

# Masterton District Brass Band 1873 – 2023



25 Year History Update  
1998 - 2023



The fact they have reached 150 years speaks volumes for the iconic Masterton District Brass Band.

No group or organisation celebrates an occasion of that magnitude without the unyielding support of a strong core of members, and of the wider community.

Tough times have been overcome with a measure of resolve and resilience and because those at the very coalface have had the energy and the spirit to make good even in the face of adversity.

There would be few people in Masterton over that long span of years whose lives would not have been touched in a positive and meaningful way by the Masterton District Brass Band.

Their music has enhanced innumerable community events and it is nigh impossible to imagine life in our wonderful district without their presence.

And just as important as the pleasure they provide in that sense is the teaching and encouragement they give young people to be part of their organisation, and to become their future leaders. They understand their very existence depends on the success of those endeavours.

So it's hats off and heartiest congratulations to the Masterton District Brass Band on reaching such a memorable milestone, and we look forward to many more to come.

Gary Caffell, Mayor of Masterton 2023.



Celebrating a sesquicentennial is an auspicious occasion, and who better to celebrate than an organisation that has performed at countless civic events and added to the rich heritage of Masterton.

Looking back through Masterton Trust Lands Trust history, you see the Masterton District Brass Band (or Municipal Band as it was then) performing at times of growth for the town. Whether that be electric lights installed at the Town Hall in 1911 or the opening of Aratoi in 2002 - the Masterton District Brass Band was there to herald the progress of the town. We look forward to many more years of hearing the band's call.

Christine Brewster  
Chair  
Masterton Trust Lands Trust

---



**TRUST HOUSE®**

150 years of brass in Masterton is a wonderful milestone, and Trust House Ltd is very pleased to have been able to support the Masterton District Brass Band for half of the band's existence – since the formation of the Masterton Licensing Trust in 1947.

Trust House Ltd wishes the band ongoing success, and knows it will continue to provide entertainment and pleasure to the people of the Wairarapa.

John Prendergast  
Chief Executive  
Trust House Ltd

You know the story of the guy who had a favourite axe. Over time he had replaced the head twice and the handle at least three times, but it was still the same axe, his favourite axe.

Well a Brass Band is like the favourite axe. People join and people leave, but it is still the same Band. Masterton District Brass Band is no exception to this. Playing members join the Band, and playing members leave. Musical Directors come and go. Even the name of the Band has changed from time to time. But all through this, it is the same Band. The Band plays on.

Obviously as we achieve the remarkable milestone of 150 years of continuous banding none of the original members are still with us, although one or two of the current members might look as though they may have been there all along. So it is not surprising that many members have come and gone in the last twenty-five years. Only four current members of the Band were in the Band at the time of the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, and one of those, who is now Band Secretary and Band Manager, was a 14 year old learner.



*Photo taken later of the Band which went to the Christchurch National Contest Band in 2000. Only five of these are still regular Members of the Band. Les Mooney, third from left, back row, was Musical Director at the time. Justin Pearce with baton.*

In the last twenty-five years the Band has had more than 120 regular members, some staying a relatively short time, others for a long time, still others seem to come and go pretty much at will. The Band has also been assisted by at least 22 members of other Bands at various concerts and contests. A constantly changing group but always the same Band.

As with the playing membership, there has been a regular turnover of Musical Directors, the baton having been wielded by no fewer than 10 different Musical Directors in the 25 year period. The Musical Director has a major influence on the Band, not just on the music and how it is performed, but also on the spirit and general wellbeing of the Band. A good Musical Director will enthuse the Band and will both make it play better and cause it to grow.



*L: Ian Hodge conducting the Band in the Queen Elizabeth Park Rotunda and R: receiving a long service certificate from the BBANZ Executive officer, David Dobson*

In the history compiled by George Groombridge for the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary he wrote that the Band did not have a permanent Musical Director, the duty being shared by Ian Hodge and Brian Anderson, both also playing members of the Band. He bemoaned the fact that “...it would be great to see a resident conductor as in the days gone by, but I fear this will not be the case until there is a major economic upturn in the life of our country”.

In fact, as it happened, for most of the last 25 years the Band has had a permanent Musical Director. Initially that duty continued to be shared by Ian Hodge and Brian Anderson, but then Les Mooney returned to Wairarapa and took over. Given Les' calm and easy demeanour, band members could never be sure whether the rehearsal was going well or not. But then he would say "liquorice" and they would know they had cracked it.

