

A little girl with a tiny trombone was an inspiration in a school band from Wonthaggi

by Jeremy de Korte

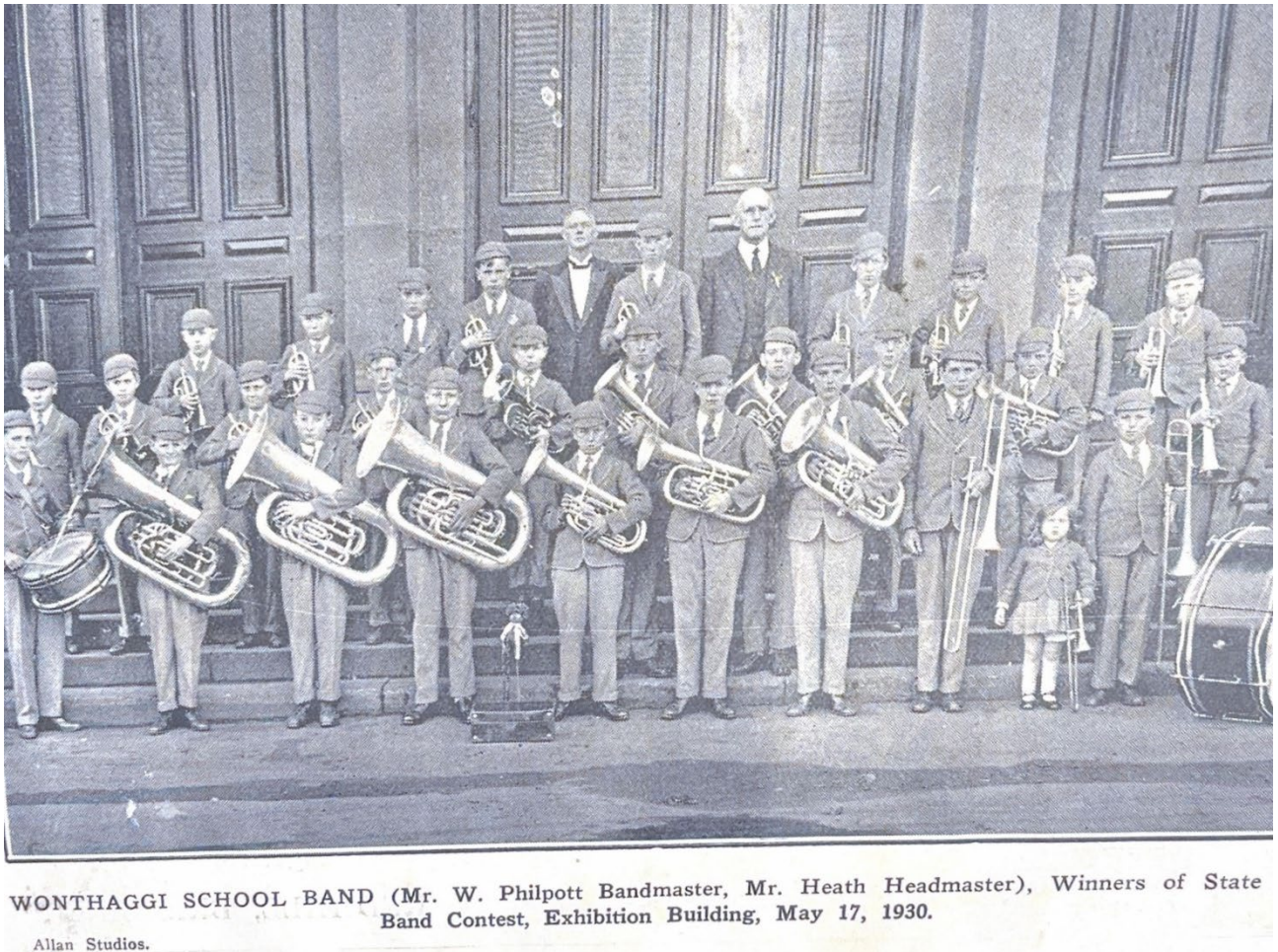


Figure 1: The Australasian Band & Orchestral News, 26/05/1930, front cover

Introduction:

It is the 17th of May 1930, and the Exhibition Building in Melbourne is a hive of activity as the Victorian State School Band Association holds the first of many annual band contests. Nine state school bands from across Melbourne, and one country representative from Wonthaggi, have come to compete and to show the rapid progress state school bands have made in the past few years from inception.

