

The Villa Marina Orchestras
and their Musical Directors between the Wars
by Maurice Powell

Between 1919 and 1939 the Villa Marina flourished under the management of Noah Moore,* with resident dance orchestras and bands engaged for the summer season, concerts in the Gardens, Sunday Concerts with eminent concert and variety artistes and seasonal revues* in the Garden Pavilion. The idea of utilising the Villa Marina and Gardens as an amusement resort was at first ridiculed, but the first post-war season proved to be a huge success - nothing short of 'astonishing' - with visitors and residents alike, and a financial success too.

* Noah Moore was an eminent Manx choir trainer and conductor; his daughter Nora was an accomplished popular Manx soprano; his son Arthur (A.Q. Moore) was a perceptive commentator on Manx life. During the First World War, Frederick Buxton had been appointed Responsible Manager of the Villa Marina and organised concerts, concert parties, dancing and 'pictures', and Sunday Concerts in the Gardens with the participation of local musicians, singers and entertainers, and Musical Directors such as F. C. Poulter and Harry Wood until 1918. See Maurice Powell, *Manxland's King of Music*, Lily Publications, 2018.

* Initially Bert Feldman's Songsters, directed by 'the popular baritone' William Brown, provided the entertainment in the Garden Pavilion which soon developed in more lavish revues such as Bert Feldman's 1925 Cabaret Show 'Carnival' and the 'Beau Jesters' of 1926. Later revues and entertainments included 'Merry-Go-Round' in 1927; the 'Tatlers' of 1928; Will Jackson's 'Here's the Show' in 1932, and 'Roosters' in 1933; 'Marina Parade' in 1935, and in 1936 Frank Terry's 'Marina Pleasure Parade' starring the Lancashire Mummies, 'Marina Pleasure Parade', 1937 edition, 'The Pleasure Cruise' of 1938 and in 1939, 'Pleasure on Parade', with a cast of twenty entertainers.

Douglas Corporation engaged various orchestras often under the banner of The Douglas Municipal Orchestra and various Musical Directors during the inter-war years. In 1919 Fred Winterbottom was engaged, his orchestra variously advertised as the 'All-British Orchestra', 'Douglas Municipal Orchestra', 'Grand Municipal Orchestra' or 'Celebrated Municipal Orchestra', which played at 7.30 each evening and featured Jazz, Foxtrot and old-time dance programmes. Commencing on 9th June there were afternoon concerts at 2.45, and Sunday afternoon and evening concerts at 3.00 and 7.30, with the aim of bringing 'high-class' music to the Villa. 'The orchestra contributed to the programme most acceptably under the very skilful direction of Mr. Fred Winterbottom . . . (and) is an admirable body of instrumentalists . . . a real delight in the beautiful gardens daily . . . is well-balanced and of excellent quality'. Sadly, Fred Winterbottom, in poor health at the beginning of the season and standing in for a Mr. Lewis, who had been originally engaged as Musical Director for the season but who was himself indisposed, became seriously unwell at the end of August and was taken into Noble's Hospital. He passed away on Wednesday 28th October and was buried in the Municipal Cemetery on Friday 30th.

Between 1920 and 1924 Douglas Corporation engaged Felix Godin,* the composer of the popular *Valse Septembre*, and a prominent dance-band leader before World War I, to take charge of the music at the Villa Marina. It was a popular choice and 'the Municipal Orchestra added fresh laurels to its fame under Mr Felix Godin's direction'.

* See Maurice Powell, *Valse Septembre, Felix Godin at the Villa Marina*, manxmusic.com.

Following the sudden death of Felix Godin in March 1925, Douglas Corporation engaged the composer and pianist Percy Kahn* who has appeared as a pianist at a Sunday concert under Godin in 1924. His most enduring composition was the song *Ave Maria* (1913), dedicated to, and recorded by Enrico Caruso, with Misha Elman obligato violin, and himself, piano. Under his direction the programmes of dancing every evening and Sunday concerts continued to flourish.

* Percival Benedict Kahn (1880-1966), studied the organ at the Royal College of Music with Walter Parratt, the piano with Marmaduke Barton and composition with Walford Davies (composer of the lovely *Solemn Melody* for organ and strings) and Charles Wood (the teacher of Vaughan Williams and Herbert Howells and the composer of the once popular cantata *Ode to the West Wind*) in the 1890s. He was highly regarded as accompanist and was associated with several great singers including Melba, Tetrizzini, Caruso, Gigli and John McCormack. He was the voice coach and accompanist for Richard Tauber for fourteen years and gave several recitals with the great violinists Mischa Elman and Fritz Kreisler.

The Case of the Disappearing Conductor?

Alas, this is not one of those tantalising cases concerning his friend Sherlock Holmes that Dr John H. Watson secreted in his 'battered tin dispatch box' in the vaults of Cox and Co., Charing Cross, until the time was right for publication. The actual events are more mundane but shed some light on the rivalry and jealousies that existed between Douglas Corporation, who owned the Villa Marina, and the Palace & Derby Company, who owned virtually everything else, and their supporters, that bubbled away just below the surface from the time of the Villa's inauguration in 1913.

