

An Address Given in King's College Chapel

David Briggs

Headmaster, King's College School 1959-1977

Bob Chilcott

David Briggs, who died in 2020 aged 102 was both a chorister and choral scholar here in King's College Choir and for eighteen years, between 1959 and 1977, was Headmaster at King's College Choir School. For all his family members and friends, former choristers and former pupils and teachers here today it is a pleasure to remember the life of a remarkable man who was such a part of the history of King's College Choir and also of this place.

David was born in Norwich in 1917. As a young boy he showed great promise at singing, so he and Stephen, one of his four siblings, were taken by their clergyman father to Cambridge for the chorister trials. David was given a place at King's on the strength of his singing of the first verse of 'Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.' This Christmas hymn, along with 'O Come, all ye Faithful' remained lifelong favourites to David and resonated with him in his deeply felt Christian faith. David also loved *The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* and indeed up to his death in 2020 he was the last surviving chorister to have sung in the historic first BBC broadcast of this service in 1928.

After his time at King's as a chorister, David moved on to Marlborough, before returning to King's for three years as a Bass Choral Scholar and also to read Classic and History. As well as his gift for music, David was a keen sportsman, but because of his choir commitments he was not able to find time for team games. He was, however, given permission by the College to keep a rather large horse called Tiny on Scholars' Piece. On one occasion David was woken by the College Porters at three o'clock in the

morning to sort out Tiny, who had broken free and was eating the crocuses. David graduated in 1939, along with a brilliant mathematics student at Girton College, Catherine Mary Lormer, whom everyone knew as Mary. David and Mary were married soon after, in 1940.

What many would not have known about David was that he had a strong pacifist commitment, that ran very much alongside his Christian beliefs. When war came, David became a conscientious objector. After a spell with the Pay Corps he moved into the Medical Corps, a move that enabled him to be in a position where he could be of help to people, which suited him very much better. When rules changed and those in the Medical Corps had to bear arms, David flatly refused to do so, even with the threat of court martial or even worse. When it was discovered that this went against the Geneva Convention, David stood firm as a conscientious objector.

After the war David decided to follow a career in education. He began at Bryanston School in Dorset, and in 1959 returned to take up the post of Headmaster at the King's College Choir School, a post that really defined his life as an educator. The family atmosphere of the school was enabled by the fact that his own family, including his wife, Mary, who taught Maths, was so evident and present in the life of the school.

Although David is the primary focus of our recollections and thanksgiving today; it is important not to pass over too quickly the contribution that Mary made to the school. She had been an outstanding scholar at Melbourne Grammar School in Australia and in later life combined mathematical brilliance with a passion and talent for teaching and supporting others. King's school was the perfect place to absorb her prodigious energies; and it gave her the opportunity to shape and encourage some of those who went on to become some of the most significant mathematicians of their generation.

Having been a chorister himself, and knowing the pressures as well as the joys of the life, must have informed David's priorities for change as a Headmaster. For changes there were, especially to style and atmosphere, which ultimately made it a very happy place to be. The first big change he made was to abolish corporal punishment, a move that at the time was very unpopular, and right at the end of his time at the school he made the school co-educational, a move that was very much in line with his open, inclusive thinking.

I was very fortunate to be a chorister living at the school between 1964 and 1968 and I hope it is not too indulgent to recall a few memories that for me encapsulate the kind of person David was to us at this time. At the beginning of the summer term, David, who was known to the boys as 'Broggles', would go through an annual ceremony to open the swimming pool known as 'breaking the ice.' A rather wobbly plank would be put up between the two sides at the deep end, and David and the Director of Music, David Willcocks would appear in fancy dress and then walk from opposite sides of the plank with pillows to try and knock each other into the freezing, unheated water. We loved it.

David also taught Latin to our class. The one really good thing about this was that he was always quite late for the start of the lesson. This enabled my friend and classmate, Adam, (who incidentally ended up as a very eminent member of the Diplomatic Service) and I to exchange homework from the night before. Quickly we compared notes and completed each other's work (well, Adam completing mine).

The school also mounted a play every summer, which David produced. I remember Macbeth one year, which was a big undertaking. David always had time to not only encourage us but also help each of us learn our lines, sometimes long into the evening. He was always patient, always on our side.

On a very personal note, I long remember the support that David gave to me when, towards the end of my time as a chorister, he had to break the news to me that my father had died rather suddenly. I will never forget how kind, how sympathetic and how supportive he was not only to me, but to my whole family.

David retired in 1977 and returned to the King's School in 2004 when the Duchess of Kent opened a new building, the Briggs Building, in his honour. At the age of 91 the final chapter of his and Mary's marriage opened as they moved to Bedford to live with their daughter Anne and her family. and sadly Mary, who by then was in poor health, passed away shortly afterwards.

In 2017 there was a lunch at the King's Choir School to celebrate David's 100th birthday and a good number of old choristers, former and present staff members, friends and family attended to honour him. By then, David was quite frail, but of course, he had a smile for each and every one of us.

David died in 2020. He gave great service to King's College School, to King's College Choir and to this College and his was a life well lived. All the legions of choristers, pupils, teachers and friends whose lives he touched will always remember this smiling, gentle, kind, deeply Christian man, and we are all honoured to have known him.

Bob Chilcott KC
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