



Gold Badge Citation: John Bacon

John's involvement with the world of folk started in 1981, on foreign shores, as a member of "The Amazing Headbangers Morris Men of Cyprus". Although he also became a member of Brighton Morris from 1983 to 1988, he spent most of his working life as a Chartered Engineer abroad and, landing in Hong Kong, soon became involved with Hong Kong Morris, of which he is still a member of the UK section. He is proud that when the team visited Sidmouth Folk Week in 2017 it included local Chinese dancers as well as ex-patriots.

On their return from Cyprus, John and his wife, Ann, settled in Ditchling, East Sussex, where they were the driving force behind the founding of Ditchling Morris, a mixed family side dancing Cotswold Morris, of which John has been Squire, Foreman and Bagman over the years. As well as running workshops at Chippenham, Sidmouth and Broadstairs Festivals, John was keen to encourage young dancers in the Ditchling side to strive for excellence by introducing them to the John Gasson Jig Competition, held each year at Sidmouth. Together with Ann he coached and provided music for young members of the side with great success, resulting in Hattie Vail's winning solo jig in 2000, accompanied by John as musician, and Jack Worth winning in 2010. Jack says:

"John encouraged me to enter the Jig Competition after less than 18 months of dancing. He was very generous with his time as a coach to prepare for entering, and the advice he gave me on dance style and choreography still influences my dancing now. Most of all he taught me to respect the audience: Morris is street entertainment and performance, not about the dancers themselves."

Morris is certainly street entertainment, and the Government's proposals for the 2003 Licensing Act threatened to prevent Morris dancers from performing outside pubs, which would have had a serious effect not only on the Morris, but also on the extent to which British people would be exposed to an important part of their own traditional culture. John had been elected as the first male President of the Morris Federation



(formerly the Women's Morris Federation), and one of his most outstanding achievements was to work with the Morris Ring, Open Morris and EFDSS in lobbying to make the views of the folk community known to central and local government. This included meeting with Kim Howells, then Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and working with Lord Redesdale to table an amendment to the Bill, which resulted in Morris dancing being exempted from the licensing provision.

John's other great achievement as President of the Morris Federation was the formation of the Joint Morris Organisation, which was a result of the close relationship between the three organisations during the campaign over the licensing laws. The JMO continues to exist, meeting together to discuss matters of mutual interest, maintaining insurance cover over the three organisations and presenting a National Day of Dance each year to showcase Morris dancing in different parts of the country. This annual event stems from the Morris dancing day held in Trafalgar Square in November 2003 to recognise the exemption. John took on the role of co-ordinating the Day of Dance with Westminster City Council and the Morris organisations, ensuring that the dancing reflected the breadth of English traditional dance and providing a template that is still in use today.

John was co-opted to the National Council of the EFDSS in 2000 and formally elected in 2001. He served as a Trustee/Director until 2005, becoming Vice Chair of the Council. John had been recruited to widen the Council's scope and experience, as at the time he was also the President of the Morris Federation. Characteristically he did not limit his interests to dance but used his skills and talents to further all the work of the EFDSS, taking a special professional interest in the structural condition and maintenance of the EFDSS headquarters, Cecil Sharp House.

A key concern when John joined the Council was the provision of disabled access to meet the requirements of the forthcoming disability discrimination legislation. Because of the building's listed status the problems were considerable, but the ground floor meeting rooms and the



all-important Vaughan Williams Memorial Library were made accessible via an external stair lift and disabled toilets were also provided.

Not only did John take responsibility for the development of plans to secure this disabled access but he also arranged the necessary planning permission and listed building consent, supervised the work himself to minimise the costs to the Society and undertook all the fund raising. More than a dozen applications were written and followed up; most did not succeed but this did not deter John, who finally secured over £30,000 worth of funding for the project.

As Trustee/Director of EFDSS with a particular interest in dance John was actively involved in the “Morris Futures” project to produce film material to promote the Morris, especially to young people, using finance and resources within the Morris organisations and EFDSS. He took the lead in this project while on the EFDSS Council.

John was also directly responsible for the EFDSS involvement in two European Communities’ dance projects. The first of these was the WebDance project, completed in January 2005, which involved working with the University of Hertfordshire, universities in Cyprus, Lithuania and Switzerland and IT companies to provide web-based facilities to exchange information about traditional dance using 3-D moving images of a solo Morris dancer.

The subsequent OpenDance project built on this and applied the technology to teaching traditional dance using 3-D images of a Morris dance and an English social dance. Simple lesson plans were developed and could be explored via the Internet. It is due to John’s work that both projects created a wider European exposure for EFDSS as well as enabling young people to use information technology in new and exciting ways.

Living in Sussex, John was keen to develop folk activities in the local area and attended the first Folk Arts Network meeting at the South East Arts offices in Royal Tunbridge Wells in 2000, as a result of which the South East Folk Arts Network (SEFAN) was created. SEFAN evolved to



become a funded, independent organisation in 2004. John attended the meetings from the early days and officially joined the board in July 2005. He remained an active member of the Board of Directors until SEFAN's closure in 2015, whereupon he joined the committee of The Stepback Consortium, which continues the three funded projects within SEFAN, namely Meltdown Ceilidhs, Stepback Higher Education and the East Sussex Schools Dance Festival.

During post-meeting networking after the first SEFAN meeting, John was one of a group that decided to investigate setting up a new English Ceilidh series in Sussex. Meltdown English Ceilidhs held the first three pilot dances in Haywards Heath in Autumn 2001 and still continues to run five or six dances each year in the winter months. John has been part of the Meltdown Committee from the start and, according to fellow-organiser Fee Lock, has kept the idea of "best band, best caller, best time" steadily on track. Fee adds that... *"John never hesitates to make sure that anyone looking a little unsure of themselves knows that it's perfectly acceptable to come along unaccompanied and make new dancing partners. Sometimes he will do this by asking people to dance; sometimes simply by starting the dancing off with Ann."*

Another SEFAN project that John has been very closely associated with is the East Sussex Schools Dance Festival. Indeed, the project was instigated by John, who did the fund-raising, found the tutors and brought the local schools on board to learn a variety of dance styles, which they perform at a much-anticipated, joyful gathering each year. Themes have included "Hobby Horses", "Green Men", "Well Dressing" ... and "Folk Song", in which EFDSS President and SEFAN Patron Shirley Collins was involved, choosing and teaching some of the songs. The children are given opportunities to perform at events beyond the Festival, including dancing out with Ditchling Morris. Shirley had this to say about the Festival and John's part in it:

"With nine schools taking part it's truly one of the most cheering (and sometimes moving) sights - so many children enjoying dancing the Morris in a huge marquee at Plumpton Race Course. And the children



are really involved, except perhaps when their attention wanders to see if Mum and Dad are in the audience!

Watching this, in John's benign and smiling presence, is a truly heart-warming experience, and you know that Morris dancing is in safe and caring hands. I feel very proud to know John and Ann and proud of them, too."

The EFDSS Gold Badge is awarded to those who have made unique or outstanding contributions to the art or science of folk dance, music or song, or have given exceptional support in furthering the aims of the Society. John has clearly met all of these criteria in his tireless involvement in, and promotion of, so many aspects of folk music and dance, his vision and expertise in the transformation of Cecil Sharp House and his enthusiasm for the education of young people in the folk arts. There can be no doubt that the award of this Gold Badge to John Bacon is long overdue and thoroughly deserved.

Barry Goodman

Barry Goodman is a past President of the Morris Federation and sometime Chair of Bedfordshire District of the EFDSS. He is a singer, musician, caller and folk arts educator and a long-time member of Redbornstoke Morris.