Unfortunately, Les had a health problem which forced him to give up the role after a relatively short time, although he continued to play in the Cornet rank for quite some time. Les' last act with the Band was to take it on its first foray to the South Island for a long time, to attend the National Contest in Christchurch in 2000. It just happens that that is also the last South Island Contest the Band has attended.

Fortunately it wasn't long before a replacement was found. Justin Pearce was a classically trained musician, French Horn player and Opera singer. The music under Justin was not what could be called 'typical' Brass Band music, with pieces selected from great orchestral composers. Justin had great enthusiasm, and tried valiantly to make the Band equally enthusiastic. He was instrumental in setting up the Brilliant Brass program (more about this later).

One memory of Justin is his insistence on the Band playing Patapan from the carol book at Christmas time – nobody in the Band liked it, and consequently the Band never mastered it. Justin decided to leave us to pursue a career as an opera singer in Wellington.



*The Band at Mauriceville Fair,  
Craig Thomson in Solo Cornet seat  
as well as conducting.*



Fortunately he pointed us in the direction of our next Musical Director, Craig Thomson. It just so happened at that time that they were both playing French Horn in the pit orchestra for a Wairarapa College production. Although both French Horn players they were very different in musical preference.

Craig was an ex-Argyle & Sutherland Highlanders military bandsman. Given his background there was frequently a Scottish influence in the Band's repertoire. During Craig's tenure the band was very active with performances at a huge variety of different kinds of events, for example in 2004 the Band performed at: NZ MG Car Club meet in Masterton; The Fell Engine Museum opening; The Wairarapa Balloon Festival Nightglow; Greytown 150<sup>th</sup> celebrations; VJ Day remembrance at Masterton Stadium; Wairarapa A&P Show; Pukaha Telethon; Teddy Bear's Picnic at Henley Lake; Opening of the new Masterton Rec Centre; Christmas Carols Concert at Masterton Town Hall; and the major event of the year, Masterton Sesquicentennial Concert. A busy Band indeed.



*The Band at the Wairarapa A&P Show, playing and then finding the Wood Chopping very interesting during a break.*

A highlight in 2006 was being part of the Dave Armstrong production of 'King & Country' in the Masterton Town Hall. The Band was on stage, but at the back, behind the performance. Besides providing the period music, the Band also provided some of the sound effects, such as a rim-shot by the percussionist creating the sound of a sniper's rifle shot – it must

have been effective as the actor immediately dropped dead every time.



*Elder Statesmen of the Band:  
Top: Darcy Christiansen. Middle:  
Norm Henderson. Bottom: Brian  
Castle. Each in turn the oldest  
member of the Band, still playing  
over 80 Years old. Brian is still  
with us.*

It is worth mentioning two of the contests under Craig. Proud Scot as he was, Craig liked to wear the tartan, and would conduct wearing his kilt. At one Wellington District Contest Craig took the Scottish theme further by introducing a Piper into the concert program. The Band performed very well, and would probably have won had it not been for an entertainment adjudicator's excoriating comments about a Piper having no place in a Brass Band, and his consequent low scoring. Craig was ropeable about that, but even moreso the following year when another Band, obviously liking what we had done, included a Piper in their program – and won!

A major event in 2008 was the Proms Concert in which the Band joined with the Upper Hutt Cosmopolitan Club Brass Band with performances at Expressions in Upper Hutt and in the



Masterton Town Hall, complete with balloons falling from the ceiling during the finale. Robert Priday was the conductor of the Upper Hutt Band, and it was a true spectacle seeing the combined bands conducted by Robert in his Union Jack and Welsh flag tailcoats, and Craig in his kilt.

2009 started as another busy year. In February the Band tried a new idea, a Rotunda Concert series in each of the Wairarapa towns on consecutive Sundays (repeated the following year but discontinued because of lack of audience support). There was the opening of Masterton Airport (discontinued because of lack of Air New Zealand support) and a March at the head of the first lap of the inaugural Relay for Life.

Sadly Craig became ill after this. He came back briefly to take the Band to that year's National Contest at Napier, but was unable to continue after that. So after more than a decade of Musical Director stability it fell to Ian Hodge to once more step into the breach, and he was more than able to keep things moving along for the next year and a half, although it heralded several years of short tenure Musical Directors.



*Ballentynes fundraiser: A small group played outside in the cold while George Groombridge warmed up the clientele inside*

In this period the Band had its one and only concert in the new Wairarapa College Hall. A major event was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Golden Shears. The Band marched at the head of the

multi-national parade of organisers and participants. It was also at this time that George and Shirley Groombridge came up with the idea of a fundraising fashion parade at Ballentynes, the Band providing music from a small group. This happened again the following year, but never since. Funny how some things have a relatively long life cycle and others are short.

