

“I didn’t know Emsworth had a band”

by John Ambler

On a Bank Holiday Monday in 1982 a group of young people aged between 8 and 15 years old stood in pouring rain in Emsworth Park playing drums, glockenspiels and flute as the last visitors to the Horticultural Show fled for their cars and homes whilst a few loyal family members watched and listened until the last notes of the final march faded away. Following a quick round of applause parents grabbed their shivering children and squelched homeward across the park. The Emsworth Marching Band had completed its first ‘gig’.

The son of a Royal Marine musician, Ken Mann was educated at a military school before following his own musical career in the Royal Artillery Band. Following retirement from the Army he became Emsworth’s park-keeper/groundsman and lived in the house in the park. He wanted to form a band – not for any self-indulgent reason but simply because he wanted youngsters to enjoy the making of music and the sense of being part of a group.

Membership would be open to those between the ages of about 8 and 21 irrespective of ability or knowledge. It

would not be essential to have either a musical instrument or the ability to read music, but the willingness to learn to read music was essential. Loyalty to the band, especially on band practice nights, was also essential. However, he made it clear that education was the first priority; he did not expect attendance at band during periods of examination preparation.

Ken insisted that music was not out of the reach of anyone. Those without instruments would usually begin on cymbals. These people were not second-class citizens; they were part of a band whose members all played an equally important part. Mutual support was encouraged and those with the ability to play and to read music were expected to help others.

Recruiting, obtaining music and musical instruments plus giving group and individual tuition became Ken’s priorities. Early jobs like the Emsworth Show and playing in shopping centres helped pay for a practice hall. He took particular interest in those who could neither read nor play music. A simple, smart and relatively cheap uniform brought a sense of belonging and pride whilst the

Ken Mann conducting the Emsworth Concert Band in a recital in St James’ Church



commencement of drill for marching and display encouraged discipline.

The band grew in size, instrumentation and ability under Ken's guidance. School fetes, town parades and static displays became regular weekend engagements, providing additional income. Whilst no rank structure existed within the band, a group of 'seniors' naturally evolved and began to take responsibility for aspects of band engagements and also looking after younger band members.

In 1988 Ken took the band to the country's major youth band competition, the National Championships at the Royal Albert Hall. No selection of band members would take place; everyone had a right to take part. Competing in the most junior of the four classes they were Best Band in the class winning seven out of eight individual and section awards. Resultant publicity generated requests for the band to play at the Basketball Championships at the Mountbatten Centre, Portsmouth; at a Portsmouth First Division football match at Fratton Park and in Portsmouth Guildhall supporting a concert by the Band of the Irish Guards and the Portsmouth Choral Society.

Following a request for help, two members of the Portsmouth Royal Marines Band came to teach the drummers how to master the rudiments and coordination necessary to improve their playing. These two men were impressed by the standard of the band, by Ken's attitude and by everyone's commitment.

The band went to the Royal Albert Hall in 1989 and entered the Championship Class winning Best Band and five out of the eight possible awards. A judge's comment endorsed Ken's philosophy of never re-arranging music to make it easier. He wrote, "Adult marches with no concession made for youth – well coped with".

A month later the band led one of the four processions at the famous Lewes Fireworks Parade. The Gulf War crisis had forced the withdrawal of the military band that should

have led this. The Emsworth band received the call for help only six hours before the parade stepped off!

The following year (1990) the band entered the National Class and won it, becoming Supreme National Champions. They were then invited to perform on the children's premier television programme, 'Blue Peter'.

Ken then decided to change the band from a marching band to a concert band. No personnel were lost, all being incorporated into the Concert Band. More challenging music was played; this encouraged more mature players to join who then shared their knowledge and skills with the younger members, and so the cycle continued.

Co-operation with members of the Royal Marines Band Service encouraged an interest in enlistment. Over the next few years, one band member joined the Royal Navy, two joined the Royal Marines Band Service, one joined the Royal Air Force and several joined the Army.

From 1992 the band gave regular concerts in the Emsworth area, including two each year in St James' Church. These events attracted more musicians to the band. Recognising that the standard of the band was approaching the limit of his musical and directorial ability Ken began the search for someone to replace him. With a new director in place Ken then settled into a regime of playing whatever instrument was required and also, when required, conducting.

In 2011 Ken decided to retire from the band to spend more time with family, and also playing golf with friends. The band continued practising and performing until it became a victim of Covid restrictions. Group practice has now restarted.

The original Emsworth Marching Band was formed for the benefit of youngsters in a way that current, and necessary, regulation would not allow. The young people who had that unique opportunity will surely look back on that period with great pride and pleasure.