Wonthaggi State School Band did themselves proud that day by winning this inaugural contest against some other highly fancied school bands. But the back stories before this win are many. One of which being the story behind the mascot of the band, three-year-old Margaret Philpott, who is pictured with the band holding a tiny trombone.

The photo above did intrigue me when I first viewed it several years ago and I had been sporadically searching for the name of the small girl with a trombone. Upon finding the name very recently, this made the photo even more special, and it adds a layer of context to the story.

This post is an addendum to another post outlining the development and legacy of Victorian state school bands, and many of the parts of this story mirror the earlier post. So, it is interesting to unpick this on a local level as the school band from Wonthaggi is a perfect example of how a school band fared in its early years. It is, perhaps, no accident that the Wonthaggi band was as good as it was due to good fortune and strong leadership – and an inspiring mascot.

Philpott's and brass bands:

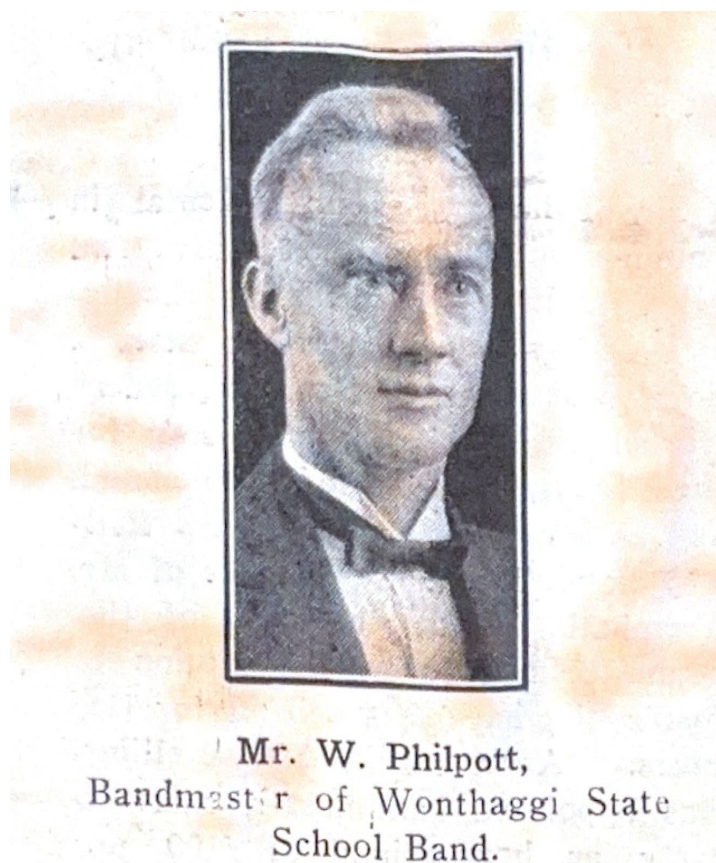


Figure 2: The Australasian Band and Orchestra News, 26/05/1930

The name says it all really. Margaret Philpott may not have realised this at the age of three, but her name carries a legacy of brass band musicianship. Her father and grandfather, both named William, were highly regarded brass musicians and conductors. Her father, William 'Bill' Philpott was the ultimate journeyman bandsman. By 1922 William had played in or conducted:

- 1899 Lismore Band (N.S.W.) conducted by his father, William George Philpott
- Appointed Bandmaster of the Brighton Town Band (Vic.) which had recently amalgamated with the Elsternwick Band
- Solo cornetist with the Prahran City Band under Edward Code and Solo Cornet with the St. Kilda Band
- Engaged to play solo cornet for the Wellington Garrison Band (N.Z.)
- Appointed bandmaster of the Coraki Band (N.S.W.) in 1908 while playing with the Lismore band
- 1911 Appointed conductor of the Wagga Wagga Brass Band (N.S.W.)
- 1918 played Soprano Cornet with the St. Augustine's Band (Vic.) and Professional Cornet with the Ballarat City Band
- 1921 Appointed conductor of the Young Brass Band (N.S.W.)