Sadly, Ian suffered a severe stroke at the beginning 2011. The Band felt very lucky to have Ian's son-in-law Ivan Patterson take up the baton. However, after only one and a half months with the Band, Ivan also had a stroke, albeit not as severe as Ian's. Nevertheless, he also was unable to continue. So now the Band entered the first Kevin Pett era which lasted until the end of the year. A measure of Kevin's mettle is that he arranged for the Band to go and play for Ian twice, once at the hospital and then at Lansdowne Court when he was moved there.

The Band had been planning to go to the National Contest at Takapuna, but the disruption meant this was no longer possible, so it was decided to enter three ensembles. Even then, as noted in the chairman's report that year, health issues kicked in, with the 12 person ensemble being reduced to 11, then 10. The Band also played a joint concert with the Kapiti Band (at Kapiti) for the first time. This has since been reprised a number of times at alternate venues.

2012 saw the arrival of Owen Clarke. Owen was the Musical Director of the Central Band of the RNZAF which is based in Wellington, but he was now living in Featherston. He brought a very different brand of music to the standard Brass Band Marches and Test Pieces, an example being the very humorous 'Gee Officer Krupke' from West Side Story.



*Owen Clarke conducting*

The Band played at 'Brass in the Park', a Wellington District event involving all of the Districts Bands. The Band took part in this for another couple of years, but discontinued because there was no benefit for the Band, only expense for Band Members.

A novel event in August was that the Band held an open day for the public to be able to come along, see what happens, maybe have a go at playing an instrument. That was followed the day after with a concert at the Town Hall. The end of September saw the Band play at Papawai Marae 115<sup>th</sup> celebrations, and that was the end of Owen Clarke's all too short tenure as he had taken up a post with the NZ Navy Band in Devonport.



*The 2015 National Contest Band to Rotorua*

Fortunately Robert Priday was able to take over. Robert probably thought he was only going to be in charge for a short time, but ended up staying for almost four years. Coming from a very traditional Brass Band background, and already a life member of this Band, his expectations were high. However, the Band at this time was at quite a low ebb, low in numbers and poorly disciplined. He quite quickly turned this around by introducing a variety of challenging music and a challenging schedule for the Band.

In 2013, Robert's first full year in charge, the Band met, not counting carolling, no fewer than 107 times for rehearsals and performances. This compares with an average of no more than

80 in previous years. There was a parade and concert to celebrate the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Band, joint concerts with Kapiti and Dannevirke Bands, Brass in the Park, District Contest, National Contest, Teddy Bears' Picnic, Fireworks at Solway Showgrounds and sadly the first funeral the Band played at in this era, that of Norm Arnold.

The following year opened with an unusual performance, playing outside Memorial Park for the crowd coming in for a Hurricanes v Blues Super Rugby warm-up game. Next was the opening of the Masterton Drag Strip – probably the only event where the sound of the action drowned out the Band's performance. Being the anniversary of WW1, the Band played at the re-enactment of the departure of a Wairarapa contingent from the Masterton railway station.

As if the year wasn't busy enough, Robert organised another very successful Proms Concerts, but this time with only the Masterton Band with one or two helpers. It is worth noting that during these very busy years the Band grew, with regular attendances at rehearsals well in excess of twenty players. A Band is better and happier place when it is challenged with a varied program of music and a varied and plentiful performance schedule. Unbelievably, in the 24 days prior to Christmas the Band met 18 times, truly dedication when it is realised that the only reward for Band Members is the pleasure of getting together to give pleasure to others.

2015 continued very much in the same vein. An interesting performance to start the year was being part of a Music Festival at 'The Tin Hut' at Tauheranikau. Once again there was a Proms Concert, or more accurately twice again, with two performances filling the Town Hall on consecutive nights.



*Robert Priday conducting the Band and the Wairarapa Singers at the 2015 Last Night of the Proms Concert*

Robert's last outing with the Band was at the National Contest in Napier the following year, setting in train another short period of instability.

It is not worth recording anything about the next few months other than that there was no displeasure when the next Musical Director resigned, or more accurately, stormed out never to be seen again. It would be fair to say, however, that a lot of the good work of the previous few years building the Band up was undone.

Craig Thomson once again stepped up to the plate for two months, and after Anzac Day David Kinzett took over. He guided the Band through as it provided the musical part of an interesting historical play in the Tinui Hall which at one point even included the Band marching inside the hall. Unfortunately David then became ill and had to take leave from the Band. And



so began a period of long-distance commuting Conductors, and quieter performance schedules.

