

David Willcocks

Born 1919. Choral conductor, organist and composer.
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The text of this life story is transcribed, with thanks and acknowledgement, from the collection of Filmed Interviews with Leading Thinkers at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. The interview was carried out by Prof. Alan Macfarlane in December 2008, and was transcribed by Sarah Harrison.

1. Early Life



Sunset over Newquay, Cornwall. Around 1925

Cornishman and amateur photographer, Major Arthur William Gill, was well known in Cornwall and elsewhere during the 1920s and 1930s for his presentations of stills and cine film to many groups including The Royal Institution of Cornwall, Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society and the London Cornish Society. The quarter plate slides which he took prolifically with his ordinary camera are, in some cases, painted by his own hand to great effect.

Born in Newquay, Cornwall, in 1919; two older brothers still living in Cambridge; of grandparents, knew only my maternal grandmother, widow of a country rector; father was a bank manager; came from a farming family in Wadebridge, Cornwall; father sang in the local church choir but otherwise neither parent was musical; mother educated us herself when we were young so I did not go to school until I was eight; both brothers got scholarships as a result of her teaching

Had an old piano in the house; when I was six after church on Sunday I would try to play the hymns I had heard; startled the piano tuner by identifying notes by their sound; alerted my mother to my perfect pitch and encouraged her to let me have piano lessons; taught by a lady in Newquay; a little later took up the cello; mother heard Sir Walford Davis talking about the need for choirboys on the radio and wrote to him; interviewed me at the BBC and as a result said he would contact Ernest Bullock at Westminster Abbey and suggest he audition me; at eight I went to see him and auditioned well enough for him to suggest I come to join the choir the next year; Sir Walford had suggested that I learnt a stringed instrument as well at the piano; my mother managed to arrange cello lessons.

I started at Westminster Abbey in June 1929; very homesick to start with but thoroughly enjoyed the daily music rehearsals; we never got any

training as such but just sang; there was a double choir so one either sang the morning or afternoon service; very unusual now where some cathedrals just have evensong; the audience was often very small but we were made to feel part of a long tradition; we also had normal schooling; the best of the singers from the two choirs were picked to sing on Friday and Sunday at the more important services; I remember particularly the service on Armistice day when we sang by the grave of the unknown warrior in the nave

Remembered teachers; reported to the Headmaster for smoking; aged twelve reported again and sent to see the Dean who let me off; can't imagine how awful it would have been for my parents if I had been sent home; at that period I was fond of games though there were few places where we could play; cricket game in an alley beside the abbey that resulted in my falling through a glass roof, trying to retrieve the ball.

2. Clifton College



The interior of the Big School, Clifton College, in the 1920s.

When I went to Clifton, apart from the usual games, specialized in cross-country running; when I was twelve my voice changed and instead of singing I was taught to play the organ by Ernest Bullock; during that year he taught me a lot of Bach; it was decided that I should try for Clifton as it was only one of two school, Rugby being the other, that offered a music scholarship.

Went for my audition in 1933 and met the Director of Music, Douglas Fox; he had been predicted to be a very successful musician but had lost his right arm in 1917; Sir Hugh Allen, Director of the Royal College of Music, experimented with playing the organ with his left hand only and encouraged Fox to do the same; he became very accomplished as a one armed organist; he offered me the organ scholarship; Brian Pippard was a friend at Clifton who described an incident when Fox exhibited his occasional temper; otherwise he was a modest and kind man, and a very good teacher.

At sixteen I took my ARCO; Ivor Keys was taking his at the same time; I got through and took my FRCO the following year; he prepared me for the next test which was getting into university; I was destined for King's for various reasons; Douglas Fox knew people there and admired the organ at King's; Boris Ord, the organist, had been at Clifton himself; I took the general school exams at sixteen and eighteen.

At Clifton I joined the Scouts; the Scoutmaster, Hardcastle, took us camping in Clifton Gorge and in the Mendips; I much enjoy walking still;

on my own religious belief, I was confirmed but had no strong belief; I felt that my job with church music was to make it as good as I could so that it would help true believers to reach God; I don't believe in a creator God or that I am being judged by God; I believe in good people.



Clifton College in the 21st century.

3. King's College Cambridge



The fan vaulting of King's College Chapel, Cambridge.

I came to King's for an interview in 1938 and I was certainly the only FRCO being interviewed at that time; I had spent a gap year at St Nicholas College, which is part of the Royal School of Church Music, at Chislehurst, Kent; the object of the school was to prepare people to take the role of organist.

