

Dr Douglas Guest

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Director of Music 1945-1950



Douglas Guest became Uppingham's third Director of Music in 1945. Martin Lloyd, the Headmaster at the time, always felt that appointing him was one of the best things he did.

Guest was an inspirational teacher, a brilliant organist and fine pianist. As a conductor, he was purposeful and exacting, and his command of the orchestra and choirs brought about the highest standards of performance in Chapel, school concerts and house musical events. His distinguished work at Uppingham was recognised by the Trustees and the Headmaster, and he was held in high esteem by his pupils and colleagues. Although he and his family were very happy at Uppingham, he only stayed five years, as his ambition and achievements naturally brought him to the attention of others, keen to fill prestigious musical posts.

Douglas was born in Yorkshire in 1916, and when the family moved to Henley-on-Thames he became a pupil at Reading School. From 1933 to 1935 he studied at the Royal College of Music. His interest in choral music was already taking shape, and he would often attend rehearsals at St George's Chapel, Windsor. In 1935 he went up to King's College, Cambridge as an organ scholar. After a long vacation term in 1939, Guest had intended to spend a year in Vienna, but the coming of war changed his plans and saw him enlist in the Royal Artillery. However, as the War Office did not require him until mid-1940, he was able to spend a couple of terms teaching at Christ's Hospital. As Major Guest, he commanded a battery in the D Day assault force in the battle for the liberation of Caen, Normandy and was mentioned in despatches. He was twice severely wounded, sustaining a leg injury which left him with a permanent slight limp.

Following his appointment as Director of Music, Guest's arrival at Uppingham prompted considerable interest and curiosity amongst both pupils and staff. With the bearing and demeanour of a soldier, he was always immaculately dressed in a double-breasted suit, and always on time. His drive, determination and tremendous capacity for getting things done brought the status of music in the School to an unprecedented level – indeed, members of the Special Choir who were also members of the 1st XV valued the membership of both equally.

Guest made three important changes in the early months of his appointment: he initiated the annual awarding of music scholarships; he founded the Paul David Society, which provided an opportunity for pupils to perform in front of their peers and staff; and he created the Uppingham and District Concert Club so that School, town and district could hear music from some of the leading orchestras and performers in the country. The London Symphony Orchestra was an early arrival, followed by renowned string quartets and artists such as Kathleen Ferrier, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf and Peter Pears, who was accompanied by Benjamin Britten. Before the concerts, Guest would give analytical talks to the School about the works to be performed, with the aim of increasing the boys' knowledge and appreciation. The legacy of Guest's Paul David Society remains in the many solo concerts given by pupil-musicians throughout the year, and in Invitation Concerts, which give pupils the chance to perform in small ensembles alongside their teachers. The Uppingham and District Concert Club ran for more than 50 years, attracting many of the great orchestras and performers of the day. Sadly, its demise was brought about by the withdrawal of local government grants.

The programme for Guest's first concert included *Zadok the Priest* and Brahms's *Requiem*. Other great choral works followed, including Bach's *St John Passion* and Mozart's *Requiem*. He produced ambitious programmes for the Special Choir and did not shy away from tackling modern music, such as Constant Lambert's *The Rio Grande*. However, he wasn't a great fan of the School Songs, and so they ceased to be sung as finales to most school concerts. That said, he fully supported the School Captain, Peter Corlett, in organising a concert of School Songs, and it was Guest himself who put the audience through its paces and taught them to sing the Football Song with vigour. In Guest's final informal concert at Uppingham he, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, concluded with the singing of three School Songs.

Whilst his concerts frequently included music of many contrasting styles, he had a particular fondness for Elizabethan madrigals and for spirituals. Guest is well-remembered for his and Toby Belk's production of Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* in 1949; a mammoth task, with costumes borrowed from Covent Garden, which elicited the interest of the music critic from *The Times*. It was a roaring success! Guest's last large-scale work at Uppingham was Bach's *St Matthew Passion*; with more than 200 voices, it is reported that the standard of choral singing was most impressive. The creation of the Special Choir, the rejuvenation of the Military Band (under the newly appointed bandmaster, A J F Allen), the expansion of instrumental lessons, and the increased numbers singing in the Concert Choir were all accomplishments achieved in the short time he was at Uppingham.

In 1950, Guest left Uppingham to take up an appointment as Organist and Master of the Choristers at Salisbury Cathedral, alongside his role of Director of Music at St Mary's Girls' School, Calne. In 1957 he became the Master of the Choristers and Organist at Worcester Cathedral, and in 1963 he moved to Westminster Abbey as Organist and Master of the Choristers. He remained at Westminster Abbey until 1981, during which time he was also a Professor at The Royal College of Music. He was a great supporter of the National Youth Orchestra and was its Chairman from 1953-1984. Although Guest didn't compose a great deal, his 1971 setting of Laurence Binyan's 1914 poem, *For the Fallen*, is sung widely across the world.

Douglas was a man of great warmth and good humour, whose rigorous standards won him enormous respect from his students and choristers. He infected many with his enthusiasm, and his love of Uppingham never left him – he gave much of his collection of music to the School's music department. In Guest's memory, Phillip Mason (Housemaster of Constables, 1947-1951) donated the organ console in the Memorial Hall in the Summer 1997.

Douglas Guest was certainly a worthy successor to Sterndale Bennett, maintaining Uppingham's reputation as a leading school for music-making. He died on 18th November 1996 at the age of 80.

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