

W. Brown & Sons: A Nearly Forgotten Name in British Brass Making

John Humphries



Figure 1

W. Brown & Sons, 2 Tracey Street, B♭ cornet with rotary change to A.
John Humphries collection. Photo by the author.

Establishing a reputation

During the last years of the nineteenth century, it became a cliché for companies advertising their wares to show a picture of their factory looking as magnificent as possible, with a chimney in the background belching clouds of smoke. Some firms selling instruments also followed this vogue: for example, the 1898 catalogue for the Parisian L'Association Gle. des Ouvriers¹ shows a huge shop front with a window full of helicons and tubas, and, emerging from a courtyard, a pair of horses pulling a carriage which is doubtless filled to the roof with the company's wares. Similarly, the Manchester maker Joseph Higham's 1911 "Coronation Catalogue"² contains a sequence of photographs which apparently shows a vast workshop filled with hundreds of instruments under construction by a sizeable team of makers.

In the *Historic Brass Society Journal*, vol. 15 (2003), Ignace de Keyser quoted Malou Haine's statistics, which showed that the great majority of instrument manufacturers were

operating on a much smaller scale than this.³ One such firm was the London company W. Brown & Sons, which seemed “old-fashioned” to Algernon Rose⁴ when he visited their workshop in around 1893. At the end of a long row of “dismal dwellings” was 2 Tracey Street, Kennington, where, on passing through the front door “without traversing even an ante-room,” Rose found himself “in the middle of the firm.” There, the partners—three of the four sons of the company’s founder—and their two assistants were at work in just two rooms. Although they worked hard (8:00 till 8:00 on weekdays and 8:00 till 4:00 on Saturdays), this was clearly a cottage industry in comparison with the big makers of the day, but Rose tells us that they were regarded by many as the finest cornet makers in England.

William Brown, who founded the company, was born 6 June 1817⁵ and was apprenticed to Richard Garrett as a flute-maker in 1830 (see Figure 2). During 1833 he became fascinated by valved brass instruments—which had been manufactured in England for the previous three years⁶ by Charles Pace—and persuaded his employer to let him turn his hand to making cornets. For eighteen years he continued to work for Garrett in King Street, Westminster, but then crossed the Thames to set up his own company in Lambeth. His first premises were at 28 Allen Street,⁷ where he worked from 1851, and in 1873 he moved to 9 Homer Street, where he employed two men.⁸

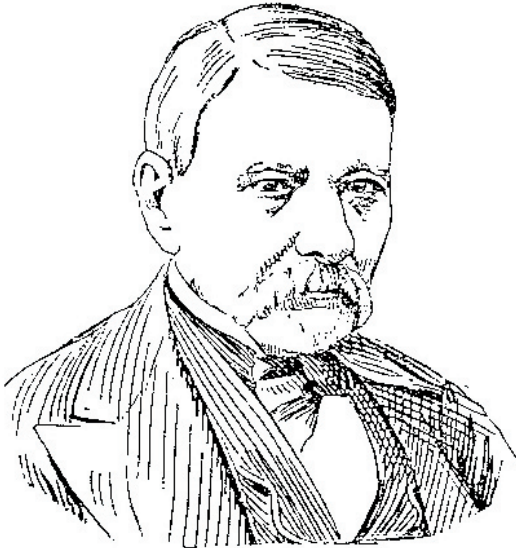


Figure 2

William Brown, founder of W. Brown & Sons. From *Musical Opinion & Music Trade Review*, 1 March 1893: 367. Courtesy of *Musical Opinion*.

Homer Street (now, strangely, named Virgil Street) is short and today is taken up almost entirely by a bridge carrying railway tracks into Waterloo Station. It was probably anticipation of the substantial enlargement of Waterloo, which took place between 1886 and 1892, that prompted Brown to find new premises at 2 Tracey Street in 1883.⁹ According to the 1891 census,¹⁰ he lived there with his wife, Rosana (born ca. 1832), his daughter, also named Rosana (born ca. 1862), and their youngest son, Arthur (born ca. 1870). Arthur and the family's lodger, Robert Leckieston (born ca. 1855), both worked in the business as did two of Brown's other sons, the oldest, Charles William, (born ca. 1856) and his third son, Francis (born ca. 1866). William's second son, Alfred (born ca. 1860), does not appear to have worked for the company. At Tracey Street, W. Brown & Sons continued to make cornets and undertook repairs for the Grenadier, Coldstream, and Second Life Guards bands and for the Royal Military School of Music at Kneller Hall.¹¹

