For many people Christmas does not truly begin until the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols on December 24. The tradition, started in Truro in 1880, was introduced to King’s College, Cambridge, in 1918 and was first broadcast ten years later. It has been heard on the radio every year since then with the exception of 1930. The last chorister to have sung in the original broadcast was David Briggs.
Briggs, then aged 11. He would remain associated with King’s for the rest of his life, as chorister, lay clerk and headmaster of the college school.

No recording of the 1928 service is known to exist, but on Christmas Eve 87 years later Briggs spoke of the occasion with Mishal Husain on Today on BBC Radio 4. “I don’t remember a lot about it,” he admitted. “What I do remember is that the recording mechanism was really very primitive. It consisted of a very small quantity of electric stuff. I suppose we must have sung Once in Royal David’s City.”

As small boys, the choristers took the preparations in their stride. “We were totally engrossed in the music, so we didn’t have any nerves or anything like that,” he said. “I can’t remember being nervous. It was just one of the things you did, really. We just loved the music, we loved the organist, and we loved the dean . . . it was a very close family really.”

Although the choristers remained at school after autumn term to sing Christmas services, a period known as the Slack, there was no feeling of missing out, not least because the school arranged a series of parties. There were also practical jokes, including the “pandemonium harp”, which squirted unsuspecting new boys with water.
The Nine Lessons and Carols remained a compelling occasion. “It’s a combination of the particular texts chosen, interspersed with carols,” Briggs told Husain. “It just sort of hits the nail on the head. It’s just what people need in a frenetic, materialistic Christmas that we have these days . . . you can stop and pause and think about more eternal things.”

John Davidson Briggs was born in Norwich in 1917, one of five children (three daughters and two sons) of George Wallace Briggs, a clergyman and hymn writer, and his wife Constance (née Barrow); his godfather was Randall Davidson, the Archbishop of Canterbury. He was raised in a vast, 800-year-old rectory near Loughborough, Leicestershire, where his father was rector of the parish church.

In 1926 he and his brother, Stephen, were taken by their father to Cambridge. “He thought it would be a lovely idea for us two boys to try to get into King’s choir, and we came up for the [voice] trial and went up to the college with about 30 other boys,” he told Husain. He recalled that his audition piece was *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*.

The fees were £8 a term, including board, lodging and education, and were designed to be
no more than the cost of keeping a boy at home. The accommodation was, however, spartan. The boy in the next bed would get up after lights out and put all his clothes on, reversing the process in the morning before matron returned. Lessons were suspended one winter so that the boys could skate on the frozen water at Grantchester Meadows.

On Sunday evenings they would crowd into the study of Cedric Fiddian, the eccentric and forgetful headmaster, where Mrs Fiddian would read a story. Briggs wrote a letter home every Saturday and his mother would reply, enclosing The Children’s Newspaper, which he shared with the other boys; once or twice a term she would visit and for his birthday in November she would bring half a crown’s worth of fireworks. Briggs’s daughter Anne Atkins, the journalist and broadcaster, said in 2014 how “in those days the choristers walked unaccompanied from the school to the chapel, in crocodile formation and wearing the Eton ‘bum-freezers’ (tail-less coats) and top hats that they still wear today”.

There was no expectation that choristers would learn an instrument, and Canon Briggs discouraged his son from doing so, believing that the future lay in scholarship.
After his voice broke young David was educated at Sedbergh School in Cumbria and then as a foundation scholar at Marlborough, where he joined the chapel choir, learnt violin and formed a jazz band called the Dandelions. Membership of the Officers’ Training Corps was compulsory until 16, when boys could instead join the Scouts, an option that Briggs, with his growing pacifism, chose to pursue.

Leaving school in 1936 he returned to Cambridge for three years with both academic and choral awards at King’s, where he now sang bass. David Willcocks (obituary, September 19, 2015) was organ scholar and encouraged him to consider singing professionally, but after a few recitals Briggs realised that his nerves could not cope.

His room in Gibbs, the 18th-century building next to the chapel, had bullet holes in the walls, the result of a tragic incident when a troubled
undergraduate shot a policeman many years earlier. Briggs was granted permission to keep a horse, called Tiny, on the grounds, but on one occasion returned from lectures to find that an order of fodder had been delivered to his room and was blocking the staircase, making him unpopular with the fellows whose rooms were on a higher floor.

In 1939, while taking part in a Cambridge pageant with Willcocks, he met Mary Lormer, an Australian maths scholar from Girton College who would often borrow Tiny until the horse trod on glass and went lame; they were married in 1940. She died in 2009 and he is survived by their four children: Johnny, who is a farmer in Wales; Andrew, a professor of nanomaterials at the University of Oxford; Catherine, a teacher of the visually impaired; and Anne.

Briggs started teacher training, but the outbreak of war meant that his pacifism was put to the test. A tribunal ruled that he should serve in the Pay Corps, which he hated. His supportive but uncomprehending father, who was now vice-dean of Worcester Cathedral, arranged a transfer for him to the Medical Corps, where an order came that everyone should be armed. He was prepared to defy it despite the threat of a court martial, but was spared when the order was ruled to be in
breach of the Geneva Convention. He took part in the Normandy landings in 1944 and helped to set up a field hospital near Bayeux, where he formed a cappella choir made up of doctors and nurses. The army paid for copious quantities of sheet music, which he was permitted to retain after the war.

On demobilisation he was accepted for ordination but chose teaching. In 1946 he became a classics master at Bryanston School in Dorset, where he arranged the building of the Greek Theatre, and in 1959 he became master of choristers and headmaster of King’s College School, where Willcocks was organist. Mary joined him there and her pupils included Andrew Wiles and Timothy Gowers, both future mathematicians and knights. True to his pacifist leanings, Briggs’s first act as headmaster was to abolish corporal punishment. His last, before retiring in 1977, was to turn the school co-educational, although he recalled how the boys “lay down in protest on the drive and refused to let the cars come in”. He had no jurisdiction, however, over the composition of the choir, whose make up of “16 boys” had been decreed by Henry VI in the 15th century.

He spent the next 30 or so years living near Cambridge, singing in the choir of St James’s Church and often convening groups of
teenagers to put on plays or musical events, including three performances of Britten’s *Noye’s Fludde* with Briggs singing Noah. Shortly before his wife’s death the couple moved to live with his youngest daughter Anne, near Bedford, where he again joined his local church choir.

Briggs returned to King’s College School in 2004 when the Duchess of Kent opened the Briggs Building, which houses classrooms for science, languages and maths, in his honour. He was thrilled when one of his granddaughters sang in the 2015 Christmas carol service at Durham Cathedral.

Despite a century of listening to music old and new, Briggs remained wedded to his favourite carols, explaining to Husain that those that moved him the most were *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* and *O Come, All Ye Faithful*, “particularly *O Come, All Ye Faithful* because faith, I think, is such an essential part of life. Everybody has faith in something. To me, faith in the Christian religion is really what keeps me going.”

**David Briggs, chorister and headmaster, was born on November 7, 1917. He died on March 16, 2020, aged 102**