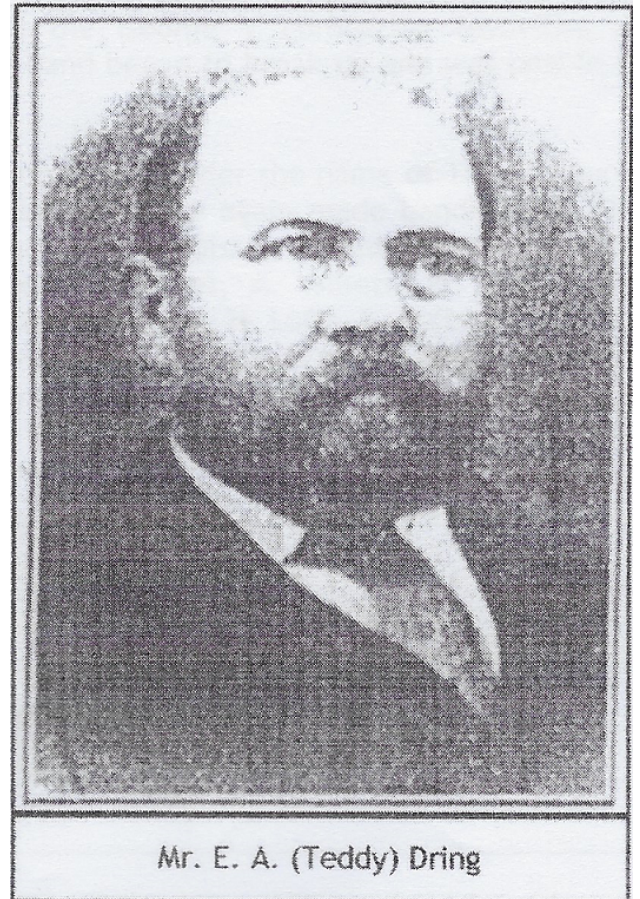


Littleport Band – A History

In the early 1880's (probably 1882) a group of young men formed the Littleport Brass Band. One of the most foremost members was Edwin Arthur Dring, a man of marked musical ability and an accomplished violinist. He was elected to be the first bandmaster at the age of 19.

Edwin's father, Samuel Dring, was a journeyman carpenter who had moved to Littleport from Stretham and married Mary Ann Chapman from Nordelph on 13th March 1836. They settled in a cottage in Wisbech Road, later moving to a larger property in Crown Street (now Main Street). Edwin Arthur was born in 1863 in this house, and was baptised at St George's Church on the 6th September. By the time of the 1871 census Edwin was 8 years old and was a scholar, presumably at the local Town School in Wisbech Road, although for him to have become an "accomplished musician" he may have had some private tuition. Upon leaving school he was apprenticed to a local grocer.



At the age of 21 he opened his own grocers shop at his father's house in Main Street. The same year he also married Phoebe Neale at St. Georges Church on the 2nd June 1884. It must have been the pressure of establishing his business that forced him to temporarily resign as bandmaster. He handed the baton over to his old school friend Edwin Taylor.

Edwin Taylor recalled that when the owner of the local brewery heard that a band had been formed he thought that a euphonium would be a good thing for them to have, and bought one for them on the understanding that they paid him back. Thus began a link between banding and beer that continues to the present day!

Under the leadership of Mr. Taylor the band membership increased to 12-16 players. All the bandsmen owned their own instruments and regular practices were held in the Infants School. Players were equipped with second hand Hussar uniforms at 16 shillings each. The band was soon fulfilling many local engagements as a whole band or as six to seven players, as well as leading parades and putting in a regular appearance at the annual Horticultural and Flower Show, where they would entertain the crowds by playing selections throughout the day. Hospital Sunday parades were particularly popular, when all the clubs in Littleport paraded with the band and collected money for Addenbrookes or the local nursing fund. They would sometimes travel into Norfolk to play and sleep in barns if the weather was warm enough. Then, as now, the band found it sometimes needed reinforcements which were to be found at the local Militia Barracks at Ely.

At one flower show in Manea, the prize cucumber disappeared. The police were called and Littleport band were placed under suspicion as the box of fruit and veg had been in the room where the band had left their cases and belongings. Edwin Taylor was questioned but knew nothing, and the missing cucumber was still not found after a search of all the bands' possessions. However, on the way home one of the band members suddenly said, "Here it is Ed," and pulled the cucumber out of the bell of his instrument! He never found out who put it there, but the two main suspects became notable Police inspectors later in life...

When Ginnetts Circus visited Littleport in 1889 they borrowed Edwin Taylor and one Harry Pratt to join the circus band. Harry won the admiration of many as he could read music, and therefore play music on his cornet written for other instruments. Indeed, both of them were invited to join the circus full time on 35 shillings per week. Fortunately for Littleport Band, they declined.

