

CHURCH TIMES

Obituary: David Briggs

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Kenneth Shenton writes:

FEW men have enjoyed as long an association with King's College, Cambridge, as David Briggs, who died on 16 March, aged 102. After the death of Canon Pat Magee in 2008, he was the last surviving chorister who sang in the historic first BBC broadcast of the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's in 1928. After he returned as a choral scholar and then Headmaster of the Choir School, his expertise and support proved pivotal in helping David Willcocks to bring the choir to a level of performance that had few, if any, equals.

A son of a Norfolk parsonage, John Davidson Briggs was named after his godfather, Archbishop Randall Davidson. Universally known as David, he was the middle child of Canon George Briggs, a noted author of many hymns and editor of numerous hymnals. In

1926, he entered the choir of King's College, then directed by Arthur "Daddy" Mann, a musician adored by his choristers, who was succeeded in 1929 by Boris Ord.

After his voice broke, Briggs won a scholarship to Marlborough College. He returned to King's in 1936, winning both choral and academic awards to read Classics and History. Reunited with Ord, he went on to take part in a further four Christmas Eve broadcast services of Nine Lessons and Carols. First joining the college at that time as organ scholar was the former Westminster Abbey chorister Willcocks. Like so many, however, the pair's seemingly effortless progress was interrupted by the outbreak of war.

While Willcocks went off to win the Military Cross when serving in France with the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, and Briggs Senior was writing patriotic hymns with Ralph Vaughan Williams, Briggs himself remained a fervent conscientious objector. Initially drafted into the Pay Corps, he later joined the Medical Corps. Like Willcocks, Briggs, too, took part in the Normandy Landings, helping to set up a field hospital near Bayeux. Never far from choral music throughout his long life, when in France he never lost an opportunity to organise music-making for the medical staff.

At the end of the conflict, having considered following his father into the Church, Briggs moved into education, joining Bryanston School in Dorset, where he taught Classics. The aims of the school suited him, as did the emphasis that it laid on music, drama, and the arts. While there, with the help of his wife and pupils, Briggs supervised the successful building of the Greek Theatre. In the interim, his father, now Vice-Dean of Worcester Cathedral, had proved pivotal in enticing David Willcocks to move from Salisbury to Worcester and, in the process, to enhance his growing reputation.

Willcocks moved back to King's College to support the ailing Ord in 1957. Two years later, Briggs would join him, succeeding Donald Butters as Headmaster of the Choir School. To no one's great surprise, he proved to be a Headmaster of high principles and unshakeable integrity. With a genuine love of learning in what soon became a richly stimulating environment, he cared for his charges in a naturally inclusive way, presiding over the school like a generally indulgent paterfamilias. Happily, amid a natural gravitas lay a most important and highly developed sense of the ridiculous.

Briggs and Willcocks formed a strong bond, maintaining a curious annual ritual throughout their time working together. Every year in May, when the outdoor swimming pool was opened, they would hold, attired in fancy dress and on planks over the pool, a pillow fight to see who could lose their footing first. Willcocks himself left King's at the end of 1973 to become Director of the Royal College of Music. In 2008, Briggs was among the many

contributors paying tribute to him in a volume appropriately entitled *A Life In Music*. Taking charge of the choir post-Willcocks was Philip Ledger.

Briggs's first act on arriving at King's as Headmaster had been to abolish the time-honoured system of corporal punishment. His final act, before retiring in 1979, was to make the school co-educational. Opened in 2004, a new science laboratory, and language and mathematics classrooms, together with a library, were named the Briggs Building in his honour. Moving to Bedford to be nearer his family, even in his late nineties, he was still happily making music. On Christmas Eve 2015, interviewed on BBC Radio 4, he movingly reflected on that first broadcast service 87 years earlier.

He married Mary Lormer, a fellow Cambridge graduate, in 1940; she died in 2009. Of their four children, John is a Welsh farmer, Andrew is Professor of Nanomaterials at the University of Oxford, Catherine teaches the visually impaired, and Anne is a well-known writer and broadcaster on religious matters. One of her novels, *On Our Own*, is a murder-mystery story, intriguingly set in King's College Choir School.

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