Boris Ord interviewed me; Douglas Guest was the organ scholar who was with me when I played for Ord; he was surprised when I said that I would perform from memory without the music; Ord got me to improvise and read a score; I found these easy as I had done them in the FRCO exam; Ord said I would also have to be able to train the choir if he was ill; I had never heard such a beautiful choir in my life; I was given ten minutes to rehearse them; I tried to involve the choir in suggesting improvements, and although they sounded just the same, Ord commented favourably on my involving them; I was given the organ scholarship, to start in October 1939; of choirs, I would rate King's the best of its kind - a choir of boys and men, which I prefer.

We didn't realize there would be a war; at first after war started it was quiet until the retreat from Dunkirk; I joined up in May 1940 and was sent to various coastal regions on beach duty to strengthen our defences against invasion.

In the year before going to Cambridge, went to the Royal College of Music twice a week to see Malcolm Sargent and Constant Lambert conducting orchestral rehearsals; I had counterpoint lessons from R.O. Morris and piano lessons from Frank Merrick who was related to one of the staff at Clifton; also went to many concerts on the suggestion of Boris Ord; came to Cambridge in October; interviewed by the music faculty and was sent to see Dr Middleton, the organist at Trinity College; he said that having got FRCO I had already done all that was necessary for Part I music so should take it in December; as a result it was agreed that I should do Part II the

following May; I was supposed to be learning composition from Hubert Middleton but learnt little from him; taught myself what little history there was; passed Part II so had got my B.Mus. after two terms.

Provost Shepherd said that he thought no one had done such a thing before; Owen Chadwick might have done so if he had not switched to Divinity; Provost Shepherd told me the statutes of the University meant I had to do nine terms before getting my degree; as I was leaving for war service he suggested that King's would allow me to complete the nine terms there after the war; if I was killed he promised I would be awarded a B.Mus. posthumously; in October 1945 I went to see Shepherd and arranged to complete the necessary years, doing a bit of modern history and economics.

4. Second World War

From May 1940 until June 1944 was in England working at coastal defence; underwent training in Scotland for an invasion of the Azores which was subsequently cancelled; John Denison, my Brigade Major, was a horn player, and later a good friend; he was later in charge of British Council and then Arts Council music.

We came down to Southampton which confirmed the rumours that we were going to Normandy; we sailed after D Day so the beaches were clear; slept in woods under shell fire; in July we had to attack Caen which was pivotal; we (Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry) managed to capture five German tanks; sent to capture 'Hill 112' and had 300 casualties out of 700 men; I was in charge of communicating the locations of all our troops to the commanding officer; we managed to hold out until we were relieved; our next engagement was at Arnhem; at Christmas the Americans attacked in the Ardennes and we were sent down to back them up, though never required to do so; in April went into Germany and attempted to get to Berlin before the Russians; meeting with Russians on the Elbe.



Because of the great number of Cornish soldiers killed in the taking of Hill 112, it was commemorated at Cornwall Hill.

Did a concert when we first got in to Germany; at the Second Army thanksgiving service in Celle I was asked to play the organ; although Germany is famous for musicians, we had been taught that all Germans were our enemies until the war ended; had no one to talk to about music, and by the end only about a third of the Regiment were genuine Cornishmen; I did not get as far as Berlin; I indicated to King's that I would

be back soon after the war with Germany was over; it never occurred to me that I would have to go out to Japan; my second brother had been a prisoner of the Japanese since 1942 since the fall of Hong Kong; I never had to go to Japan as the dropping of atomic bombs ended it.

The following account of the Battle for Hill 112 was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Bodmin Keep museum at www.bodminkeep.org.

HE WHO COMMANDS HILL 112, COMMANDS NORMANDY!

In June 1944, Britain and its allied forces had landed thousands of soldiers on the 5 beaches of Normandy in Northern France as part of Operation Overlord and the D-Day landings. It was a final bid to liberate France from the Nazis, but on July 10th the German army fought back to fight one of the fiercest battles the war had seen at a site called 'Hill 112'.

The British soldiers in the battle were the 5th Battalion DCLI. Hill 112 was an important area of high ground near Caen in Normandy which the German army wanted to keep control of because the hill gave them a strong advantage.

On the evening of 10th July 1944, around 380 soldiers from the DCLI launched an attack up Hill 112, where the German army's 10th Panzer (tank) division fought back with stronger armour and more powerful guns.

The German army launched 12 counter-attacks but undeterred and resilient, the DCLI fought off each one. Fighting continued all night, with German tanks rolling over the top of the trenches in which the Cornish soldiers were hiding.

Although they were outnumbered and out-armoured, after 19 hours of fighting and big losses on both sides, the Cornish soldiers had smashed one of the German army's best tank divisions.

Fighting over control of Hill 112 continued for weeks until the German army finally retreated. The soldiers of the DCLI formed part of a larger group called the 43rd Wessex Division. In total, 7,000 men from this division were killed during the battle for Hill 112.