Rose was surprised that the company neither retained the services of a commercial traveler, nor gave instruments away as prizes at band contests "to acquaint the best bands with the merits of their work." Instead, they were content to "jog along in a peaceful old-fashioned way, animated, apparently, by love of their craft, or ... loving art for art's sake."¹² William Brown's sons told him that the company made all the parts for all of their instruments themselves, but William himself admitted to Britain's first serious horn historian, W.F.H. Blandford (1864–1952), that he did, in fact, farm out some of his work. Horn manufacture was, however, such a skilled job, that he "had to do practically all of it himself" and as a result it was not his main priority as he "could not make it pay him."¹³ Nevertheless, he "earned a good name for his valve French horns, and supplied some of the most expert players."¹⁴ Farquharson Cousins thinks that in his youth he heard a story that Brown sometimes used bells made for him by the Raoux company, although they were not actually marked as such.¹⁵ He concedes that in fact Brown may just have copied Raoux's bells, but throughout history brass makers have brought in parts from other manufacturers without admitting to doing so. Anthony Halstead has confirmed that a horn by Brown which he used to own had a centred sound "just like a Raoux,"¹⁶ but Blandford (who preferred the horns of another nineteenth-century London maker, Goodison of Soho) felt that "Brown cannot get quite the tone quality [that] a good Raoux gives."¹⁷ Nevertheless, he admitted that this shortcoming "didn't seem to trouble" Franz Paersch (1857–1921), the finest British player of his day and first horn in the Hallé Orchestra, who changed to a Brown when his Raoux wore out.¹⁸ Another leading performer who spent part of his career playing a Brown was London Symphony Orchestra principal Thomas Busby (1862–1933), although he later changed to an instrument which Blandford described as "one of the few good horns Hawkes ever made."¹⁹ The popularity of Brown's horns continued after World War I: among the last to use one professionally was Franz Paersch's son Otto, who played third horn in the Hallé Orchestra from 1919 and used a Brown until, "with great reluctance," he changed to an Alexander 103 after World War II²⁰ (see Figure 3).

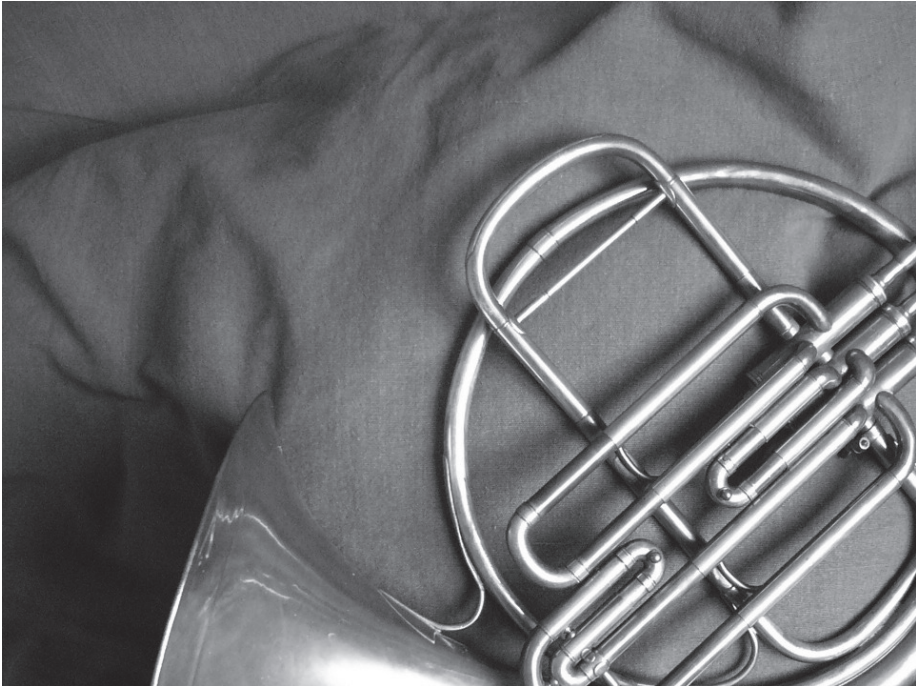


Figure 3

W. Brown & Sons, 2 Tracey Street, horn no. 599.

Photo courtesy of Martin Prowse.

