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David Briggs, last survivor of the first BBC broadcast of the Nine Lessons and Carols – obituary

Briggs had a uniquely long association with the choir of King's College Chapel, Cambridge, and became head master of King's College School

By Telegraph Obituaries

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Premium

David Briggs, who has died aged 102, had a long association with King's College Chapel, Cambridge: he was a boy treble in the first broadcast of Nine Lessons and Carols in 1928; sang bass as a student in the 1930s; and from 1959 to 1977 he was headmaster of King's College School, where he formed a strong bond with David Willcocks, the director of music who had been organ scholar at King's on the eve of war.

Nine Lessons and Carols, a variant of the service started in Truro by Bishop Edward Benson in 1880, had been introduced to King's in 1918 by Eric Milner-White, the Dean, and its reputation quickly spread.

Briggs recalled how during that first broadcast "the Crucifix actually collided with the microphone which was hanging from the ceiling." That and other issues were dealt with by "a chap called Mr Anderson, who used to come year after year from the BBC with a box of tricks that he would unpack in the vestry".

For that first broadcast Briggs was a rank-and-file chorister. He recalled once singing the famous opening solo for Once in Royal David's City, possibly in 1929. Except for 1930, the service has been broadcast live on the radio ever since (the television programme, a diluted version, is recorded in advance).

Humour and a liberal approach were hallmarks of Briggs's time as headmaster at King's. One of his first and most controversial moves was to abolish corporal punishment.

Although he could not make the choir a mixed one (Henry VI stipulated in 1441 that there should be 16 boys, a rule reinforced by the college statutes of 1453), he could make the school co-ed, which was one of his last acts.

At the start of every summer he and Willcocks would, to the delight of the boys, put on fancy dress and officially open the unheated outdoor school swimming pool with a pillow fight on a wobbly plank above the water until they both fell in.

John Davidson Briggs was born in Norwich on November 7 1917, the day of the Russian Revolution, he liked to say. He was the third of five children of Canon George W Briggs, a Cambridge man who became a distinguished hymn writer and rector of Loughborough parish church in Leicestershire, and his wife Constance (née Barrow). Randall Davidson, Archbishop of Canterbury, was one of his godparents, and young David spent his early years in a vast, 800-year-old rectory.

He spent a year at Fairfield prep school, Loughborough, and had a handful of singing lessons from a Miss Anstey before singing Hark! The Herald Angels Sing for his voice trial at King's; he joined the choir in 1926.

Arthur "Daddy" Mann had been director of music since 1876, and Briggs recalled that little had changed in the intervening 50 years. Briggs adored Mann and kept a photograph of the organist above his bed for the rest of his life.

The fees were £8 a term. "Life at the school was quite spartan, very simple," he told the journalist Alexandra Coghlan in her book *Carols from King's*. "There wasn't an awful lot of heating or that sort of thing. It took great quantities of rice pudding to keep us going."

He recalled that the boy in the next bed would get up after lights out and put all his clothes on, removing them before matron returned in the morning.



David Briggs, first right, bottom row, at his school in 1927 | CREDIT: John Lawrence

He won a scholarship to Sedbergh and then Marlborough, where he joined the chapel choir, took up violin and formed a jazz band known as the Dandelions.

Membership of the Officers' Training Corps was compulsory. Once while they were on parade the big bass drum that beat out the marching rhythm suddenly started sounding at random. It transpired that a practical joker had earlier opened it and put a frog inside, which was now becoming increasingly frantic.

Briggs found the increasing militarisation of the 1930s incompatible with his growing Christian faith and left the OTC for the Scouts.

He returned to King's as a student, winning an academic scholarship to study Classics and History and a choral scholarship to sing bass, taking part in four more Nine Lessons and Carols services before the war.

He bought a horse, Tiny, and paid a shilling a week to keep him on Scholars' Piece, land at the back of the college.

On one occasion the horse broke free. "At about 3am the porter knocked on my door and told me that Tiny had jumped over the fence and was eating the crocuses and could I please do something about it," he told Coghlan in 2016. "So I had to go out in my pyjamas and fetch him back."

He was about to start teacher training when war broke out. As a conscientious objector he was ordered to face a tribunal which, in January 1940, ruled that he should join the Royal Army Pay Corps, a posting he disliked intensely.

While he had no wish to bear arms, he also had no desire to be spared the horrors of war. Although his father, by now Canon of Worcester Cathedral, found his son's "unpatriotic" stance incomprehensible, Briggs Sr travelled to the War Office in London and secured a place for him in the ranks of the Medical Corps.

When an order came that all men and officers should be armed, Briggs took a stand: he could not and would not carry or use a weapon. He was prepared to face a court martial – even, he said, execution.

However, the order was ruled to be against the Geneva Convention and he was spared. He found solace with the a cappella choir he formed from doctors and nurses, with

copious quantities of sheet music paid for by the Army that he was later permitted to keep.

After the war he was accepted for ordination but decided instead on teaching. In 1946 he became classics master at Bryanston in Dorset, where he oversaw the building by the boys of the school's Greek Theatre and persuaded Ralph Vaughan Williams, a family friend, to write a trumpet flourish for the laying of the music school's foundation stone in 1953.

Six years later he succeeded Donald Butters as headmaster at King's, where Willcocks was now organist. A new classroom block opened in 2004 was called the Briggs Building.

In his late nineties Briggs was still singing with his local church choir in Bedford. On Christmas Eve 2015 he gave an interview for the Today programme on Radio 4, some 87 years after he was first heard on the radio.

In it he recalled the enduring tradition of the candles flickering in King's College Chapel on Christmas Eve as a boy treble's pure voice sings: "Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ her little child."

In 1940 Briggs married Mary Lormer, an Australian maths scholar at Girton College. She died in 2009. They had two sons, one of whom is Professor Andrew Briggs, professor of nanomaterials at Oxford, and two daughters, one of whom is Anne Atkins, the novelist and former Daily Telegraph columnist.

David Briggs, born November 7 1917, died March 16 2020

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