Jack Howard's thirteen-strong 'Famous Broadcasting Band'* was engaged for the 1926 season to play nightly for dancing, and in the Gardens each afternoon, but was not considered to have been as successful for the Sunday orchestral concerts and the light classical repertoire required on these occasions. With some misgivings about his suitability for the Villa Marina, Jack Howard and his 'Grand Orchestra' was re-engaged in 1927 but was 'better equipped' for the 'classical' repertoire that season and received increasingly good reviews as the summer progressed: 'Jack Howard's Orchestra makes dancing an intense joy . . . the concerts in the gardens are becoming increasingly popular with the visitors'. However, Howard apparently 'disappeared' during a concert at the end of the summer season after he 'just walked off the stage in the middle of a number and never returned'.*

* Jack Howard was born in London but emigrated to America before World War I and may have played in a forces band there. He was a tenor sax player with Art Hickman's London Five in 1920 and soon formed his own band for a series of broadcasts of the *Midnight Follies* at the Metropole Hotel, directed a band to play at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, for the dances held there, and at the Olympia Ballroom at Earl's Court which sometimes attracted up to 12,000 dancers. An undated photograph of his band in the 1920s shows a line-up of saxophones, brass, including trumpets, trombones and sousaphone, violin, bass, banjo and percussion.

* According to his entry in the online Dance Band Encyclopaedia, he was apparently seen in Chicago in 1928, but thereafter the trail runs cold.

This remarkable occurrence is probably unique in the story of professional summer orchestras and bands in Douglas but is not referred to in the Isle of Man newspapers, at

least not directly. The incident, if it occurred at all, could have taken place during the Sunday Concert of 11th September which featured guest singers Peter Dawson and Margaret Collier. Jack Howard certainly conducted the overture to Herold's *Zampa* at the beginning of the evening, but later in the programme the deputy conductor, William Brown, conducted the overture to Wallace's *Maritana*. Was this because Howard had mysteriously absconded?

A court case involving Howard and one of his musicians may have some bearing on events. At a sitting of the Douglas Vacation Court the following day, Monday 12th September, Leonard Pearce, the pianist with Jack Howard's orchestra, sued the conductor for damages for 'Breach of Contract of Engagement', following the termination of his engagement with the band in late August. The claim was paid but without costs, and a continuance was sought and granted.*.

* See the *Mona's Herald*, 14.09.1927, 'Jack Howard and His Pianist'

'Controversy over the Villa Marina Band. . .'*

During the season there had been a number of anonymous allegations of mismanagement of the Villa Marina and complaints about Jack Howard's band in the local newspapers from those styling themselves 'Puzzled' and 'Also Puzzled'. Arthur Q. Moore (AQM) aka 'Not Afraid', wrote to the editor of the *Examiner** in defence of the Villa Marina and its musical director and attempted to diffuse the rhetoric, counter the 'cheap jibes', and lift 'the despicable cloak of anonymity' that surrounded the allegations. By referring to Jack Howard as 'the would-be famous Jack Howard', his accusers had come 'dangerously near to libel' in AQM's opinion; in any case, Jack Howard was as 'famous in dance band circles' as Jack Hylton, Debroy Summers and Al Davidson, and was 'familiar to radio enthusiasts throughout the British Isles'. Why, if they were so disappointed with the management of the Villa Marina, did not 'Puzzled' and 'Also Puzzled' transfer their patronage to the Palace & Derby Castle? AQM was able to counter their 'grousing' and 'sinister attacks' with the fact that, despite Mr Howard's so-called 'failings', the Villa Marina had enjoyed an excellent season, and, furthermore, in the past few weeks the box office receipts had exceeded those of same period the previous season. Not beyond a pointed swipe himself, AQM surmised that, in complaining that their amusements for a week had cost 'Puzzled' and 'Also Puzzled' the princely sum of 1/1, they were not Manx, but Aberdonians!

* 'Pointed Answer to Sinister Attack', *Isle of Man Examiner*, 16.09.1927.

Jack Howard was back in charge of his orchestra for the last concert of the season on Sunday Concert 18th September. Len Manning's Capitol Band, who had spent the summer in Port Erin, took over at the Villa Marina in mid-September;* at the end of the season the band moved to Bournemouth under the baton of William Brown.

* The *Mona's Herald*, 21.09.1927.

Percy Kahn returned to the Villa Marina in 1928 for programmes of 'non-stop dancing with two orchestras and achieved 'a fine balance of tone in all sections'. For the next three seasons - 1929-31 - Al Davidson's Claribel Band of fifteen players,* and the smaller off-shoot,

the Omega Collegians gave 'equal satisfaction to dancers and lovers of classical music'. In 1931 he introduced his own arrangement of Manx popular tunes, *A Manx Medley* into the programmes with great success.

