



## Banding is who we are

Brass banding has woven its purpose through time and place. From a call to action in military heritage (since Ancient Rome) to intentional recreation (British 1800s colliery and factory bands), to civic pride (villages, towns and cities across the British empire) threaded back into the battlefields of World War I (battalion bands) where they provided much-needed memories of home.

Civic, military and memorial purposes over the past two centuries have interacted and combined. Both military and civic uses of banding have been integral to the culture.

Over the last half-century, the Soldiers' Band / BMCB has shifted increasingly to a civic focus and the band's ties to war have become less immediate and more retrospective.

From the 1970s onward, we notice an informalisation of banding culture coinciding with the widespread anti-Vietnam War sentiments and protests. By this time, the hero status days of the twentieth century brass band, during which people were given time off work and school to spectate at the famous South Street competitions, and the decades where Ballarat was the 'Bandsman's Mecca', were becoming a distant memory.

The decrease in march duration, disappearance of the quickstep competition, dissolution of an all-male playing culture, loosening of military ties and reimagination of the uniform by the 80s all reflect this cultural shift. However, the military heritage and connection is still present, expressed through repertoire, representation in military memorials and activities such as marching.

When we look at the photos from the 1920s and compare them with the recent banding photos, we clearly see the relaxing of a regimented culture. Formal AGMs with the mayor in attendance and smoke nights at the rifle range became Christmas barbeques and, later, McDonalds band meet-ups in the late 70s, dim sims at band practice in the 80s and, more recently, pizza nights and dress-up performances.

Turnouts, which are now called playouts, speak to the evolution of the informality of the band, but also to its consistency of purpose. Copperplate script for committee meetings, carvery knives for betrothals and wreaths for bereavement seem a long way off now, but the spirit of community has not changed.

The most profound changes for the band and its community have been the 1970s welcoming of women players, the 1980s change of instrumentation from all-brass to concert band, and the aforementioned loosening of formal structure and discrete military connection. These changes all reflect cultural shifts regionally, nationally and globally.

## Still relevant, 100 years later

The band still provides a central recreational focus for people's lives; an opportunity to learn new skills, share experience and mentor new players; and a way for civic-minded people to be musically self-expressed while bringing unity and joy to the community in which they play and live.

Contribution to community life continues to be at the heart of the band.

Bec Paton, who describes herself as a recent member (only having been with the band for ten years), writes about the band in 2019, a year before its centenary:

It's a beautifully diverse, accepting, supportive, fun, group of people. We come together and we support each other and have a great time. The band started off as a bunch of traumatised ex soldiers, so how we got from there to where we are now, that's a big change so there's a lot of stories in that because change is stories. Every change has a story.

The band is not the competition results, the band is the people. The results is the boring stuff, we did South Street last year and we did well and we're really happy with that, but it's much more about the process of doing that and working hard and getting together and at the end it was great that we'd won our section but it was more that we'd accomplished this many months of preparation and put together something that was good and played music that we didn't think we could play. So setting a challenge and supporting each other to meet that challenge is pretty cool.

– Bec Paton

With all of the changes over the past century, what does the band offer current players? How might that parallel with what the original returned soldiers were seeking when they initiated the band?

The band gave me probably a bit of what it gave those guys way back then. Because I joined the band when my kids were little and I was a stay at home mum and confronted with being a parent of a child with multiple profound disabilities and it was actually my husband who suggested I join the band and it was wonderful because it was something that had nothing to do with disabilities. It was great because I got to meet different people and focus on that process of looking at the music, looking at the notes and getting the fingering right and keeping an eye on the conductor and your brain is so busy doing all these things and putting it together and at the same time being amazed by the gorgeous music being made around you. Sometimes it can be distracting while you're trying to concentrate (lol). You can hear someone do a beautiful part off in the ether and then realise, oh I forgot to count my bar numbers! But that's getting lost in the moment which I think we can forgive ourselves for that from time to time. So for me that was the big thing, it was something outside of dealing with disability because my life had become very much focused on that.

– Bec Paton

## Who we are now

The band reflects a wide skill-set from diverse parts of the community and a broad mix of occupations coming together with a common purpose: to make music.

Most people I contacted for the research of this book were willing to see me within forty eight hours of the first phone call. This sort of 'can-do' attitude is catchy! I met people who give blood every fortnight, got the all abilities playground funded and built at Victoria Park, clean the hall and make the supper, and who volunteer their time at the Anzac and Remembrance Day services or Carols by Candlelight – in some instances for forty and fifty years running.

These are capable, humble, passionate and connected humans.

One of the palpable side effects of playing together, immediately noticeable when stepping into the bandroom, is that friendships made through banding have a special and highly valued quality.

Significantly different to 100 years ago, the band now has a balance of genders, and representation throughout the straight and LGBTQIA community as well as an increasing diversity of nationalities.