William continued on his journeyman ways when he moved to Wonthaggi in 1928 to take up a position of conductor of the Wonthaggi Union Band, and soon after the Wonthaggi State School Brass Band. By all accounts, the bands that William had been associated with by this time were very grateful for his tutelage and his knowledge – and his success in competition – so they were sorry to see him go. Wonthaggi offered much opportunity and under the leadership of William, the Wonthaggi Union Band and later the Wonthaggi State School Band both had success – the school band achieved second place in the 1929 Royal South Street contest

Of course, W. Philpott did not stop at Wonthaggi, he still had many years of conducting ahead of him, and his band journey continued:

- 1934 Appointed bandmaster of the Benalla Citizens' Band
- 1936 Resigns as Benalla's bandmaster and goes back to Wonthaggi to resume his former conducting appointment
- 1938 Appointed bandmaster of the South Melbourne City Band
- 1940 Appointed conductor of the Williamstown Brass Band while continuing as bandmaster at South Melbourne
- 1946 Becomes the conductor of the Malvern Municipal Band

The Gillies Bequest and the Wonthaggi State School Band:

As previously outlined in the post on school bands in Victoria, the support from the Gillies Bequest was a catalyst for the setting up of school bands across Victoria. The establishment of school bands was a great success. At the presentation of trophies for the 1930 State School Band Association contest (which Wonthaggi won), Mr. Hansen, then Director of Education, outlined just how many bands there were.

"There are now in State schools twenty brass and eight drum-and-fife bands. The recent and rapid growth of them was due largely to the activities of Mr. A. B. Lane, president of the band association. Of the bequest made by the late William Gillies, out of whose love of music and study the contests were inaugurated, £3750 had already been set aside."

For perspective, the number of school bands grew rapidly in Victoria. By 1932 there were "31 brass bands, 9 orchestras, 13 fife bands and 23 violin classes" and by 1937, the number of school brass bands had risen to fifty. At the 1930 contest, as mentioned, there were ten school bands from "Albert Park, Ascot Vale West, Armadale, Coburg, Coburg West, Footscray, Northcote, Preston West, Princes Hill and Wonthaggi" .

At this time, not only were school bands forming at a rapid rate, but the expertise of some very fine conductors was also available. Frank "Massa" Johnston of Melbourne Fire Brigade and Footscray City Band fame conducted the Hyde Street Youth Band and Northcote Central State School Band, Mr. H. Hellings conducted West Preston, and William Philpott conducted Wonthaggi.

With conducting pedigrees like this, and support from school communities and the Gillies Bequest, it is no wonder that school bands began to thrive and succeed. The Wonthaggi school band was very lucky to share Mr. Philpott with the Wonthaggi Union Band.

A year of successes:

SCHOOL BAND FROM WONTHAGGI.

In connection with the Wonthaggi State school's visit to Melbourne for the Victorian State schools' band competitions at the Exhibition Building on Saturday, a train will leave Wonthaggi at 6.55 a.m., and return from Flinders-street station at 11.30 p.m. Special cheap tickets will be issued at 3/1 for children under 16 years, and at 9/10 for adults, available for return until 2nd June.

Figure 3: The Age, 14/05/1930, p. 18

The State School Band Competition was a big day for Wonthaggi, and the other bands of course, not just because of the travel to and from Melbourne. Mr. Philpott, the Headmaster, band, parents and supporters, and little Margaret Philpott, made the journey to the contest at the Exhibition Buildings. Seven days before the contest, Mr. L. Jabara of Wonthaggi gave a gold cup to the Wonthaggi Headmaster, Mr. Heath, "to be presented to the winners of the State school band competition" which was also taken with the group. In the end it was the remarkable success of Wonthaggi that was the story of the day. Comments from adjudicator Mr. Harry Shugg gave high praise to the Wonthaggi Band:

"The adjudicator (Mr. Harry Shugg), commenting upon the performances, expressed surprise that the players, whose average age did not exceed 12½ years, had so done so well within such a short period. He thought it especially true of the bass soloists. The Wonthaggi band astounded him, and shamed many of the adult bands in Victoria."

The placings were as follows:

	March:	Hymn:	National Air:	Grand Aggregate
Wonthaggi	1	1	1	1
Princes Hill	2	3	2	2
Footscray	3	2	3	3

The band deserved all the accolades that were given to them, and the school was very proud of their achievements.

"In recognition of winning all the cups and the honour of winning the championship at the State school band contest in Melbourne the teachers of the Wonthaggi State school entertained the members of the band at a dinner. After playing for the sisters of St. Joseph's and the scholars at St. Joseph's school the band boys were entertained at afternoon tea. Arrangements have been made by the school master (Mr. H. T. Heath) for the championship State school boys to play at 3LO and 3AR. The band will also play on the M.C.G. ground on Saturday.

The Wonthaggi community was no less appreciative of Mr. Philpott's dedication to the school band, and in July 1930 presented him with a gift.