Byron 'Buzz' Newton took over in the last quarter of 2017. Playing strength remained at a fairly low ebb, and the only performances, apart from the now usual presence at the Cenotaph for Armistice Day, were the Teddy Bears' Picnic and the Rathkeale College Christmas Fete. The following year, as noted in the President's annual report, was 'fairly quiet. On the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Featherston Japanese POW Camp uprising the Band played along with the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion Band at the dedication of the Featherston Camp Memorial Sculpture.



*2018 Combined Bands at Featherston Camp Memorial Sculpture dedication*

A sad event of 2018 was the Band playing at the funeral of Tommy Clark. Tommy had been one of the learners in the Brilliant Brass Program at the start of this quarter century. And to finish off a fairly forgettable year, even the Teddy Bears' Picnic was cancelled due to bad weather. Next year continued much in the same vein. The commuting became a struggle for Buzz, but Kevin Pett filled in when Buzz couldn't make it.

The Band did manage a major concert in conjunction with the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion Band, but this was Buzz's last performance with the

Band. Looking now at the success of his 'Buzzing Brass' academy we can only surmise what could have been if it hadn't been for the travel obstacle. Kevin Pett stepped in again for a short time, and late in the year Bruce Roberts took over.



*Buzz Newton with the combined Masterton District and 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion Bands in concert*

As everyone knows, 2020 was not a good year. The first half of the year was a write-off because of the Covid 19 lockdowns. Sadly, the first engagement the Band had after lockdown was to play at the funeral of Kelvin Paris. This was the second of a series of occasions the Band played with a respectful presence at the funeral of a past member, Ian Hodge having passed away in October the previous year. Subsequently the Band has farewelled Skip Davies, George Groombridge, Norm Henderson, and earlier this year, Graeme McArthur.

However, as these past players who learned Brass in the 1940s, 50s and 60s passed on, the Band, under Bruce Roberts, revitalised the Brilliant Brass program. Several Junior Band

Camps have been held, and for the few, albeit low-key concerts the Band has held in this time period, the new Junior Band has been able to support with a few numbers.



*Junior Camp activities, 2020*

Bruce departed at the end of 2022 and once again Kevin Pett has taken over. The Band performed at the Battle of Britain Remembrance Service at the Crossways Church, but the major event of the year has been preparations for the 150<sup>th</sup> celebrations.

A number of performances have taken place over the past 25 years which are not specifically mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. Like the Band Members, some of these were long-term regulars, some were in or out from year to year, and some were one-offs. By no means a complete list these include: Masterton A&P Show, Wairarapa A&P Show, Mauriceville Fair, Teddy Bears Picnic, Lansdowne Presbyterian Church, Cobblestones Garden Party, Arotoi, Harlequin Theatre, Metlifecare, Carrington House, Beerfest at Peak Brewery, Rathkeale Christmas Fete.....

One particular regular event, normally in November and appropriately just before the Silly Season got under way, deserves special mention. Norm's Night. A rehearsal night would be given over to a fun evening. Norm Henderson would cajole (not browbeat, we are talking Norm here) Band Members

into providing an entertainment item for the rest of the Band's enjoyment. There was always chocolate as prizes, and chocolate given out not necessarily as prizes but simply because Norm was generous and liked chocolate. Most would perform something on their usual Band instrument, but others would do something different. Matt Chapman once played a penny whistle very well, Barbara & Jim performed a funny deckchair sketch from a play they had been in and funniest of all was the two Norms' lamppost sketch. Norm's Nights were great, and should be revived – sadly, unfortunately, without Norm

Of course, on every one of the past 25 years (barring 2020 because of Covid) the Band has been on parade for the Anzac Day Services at Masterton, Carterton and Featherston – the busiest day of the year. Since 2011 the Band has also been on Parade at the Masterton Cenotaph for the Armistice Day remembrance.



*Carolling at Cornwall Rest Home and a Masterton street corner.*

Christmas time also is a busy time for the Band, with normally Christmas Parades in three of the Wairarapa towns. Saturday morning carolling throughout December has been one of the major fundraisers. At the start of the 25 year period one group would be out every Saturday morning. As Band strength and numbers grew in the middle part of this period it was often possible to muster two groups each with a collector, but as Band strength faded again, particularly in the solo cornets, only one group is possible now. But the nature of carolling has changed

now. With the growing ‘cashless society’ few people have loose change to drop into a collectors box, so carolling has become more of a civic duty than a fundraiser.

