle

The bugle is a very important instrument for the Light Infantry. It was first introduced to the British Army in the 1750's. At this time the new agile and fast approach to fighting, characteristic of the Light Infantry, was being developed. During the 7 Years War in the dense forests and rougher terrain of what is now the American-Canadian border, in the fighting against the American Indian allies of the French, the Bugle was easier to carry and operate than a drum or fife and its sharp brief calls were perfect in the chaotic skirmishing of infantry operations. Both the Light Infantry and the bugle were permanently adopted into the British Army by the end of the 18th century.



*Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (DCLI) Badge
An example of the Bugle Horn iconography*

The bugle horn itself is traditionally associated with the men who volunteered and filled the ranks of the skirmishing infantry and rifleman specialists of the 18th and 19th century. They were hunters and foresters who lived off the land. The instrument became a symbol of these men, adorning the standards, pennants and badges mounted on their caps from then to the present day.



Regimental bugle calls from the early 20th century.

From the 19th century to the present day, British Army bugle calls have dictated the life of both soldier and officer in the grounds of the barracks. These calls inform everyone in the barracks of the time and ensure the regimented and scheduled life of the common soldier ran like efficient clockwork. At a time when watches were an unaffordable luxury for the common soldier, the musical bugle calls helped with organisation and timing of the strict regimen of duties and services a soldier performed in the barracks.

Army Music Today

Music is still central to Army training, parade-ground drilling and ceremony. It is used to signal the movement and changing formations to the soldiers performing their parade drills in the same way that it told soldiers of the past how to manoeuvre on the battlefield. Modern Musicians now have a military role to play outside their music and are trained as specialist engineers whose duties include breaching into buildings using explosives and the knowledge of construction and demolition of minor fortifications and obstacles.

Back home the military band performs the same duties outside the barracks as it did in the 19th century, playing music for the British public for both state and civil events through the

country. Along with the more traditional musical instruments and styles, specialists are now trained to handle more modern electronic instruments and styles as well. And even today, the uniform of a British Army bandsman is unique and they retain their own unique traditions

Credits:

Images and information in this article are taken from Hugh Barty-King's *The Drum*