

CASTLE STREET FIFE and Drum Band it was called. People from outside the district must often have wondered why the street was mentioned. Maybe the more innocent thought that there was a band in each of every street of the town — an extravagant sort of misapprehension — but pardonable.

It is a little difficult to explain why it got the name. It was, of course, conceived and launched by residents of Castle Street. Residents of Main St., and other parts of the town weren't discouraged from helping to get it on the road. Possibly they were invited but didn't respond. In any case it would appear that the Castle St. people, having fathered the band, felt they were entitled to name it.

There was some geographical influence here, it may be argued. Castle St. happens to be in the Parish of Killasnett while the rest of the town lies in the parish of Cloonclare. Maybe the real reason for the band taking the name of the street was that at the time of its foundation there was a brass band in the town and, likely, in order to avoid any confusion, it was thought best to distinguish and localise the fife and drum ensemble by calling it after Castle St.

PADDY McSHARRY

It began in the year 1951. I don't know how much activity took place before the first meeting, but I remember being invited by Paddy McSharry of Castle St., a week or so before that. Indeed this man of great enthusiasm was one of the important influences then and afterwards for the band's existence. I was told that the first notion of it began in Wilson's in Castle St. Wilson's was a great ceilidhing house where there was always an open forum and there the idea of the band was born and discussed. Anyway a public meeting was held in St. Clare's hall some time in 1951. I remember that Patrick Fox, Tom Fox, and James McSharry all since deceased, God rest them, were elected as chairman and vice-chairman and Tom D. Rooney (R.I.P.) as treasurer. The first work to be done was, of course, the raising of funds; but long before there was any very substantial amount gathered the new instruments were bought. Tom Dominic, as the treasurer was called locally, knew that delay might damp enthusiasm and in his generosity made the money available for the purchase of the equipment. How long it was until his loan was repaid I'm not certain, but every member of the band knew of his very generous deed and never forgot it.

The new instruments were brought to St. Clare's hall where they were later distributed to the, then, very enthusiastic band members or band



CASTLE STREET BAND

recruits. The fifes looked very well, the dark shiny wood and the bright polished keys and the drums waiting to be tapped. To the uninitiated it seemed as if the band was nearly ready to march but they had a long way to go.

THE FIRST NOTES UNDER SEAN DONOHUE

Sean Donohue (R.I.P.) was to be the band master. He lived in Ballyshannon, though he was formerly a resident of Ballinamore. A tall striking looking man, he combined great dignity and a natural ability for maintaining discipline with a ready wit and a great ability to communicate. I think he must have been in some army for some time and certainly had what might be called "the common touch".

After getting the fifers through the scales and familiarising them with

written music, he started them into a rather daunting piece called "Scipio". This was daunting because none of the class had ever heard it before and because it had some very high notes. Some considerable wind pressure was expended for some time in trying to get these high notes. And even after some time they continued to be a little elusive. But Sean, the trainer, knew what he was at. He knew that when the tune was a strange one they had to read it: if they already knew it by ear, the reading would be neglected.

ST. PATRICK'S DAY 1952 — FIRST OUTING

As in the case of all new ventures, the public was very curious to know, "when the band was going out?" It must have been on Patrick's Day, 1952, it made its grand debut. On the Sunday previous to this it did some marching practice on the Bundoran road, going as far out as Rogans.

And then the first public appearance. Some time in the afternoon of that memorable day the members were all placed in position. At the top of Castle St., Sean Donohue was to be marching and playing as well — he was an outstanding performer on the side drum. His presence, of course, was a steadying source of strength to the shaky amateurs. He gave the last advice — a very frequent advice of his... "Now blow it out, lads".

Paddy Wilson, (R.I.P.) the band major gave the marching command. The band moved off. The bass drummer, struck two blows on his drum, the side drums rolled, the fifers struck up, and then something happened that wasn't planned nor expected. A few Castle St. dogs, not accustomed to such a musical diet, got a bit excited and began barking. Someone must have set about discouraging one of them in the traditional fashion for he ran in under the legs of the marching bandsmen followed by another dog. From my position in the rear rank, I saw the lines in front of me getting very wobbly — I think the melody wobbled a wee bit too; but we were marching downhill and soon got into line again, and by the time we got as far as the Main St., we were playing with great unity and some confidence. I'd say this little incident of the dogs went unnoticed by the vanguard of the band, but those of us in the rear ranks were profoundly impressed by it and so also were our memories.

