

Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker investigates the musical career of Len Collis, percussionist and bandleader.

Every now and then in family history research, you have the good fortune to track down a colourful obituary, one that provides a real insight into your ancestor's life. Such was the case when I traced my relative Len Collis, "a well-known Leicester musician". Inspired by the snippets in his 1946 obituary in the Leicester Mercury, I set out to uncover more about his musical career.



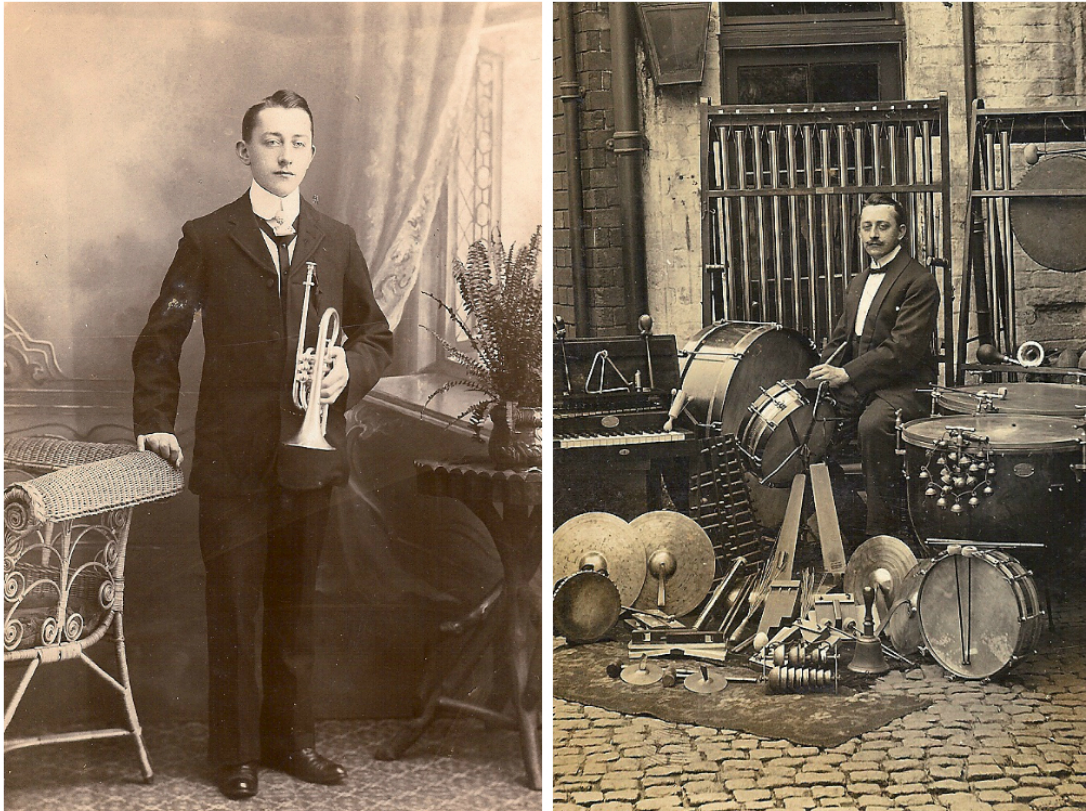
Leicester Symphony Orchestra under Malcolm Sargent, with Len Collis on tympani (courtesy of LSO)

Leonard George Collis was born in 1886, the second son of publicans, Martin and Elizabeth Collis. The obituary sets out his early musical interests:

“Being fascinated by music at an early age, Mr Collis had mastered the cornet at the age of 10, and two years later started his career by playing this instrument in an old Leicester Railway Band. Later, he became a member of the Leicester Imperial Brass Band, the Excelsior Brass Band, and took part in many band competitions, playing with massed bands at the Crystal Palace.”

For background on brass bands, I head to Max Wade-Matthews' book 'Musical Leicester': "In the 1890s the number of brass and reed bands in the town increased at a vast rate... Big band popularity grew for two main reasons: the advent of the railways, which made travel easier for the working man, and the improvement in the manufacture of brass instruments, which made both fingering and blowing easier... It was not long before bands began to compete with others in friendly rivalry."

One of the top combinations was the Highfield Brass Band – later re-named Leicester Imperial Prize Brass Band – which won first prize at the 1900 Easter Monday concert at Rugby, and in 1901 the top prize at the Crystal Palace contest. Whether Len was part of the prize-winning team isn't clear, but he would certainly have been a regular performer. Cornet players typically form the mainstay of a brass band, with 'front row cornets' often featuring as soloists.



“By this time he had [also] become an expert player on the timpani, the drums and the xylophone,” continues his obituary. Our family album includes a portrait of Len, surrounded by his percussion instruments. Staged in a cobbled back yard, in all likelihood behind his parents' Admiral Nelson pub in Humberstone Gate, it presents an amazing display; as well as timpani, a selection of drums and a xylophone, his kit includes a keyboard glockenspiel, cymbals, cup chimes, tubular bells, sleigh bells, a bell tree and hand bell, tambourine, claves, jam blocks, castanets, triangle, whistle, gong, coconut shells and a taxi horn.

In the 1911 census Len is listed as 'Musician at Music Hall'. A flick through trade directories indicate there were five theatres and music halls in Leicester at that time: the New Empire Music Hall, Palace Theatre of Varieties, Pavilion (New) Theatre of Varieties, Royal, and Royal Opera House.

THEATRES & MUSIC HALLS.