Although Pace introduced the valve horn to London in 1830 it only superseded the hand horn in professional circles in about 1875, and horns continued to be designed with crooks as standard in England until well into the twentieth century. There was therefore a continuing market for crooks, and W. Brown & Sons is thought to have made these as well as valve horns, marking them in both English and French, so, for example, an A crook would be marked “A/La.”²¹ More notably, however, they also cornered the market in “sauterelles,” sets of detachable valves which could be used to modify many otherwise obsolete hand horns (see Figure 4). According to Farquharson Cousins, “no one else seemed to know much about it”²² and while other makers including Hawkes made sauterelles, there seems to have been some presumption of quality about Brown’s work: Aubrey Brain’s surviving Raoux-Labbaye which was imported by Hawkes was later fitted with Brown valves.²³ As each sauterelle must have been made individually to fit a particular instrument, it was certainly a job that would have suited a small-scale organization like W. Brown & Sons. Their own horns, which follow the standard design favored by French and English makers, often have a detachable sauterelle, but owners of other instruments turned to them as well: the Raoux cor-solo²⁴ that Dennis Brain played at the beginning of his film recording of Beethoven’s

Op. 17 Horn Sonata²⁵ is said to have had a set of Brown valves at one stage, as did the Raoux-Labbaye formerly owned by Antoine Victor Paquis (born 1812), first-prize winner at the Paris Conservatoire and subsequently first horn of Manchester's Hallé Orchestra.²⁶



Figure 4

Sauterelle for W. Brown & Sons horn no. 599.

Photo courtesy of Martin Prowse.

W. Brown & Sons' interest in sauterelles may be ascribed to the founder's particular interest in the manufacture of valves. He claims to have been the inventor of the system still seen on instruments today in which the valve-spring is located in a cylindrical box above the main part of the valve and below the spindle. A circular brass plate sits below the spring with three guide pins projecting from it. These fit into grooves in the valve casing to hold the valve in place (see Figure 5). Brown admitted to Rose that originally his system had just two guide pins and that he had improved it by increasing these to three along the lines adopted by the French company Courtois.²⁷

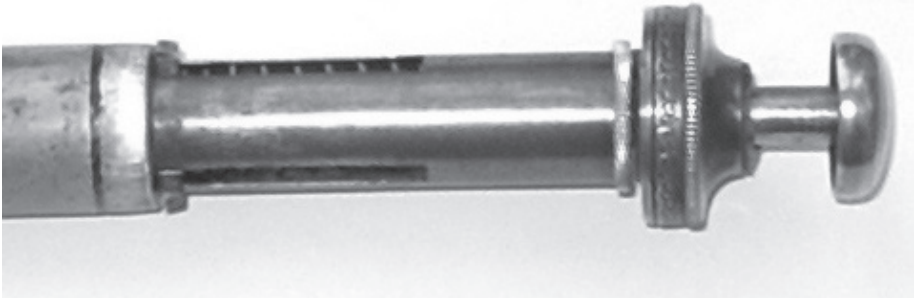


Figure 5

Detail of valve from W. Brown & Sons cornet from 2, Tracey Street, showing guide-pin arrangement. John Humphries collection. Photo by the author.

By the 1920s, however, W. Brown & Sons had moved on from this system in favor of a single guide-pin soldered on to the top edge of the main body of the valve. Brown was also keen to describe to Rose the experiments he had conducted on curving the windways leading into the valve section of his cornets so that the tubes maintained an even internal diameter and therefore allowed notes played using the valves to be “as equal in tone as the open notes.”²⁸

“Old Brown,” as he seems to have been known to all, was “a mine of information about the old school of horn players.”²⁹ He died at the Tracey Street address from heart failure following an attack of bronchitis in January 1893.³⁰ Among the many to send condolences following Brown’s death was the bandmaster Dan Godfrey (the father of Sir Dan Godfrey, the famous conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra), who wrote that he never knew anybody whom he admired more for their “ability, industry, and for honesty.”³¹

1893 onwards

The firm continued under the direction of the eldest son, Charles William (known, like his father, as William) who alone among the sons now lived in Tracey Street.³² He in turn moved the business about 250 yards to 323 Kennington Road in 1911³³ (see Figure 6). The house in Tracey Street was demolished in the 1950s to make way for high-rise apartments, but Rose’s description of it accords with the size of remaining Victorian houses nearby and so the new premises probably offered W. Brown & Sons more space. They were still far from large, however, and consisted of a shop built out at ground-floor level from a four-floor terraced house. The house is now divided into apartments, and how much of it they occupied is not clear, but immediately to the right of the shop, as seen from the road, is an alleyway which leads through an archway to a yard. This presumably allowed W. Brown & Sons the small luxury of being able to load and unload off the main road.



