

The Ramsey Municipal Orchestra

by Maurice Powell

The violinist and musical director Hilton Cullerne played an important role in the story of musical culture and the entertainment industry on the Isle of Man from just before World War I until just before World War II and was associated with Ramsey Town's endeavours between the wars – albeit short-lived – to establish a resident summer municipal orchestra for the premier resort in the north of the Island.

Frank Hilton Cullerne was born in October 1892 at the Lewisham Hotel, Slaithwaite, the small industrial town just south of Huddersfield, the middle son of Francis and Mary Cullerne, the eldest daughter of Clement and Sabra Wood, the parents of the well-known musicians, musical directors and composers Harry, Daniel and Haydn Wood.* Hilton was their nephew.

* See Maurice Powell: *Manxland's King of Music, the Life and Times of Harry Wood*, Lily Publications, 2018, for further details about the Wood family in Yorkshire and their years in Douglas. An article about the career of Hilton Cullerne in the Culture Vannin's series Manx Musical Worthies is in preparation.

Hilton won an open scholarship to study the violin at the Royal College of Music with Enrique Arbos, the teacher of Haydn Wood, and Achille Rivarde for four years from c. 1909. His name appears in the local newspapers in December 1913 when he was living with his uncle Harry and eldest sister Adeline in Douglas and participating in many concerts and recitals and was highly regarded as 'a violinist of fine parts'. Private, and later Lieutenant, Cullerne had a distinguished war service and was commended for 'Gallant Conduct'. After the war he was engaged as conductor of the dance band at the Spa Ballroom, Scarborough, but returned to the Island in 1920, became increasingly involved in music making during both the summer and winters seasons, and became Harry Wood's deputy conductor at the Derby Castle introducing his waltz *Seashore Murmurs* during his first season there.

Sweet sounds from the North

Hilton Cullerne's engagement to provide an orchestra for the summer season in Ramsey commencing 16th July 1928 was announced in the *Ramsey Courier* of 4th May, which also confirmed that a band committee consisting of members of the Town Commissioners and the Development Association had been appointed to oversee the project. At that time Hilton was playing in the orchestra of the London Hippodrome for the run of the 1927 musical show *Hit the Deck*, and at Covent Garden for the opera season, '. . . but hopes to be in Ramsey by July 18th.

Hilton's 'orchestra' consisted of six players: Hilton himself, violin and director; Mr. W. E. Evans, obligato violin and Banjo, from Monmouth; Mr William E. Wright, piano, from Manchester; Mr F. Nethercote, 'cello and saxophone, recently of the Bombay Symphony Orchestra; Mr Peter Wilson, trumpet, recently engaged in Manchester and the Covent Garden Grand Opera season and Mr. T. Bates, drums and saxophone, also recently returned from India where he, too, was a member of the Bombay Symphony Orchestra.

Thus, with just six players the orchestra was able to adapt to the demands of concert and dance music. A large audience were present 'in perfect weather' at the new bandstand in Mooragh Park at the so-called Electra Grounds that first Sunday afternoon, July 15th, and according to one report: 'Hundreds of listeners sitting in and around the flower borders, under the shelter of stately palms, and flanked by the placid Mooragh Lake, no more tranquil or sequestered spot could be imagined in which to enjoy the orchestral strains on a beautiful summer's day'. The numbers increased throughout the afternoon and the crowds were 'loud in their praise'. Such was the enthusiasm for their new summer orchestra that many Ramsey residents and visitors were turned away for the Grand Opening Sacred Concert at 8.15 that evening when the orchestra was joined by the Cushag Choir and popular Manx bass Allan Quirk, the Cleveland Medal winner at the 1923 Manx Music Festival.

'Our visitors want music'

'There is no reason why Ramsey - with appropriate advertising in the South of the Island, a little enterprise and a little money - should not become one of the most popular summer resorts in the Isle of Man', but 'a first-class Municipal Band is essential if Ramsey is to take advantage of its summer season'.*

* *Ramsey Courier*, 12.07.1928.

Indeed, Ramsey did begin to make definite strides with its 'go-ahead policy', which included installing decorative multi-coloured electric globe lighting on the South Promenade. There were, of course, dissenting voices and one correspondent felt that the town was '... labelled with a most unattractive and uncouth name' for its lovely park and lake. The name 'Mooragh', he suggested, conveyed 'nothing to the visitor'; why not 'Ramsey's Royal Park' or 'Royal Gardens?'