Because so many Cornish men died during the battle, the hill became known as 'Cornwall Hill' and the wood at the top of the hill where the DCLI gathered on July 10th 1944 became known as 'Cornwall Wood'. We have a splinter of wood and part of a Nebelwerfer artillery shell in our museum collection. They were discovered at the site in the 1960's.

Lieutenant Colonel Dick James, a Commanding Officer of the DCLI soldiers on Hill 112, was killed in the battle. He had climbed an apple tree to get a better view of the German army positions but was shot in the neck and killed instantly. He was only 26.

Sir David Willcocks was born in Newquay. He was made a Temporary Captain in the DCLI and fought at the Battle of Hill 112. For his bravery in the battle, he was awarded the Military Cross.



A portrayal of the battle for Hill 112.



A photograph of the battle for Hill 112.

5. Back to King's College



King's College Cambridge, viewed across the River Cam.

Arrived back in Cambridge in November 1945. I was surprised to see that Cambridge had not changed at all. Boris Ord came back at the same time and we began to share choir practices again; however, I had been rather frightened of him when I first came and now I felt we were colleagues; Harold Darke had been left in charge of the choir and continued until after Christmas.

I played for the Advent Carol service that year and Boris Ord did the Christmas service with Darke conducting; the Christmas broadcast on BBC had been kept up right through the War; ever since 1928 it has been broadcast live; the Chapel windows had been removed during the War and taken to the Welsh mountains and were brought back in the Spring of 1946; John Saltmarsh had been in charge.

I got engaged in 1947 and my wife went on one of John Saltmarsh's tours of the Chapel; he knew everything about it; found playing for the Advent service was as though nothing had happened, and even the choir was in reasonable shape; Boris then started recruiting choral scholars again and two years later the choir was back to its previous high standard; Herbert Howells, the composer, was in the Advent Carol audience; I remembered him from when I



had been a chorister at Westminster; later, he was on my staff at the Royal College of Music; Ernest Bullock was also there, and both congratulated me.

Had to do the two years to get my degree; went with Peter Godfrey for history supervisions with Jack Plumb; told to write an essay on Cecil Rhodes and found we had both used the same source 'The Children's Encyclopaedia'; I did not go to any lectures but just read; in July 1947 the College gave me a Fellowship for four years to do research; I wrote to Watkins Shaw who was working on the organist, John Blow, and offered to help him as a researcher; he wrote back positively.

6. Salisbury Cathedral



Salisbury Cathedral viewed from the Triforium.

The next morning I was offered the post of organist at Salisbury Cathedral; Sir Walter Alcock, then eighty-five, the finest organist in England, was retiring; I went down to Salisbury and met the Bishop of Sherborne who offered me the post; I was shown the organ and the Cathedral Close and the organist's house; told them I was to be married the following November; came back and told Boris Ord who realized what a wonderful opening it was; think that Eric Milner-White had suggested my name; he had been Dean of King's when I was first there; when I went to Salisbury I was to stay with the Bishop of Sherborne for a month; they then put me in a two-bedroom cottage until the following May, when Lady Alcock moved from the organist's house and we moved in.

Had three years there; during that time the conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra was Rudolph Swartz; he was asked to do some concerts at Birmingham and asked me to deputise for him; did three concerts and got very good reviews.

7. Worcester Cathedral



Sir Adrian Boult, a friend, was asked to advise Worcester Cathedral on a successor for Sir Ivor Atkins; Canon Briggs asked me to consider moving to Worcester; Boult also said that the City of Birmingham Choir needed a conductor, and that the two jobs could be held together; also, with the Three Choirs Festival each year, the very best London orchestras and singers would come, and that this would be a good career move.

Went to Worcester in September 1950; first concert was actually at Gloucester, conducting Elgar's 'Dream of Gerontius', as part of the Three Choirs Festival; met Ralph Vaughan Williams and his future wife at a house party, also Gerald Finzi; when I arrived in Worcester I was welcomed by Ivor Atkins who said he was staying on as librarian; met with the Precentor once a week to determine what should be sung in the following week; often this was unchanged from the year before but occasionally I added new music, particularly Herbert Howells; encouraged him to write pieces for Worcester; first task was preparing for the 1951 Three Choirs Festival which was to be held at Worcester

At the 1954 festival got Douglas Fox, my teacher at Clifton, to perform Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand; distinguished performers at the Three Choirs Festival; had the opportunity to choose my own choristers, many of whom have gone on to do great things; was responsible for three of the festivals in my seven years at Worcester; works performed included the first performance of 'Hodie' by Vaughan Williams, and conducted by him; persuaded them to do Walton's 'Belshazzar's Feast' in 1957.