The band were occasionally engaged to play at choral festivals in Ely Cathedral and they also led the George V coronation festivities at Wimblington. But by 1912 the band began to break up and was unable to function as a Brass Band.

In July 1915 the brass band was reorganised under the name of The Littleport Town Band and Mr. Edwin "Teddy" Dring was once again made bandmaster. The following were enrolled as bandsmen: A. Bishop (deputy bandmaster), H. Crowe, J. Glover, C.W. Fox, J. Sorfleet, A. Willett, W. Hawes, W. Register, L. Ashman, H. Harlock, H. Lofts, F. Lofts, A. Bassett, G. Lewis, G. Stute and W. Harwood. The officers of the band club were Mr. Fred Davies, Chairman; Mr. Duncombe (manager of Capital and Counties Bank) treasurer; Mr. J. Field, secretary; Dr. Martin and Mr. J. S. Fendick were trustees. About a week after the formation of the band, new instruments were distributed to the bandsmen, who each signed an agreement for the "safe custody of the instrument he held." A rule was also passed that if the band should at any time disband, the instruments would be returned to the trustees to be sold and the proceeds donated to the local nursing fund.

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meeting of the Littleport Town Band in November 1916, held to discuss a concert the band funds, a presentation was made Teddy Dring of a silver mounted baton, inscribed "Presented to E. A. Dring from the Littleport Town Bandsmen, Nov. 1916". The presentation was for the tremendous work to bring the band to a state of efficiency his zeal in assisting members and stimulating others. Mr. Dring remarked that labour of love and it had "always given him greatest pleasure to foster the love of others." When the presentation was over, Dring took up his new baton and "was soon it in the conduct of the band".

As an aside, band member Charlie Key went to Australia on the post-war emigration ticket when anyone could go to Australia for just £10, and even led a band in the country. Sometime later, a baton with the inscription 'Presented To E.A. Dring- From the Littleport

Town Bandsmen – Nov 1916' was found in Australia and sent back to The Littleport Society who proudly have it on display!

The band continued to operate well under Mr. Dring's leadership, although he was forced to relinquish position due to illness in 1919, when Mr. Ernie Crabb took over as bandmaster. During this year it was noted that the band collected funds for a local resident widowed by a train accident. Although the band was never a military style band, reed players in the town occasionally volunteered their services and were taken on. After successful fundraising, new uniforms (blue with gold piping) were acquired in 1920 and were first worn for a concert in the Cinema Theatre, Hitches Street, on 23rd March 1920.

In 1921 Mr. Dring, having recovered from his illness, once again took over as bandmaster and held the band together until 1924, when he resigned "for business reasons". His place was taken by Mr J.H. (Joe) Hawkes. Despite Mr Hawkes enthusiasm for the band, it gradually fell into decline and by 1929 was rarely seen in public. In 1931 it finally wound up its affairs.



Littleport British Legion Band, 1948. Our current President, Bill Sharpe, is 4th from right, back row.

A public appeal was made by the Littleport branch of the British Legion, aided greatly by Mr Cecil Mott. In 1932, the Littleport British Legion Silver band was formed with Mr. Hawkes continuing as bandmaster. Practices were initially held in Miss Summerlee's shed and then

at Dr Hendleys. The band first appeared on May 22nd, 1932, and the next week took part in

the British Legion County Rally at Ely. The band attended its first contest soon after this at Skegness, gaining a second prize and thereafter styling itself the Littleport British Legion Silver Prize Band, an impressive title which sorely tested the patience of band members writing out posters and programmes! In 1934 it was noted that the band gave concert takings to the Gresford Colliery disaster fund. On October 22nd 1934 Mr Hawkes was succeeded by Mr. Rayner Dent, ex bandmaster of Wiggshall St Germans, who conducted his first public concert early in the new year.

The band continued to contest vigorously both in full and in quartets and solos, gaining many prizes. In 1937 attendance at contest was cancelled owing to severe floods. The following year in Hatfield the band attended a big Legion rally. Many other bands played with Littleport remaining uncalled. At last, there was silence and Mr Dent struck up a rousing march. Only a few bars had been played when a voice came over the Tannoy "Someone pull that Bandmasters ear, the rally is over!"

At the outbreak of war in 1939 the band, determined to weather the storm and survive intact, discussed economies including lowering the bandroom rent. Mr Place, at whose hotel (the Granby) rehearsals were then being held, volunteered a 50% reduction. Coupled with other measures this enabled the band to continue. Committee meetings were dropped, and practices were reduced to once a week. The hotel rooms were requisitioned for evacuees, so practices were held in the Legion club. The band kept playing for charities and "savings weeks", helped by guest players from the services stationed locally. Around this time at a large event, Littleport band and a local Military band both struck up the National Anthem, only to find that they were playing in different keys!

