

The Horbury's - Three Generations of Concertina Players

By Ian Radcliffe 2022

February 6th will probably pass much like any other day on the Isle of Man, however it is 'World Concertina Day, a celebration the 220th anniversary of the birth of Charles Wheatstone the creator of the English Concertina. Today there are probably no more than a dozen concertina players active on the island, but at one time it was a popular instrument seen regularly in the theatres and town and village halls. One family of regular performers were the Horbury's who entertained across the island from around 1918 through to 1958.

Their story begins with Jim Horbury of Macclesfield (Leader of a 27 strong concertina band¹) enlisting for service in World War 1 in around 1915. Being an 'older' (about 39) recruit, he was posted as part of the R.D.C. to guard Knockaloe Internment Camp. There he became a member of the Knockaloe Garrison Band. Private Horbury made his first recorded public appearance at a sale and concert in aid of the war effort in Peel, in February 1918². Further performances quickly followed such as one held in the Peel Centenary Hall (in aid of St Dunstan's Hostel for blinded servicemen) where we are afforded a glimpse in to the music played. The pieces noted were: 'Light Cavalry Overture', 'The Bells', Bohemian Girl' and Entry of the Gladiators'³. The hall was described as 'uncomfortably overcrowded' due to the enthusiastic committee selling more tickets than there was room for!

In the following years Private Horbury performed at a wide range of events both civilian and those with military connections. It has not yet been ascertained when he was demobilised by the army, but it is likely that the camp management were flexible enough to allow him to perform beyond the confines of the camp, as by August of 1918 he was playing at the Gaiety Theatre alongside a two-act play⁴ and a number of other artists. By the end of 1918 Private Horbury was being billed as a 'concertina expert' and was part of the Knockaloe Concert Party that performed in Ramsey on 26 December 1918 where the Ramsey Courier described his performance as giving 'infinite pleasure to his listeners'⁵.

Jim Horbury had fallen in love with the island⁶ and he made it his home, bringing to the island his wife and son, also Jim who was born in 1902, to live in Onchan. Jim junior married, with the third generation Jim Horbury being born in 1926.

For many years Jim senior and Jim junior, performed at numerous events such as parochial tea parties, some held in small venues such as the Baldwin Young Men's Reading Room, and others in much larger ones like the Villa Marina. The title "Horbury's Comedy Co." also appears in the newspaper reviews⁷ as Jim senior is noted as humorous raconteur as well as musician. They also found regular employment as a novelty concertina act at the Grand Theatre, Douglas, (directed by Mr Buxton) as the island started to reopen as a tourist destination following the Great War⁸.

From 1925 to 1933 the duet were playing regularly in the Sunday Sacred Concerts held at Cunningham's Camp, with audiences of between 1,200 and 3,000 people⁹. They also performed at concerts around the island, where they were always greeted with enthusiastic audiences. They were the sole attraction at some events, but at many they shared the stage with numerous vocalists, and on one occasion a nurses' gymnastics display team¹⁰! The tunes played are usually not mentioned, but there are indications that they played popular songs of the day¹¹, no doubt accompanied by the audience singing along.

It is around this period that the Ballafesson Concertina Band¹² performed, a group of around six players connected with the Ballafesson Wesley Guild. This period also saw the death of Captain

George Kelly, a singer and concertina player of note¹³, and the move to the island of Frank Ollums who played concertina and xylophone. Ollums was a professional musician and performed at a live broadcast by the BBC in 1932¹⁴ from Birkenhead.

In 1935 the youngest Jim makes his first public appearance aged 9, using a miniature concertina, at the Armistice show at the Palace Coliseum, reported in the Isle of Man Times under the headline 'Boy artiste's Great Reception'¹⁵. The three generation of Horbury's were the hit of the evening, eclipsing the performance of the new song by Haydn Wood - 'This Quiet Night'.

They performed regularly up to the start of World War Two, at which point the reporting of local events appears to be curtailed. Following the war there are few engagements noted in the newspapers through to 1950, and the eldest Jim passed away in 1948. A new wave of music was perhaps pushing the concertina to one side, and most appearances are given by 'Jim Horbury' (but which one?) rather than by the father and son duo. In January 1958 it was noted that the attendance at the Manx Tea and Concert in Port Erin, where part of the entertainment was provided by the Horburys, had been falling over the past four years¹⁶. The decline in population since the war, and the increasing ownership of televisions, probably also contributed to the demise or rethinking of the entertainment provided at many local events.

The middle Jim continued to live in the Isle of Man until his death in 1988. The youngest Jim married in 1960 and moved to Surrey, then Australia and finally settled in the United States where he passed away in 2008¹⁷.

Is now the time we should have a concertina playing revival on the island?

1 Ramsey Chronicle, 5 February 1926, page 5.

2 Peel City Guardian, 23 February 1918, page 5.

3 Peel City Guardian, 27 April 1918, page 6.

4 The play was 'Sons of Empire'. Isle of Man Times, 3 August 1918, page 7.

5 Ramsey Courier, 3 January 1919, page 3.

6 Personal correspondence with his great-grandson, December 2020.

7 Isle of Man Times, 3 May 1919, page 5.

8 Isle of Man Examiner, 13 September 1919, page 3.

9 Drower, J. (2018), *Good Clean Fun*. (London, Scrudge Books). Page 116.

10 Mona's Herald, 29 December 1931, page 1.

11 Mona's Herald, 22 October 1930, page 3.

12 Isle of Man Examiner, 31 January 1930, page 11.

13 Isle of Man Examiner, 29 January 1932, page 8.

14 Ramsey Courier, 15 January 1932, page 7.

15 Isle of Man Times, 16 November 1935, page 4.

16 Isle of Man Examiner, 16 January 1958, page 11.

17 <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/ctpost/name/james-horbury-obituary?pid=119525074>