Programme details of one of the early afternoon and evening concerts have survived in the local newspapers. There was a change of programme each concert which consisted of light classical overtures, selections from opera, operettas and musical shows, short descriptive pieces, instrumental solos, songs and choral items:

Afternoon concert: Valverde's Spanish Military March *Cadiz*; overture to Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*; a *Humoresque* (possibly by Dvorak for violin); a selection from Gounod's *Faust*; *Maritza* (Waltz?) by Daniel Wood;* *Love in Arcady* by Haydn Wood (possibly arranged by Hilton Cullerne as a violin solo); a selection from *HMS Pinafore*; Jessel's *Parade of the Tin Soldiers* which was 'enthusiastically encored'; a selection from Romberg's *Desert Song*. The concert created 'a most favourable impression . . . every item exquisitely rendered'.

* Daniel Wood was a professional flute and piccolo player with the London Symphony orchestra and the King's Private Band.

Evening Sacred Concert: an opening hymn followed by the overture to Thomas' opera *Raymond* which was 'beautifully rendered'; Toselli's *Serenata* no. 1; a violin solo, *Slumber Song* by Haydn Wood played by Hilton, and encored; *The Lightning Switch*

(New Musical Switch), a Humoresque or 'pot-pourri' by Kenneth Alford during which several tunes of a similar nature are 'welded together in a continuous blend of harmony and merriment', and Harry Wood's *Manx National Airs*. A selection of songs sung by Allan Quirk and choir items were all 'loudly appreciated' . . . in what was 'a delightful and very enjoyable concert'. Hilton's 'mastery of the violin . . .' was commended.

Throughout August Hilton's orchestra played three times daily at 11.00 am, 3.00 pm and 8.00 pm at the Cosy Corner supported by a local vocal soloist and choir. On Thursday 6th September there was a Grand Finale, Manx Mhelliagh, Dance and Fancy-Dress Ball organised by the Ramsey Development Association; Mr Hilton Cullerne was reportedly 'in great form'. The final concert of the Season took place on Sunday 9th September at the Cosy Corner. 'There will be general regret when we bid farewell to Mr Hilton Cullerne and his splendid orchestra' which has earned the 'warmest praise' as has his 'superb violin playing, a feature of every concert'. Nearly 13,500 people had attended the concerts during the eight-week season which proved that the provision of the orchestra for the town 'was a step in the right direction'. It was hoped that the orchestra would return for the summer season in 1929. The end of the year review of 1928 in the *Ramsey Courier* included the start of the summer season and the first concerts with Hilton's orchestra among the notable events of the year. At the close of the season Hilton enjoyed two weeks holiday on the Island before leaving for London to commence rehearsals for the Leeds Festival in October.

* *Ramsey Courier*, 28.12.1928.

In December 1928* the Chairman of Ramsey Town Commissioners J. R. Richdale commented during his re-election speech that although he had heard Ramsey Town (Brass) Band only once since they had received their new instruments, they were full of enthusiasm. He expressed the hope that next season they would be able to fully function as a town band and play frequently during the summer. He hinted at rivalry between the town band and Hilton Cullerne's orchestra even though 'the town band could not under any circumstances fulfil the functions (that) the orchestra fulfilled' and commit to a regular series of appearances. There was more than a hint of *déjà vu* here for those in Ramsey with long memories as a similar situation arose before the First World War in respect of the town band versus Mr New's German Band who were engaged to play around the town, in Mooragh Park and on the Queen's Pier to welcome the steamers for some decades.**

* *Ramsey Courier*, 07.12.1928

** See Maurice Powell, *Mr New's Band in Ramsey*, manxmusic.com.

'Choice music helps to make our visitors happy'.

