

DAVIES, JOHN HAYDN (1905-1991), teacher and choirmaster

Name: John Haydn Davies
Date of birth: 1905
Date of death: 1991
Spouse: Sarah Olwen Davies (née Williams)
Child: Susan Davies
Child: Geraint Davies
Parent: Lucy Davies (née Morgan)
Parent: Daniel Davies
Gender: Male
Occupation: teacher and choirmaster
Area of activity: Education; Music
Author: Trevor Herbert

His registered name was John Davies, but an aunt unaccountably and persistently referred to him as Haydn and it stuck: for the rest of his life he was known ubiquitously as John Haydn Davies. He was born in Hendrewen Road, Blaencwm, Rhondda Fawr, on 3 February 1905, the son of Daniel Davies (1881-1971) a stonemason and his wife Lucy (née Morgan) (c.1881-1961). The parents moved to the Rhondda from Carmarthenshire before the birth of John and his younger sister Rebecca. Rebecca married John I. Price, a hymn-tune composer whose tunes were included in *Caneuon Ffydd*.

He was introduced to music at Blaencwm Welsh Baptist Chapel, where the incumbent minister, Rev. W. Cynon Evans, was a graduate of the Tonic Sol-fa College. John Haydn was a life-long advocate of the solfa method and used it unflinchingly in his choral training. He also learned the violin as a child and played the instrument throughout his life. After attending Blaencwm elementary school, he won a scholarship to the Tonypandy Grammar School, and then trained as a teacher at Caerleon College. His teaching career was spent entirely in two Rhondda schools: Blaencwm Primary, where he became head, and from 1960 as headmaster of Brodringallt Primary in Ystrad.

He was a young school teacher when he became conductor of the Blaencwm Choral Society, but his competence was such that he was soon made assistant conductor of the Treorchy Male Choir. He became its principal conductor in 1946 and held the post until he retired in 1968 with the title 'conductor emeritus'. Under his stewardship the choir gained its greatest celebrity, both within and outside Wales. It won the National Eisteddfod eight times, the Miners Eisteddfod five times and featured in numerous prestigious engagements, tours and broadcasts.

Davies was a frequent adjudicator and a noted local historian, but his enduring reputation derives from his exceptional ability as a choral trainer. The limits of his musical education presented no barrier to the scope and sophistication of his musicianship. Under his stewardship the Treorchy Male Choir became one of the greatest ensembles Wales has known and did much to define the idiom of the large male voice choir. He benefitted from the fact that the choir had been wound up for three years before he took it over in 1946: this enabled him to restart it with a clean sheet. The secret of his success was a highly systematic rehearsal technique; he identified accuracy of intonation as the key to clarity of texture, and disciplined phrasing with harmonic balance as the route to comprehensibility of texts as well as beauty of sound. Rehearsals would begin with prolonged exercises to create an instinctive sense of ensemble before a written work was sung, and ranks of men, most of whom had spent much of their day at the coal face, acquiesced to every nuance of his instruction.

Davies was a man of diminutive stature, softly spoken, unerringly polite and studious. Even in his teens he had committed much of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* to memory, and in his fifties he mastered German to the extent that he could read the Lutheran Bible in its original language and arrange German folk songs with sympathy for the meaning of their texts. These qualities contributed to the charisma that his persona assumed when he stepped on the podium.

Apart from his sojourn at Caerleon College, he lived in the upper Rhondda Fawr throughout his life, and it was to the narrow orbits of that short section of the valley that his life's work was dedicated; one suspects that the international celebrity that the Treorchy Choir gained was ancillary to his main purpose. The family home was initially in Scott Street, then at 'Gwynant', Dumfries St., Treherbert. He married Olwen Williams, the daughter of Uriel Roger Williams, a shopkeeper, in Porth in January 1942; the couple had two children, Susan and Geraint. He worshipped at the Blaencwm Welsh Chapel, Tynwydd, and was its secretary for more than forty years. He was awarded the MBE for services to music in 1961 and was admitted to the Gorsedd at the National Eisteddfod in Cardiff in 1960, taking the bardic name Gwion - the name of a stream at the head of the valley that feeds the river Rhondda and subsequently the Taff.

John Haydn Davies died of coronary thrombosis on 17 June 1991 at the East Glamorgan Hospital. His funeral was at Blaencwm Chapel, where he had worshipped since childhood. He is buried at Treorchy Cemetery.

Author

Trevor Herbert

Sources

Various obituaries and appreciations

Official Birth, Death, Marriage and Census documents

Consultation with the subject's family

Personal knowledge

John Haydn Davies Papers deposited at the National Library of Wales (GB 0210 JOHADA)

Photographs of John Haydn Davies are available at the Treorchy Male Choir Archives

Further Reading

BBC cymrufyw: [John Haydn Davies: Cofio'r arweinydd corawl o Gwm Rhondda](#)

Wikipedia Article: [John Haydn Davies](#)

Additional Links

Wikidata: [Q28308507](#)

Published date: 2015-07-14

PDF Print Cite

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APA Citation



Herbert, T., (2015). DAVIES, JOHN HAYDN (1905-1991), teacher and choirmaster. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 11 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s10-DAVI-HAY-1905>

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