In 1946 after demobilisation many bandsmen returned to Littleport. The old committee generously withdrew so that ex-servicemen could take their place. A notable event was held on July 16th 1947 when 12 bus-loads of legion members spent the afternoon at Waddington Hall as guest of Major Hilton Luddington, with free strawberries and beer!

Mr Dent retired as Bandmaster in late 1947 and was replaced by Mr. J. H. Hawkes. Practices were then held in an old Nissan Hut, soon moved to the Methodist Sunday school after refugees from the floods needed accommodation. On January 4th 1948 the band acquired its own premises, given by the British Legion Club, at the rear of what is now the ex-servicemen's club. It remains one of the very few East Anglian bands with its own dedicated bandroom. On Easter Sunday that year the band won 1st place in the Section B contest at Norwich ("Recollections of Donizetti" under J.H. Hawkes) and were promoted to Section A. In 1949 a very impressive four quartets were entered into the Thetford contest. A grand band contest was held in 1950 on Whit Monday, which raised more funds for the band than any other previous event.

The band entered many contests in the 1930's through to the 1970's when the British Legion relinquished control. Notable wins and podium places were achieved at the East Anglian Brass Band Association contest in Norwich on long-forgotten test pieces such as Recollections of Bellini (3rd place in 1936 under Raymond Dent) and also at the famous "areas" contest in 1956 playing Normandy, Symphonic Ode (1st place, again under J.H. Hawkes). Concerts were held at Quat Hill, Brewery Corner, Gas House Green, Crown Corner, The Grange, Highfield, Old Cinema, Constitutional Hill and others. Christmas Carols were, as for every band, an important event and a key source of income.

The legendary Stanley Boddington (Munn and Felton Band Director) would travel from Kettering to Littleport to give the band extra instruction when it was contest time. He used to stay with George Elsegood (Musical director from 1958) in Parson's Lane. Several band members suggested that this was because there was a "more than merely platonic" relationship between him and George's wife.....



Littleport Band, 1958 (?) with Stanley Boddington



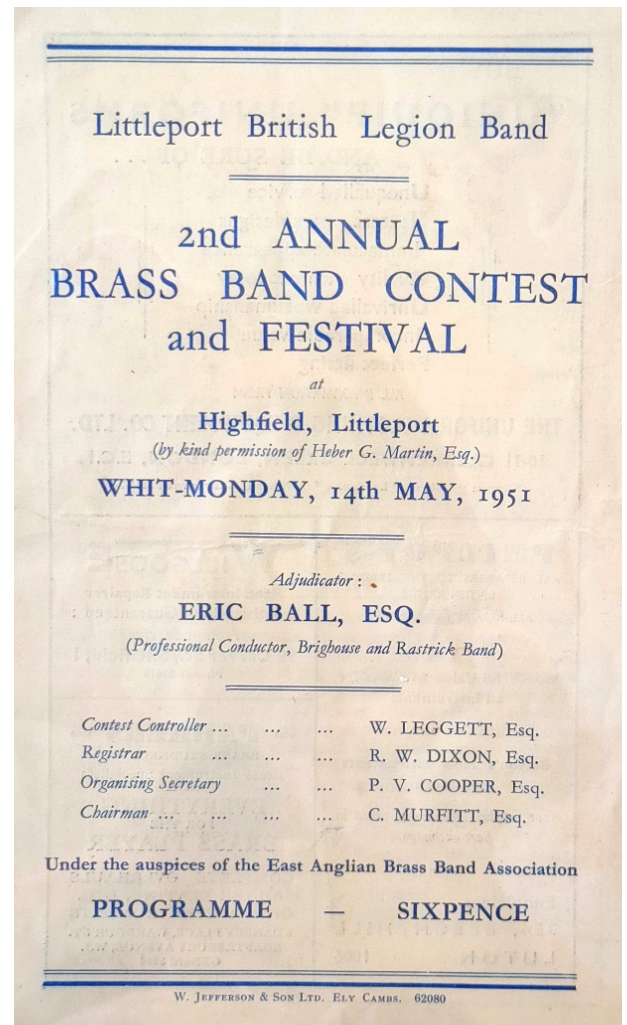
A little light music: 1961. Harold Coleman on side drum, Ron Barber on the bass drum. Stephen Misson in the white (mute!) hat, next to him is Danny Murfitt and in the centre is Brian Halls.

