

Past Events

Talk by Philip Norman: “Christmas Carols - what are they?” Thursday 8th November at 8pm

Philip Norman delighted EDOA members in October 2017 with his talk on the Reformation, and so his talk on Christmas carols was eagerly awaited. Again Philip came fully equipped with all the kit for his Powerpoint presentation which included appropriate video and audio clips.

The venue was again St Andrew's Church in Enfield Town, which was decorated with knitted and crocheted poppies for Remembrancetide.

Philip's talk covered the history of Christmas hymns and carols from the monks' plainsong hymns and the peasants' songs and dances of medieval times, up to the twenty-first century. It is well known that Cecil Sharp and Ralph Vaughan Williams collected many traditional tunes, carols among them, but as early as 1822 Davies Gilbert's 'Some Ancient Christmas Carols' was published; 'A virgin most pure' is one of the carols he collected. The Cowley Carol book, published in 1901, edited by G R Woodward, contains Woodward's inimitable translation of the words of St Ephrem Syrus:

*Saint Joseph, meek and mild,
Embraced the new-born Child,
Then knelt upon the sod:*

Some of the hymns we loosely think of as Christmas Carols, were composed, but not necessarily intended for Christmas worship. Mendelssohn's tune which is now used for 'Hark the Herald' comes from a secular cantata in praise of Gutenberg.

The service of Nine Lessons and Carols was introduced by the Bishop of Truro in 1880, while the Cathedral was still under construction. The bishop's aim was to keep the citizens of Truro out of the pubs and it seems that he succeeded. The service, incorporating hymns, carols and anthems as well as readings was popular then and has been popular ever since. King's College Cambridge took up the idea in 1918 and since the first televised carol service from King's in 1954 under Boris Ord, it has become staple fare in parish churches at Christmas.

During the twentieth century carols came to be performed in more elaborate choral arrangements, particularly those by David Willcocks in Carols for Choirs Book 1, published in 1961. New carols continue to be written. Philip ended his presentation with a video clip of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, singing and also dancing. The carol, which had begun with peasants singing and dancing, had come full circle!



*EDOA President Terence Atkins thanking
Philip Norman for his talk*

The committee had hoped that this talk would have a wide appeal, not only to organists but also to local singers, but in the event only a small number of EDOA members and a few members of St Andrew's Church were present. What a pity more people were not there to enjoy it.

Rosemary Knight