Here are some personal accounts from current members of what it means to be in the band:

I joined the band in 1995 when my Pop saw an advertisement in *The Courier* and thought it would be good. So I joined and have been there ever since (only missing a handful of rehearsals). I love the range of music but mostly the friends I have made through the band – even though some of them aren't playing with the band any more.

– Charlotte Withers

I may be a person with a disability, and a hidden one at that, but if there's one thing I pride myself on, it's showing people without disabilities that we people with disabilities can do anything they can do, especially with the right amount of support where it's required. I initially intended to join the Ballarat Memorial Concert Band in 2000 after participating in a school band workshop with them, but I got held back by my parents who insisted that the completion of my secondary education came first. But the day when I eventually joined the band didn't matter in the end, because I am proud to be part of a group that looks upon me as another member and sees my disability as something that adds to my uniqueness.

– Tanya Hale

I like being able to see families coming together to make music. My sister Boon comes with me when she can (she's blind but can see some things so uses an iPad to read music) and Mark Witham is currently MD and is also inclusive of people and a great teacher.

– Zoom Beck

It's an honour to be the music director heading into the centenary year.

– Mark Witham (MD)

I played with Memorial Concert Band soon after moving to Ballarat from Hamilton in 1991. Later, returning from a Melbourne work transfer, I was eager to play and immediately sought out the band to catch up with friends, and to see what was new. Brenda Beck was MD, and she is fabulous. Being involved in anything musical that has her touch is always a joy and I was keen to see her too.

Returning felt like a comfortable pair of slippers; the time away very quickly seemed a distant memory. New to the band was a young and very pretty trumpet player who, in addition to her nose ring, played with a beautiful sound. It was her sound that I noticed first. Meeting and chatting with her was the goal but every time I managed to sidle along the section, painstakingly seat by seat, a week at a time, Brenda would make me move back.

Triumph in the end and we finally chatted. Ultimately, we became a 'memorial band' relationship! This year we celebrate fifteen years of marriage.

I have very fond memories of playing in the band and I was fortunate, later to hone some conducting skills for a little while. In addition to proving very useful musical skills, I received tremendous joy conducting in what was the feeder band. The band was kind in allowing me to explore the arcane arts of French horn and trombone too. This opportunity to explore, play and conduct has assisted me tremendously as now a music teacher.

While I haven't performed with the band for a while now, I enjoy catching up with my friends here and there. In some cases, playing in other ensembles for one off gigs.

Memorial gave me a chance to develop as a player, explore other instruments, conduct and meet lovely people.

– Simon Marcollo

Matt [16] loves his music and wants to do something with it, even if its just playing with others or in bands. I think the others are a bit young yet to have had music playing impact them much. However Dan [12] has mentioned that one of the others in learner band will be in his class next year at college so he is looking forward to that as he only has one friend from school going into the selective class with him.

As you know our kids do lots of things, scouts, ballet, now basketball too. So I guess you could say making new friends who may not be interested in gaming influences – but share what interests you yourself have – could get them away from computers.

– Kathryn Flind

I joined the band in 2009. At that stage I was a full time mother and carer. I had two little girls aged eighteen months and three years.

Before the kids were born, I was a teacher. We had moved from Melbourne and the only people I knew in Ballarat were my colleagues at the school. After the kids were born, the only people I saw were my mothers' group and doctors and therapists. It was my husband who suggested the band, he worked with Karen Roberts – clarinet player. I went along a couple of times and realised I was out of my depth. It had been over 15 years since I had picked up a clarinet. Thankfully the developmental band was quite strong at that point and provided a more gentle reintroduction to playing.

It was wonderful to meet new people and to do something separate from being a mum, a role that had become all-encompassing with my eldest child's diagnosis of a rare syndrome that would cause severe disabilities. Band became an outlet and the people I met through the band became both a distraction and, in time, amazing support. I was so grateful to the band for what it was giving me, I joined the committee to give something back.

I've been in the band a decade now. I have been on the committee for much of that time. Often as either president or vice president. My younger daughter is now a member and sight-reads better than I do.

People I have met through band have become some of my closest friends. They are a diverse group of wonderful people. Some are older than I am, some a lot younger, some gay, some straight, some working, some studying, some looking for work, some retired, some religious, some not. We work together to make music, to make others smile and to continually improve our skills and knowledge.

Discussions about how we would celebrate the centenary of the band began in 2017. In early 2018 our MD at the time sent me a link to a grant from the Public Records Office. With the help of Cheryl Russell, Georgina Williams and others, we got the submission in and the result is this ebook.

I am so proud we now have this record of how this wonderful community began and became the diverse, supportive, inclusive, group of musicians that I look forward to seeing every Wednesday night.

– Bec Paton

The fundamental human need to make and experience music together has not changed over the last 100 years, and is likely to remain undiminished as it is central to our biology. Music is who we are.

Here is a band that has stood the test of time and continues to look forward to a bright future.