The current Littleport Band president, Bill Sharpe, joined the British Legion Littleport Silver Band in 1943. His father Sidney, whose nickname was Sam, was an excellent tuba player who worked for the Metropolitan Police force in London and played for the Metropolitan Police Band. Following in father's footsteps, at just 8 years old, Bill took up playing the cornet. The family lived in Finborough Road, Earls Court, before the war broke out, and young baby Bill moved with his parents and sister Betty up to Littleport in Camel Road that Bill recalls was

then surrounded by fields.

Bill first played for Littleport and stayed with them, despite being conscripted into the RAF for 2 years. Then he was in the Lakenheath Band before they amalgamated with the Newmarket and Brandon Bands to become the Forest Heath District Band enjoying yearly trips playing in Germany.

Bill Sharpe continues to support the Littleport Brass Band regularly by attending their concerts despite Bill not being such an active player anymore. One wall of Bill's Hall is covered with band pictures from the past. Bill's two sons, Graham and Simon kept the musical family tradition going by playing for Littleport Brass Band, as they still do to this day.



Band at Seaside. — The British Legion Band on their first visit of the season to Hunstanton on Sunday, had a successful day, although the holiday crowds were not as large as was expected. Their music was, however, greatly appreciated, and they were warmly received. As is the Band's custom on these occasions they started off with a parade along the sea front, led by their smartly turned-out drum major, Mr. R. Neal, and under the conductorship of the bandmaster, Mr. George Elsegood. Later, musical concerts were presented on the Green facing the sea, when included in the programme were competitions for guessing the tunes and a session of "conducting the band." Children were also catered for in special items of their choice and a number of prizes were awarded to competitors. An impromptu football match, a relaxation by the players during the day, was however unfinished owing to unforeseen circumstances.

Littleport Gazette, July 1962

"The British Legion Band which became the Littleport Town Band was so rigid in its rules those days that they wouldn't allow women. It all changed under the tutelage of band player and member Brian Halls. Women's Committees were being formed around the country, and here in Littleport we organised many events from dinner dances to bingo to raise money as well as playing in the bands. The Band used to have concerts on the green, and they played every time there was a feast week too."

In 1972 the British Legion connection came to an end and the band continued

Bills wife Joan (d.2023) recalls "The Band always came first in our household, so both me and another band member Doris (wife of the George Elsegood who came to the band from the local Salvation army band) used to call ourselves the 'band widows'. Invariably we were left alone while our husbands cleared off to pursue their musical interests. There were many times I'd have to get the children washed, fed, and clothed before getting all of us ready and out of the house and travel to Hunstanton where Bill and his band members would regularly play. I wouldn't see Bill for the whole day, so in order to occupy and amuse the children I would repeatedly walk them up and down the promenade which tended to tire me rather than the children!"



Coronation March 31st May 1953, Littleport High Street. Littleport Band leads the Coronation Parade.

independently under the name “The Littleport Band”. The band room was sold to the trustees of the new band, in whose care it still resides.



Musical Directors of Littleport Band since this time have been

George Elsegood (1958-1976), Brian Halls (1976-1993), Susan Peacock (now Susan Stygall) (1993-2001), Jonathon Hammond (2002-2004), Philip Mead (2004-2006), Nigel Bramley (2007-2016), Nicholas Garman (2016 – 2018), Ian Knapton (2018-2022), Ian Johnson (2022 – present).

During the 1990’s a junior band was active. It was formed by Susan Stygall, and the Musical directors was Suzie White (who still occasionally plays with the band on percussion). Many of the junior band players went on to be members of the adult band, and some went on to be successful professional musicians.

Littleport Band Room, Pont’s Hill Road, Littleport

Contest success during this period has been substantial, with the band gaining promotion to the second section of national brass band grading (sections are championship, first, second, third and fourth) in 1997, and promotion to the first section in 2012. Currently the band competes in the third section, but with high hopes of promotion in the near future. In the last few years, Littleport band



Littleport Junior Band

has come first in the Milton Keynes entertainment contest, second in the Bolsover

entertainment contest twice, second at the 2022 Leicester contest, and won “Best Bases” in the 2024 regional contest in Stevenage.

The band continue to give high quality concerts throughout the year at venues such as Littleport Ex-servicemen’s club, St Georges church Littleport, Littleport Village Hall, Ely Bandstand, Hunstanton Bandstand, Oxburgh Hall, and many others. One of the highlights of the year is the Community Carol sing in Ely Cathedral every December, when a packed Cathedral enjoys both Christmas favourites and Carol singing to a full Brass Band.

Littleport Band under Musical Directors Brian Halls (top), Susan Stygall (middle) and Nigel Bramley (bottom)





*Best Basses trophy, regional contest 2024,
taking pride of place in the band room!*



*Success and a (miners' lamp) trophy – the
"Leicester" contest, 2022*



Littleport Band 2023!