**Cover story**

**A unique combination**

**British Bandsman Editor, Kenneth Crookston, meets an outstanding group of musicians who have been at the cutting edge of trombone quartet playing for the past decade.**

Brass bands have changed a lot in the past few decades. Gone are the days when a promising young player would be picked up by one of the big colliery or works bands like Fairey, Foden’s, Munn and Felton’s, Black Dyke Mills or Grimethorpe Colliery, lured by the promise of a job for life. Very often, these actually involved turning up with one’s instrument in hand, clocking on, then spending the rest of the shift practising for the next big contest or the summer season around the city parks and seaside resorts. It was therefore hardly surprising that it was common for players to spend their entire playing (and working) careers with a single outfit, the greatest example being Fred Mortimer’s famous Foden’s Motor Works Band of the 1930s - the only ever double-hat-trick winner at the National Championships - which is reported as having changed only one player during these momentous years.

Nowadays the brass band landscape is very different. The pits, mills and heavy industry, some of which supported their bands and communities for over a century, have all but closed, and even the biggest names are getting used to the hard reality of 21st century business, which finds little benefit in supporting a pastime that the general public rarely sees at its full potential and that many would consider more at home in an industrial museum. As a consequence, lifetime loyalty to a single band is very uncommon indeed.

How rare it is, then, to see a trombone section in one of the finest bands of them all, which has been together for the best part of a decade and that also manages to augment its already busy schedule with some of the finest outreach work being done in connection with brass bands in England. This is the case with the Black Dyke Trombone Quartet, the members of which I caught up with after a recent concert, one of around 50 engagements that Black Dyke Band gives annually.

Well known to all readers of *The Trombonist* is Brett Baker, the band’s principal trombone since 2000, who began his career in the Forest of Dean where he played with Bream and Lydbrook bands before moving to Flowers Band in Gloucester and then Williams Fairey in Stockport. He was also principal trombone of the National Youth Brass Band of Great Britain and a brass finalist in the BBC Young Musician of the Year competition, and now enjoys a busy career as a trombone soloist and educator.

A fifth generation Salvationist and a fourth generation trombonist, Paul Woodward’s early playing experiences were, of course, in The Salvation Army. He first came to Black Dyke’s attention in 1996, during James Watson’s tenure as Musical Director, but due to the impending birth of his first child, Paul had to decline the offer of the principal seat at that time. Seven years later, he took on the position of 2nd trombone, but increasing pressure of work in the banking industry meant that he had to relinquish that seat soon after. It was during a trip to Bermuda in 2004 that the band’s current Music Director, Nicholas Childs, suggested that a good compromise would be to support Brett in a new position of co-principal trombone, and that’s the way it has been ever since.

Garry Reed, the band’s 2nd trombone, started playing with North Skelton Band (later British Steel Teesside) in 1974. Twenty-three years later, an accident that resulted in a split lip brought his trombone-playing career to an abrupt halt. Never one to be defeated, Gary went about the business of rebuilding his career, starting with the well-known *Little F and G March* (although he admits that he did have a few different names for it at that time!), and two years later he was again fit enough to join the ranks the North east’s leading band, Reg Vardy (formerly Ever Ready). Although his Brotton home is just over 100 miles from Black Dyke’s base in Queensbury in Yorkshire, Garry faithfully makes the journey to every rehearsal and engagement with his good friend and principal tubist, Joe Cook, at whose invitation he joined the band in 2004.

The elder statesman of the ‘Dyke Bones’ is Adrian Hirst, a chartered surveyor who recently celebrated 20 years with the band. Adrian started playing bass trombone at Frickley Junior Band in South Yorkshire, moving to Barrow Colliery Band where he met his wife, Karen. In 1998, both of them joined Yorkshire Imperial Band and Adrian moved on to Black Dyke in 1992, where he took over from Mark Frost, who was at that time embarking on a professional career.

So, a talented and long lasting quartet indeed, but what’s the secret of its longevity? “Having a wife who understands the demands of top-level brass banding is one aspect central to lasting in a high-profile and hard-working band like Black Dyke,” said Adrian, continuing, “We had a string of 2nd trombone players over a period of four or five years, who all had to leave for various different reasons, but luckily all of our circumstances are suited to the band’s schedule nowadays, plus we happen to get on well with each other. There’s no one-upmanship either. We always help each other as a team and if Brett goes on one of his tours, he usually comes back even more enthusiastic after a break from the band.” To this, Brett added, “I wouldn’t have been in the band for 12 years without the arrangement we have with Paul. He steps in as solo trombone when my other playing activities mean that I’m not going to be around, but not many brass band soloists have this luxury.”

