

Thomas Vernon Griffiths OBE (1894–1985)



Between the late 1920s and the early 1960s Vernon Griffiths, as he preferred to be known for most of his adult life, was a leading light in the musical life of New Zealand as a composer, teacher and musicologist. The bulk of his childhood, however, was spent in Norwich where his father was the rector of St Augustine's.

Vernon was born in West Kirby, Cheshire, on 22 June 1894, the eldest of the six children of John Herbert Griffiths, who was from Shropshire, and Clara Augusta Isabel Griffiths née Vernon, who was born in Peru. His father was originally a chemist and ran his own pharmacy on the Wirral until 1896 when he discovered his religious vocation. After graduating from Cambridge, his first ecclesiastical appointment was at St Paul's, Norwich, in 1900. Between 1905 and 1928 he was rector of St Augustine's and vicar of St Mary's Coslany. The family lived in Gurney Court off Magdalen Street, where Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Fry were born. Vernon was a pupil at the King Edward VI School and Norwich Grammar School, where his father was also a science master. Vernon excelled both academically and in the sporting arena. His parents and schoolmasters also encouraged his interest in music and his first piano lessons were provided by St Augustine's organist, Mr R. W. Wilkinson.

Vernon's love of music was further strengthened by daily attendance at Norwich cathedral, where he listened to rehearsals of the boys' choir and the organ voluntaries. His father also took him to organ recitals, in particular of the music of J. S. Bach. He was also influenced by the music he heard played in the streets of Norwich, including the calls of the town crier or Bellman, barrel organs, German bands and Scottish pipers. In 1910 he was awarded a 'Bunnett' scholarship, which funded two-years' study under Dr Edward Bunnett, the composer and organist at St Peter Mancroft in Norwich.

In 1913, aged 18, Vernon moved to London to work as a clerk at the Bank of England, principally so that he could earn enough to continue his musical education. In 1915, he enlisted as a private in the Artists Rifles and later obtained a commission as a 2nd lieutenant in the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Regiment, the Sherwood Foresters. During his spare time in the trenches he studied brass band music and later composed pieces to be played by British and French military bands. In 1918 he was badly wounded by a gas shell and spent the remainder of the war recovering in hospital.

After the war he won an organ scholarship at Cambridge where the composer Sir Charles Stanford was one of his teachers. After graduating in 1922, despite having been offered a full-time job as organist, choirmaster and chaplain at Pembroke College, Cambridge, Vernon worked as a school master at Downside School in Somerset, a Catholic boarding school, and later at St Edmund's School in Canterbury, Kent. He later converted to Roman Catholicism, very much against his family's wishes, and emigrated to New Zealand in 1927. Here he greatly developed musical education for the young and eventually rose to become professor of music at Canterbury University. He received the OBE in 1957. He retired in 1962 and died in Christchurch on 23 November 1985, aged 91, survived by his wife, Daphne, and their five children.

Text by Stuart John McLaren based on 'Vernon Griffiths: His Life and Philosophy of Music Education' by Rachael M. Hawkey (University of Canterbury, New Zealand, 1993).