

ARTHUR'S LAST HURRAH

Arthur Hutchinson was determined that the Frimley Brass Band would take part in the town festival. After all, it was to be on the anniversary of Armistice Day and a brass band was expected, wasn't it?

Arthur was surprised when his application was turned down. The letter read, "We regret to inform you that the Brass Band does not fit the multi-cultural theme we are promoting at this years' festival."

'Multi-cultural?' Arthur pondered. 'What has that to do with Armistice Day?'

Arthur remembered, as he often did, how he had been turned down once before, when he applied to join the Army at the beginning of the second war. He had wanted to fight for his country, like many of the other lads, but his country didn't want him. Mind you, he was only twelve at the time but it still rankled. He had taken up the trumpet instead and joined the Brass Band. Whenever he marched with the band, he imagined he was playing for those brave soldiers he should have been fighting alongside.

Now, seventy years later, the Brass Band was still going, but only just. Arthur couldn't find enough puff for his trumpet now but he conducted the remaining six members of his troupe. He suspected they only turned up to humour him. They probably had better things to do but this festival, to be

held in the Town Hall, would be their last public performance and he owed it to the rest of the band to make sure they were on the bill as a reward for their loyalty to him. He was not going to be put off by a rejection letter. He rang the number at the top of the letter and made an appointment that afternoon to meet the Festival Events Organiser, Brandon Little.

Brandon can have been no more than twenty-three years old. He'd probably never heard a brass band play.

"You see, Mister Hutchinson," Brandon said, as he looked for a first name on the form in front of him. "Arthur, it's like this. Our programme is just about full. There would be no time for your band to play."

"It's not totally full then?"

"Well..." began Brandon.

"Then we'll take one of the free slots, even if it's only fifteen minutes."

Brandon tried another tack. "You do realise that this is a multi-cultural festival? The council is very keen to promote harmony. Do you have any ethnic players in your band?"

"We have Ken McBride from Newcastle. He always seems to be a race apart."

Not a twitch of fun or humour was evident in Brandon's face.

Arthur caught sight of a draft flyer for the event on Brandon's desk.

He noticed there was a Punjabi Bhangra Band on the bill and he wondered if they were multi-cultural.

Brandon followed Arthur's gaze and brightened up. "Ah, the Bhangra Band. I hear they're very good; been recommended to us."

Arthur said, "Do you know the festival is on Armistice Day, Brandon?"

Brandon looked blankly at Arthur. "Armistice Day?" he asked.

"You don't know about Armistice Day? When the first war ended? When young men like you could start to live instead of dying in trenches? That's why we have brass bands, you know, to celebrate the fact that you don't have to go through what those young men did. Now how about that fifteen-minute slot, eh? For them; for those young lads like you. What about it, Brandon?"

Arthur's argument won the day and Brandon reluctantly included the Frimley Brass Band in the spot originally planned as a break for the stage technicians.

Come, the day, the band was ready. Arthur had to concede that Brandon was right; they didn't really fit in. They were the only non-ethnic group there, not only amongst the performers but the stallholders too.

Ken commented to Arthur that they were in the minority.

"You always were, Ken," said Arthur.

This was to be the Frimley Brass Band's last ever performance. Arthur had them practicing hard over the last three weeks and the band had presented him with a lovely watch that morning 'to help him keep better time when he was conducting' they said. They were rather emotional after all these years together, not least Arthur, who found his voice cracking as he thanked them for his present and their loyalty for so long. He was determined to put on a good show.

When their time arrived Arthur led his troupe onto the stage. There were many people milling about in the auditorium looking at the displays and the stalls but no one seemed to notice the band.

Arthur made a short introduction about this being their last show and they went straight into 'Greensleeves'. As he conducted, Arthur took a glance over his shoulder to gauge audience reaction but although there were thirty or forty seats set in front of the stage, they were all empty bar one, the

one that was occupied by Brandon. He had taken the trouble to listen. Arthur nodded at him and Brandon nodded back.

‘Alright,’ thought Arthur, ‘we’ll play for that lad then.’

They played six tunes and for the finale Arthur turned to face the hall, while they played his favourite, Pomp and Circumstance. Arthur had tears in his eyes and his chest heaved as they played the last notes. Brandon stood to clap, the only one, then he turned and headed for the back of the hall.

Something happened to Arthur. He saw, through his tears, not Brandon leaving the hall, but instead his twelve-year-old self, in the Army, going over the top of the trench to meet his fate with the other lads.

Arthur stood to attention, saluted, and said, “Good on yer, lad. You’ve made a fine soldier. You’ve done your duty.”