

# The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols

The history of the Advent tradition of interspersing short “lessons” with carols begins in the small town of Truro in Cornwall in 1880. Construction of a new cathedral had just begun and services had to be conducted in a wooden hut. Edward White Benson, the Bishop, realizing that a conventional ostentatious Christmas eve service in this bleak mid-winter venue would be risible, decided to try something new. Drawing on the monastic office of Matins with its three groups of three lessons each followed by a responsory, he laid out an Order of Service of nine lessons interspersed with familiar carols. The service started at 10 p.m; it was hoped this would keep men out of pubs on Christmas eve. The lessons were read by various officers of the Church, beginning with a chorister and ending with the Bishop himself. Benson went on to become Archbishop of Canterbury but perhaps nothing else in his career has had such impact.



King's College Chapel

The story continues at King's College in Cambridge, named after King Henry VI, who founded the college in 1441. If the wooden hut in Truro is the ecclesiastical equivalent of the stable in Bethlehem, the King's Chapel is the Temple in Jerusalem. Construction of the Chapel was started during Henry VI's reign but had to be halted during the War of the Roses. Construction was started again by Richard III (whose portrayal in Shakespeare's play is a politically motivated caricature) but wasn't finished until the reign of Henry VIII; differences in the stone colour can still be seen in the west wall. The King's Chapel is one of the most significant ecclesiastical

structures in all of Britain. It has the world's largest gothic fan vault and Rubens' *The Adoration of the Magi*, painted in 1634. The immense stained-glass windows date from the reign of Henry VIII and include depictions of events such as the birth of Mary and her marriage to Joseph that were omitted from the King James Bible of 1611.

When Eric Milner-White became Dean of King's at the age of 34 after being an army chaplain during the Great War, he felt the Church of England needed new forms of worship and adapted Benson's Lessons and Carols for the Christmas eve service in King's in 1918. Milner-White's contributions are extraordinarily eloquent; for example, it would have been clear to the 1918 Cambridge audience to whom the following words refer: "all those who rejoice with us, but on another shore and in a greater light."

In 1928, the service at King's was broadcast for the first time by the BBC. With the exception of 1930, the broadcasts have continued annually, even during World War II

when the service papers contained evacuation instructions in case of an air raid and the stained glass had been removed and safely stored. The live broadcasts are now heard by millions around the world. Often a recording of the service is broadcast on Christmas Day. Similar services are held in schools and churches all around the world.

Most of the seats in the Chapel are reserved for members of King's, but it is possible for the public to attend the Christmas eve service. There are no tickets; one must join the queue in the early morning of Christmas eve and wait till the doors of the Chapel are opened at 1:30 p.m. The service begins at 3 p.m. Some seats are reserved for those unable to queue because of disability or illness; these must be applied for months in advance.

Since 1919, the King's service has always begun with a single boy soprano singing *Once in Royal David's City* unaccompanied; however, to avoid creating undue anxiety, the boy is not picked out from the Choir until just before his solo.

Starting in 1982, the College has every year commissioned a contemporary composer to create a new carol. Among the composers whose works have been sung in the Christmas eve service are Richard Rodney Bennett, Harrison Birtwistle, John Tavener, John Rutter, Lennox Berkeley, Peter Maxwell Davies, and Judith Weir. The lessons and prayers have remained virtually unchanged.



*Adoration of the Magi* by  
Peter Paul Rubens (1634)