8. Director of Music, King's College

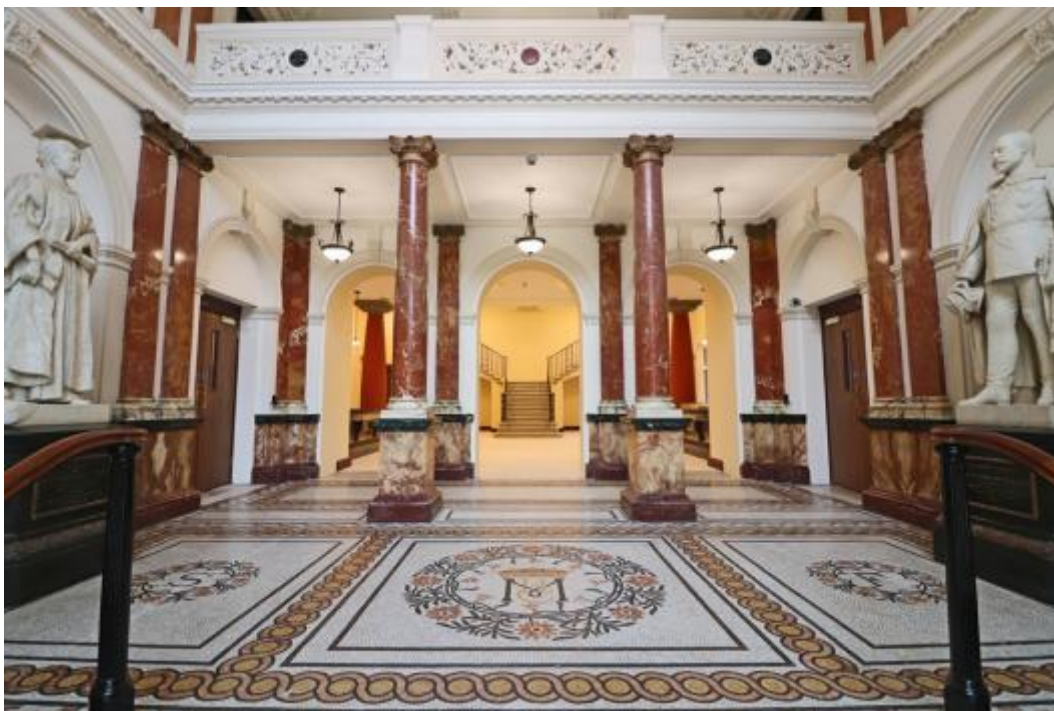


I think it was in 1955 or 56 that I had a letter from Noel Annan, Provost of King's, recalling my interest in coming back to King's; Boris Ord was not in good health and the feeling was that he should retire; to ease the process, I was to be appointed as organist while he was to be Director of Music above me, and by this means I could take over when necessary; agreed to do so and returned to King's in September 1957.

At first felt very similar to when I had been an organ scholar; by the end of December Ord's health had deteriorated so much that I took over; Ord's rooms were over the arch in the Gibbs building and a microphone was put above the choir so that choral evensong could be relayed to him; I have never felt the need to change anything that he did; he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University a little before his death; introduced descants into the first carols service that I did in 1958; encouraged to write more with Reginald Jacques which were then published by Oxford University Press and known as the "green book"; very successful throughout the English speaking world; tried to introduce two or three new carols each year; selection of choirboys and their successes

Memories of Fellows of King's; looking for somebody to do a second book of carols as Reginald Jacques had died, chose an organ scholar at Clare, John Rutter. Recordings and BBC broadcasts made King's College choir so well known; Neville Marriner and David Munro; Thurston Dart; authenticity of sound; Bach; the story of the King's Singers; history of the London Bach Choir; took over from Reginald Jacques; work with the choir over thirty-eight years; conducting techniques; composition for the Royal Wedding and other events.

9. Royal College of Music



In 1974 left King's for the Directorship of the Royal College of Music; Herbert Howells and Ernest Bullock; financial appeal for the College; Leopold de Rothschild; new Britten Opera Theatre; student accommodation; choir singing expected by every student in their first year; memories of Benjamin Britten; performing at the Snape Maltings concert hall.

Since retirement have travelled much more, conducting choirs; honorary doctorates; never enjoyed lecturing; Chairmanship of the National Federation of Music Societies and the Musicians Benevolent Fund; only time I have played jazz was during the War; own favourite pieces are classical; autobiography 'A Life in Music' [Edited by William Owen, Oxford University Press 2008]; I knew my wife from childhood but met again after the War; proposed to her by telegram when I was offered the position at Salisbury; Stephen Cleobury present Director of Music at King's; touring with King's choir.