The *Isle of Man Times* dated 24th May 1929 announced that Hilton and the Ramsey Municipal Orchestra would be opening the forthcoming season on 14th July with an ensemble of six musicians and a full programme of appearances on Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday mornings at 11.00, afternoons at 3.00, Monday and Thursday evenings for dancing and a Sacred Concert on Sunday evenings in the Ballure

Hall, formerly the Queen's Hall. The dance sensation that season was the 'Paul Jones' fox-trot; the new waltz *Ninette* soon became popular along with such novelties as *Happy Days and Lonely Nights*, *Dada! Dada!* and *Shinaniki Da* and some dances were encored two and three times. The combination of a dance floor 'in excellent condition', Lucky Spot dances, light refreshments and 'a high-class band' ensured that the Ballure Hall became increasingly popular as the season progressed; and the Ramsey Commissioners were doubtless pleased to see the Market Square clogged with charabancs and motor vehicles and increased numbers of visitors flocking to the town by train, bus and electric tram.

A rumour that Hilton was 'contemplating an engagement' began to circulate early in the season, and indeed his marriage to Irene Augusta Violet Finnemore, who had been a student at the Royal College of Music, London, was confirmed in the *Isle of Man Examiner** in June, and took place in London on 2nd July and was attended by Adeline Wood.**

* *Isle of Man Examiner*, 29.06.1928

** Her father Robert Isaac Finnemore of Pietermaritzburg, Natal, S. Africa was the holder of various Government positions including Chief Justice.

One of the highlights of the season in Ramsey was the Manx Evening held at the Ballure Hall August when the orchestra played a selection of Manx Tunes – probably part of Harry Wood's selection of Manx melodies – together with a re-creation of a traditional Manx Wedding, a Mhelliah, Manx Dancing and Manx language recitations. The final dance of the season took place on Saturday 7th September followed by a subscriber's concert the next evening at the end of which Mr J. N. Richdale expressed the appreciation of the Committee of the Ramsey Development Association. The future of summer seasonal music in the town looked secure, and residents and visitors no doubt anticipated that they would be hearing a good deal more from Hilton and his musicians. It was not to be.

Summer music ceases amid disharmony among local factions.

Early in 1930 Ramsey Town Band requested financial assistance in order to guarantee a summer programme of three concerts each week during the summer. As the band had earlier offered to play for only two nights each week and refused to play in Mooragh Park every Sunday afternoon, their petition was rejected. The Ramsey Development Association had approved a grant of £100 towards the cost of Hilton Cullerne's orchestra, the remaining £700 had been raised by collections, concert receipts and concert subscriptions. Furthermore, Hilton had provided eighteen concerts each week! The town band then asked to be allowed to present proposals for a series of concerts with a grant of £100, and the suggestion was put forward that perhaps both the town band and Hilton's orchestra could provide suitable music in the town during the summer. No agreement for any such plan was arrived at and Ramsey's Town Commissioners continued to squabble over whether to engage an outside band or not, and how to finance it (without having to designate sufficient funds), and, swayed by local jealousies,

they allowed an 'own goal' to be scored against the town. Hilton's orchestra never appeared in Ramsey again.

That was not the end of the matter, though, as the quest for a suitable summer band or orchestra for Ramsey rumbled on for years and the fate of Hilton's orchestra surfaced from time to time in the local newspapers over the next quarter of a century.

The *Ramsey Courier* in September 1932* reminded its readers that, although 'Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast', this did not apply in Ramsey, where the lack of a suitable orchestra in the town for the summer season was 'regretted'. Hilton Cullerne's orchestra 'had given much satisfaction' and the holiday makers had been 'charmed by their music' until a 'deplorable rivalry arose between visiting bands and the local bands'. There would have been no music if the Town Commissioners had not engaged a band from Liverpool, who, although rendered 'the latest music hall "hits" with a degree of ability' and were successful in the open-air in Mooragh Park, Hilton's orchestra had provided 'a better class of music' for the Sunday evening concerts. Furthermore, the last year that Hilton's orchestra played in the town was 'free from debt'; any band in the future would have to be self-supporting.

* *Ramsey Courier*, 23.09.1932 and 16.12.1932.

During the 1930s the Cullernes lived in London, but at the end of 1938 or the beginning of 1939 they moved to Cape Town and later Johannesburg, South Africa, where Hilton was engaged by the South African Broadcasting Company. He died unexpectedly in Johannesburg in January 1942 from complications following an operation, aged just forty-eight years.

Andreas, June 2024.

Photo of Hilton Cullerne in the *Ramsey Courier* 21.09.1928

Photo of the Hilton's Ramsey Orchestra on p.248 of *Manxland's King of Music*.