Figure 6
W. Brown & Sons' premises at 323 Kennington Road today.
Photo by the author.

Any hope they had that the move might herald an era of prosperity was soon thwarted: like much of British industry, they suffered badly during World War I and offered their stock for sale at a 60% discount for cash.³⁴ After the war they seem to have tried to move with the times and started giving away instruments as prizes. The father of the distinguished horn player Ifor James played with the Carlisle St. Stephen's Band, which won the National Brass Band Championship in 1927, and at the same time won the prize for the best cornet player. The following year, they returned to Crystal Palace and the company presented William "Billy" James with a beautifully engraved Brown "Brilliantone" cornet (serial number 16432; see Figure 7).³⁵



Figure 7

"The Brilliantone." Cornet no. 16432, presented to Billy James, 1928.
Photo courtesy of Ifor James.

Ifor James played the instrument himself as a boy and remembered that it had "superb valves" (see Figure 8). "I left it in its case," he recalled, "for fifteen years, and when I got it out to look at it again, the valves worked perfectly."

W. Brown & Sons also made trumpets to satisfy the demand from dance band players and in 1928, placed an advertisement in Lambeth's official Borough Guide describing themselves as "Band Instrument Manufacturers" and "Makers of the famous New Radio trumpets"³⁶ (see Figure 10), which seem to have been played by the BBC London Radio Dance Band, among others.³⁷



Figure 8

Ifor James with his father's cornet. Photo courtesy of Ifor James.



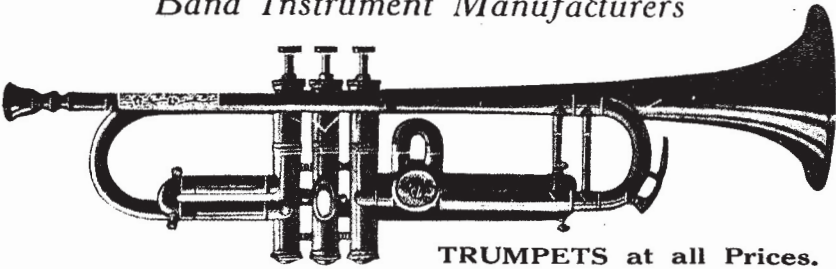
Figure 9

Cheaper model from a similar date (cf. Figure 7) marked "Church Army 4073."
John Humphries collection. Photo by the author.

ESTABLISHED OVER 80 YEARS. Telephone: RELIANCE 2137.

W. BROWN & SONS, 323 Kennington Road, LONDON
S. E. 11

Band Instrument Manufacturers



TRUMPETS at all Prices.

*Makers of the Famous "New Radio" Trumpets as played on by B.B.C. London
Radio Dance Band and other Leading Dance Bands and Orchestras.*

Figure 10

Advertisement for W. Brown & Sons, 1928. *Lambeth Borough Guide*, 1928.
Reproduced by kind permission of Lambeth Archives Department.

As well as claiming to sell "trumpets at all prices," W. Brown & Sons' advertisement showed a B \flat trumpet with an engraved mouthpiece and a manually operated rotary change to A (see Figure 11).

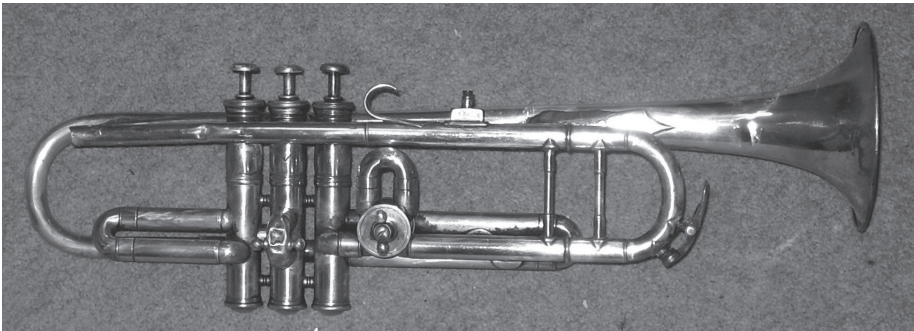


Figure 11

W. Brown & Sons B \flat trumpet with rotary change to A. 323 Kennington Road.
John Humphries collection. Photo by the author.