“In appreciation of his tutoring of the school boys’ band, which won every event at a recent band contest in Melbourne. Mr. W. Philpott was presented with a wallet of notes at the Union Hall on Wednesday night. The band is to take part in another contest in Melbourne on 23rd instant, and will also compete at South-street in October. A school choir, which will also take part in the competitions at South-street has been formed with Mr, Philpott as conductor.”

As for little Magaret Philpott, she was a much a part of the band as the bigger boys with their instruments. Not much is said about her, but she is visible in some further photos, such as this one published in *The Herald* newspaper showing the boys arriving at the East Malvern State School in preparation for another contest. Margaret, sporting a beret, can be seen right in the middle of the photo.



Figure 4: The Herald, 24/07/1930, p. 20



HANDING OVER THE TROPHY: Professor Heinze presenting The Herald Cup to Horace Philpott, the captain of the Wonthaggi Boys' Band, who were awarded the trophy as winners of the Schools' Band Contest. The flashlight was taken at the Radio Show last night.

Figure 5: The Herald, 25/07/1930, p. 20

While the Wonthaggi State School band had numerous successes, and many engagements during 1930, they were not immune to events happening around them. Wonthaggi was home to the State Coal Mine which supported the Wonthaggi Union Band, also conducted by Mr. Philpott. Many of the mine workers were parents of children at the school, and in the 1930s there were disputes with the State Government which came to a head when a delegation was to visit the town. The Union band subsequently refused to play, and banned Mr. Philpott from conducting the school band when the delegation visited. The caption on the photo below, published in *The Weekly Times* newspaper, provides some more reasoning.



Figure 6: Weekly Times, 29/11/1930, p. 7

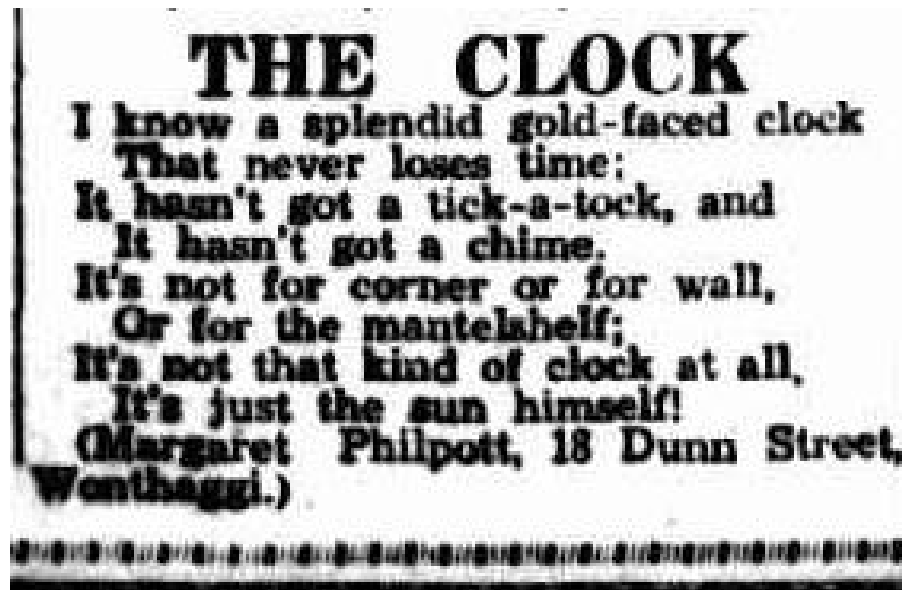
And again, here is another photo showing Margaret Philpott sitting among the boys of the band.

There are not many other mentions of the Wonthaggi State School Band after 1930 in the newspapers, and due to the transient nature of Mr. Philpott's band career, he was not there to continue it through, although the political and industrial undercurrents did affect life in town. We can at least, view the successes of the school band for what they were at the time; remarkable and very worthy

Conclusion:

When William Philpott and family arrived in Wonthaggi in 1928, they could not have known what kind of influence they would eventually have. Through Mr. Philpott the town and school had musical expertise, with his sons they had solid musicians, and with little Margaret the school band had their own mascot – and she had her own tiny trombone. Who knows what the Wonthaggi school band might have become if circumstances had been different? This was only one Victorian school band among many, and they set the early standards.

As for Margaret Philpott, she may not have followed her brothers into brass music, but she was a creative type. To finish this post, here is a poem that she wrote that was published in *The Sun News-Pictorial* newspaper, supplementary section in August 1936. Simply titled 'The Clock':



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The following is the link to Jeremy's blog

<https://bandblastsfromthepast.blog>

<https://australianbandstands.blog>