Fundraising has always been a major activity for the Band. The Band is exceedingly grateful for the Grants and Donations it has received over the years from Masterton District Council, Masterton Trust Lands Trust and Trust House. The Band is very proud to be known as the Masterton District Brass Band, and embraces the Civic Duty that the name implies it must do.



*Erecting Golden Shears (2008). Everybody is expected to be involved, Members, Learners’ parents, even the President and MD as seen in this collage.*

But more funds are always needed, so other sources must be found. The major fundraiser for the Band for over 50 years has been the erecting and dismantling of the shearing platform and pens for the annual Golden Shears event. This is a major exercise and all Band Members are expected to help regardless of age or ability. As the average age of the Band Members has got older their ability to do the ‘heavy lifting’ has got less and so help is sourced from elsewhere. As the playing strength increases, and hopefully the age decreases, the Band will once again be able to do the whole job themselves.



Another fundraiser for many years was the building and dismantling of the catwalk for the Bride of the Year Contest at the Solway Cophthorne Hotel. Unfortunately for the Band there is now a new management team for this event and it has been moved to the Carterton Events Centre.

Of course the best way for the Band to fundraise is to put on paid performances. That way the Band is getting paid for its Members doing what they enjoy. From the early 2000s to the late 2010s the Band was of sufficient strength and playing ability that it could put on concerts of a high standard that the public would pay to attend. That is not realistic at the moment.



*MDBB's winning ensemble at the 2015 National Contest*

The Band has a proud history of Contesting and it is galling to record that with regular attendance at District Contests and fairly regular attendance at National Contests the Band has not had a single overall win in the last 25 years. There have been some wins in the Hymn / Reflective Item, and some wins in Test Pieces, but never have they been put together for an overall win.

But contesting has not been entirely fruitless. At the 2015 National Contest in Rotorua a Masterton Ensemble won the 7-12 Person Ensemble with a brilliant rendition of 'Powerhouse', beating several 'A' grade bands in the process.



*The successful junior ensemble, Napier National Contest 2016*

The Band has another important function besides performing and contesting, and that is education, the teaching of Brass to the next generation. At the start of this 25 year period the Band had embraced the Brilliant Brass Program formulated by the NZ Brass Bands Association. Teaching requires the provision of instruments and tutors. Instruments used were old Band



*2013 Juniors*

instruments and entry level instruments funded by generous grants.



### *2017 Juniors*

come through the Brilliant Brass program. The number of junior players continued to grow to the point that a Masterton Youth Concert Band was formed in 2003 to visit Masterton sister city Armidale in NSW, Australia. The majority of this Band were products of the Brilliant Brass Program.

Ted Paris drove the project with help principally from Kelvin Paris, Darcy Christiansen and Ian Hodge. It was very successful. The Band which attended the 2000 National Contest in Christchurch contained nine members who had

One of the major problems that Masterton and its Band have is, unfortunately, that the brightest and best leave the area for university, other career options, or simply for their OE. So a continuous training program is required to provide new players. As the tutors grew older and retired from the Band the Brilliant Brass program faded and the stream of new players slowed significantly.

When Bruce Roberts came to the Band it presented the opportunity to revive the Brilliant Brass program, Bruce having been involved in Brass tuition before. Ably assisted by Narissa Lower-Knight and Brian Castle as tutors, and other Band Members as mentors, the program is fully functioning again. Following Bruce's resignation Brian & Narissa have proved capable of continuing the program without him, and even growing it further.



*The Junior Band rehearsing in 2023.  
Interesting to note that of the two adults  
seen in the band, one is a current learner,  
the other was a learner in the band at age  
50 and is now helping the new learners.  
**You are never too old to learn!***



*Narissa & Brian*

The Band prepares to embark on its next quarter century in good heart. There are now five school-age youngsters in the Band with more to come, and this augers well for the future. The opening words of the 100 year history, written by Norman Tankersley, the Mayor at that time, are “A town without a band is not a complete entity”. Fifty years later Masterton District Brass Band move on confident that they will continue to perform their important role of making the town a complete entity.

Jim Barr, October 2023





And so the Band steps off into another quarter century. Although this picture is of the 2006 Band leading the Masterton Christmas Parade it symbolises the continuity of the Band. Some of these players have been with the Band for the whole 25 years, some have joined and some have left in that time, but it will still be the same Band going forward.

Personnel change, uniforms may change, but the Band goes on – forever.



Masterton District  
Brass Band