New Empire Music Hall, 27 Wharf street; The
New Bioscope Trading Co. Ltd. lessees; Chas.
Robert Craig, manager
Palace Theatre of Varieties, Belgrave gate; G.
F. Reynolds, acting manager
Pavilion (New) Theatre of Varieties, 153 Bel-
grave gate; Frank Macnaghten, proprietor
Royal, Horsefair street; Milton Bode & Edward
Compton, lessees
Royal Opera House, 26 & 28 Silver street & 17
Cank street; Milton Bode & Edward Compton,
proprietors; Truzman Towers, manager

It's tricky, without further evidence, to be sure where he worked but my hunch is at the Pavilion on Belgrave Gate; Len's uncle, William Charles Shipley was 'Bar Manager at Music Hall' (1911 census) and oral family tradition places him at the Pavilion, or 'the Pav' as it was affectionately known.

For those with an interest in theatre and music hall history, the Arthur Lloyd website (www.arthurlloyd.co.uk) is a goldmine. From 1863 there was a succession of entertainment venues on the corner of Wilton Street and Belgrave Gate – initially landlord Billy Paul ran a 'free and easy' song-and-supper room at his Old Cheese pub, then in 1870 it was redeveloped into the Midland Music Hall. After a fire in 1889, the Prince of Wales Theatre of Variety was erected on the site, later renamed the New Tivoli and ultimately the Pavilion.

The Pavilion hosted a twice-nightly variety show; over the years, audiences were entertained by escapologist Harry Houdini, strong man Samson, and warbling Gracie Fields. It had seating for 1,260 in the stalls, circle and gallery, and an orchestra pit for 20 musicians. With his array of percussion instruments, Len Collis would have been kept busy creating music and sound effects, as he hopped between drums, bells and chimes.

As well as light-hearted variety, Len played the timpani, or kettledrums, in more serious settings. As his obituary continues:

“He was still young when he first joined the old Wesley Hall Orchestra, which is now known as the De Montfort Symphony Orchestra. Later, he played all these instruments in symphony concerts in the Midlands, under the baton of the late Sir Henry Wood and Dr Malcolm Sargent.”

The Wesley Hall Orchestra – founded in Highfields in 1897 – changed its name to the De Montfort Orchestra on the opening of the town's new concert venue in 1913. In the photograph taken to mark the occasion, Len Collis stands apart at the back, behind his timpani.

De Montfort Hall was one of the country's finest concert halls. Situated beside Victoria Park, amidst flower gardens, it was an enlightened Corporation project. With a capacity of around 3,000 and a fine concert organ donated by

Alfred Corah, De Montfort Hall became noted for Sunday concerts (under George Tebbs), choral performances, and visiting international musicians.



Inaugural concert of the De Montfort Orchestra with Len Collis behind tympani (courtesy of Tebbs family archive and LSO)

To understand the local orchestral scene at the time, I refer to Sam Dobson of the LSO (www.leicestersymphonyorchestra.co.uk) and Neil Crutchley's splendid book, 'Leicester Symphony Orchestra: The First 90 Years'. The pivotal role played by Dr Malcolm Sargent shines through.

Malcolm Sargent was charismatic and talented. As organist and choirmaster at St Mary's, Melton Mowbray from 1914, Sargent "first learned a skill that was to make him world famous... namely the ability to inspire people to sing with confidence and conviction," explains Neil Crutchley. After conducting a series of concerts at De Montfort Hall in 1921, Sargent went on to found the Leicester Symphony Orchestra the following year. Despite his increasingly demanding schedule, he was to conduct it for much of the next twenty years.

Sargent's enthusiasm and positive attitude had a great effect on the orchestra. One player put it this way, "The first rehearsal was a revelation, it transformed me as a player and suddenly I felt that I was a real musician. What had been impossible became possible. What was possible became almost easy."

Timpani wouldn't feature in every piece, though they came into their own in Berlioz's Symphony Fantastique, Haydn's 'Drumroll Symphony' or Holst's Planets Suite, for example. Len was undoubtedly an LSO stalwart, with his name featuring in programmes through the 1920s, 30s and 40s.

His obituary rounds off with a flourish:

“He had been broadcasting from the time wireless was introduced. Another successful venture by Mr Collis was the founding of the ‘La Veeda’ dance band, which he led. His daughter Mabel joined the band and became a noted saxophone player. Father and daughter broadcast together on many occasions.”

In a family photograph from the late 1920s, we see the band about to strike up its signature tune. Wax-moustached and wing-collared Len Collis is poised at the drums, with his xylophone close to hand. Daughter Mabel stands centre stage with her saxophones and clarinets. A pianist, cellist and violinist complete the troupe.



La Veeda – a foxtrot composed by John Alden in 1920 – has a gentle, cantering rhythm and cheery saxophone melody. Perhaps the band would follow on with ‘Tea for Two’ or a spicier Charleston. In her brief memoir notes, Mabel takes up the story:

“When Boot’s the Chemist opened their new branch in Gallowtree Gate, my father was Musical Director in their restaurant on the second floor and had a five-piece band. We were there for six or seven years and it was a very popular rendezvous for Leicester people... During our years at Boot’s my father [also] ran a 10-12 piece dance band, playing at the big events.”

Mabel was offered a recording contract with the BBC – she made over 40 broadcasts during the early 1930s. But that, as they say, is another story.

Unfortunately, early wireless broadcasts were not recorded; virtually every broadcast was live. However, to get a sense of Len's musical repertoire I tune into the dance band encyclopedia that Mike Thomas has compiled at www.mgthomas.co.uk. It includes hundreds of inter-war recordings by the likes of Jack Hylton, Billy Cotton and Henry Hall. As I listen, I'm transported for a moment, tuning in to Uncle Len and his band, an echo of my family history.

Auntie Mabel: inspiring family histories

To read Graham's previous 'Trading Stories, Working Lives' articles – and for ideas on writing your own family history – visit www.auntiemabel.org or follow him on Twitter [@auntiemabel.org](https://twitter.com/auntiemabel)