For some time we had a rather limited repertoire of tunes for public recitals and a certain economy had to be observed. The first one generally took us from the castle as far as the Market House. A lull followed nearly as far as the Garda barracks. The next

tune took us well above Mitchell's. Then we generally marched without playing up the hill before we went into Mac Dermott Terrace. Two or three tunes would take us around this circuit; and because of its distance from our starting point we could well use the first tune again since we had, or hoped to have, a different audience. Thus we managed to make a little go a long way.

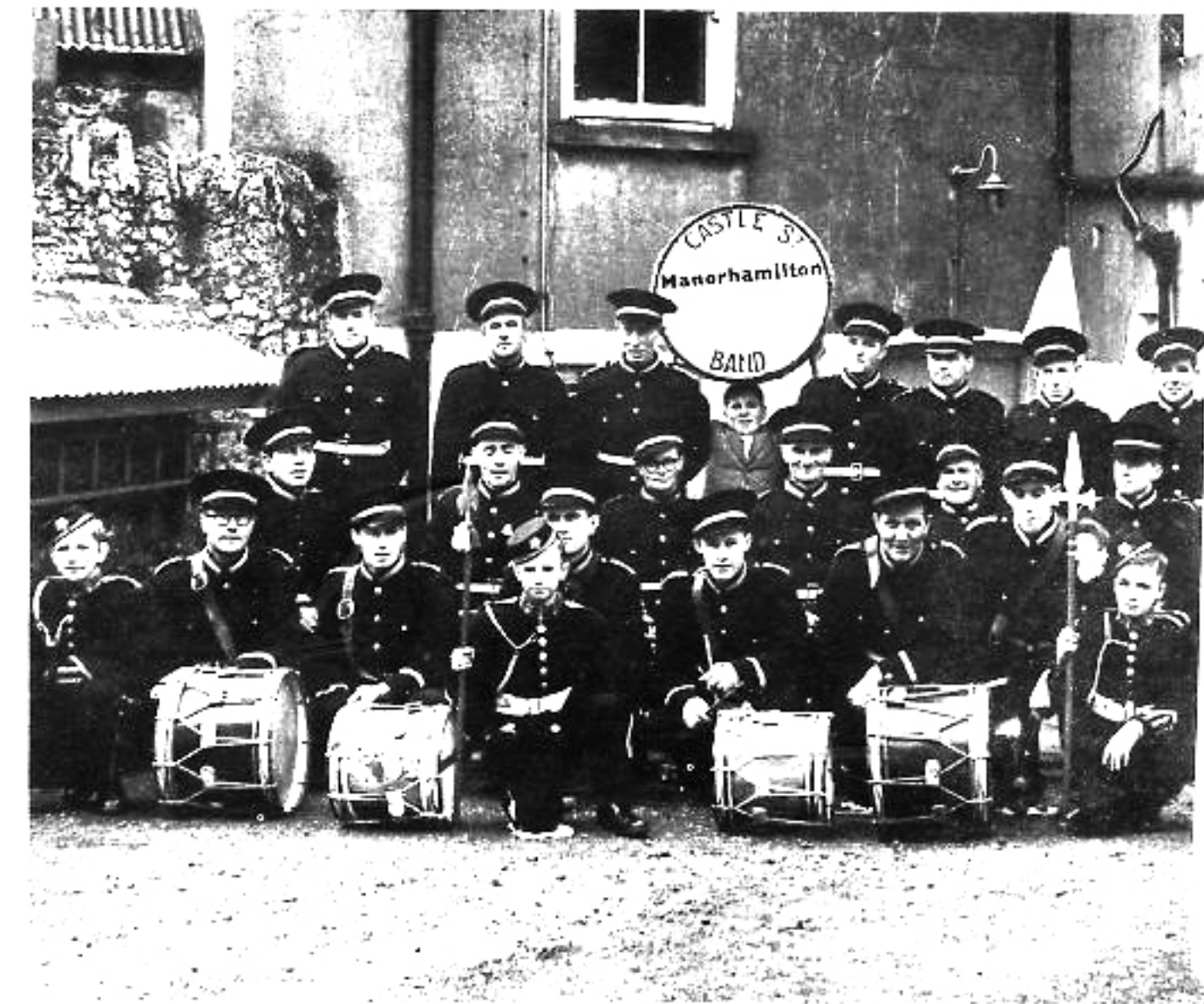
INCREASING CONFIDENCE

With time, however, the repertoire was extended. I recall "Steer my Barque to Erin's Isle", a march in 6/8 rhythm combined with "The Green Flag", a 4/4 march, giving, as we thought, very pleasant contrast. And much later — was this EEC influence? — a kind of international attitude was adopted with the playing of "Waltzing Matilda", "Marching through Georgia" and "John Brown's Body" or should it be called "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"? Indeed during the Marian Year (1954) the band, preparing for the official opening and blessing of a few Marian Year Shrines temporarily abandoned what might be called profane music and took up the playing of a number of hymn tunes; switching as successfully as could be expected from the martial to the celestial and back again as soon as the demand ceased.

BAND MEETS BAND IN PARK

Our first engagement outside of the town was, I think, in Parke near Kinlough in connection with a football tournament. Some time after we reached the field we heard the "bum, bum" of a brass drum and the shrill notes of fifes approaching. Soon the creators of the sound came into the field. It was a fife band from, I think, Tullaghan, very low in numbers and most of these no longer young. There was about them a certain pride and "old soldier" quality, all determined to "blow it out" even tho' their band was only a remnant of what it once must have been. Had we been as wise then as we are now we might have said: "As you are now, once we will be", but it was summer-time and our thoughts were of the non-sombre kind, enjoying the present with never a thought of the future.

When we got into uniforms after a few years we felt very trim and smart. Most of the uniforms are still in very good condition tho' after a score or so of years, the waist bands of some of the trousers may be in need of a little extension to allow for expansion in the waists of most of the wearers. These uniforms were very similar to garda uniforms. This similarity had a certain virtue. On one occasion, motoring through Bundoran in the band uniform