Garry, a plumbing and heating engineer to trade, added with his tongue firmly in his cheek: “My wife is a brass player too, so that certainly helps me to balance band and family life, but working for myself is another advantage. I can organise my schedule around the band and the other guys like having someone on call when their heating needs repaired!”

Brett, Garry and Adrian are the regular ‘first team’ players at Black Dyke, so how does Paul Woodward feel about being left out for some of the major events? “It’s the most difficult thing ever!” he began. “I’m more than happy to be the ‘occasional’ member as it keep me playing at a high standard, even although my work commitments would otherwise make that impossible. I generally go to listen to rehearsals during the preparation for major contests as the pieces in the pad will more than likely be featured in future concerts, so I have to know them all. When it comes to the major contests, though, I’m always there supporting the band and feeling like I’m playing every note from my seat in the audience!”

Due to the slightly different rules in play against continental opposition, Paul had a rare chance to feature in a winning Black Dyke performance when the band won the recent European Championships in Rotterdam, on which Brett commented: “It’s the first time we’ve played four trombones at a contest and it worked a treat. One of the main reasons we’re still together is that there is four of us, and events like the one in Holland help keep that chemistry, but none of it would work if Paul and I were over-competitive or didn’t trust each other.”

Few leading bands have the luxury of four trombonists on their books, so having a group that also performs separately as a quartet is a rare aspect of Black Dyke’s activities. So what do the guys get up to when they’re not playing for the full band? “We do a lot of workshops for the BTS,” said Adrian, “But we’ve also done some work with Ashley Jackson, the famous Yorkshire artist, played at the unveiling of a train and performed at business seminars, so it’s fairly diverse. This has also included work with Salvation Army bands to raise funds to send young trombonists to their equivalent of the National Youth Brass Band.”

Among those to write and arrange for the group are Derek Bishop (bass trombone with Scottish Ballet) and Roger Harvey, while Ian Jones’ arrangements of well-known Salvation Army marches are always very popular when the Quartet plays at SA venues. The Quartet has also made a number of recordings, with its *Fly Me to the Moon* CD being released just before they acquired a set of Rath trombones in 2007. “We also put a few tracks on my solo CD, *Monument*, made with Black Dyke, while the recently-released *Soloist Showcase* features *Devil’s Galop*, which older listeners may remember as the theme for *Dick Barton - Special Agent*!” said Brett.

We’ve established that the Quartet is prominent amongst brass bands, but how do the ‘Dyke’ boys connect with the wider trombone community? “I think a lot of the jazzers see us as equals,” said Brett, “plus many of the orchestral players started their careers in brass bands, but our work at the BTS days helps considerably in building relations.” Commenting on contrasting styles, Adrian added, “A lot of brass band bass trombonists change when they go to college, with the edge sometimes being taken off their sound. I think that playing in a brass band needs that, but you wouldn’t want to become over-zealous. Neither Garry or I were products of colleges, in fact we were both taught initially by cornet players, so I’m sure that will be reflected in our style of play, but you also find that a lot of top orchestral players, like Dudley Bright with his thick, open sound, still keep aspects of brass band styles throughout their playing careers.”

For the past five years, Black Dyke has had a partnership with Michael Rath Trombones, so what do the players think of their equipment? “They’re very free blowing and the parts are interchangeable, so the instrument I have is individually tailored to my sound,” said Garry, with Adrian adding, “We tried a few bits and pieces before we settled on what we have now, as Mick had just moved factories and we were limited to what we could try, but they must be working well as we’ve noticed that a lot more brass band players are using them since we got this set.” Brett continued: “As well as making great instruments, Mick Rath is very straightforward and easy to get on with, so we always feel that we have their immediate support should any work need done on them.”

Being amongst the busiest musicians in the UK, I wondered what the lads had lined up next. “We have a very full diary,” said Garry, “but we have no immediate plans to do anything different from our current work. With the band’s schedule we can’t fit in too much as a quartet, but it would be nice to do an ITA gig!”

They have won every brass band honour open to them, some a number of times, so you might think it would be easy for them to become conceited. However, there’s none of that at all, as Adrian summed up: “People from other top bands notice a difference when they come to play for Black Dyke. The band is extremely well run and highly disciplined, so there are never any empty chairs at rehearsals. If for any reason someone can’t make it then one of our ‘family’ of deps, often former players who are happy to help out when they can, will be in there taking their place.” Paul added, “The one thing you can never forget is what a privilege it is to play for a band like Black Dyke. Youngsters watch even the way you put your mute in, and often ask for autograph and photos. It’s the same with the quartet, so it is great to be able to give something back in our workshops.”

As our conversation drew to a close in the concert hall bar, yet another group of aspiring young musicians approached our table hopeful of a picture, an autograph and a handshake. As ever, none went home disappointed, but with these guys you wouldn’t have expected it any other way!