* See *Isle of Man Examiner*, 06.06.30 for a list of the players. The percussion soloist for the 1931 season was James 'Jimmy' Blades (1901-99), one of the most revered and distinguished percussionists of the 20th century. During World War II his V-for-Victory morse code signal played on the timpani was heard at the beginning of BBC broadcasts to the resistance movements in Europe as was the mighty gong sound (actually a tam-tam) heard at the beginning of all Rank Organisation films. He later became associated with the Melos Ensemble, The English Chamber Orchestra and was a close associate of Benjamin Britten. His *Percussion Instruments and Their History* (1971) is the standard reference work on the subject.

Stanley Holt's London band - a sextet or octet at the start of the season, but by end of June a band of fifteen players - was engaged for the next two seasons, 1932 and 1933. Holt had been a member of Felix Godin's band in 1922, and is remembered today as the leader of 2LO, the BBC's first broadcasting dance band, for 18 months until 1924.

* The 2LO London Radio Service broadcast from 1922-29 and was then replaced by the Regional Programme, London. Stanley Holt's Villa Marina Band playing the Foxtrot *Love Me Tonight* with vocalist Bobby Sanders (Sterno 1063) can be heard on YouTube, recorded in 1932.

From 1934 until 1939 Phil Richardson's Broadcasting Band, '... the finest dance band ever engaged by the Corporation', was engaged for the ballroom and cabaret style entertainments, and was re-styled the 'Municipal Band' for the Sunday concerts. 'Always merry, always bright', the fifteen-piece band won plaudits from their first season, earning 'high praise' as one of the finest 'straight' (strict tempo) dance orchestras, and made many new friends during their six seasons in Douglas.

As the Scottish visitors boarded the steamers for their journey home at the end of the 'Scot's fortnight' in 1935, they crossed paths with 'the high-spirited folk from Blackburn and Huddersfield', many of whom found themselves in the Villa Marina Gardens during the afternoons listening to Phil Richardson's band's entertaining selections. At the end of the season in September 1936 Phil Richardson and band members were present at the wedding in St. George's Church of trombonist J. F. Butt to a local girl. The 'hit' selection of the 1937 season was Phil Richardson's arrangement of 'songs of the last fifty years'. On 6th September 1938 between 8.30 and 9.30pm Phil Richardson broadcast from the Villa Marina Ballroom in a variety programme that included of excerpts from the revue 'The Pleasure Cruise', a sing-along from Cunningham's Camp and choral singing from Groudle Glen directed by Noah Moor.

In June 1939 Phil Richardson was present at special meeting of the Rushen Freemason's Lodge and raised to degree of Master Mason. The following month his three-year-old daughter Pamela was rushed to hospital in Manchester, a victim of meningitis, with little hope of recovery. He kept in touch with the hospital on daily basis and travelled to Manchester to be with his wife at his daughter's bedside whenever possible, returning to Douglas to direct the band. The audience at the Sunday concert on 23rd July had no idea of the anguish suffered by the musical director, who, as soon as the concert was over, caught

the midnight steamer to Liverpool. He was at his daughter's bedside when she passed away three days later.*

* In July 1936 Pamela, then eight weeks old, made Manx aviation history when she became the youngest passenger to fly from Blackpool to Ronaldsway with the West Coast Air Service. Upon arrival she was 'interviewed' by children's entertainer Uncle Tim, and promptly fell asleep.

On the afternoon of the Sunday concert scheduled for August 6th, news reached the Island that the stars of the show, the Mills Brothers, had been involved in a car collision and taken to hospital. A new programme was hastily arranged featuring local soprano Norah Moore, stars of Frank A. Terry's revue *Pleasure on Parade* and Phil Richardson's band, who 'excelled themselves in a number of catchy selections which brought the house down. What could have been a disaster on one of the busiest Sunday evenings of the season became one of the season's most successful concerts.

The Villa Marina closed on Friday 8th September after a final concert in the ballroom was attended by four hundred people and featured Phil Richardson's band playing a selection of 'old wartime ditties', *Land of Hope and Glory*, *Auld Lang Syne* and the National Anthem. Speeches from Alderman J. H. Skillicorn, Chairman of the Parks Committee, and Noah Moore, manager of the Villa Marina, praised 'the good work' of the band and its musical director, after which gifts were presented to each player.

There is little doubt that, had war not intervened, the 1939 summer season would have been a 'bumper' one, perhaps even exceeding the number of visitors in the record year of 1913. Phil Richardson and his band would have been re-engaged for the 1940 season, as indeed was announced at the end of their final concert, perhaps in the belief that the war would be over by then. It was not to be. As the *Examiner* put it: '... there may be a long trail ahead ere the bright lights blaze forth to announce the shows of the season'.*

* See Maurice Powell, *Summer Entertainment on the Isle of Man, from Pleasure Isle to Internment Isle, 1939-45*, manxmusic.com., for the story of how the Island entertained itself during WWII.