Front row: L. to R. — T. Magee, P. MacSharry, M. O'Connell, H. Gillespie, P. Fitzpatrick, F. Rooney, J. Somers, D. MacPartlin, M. MacSharry.
Middle row: T. Dwyer, P. Gilroy, M. Mawn, H. Harte, M. Rooney, F. MacDonnell.
Back row: F. Kelly, M. MacGarry, J. Mitchell, L. Magee (under drum), P. MacDermott, J. Gilmartin, J. Hamilton, J. Rooney, P. Mitchell.

en route to some function, I was very impressed with the courtesy of car drivers I met coming in the opposite direction. It didn't occur to me till afterwards that I was mistaken for a garda!

TWENTY YEARS A-PLAYING

From 1952 till 1974 or '75 the band gave its services to most activities in the district at very reasonable terms, lending the little bit of pageantry to functions and always capable of giving the "Starting off" to an occasion whatever it may have been. These included occasions as varied as Sports, the welcoming home of new ordained priests, playing in Santa Claus to the town at Christmas and on one occasion the opening of a Georgian dwelling to the public — this last mentioned being near Mohill.

One unique tradition the band had was turning out on the night of the 22nd of November to commemorate the Manchester Martyrs. I don't know who was responsible for starting this; but it's nice to think that somewhere in Ireland there was one small group wishful to pay their small musical tribute to four brave patriots.

One of the articles in the band's constitution — I'm not sure if it was

written or unwritten — was that the band would not perform in connection with parades or other functions of a political nature. This was waived or temporarily suspended one night when the leaders of our two main political parties, the present Taoiseach and the Fianna Fail leader, Jack Lynch both addressed meetings in Manorhamilton during a general election campaign in the early seventies. On that occasion there was some compromise between the two parties: the band paraded Jack Lynch and his party into the town by the Carrick road and a short time afterwards the same evening did the same for Liam Cosgrove and his party via the Sligo road.

Not until I started reminiscing did I realise how many members of the band and its founders have passed on. I can't help recalling all the Sundays we met at O'Connell's in Castle St., testing the fifes and tightening the drums and wondering how many of the members were going to turn up. Jack O'Connell and his gentle wife, God rest them both, always gave us an encouraging smile. Jack indeed was a member of the first Committee. May the clay lie lightly on them and may they enjoy the angel choirs and bands as they made and enjoyed band music here.

"Ni bheidh a leitheidi aris ann"