Whether or not by this stage W. Brown & Sons were actually making all instruments themselves is open to question. They were probably still fitting sauterelles to hand horns, since as late as 1925, the practice was still relatively common, with Blandford writing to Morley-Pegge that “the cost of converting a hand horn by adding new valves is about £6—so that a hand horn picked up and converted would work out at about £8, more or less.”³⁸ They certainly put their names to instruments other than cornets, trumpets, and horns, as high-pitch tenor trombones (see Figure 12), tenor horns, baritones, and tubas as well as mouthpieces marked W. Brown & Sons survive from their years at Kennington Road.



Figure 12

Detail of bell of W. Brown & Sons trombone.
John Humphries collection. Photo by the author.

An E♭ bass by Brown (see Figure 13) with excellent valves and a vibrant, ringing tone, especially in the upper register, is still an attractive instrument to play today. Its bore, however, is so narrow that it needs to be played with a small mouthpiece: the shank of a Besson “Prototype” E♭ bass mouthpiece which is roughly contemporary with this instrument is too wide to fit it.



Figure 13

W. Brown & Sons E♭ bass. 323 Kennington Road.
John Humphries collection. Photo by the author.

More exotic instruments to bear W. Brown & Sons' name are echo cornets manufactured during the Tracey Street era. One is preserved in Oxford University Music Faculty's Bate Collection,³⁹ while another is in private ownership in the United States (see Figure 14).

Two "Aida" trumpets are in the instrument collection of the Kunitachi College of Music, Japan, and these are thought to date from around 1915.⁴⁰ Other interesting instruments made by the company include a miniature cornet in C/B♭ (in private ownership) and a trumpet in C, in the Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments.⁴¹ The Utley Collection has, in addition to a pretty B♭ cornet, an attractive trumpet in F (see Figure 15).⁴²



Figure 14

W. Brown & Sons, 2 Tracey Street, echo cornet, no. 4320.
Collection Nick DeCarlis, courtesy VintageCornets.com.

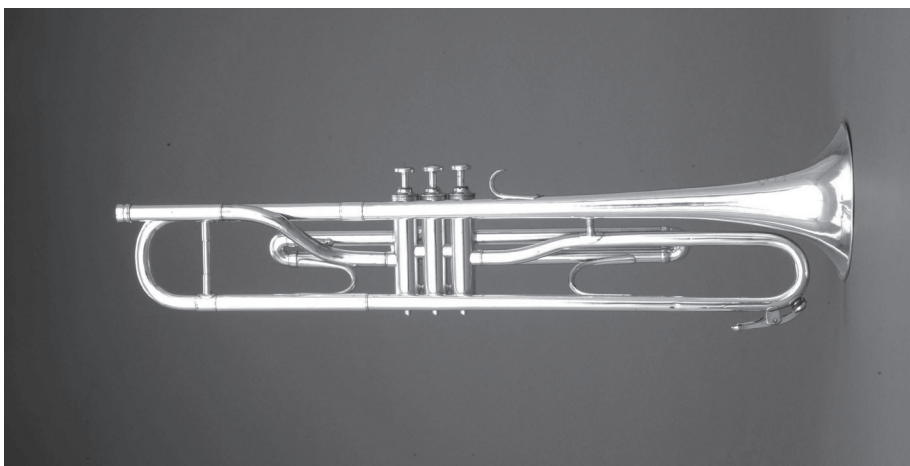


Figure 15

W. Brown & Sons, 2 Tracey Street, F trumpet. America's National Music Museum,
The University of South Dakota, Joe R. and Joella F. Utley Collection, 1999,
cat. no. 7163 (photo: Mark Olencki).

As the twentieth century wore on, W. Brown & Sons' output of instruments ceased and in their last years they worked as repairers. Among their last customers was the Morden, Surrey Salvation Army Band, who used W. Brown & Sons for their repairs;⁴³ the company closed its doors for the last time in 1952.

John Humphries studied musicology at Oxford University and natural horn with Anthony Halstead at London's Guildhall School of Music. His reconstructions of Mozart's incomplete movements for horn and orchestra have been recorded several times and his book The Early Horn is published by Cambridge University Press. He is also active as a teacher, examiner and arranger. He lives in Surrey, England with his wife and two children.

Notes

¹ Author's collection.

² Author's collection.

³ See Malou Haine, *Les facteurs d'instruments de musique à Paris au 19e siècle : Des artisans face à l'industrialisation* (Brussels: Editions de l' Université, 1984), 114-21. Quoted in Ignaz de Keyser, "The Paradigm of Industrial Thinking in Brass Instrument Making during the Nineteenth Century," *Historic Brass Society Journal* 15 (2003): 233-58.

⁴ Algernon Rose, *Talks with Bandsmen* (London: William Rider, 1895; reprint, London: Tony Bingham, n.d. [ca. 1996]), 189.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁶ *The Harmonicon* (London: Samuel Leigh, 1830), 370.

⁷ Street number from 1871 England Census 658/23v-27.

⁸ Rose, *Talks*, 191. Lyndesay G. Langwill, in *An Index of Musical Wind Instrument Makers*, 5th edn. (Edinburgh: Lyndesay G. Langwill, 1977), erroneously gives the address as "Horner Street."

⁹ Information provided by National Railway Museum, York.

¹⁰ 1891 England Census.

¹¹ "Death of Mr. William Brown," *Musical Opinion & Music Trade Review* (1 March 1893): 367.

¹² Rose, *Talks*, 193.

¹³ Blandford / Morley-Pegge correspondence (Bate Collection, Oxford University Music Faculty), 5 September 1930.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Farquharson Cousins, personal communication. Farquharson Cousins was a pupil of Aubrey Brain at the Royal Academy of Music. He then played principal horn with orchestras including the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and the Scottish National Orchestra. He was friends with both W.F.H. Blandford and Reginald Morley-Pegge.

¹⁶ Anthony Halstead, personal communication.

¹⁷ Blandford / Morley-Pegge correspondence, 24 May 1931.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23 March 1925.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Tony Catterick, personal communication.

²¹ Martin Prowse, personal communication.

²² Farquharson Cousins, personal communication.

²³ In the collection of the Royal Academy of Music, London.

²⁴ Farquharson Cousins, personal communication. Farquharson Cousins sold this horn to Dennis Brain.

²⁵ Anvil Films, no longer available.

²⁶ Martin Prowse Collection.

²⁷ Rose, *Talks*, 191.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁹ Blandford / Morley-Pegge correspondence, 7 May 1921.

³⁰ *Musical Opinion* (1 March 1893): 367.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² 1901 England Census RG 13/468, folios 14-16.

³³ William Waterhouse, ed., *The New Langwill Index* (London: Tony Bingham, 1993).

³⁴ Alf Hailstone, *The British Bandsman Centenary Book—A Social History of Brass Bands* (Baldock, Hertfordshire: Egon Publishers Ltd, 1987), 126.

³⁵ Information provided by Ifor James.

³⁶ *Lambeth Borough Guide*, 1928. Copy in Lambeth Library.

³⁷ W. Brown & Sons were not the only manufacturer to suggest that their trumpets had an advantage over others for broadcasting: F.E. Olds, the American firm, famously made a “Recording trumpet” from around the time of World War II onwards.

³⁸ Blandford / Morley-Pegge correspondence, 23 March 1925.

³⁹ Oxford, Bate Collection, catalog no. 648.

⁴⁰ Kunitachi College of Music, Japan, instrument collection, nos. 2076, 2077.

⁴¹ Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments. trumpet in C, ca. 1920, catalog no. 2777, miniature cornet in C / B♭, ca. 1910, catalog no. 4243

⁴² America’s National Music Museum, University of South Dakota, Joe R. and Joella F. Utley Collection. F trumpet, catalog no. 7163 (2, Tracey St) B♭ cornet (Kennington Road), catalog no. 6841.

⁴³ Ray Hensher, personal communication. Hensher used to play a W. Brown & Sons baritone in the Morden, Surrey Salvation Army Band.

