EFDSS GOLD BADGE

CITATION

for DENIS SMITH

Cecil Sharp House

Saturday 10th November 2001

"…. accompanied by Dr Denis Patrick Smith on his mighty organ!"

This is the usual announcement as Denis, with his Scandalli accordion and its familiar 'dustbin lids', takes his place to accompany a Westminster Morris man about to perform a solo jig. The dancer will be totally confident in the completeness of the accompaniment, knowing full well that Denis will be following every nuance of his movements to provide the right 'lift' and balance. The audience equally will be impressed and delighted by Denis's musicianship.

But Denis's skills extend far beyond the Morris. He has been playing for dancing and to concert audiences for almost 50 years. He has also found time to fit in Society business at District and Area level, as well as serving on the Editorial Board of the Journal.

Denis was already playing for country dancing when, in 1954, he was approached by a Westminster Morris Man and asked if he played for Morris. "Who's Morris?", came the innocent enquiry. But it did not take long for Denis to learn the Westminster repertoire – being corrected by 'Ginger' Saunders in after-breakfast sessions during Westminster's first week-long Cotswold tour in 1955. The men would then set off on bicycles, Denis on his Bantam, his accordion strapped to his back, around the Cotswold sites that have become a constant feature of the annual Westminster pilgrimage.

Denis's reputation for accompanying the Morris grew rapidly. Douglas Kennedy remarked to him at the following Stratford-upon-Avon Festival, "It's nice to hear the Morris played as music!", a remark that harked back to a talk given by RVW in 1923. Denis, a stickler for accuracy with the melody, has always worked at finding just the right chords for the accompaniment. Add to that Denis's true 'feeling' for the Morris, and magic can be created. His interpretation of Staines Morris, *with no bass chordings,* can send a tingle down the spine, both of dancers and audience, in a suitable evening atmosphere.

The Westminster Morris and Unicorn owe their success in no small part to the music of Denis. For almost all of the team's near-50 year history the musician was always and only Denis. Even with his multitude of other commitments he always made his diary available for the team's engagements.

Denis's music career started in the early Fifties playing piano for ballroom dancing in the Charlton Sextet. Then they wanted to add the tango to the repertoire so he bought an accordion!
At the time when Colin Fleming 'discovered' him for Westminster, he also tried to introduce Denis to the folk dance club scene. Betty Kernahan had been teaching folk dancing to her W.I. and was subsequently persuaded to set up the Chigwell Row folk dance club. On the suggestion that Denis might come and play for a club dance, she is reported to have remarked, "We can't have him; he charges!" But Denis was entranced by the country dance tunes and, on one occasion, innocently paid the 3/6d to enter a young farmers club dance he was playing for!

Denis has always had strong connections with Essex, and has been a firm supporter of the Society in the area. In the Sixties and Seventies he was District Chairman and subsequently Chairman of the Eastern Area, at the time when Peter Dashwood moved south to take over responsibility for the Area from Molly du Cane.

Denis has also served the Society at the core, as a member of the Editorial Board of the Folk Music Journal from 1971 to 1981, alongside such distinguished personalities as Douglas Kennedy, Maud Karpeles, Kenneth Loveless, Pat Shuldham-Shaw, Francis Collinson and Frank Howes.

Apart from the Morris, Denis has made an important contribution to the development of folk music, not just for its enjoyment on the dance floor but also in the concert hall. His solo performances continue to be admired – Morris tunes, Shetland tunes, and Manx tunes spring to mind. And for most of the past 50 years he has played in two principal partnerships.

His early recordings of Morris tunes with Jim Coleman, produced in the Fifties, are still available in the Sound Library, and the two made concert appearances around the country. They are still delighting their audiences and are continually in demand for dances, festivals and weekend courses.

Nan and Brian Fleming-Williams and Pat Shaw created the Music of the Countryside concerts while on a visit to Shetland in 1947. Jean Forsyth was part of that early group, but she and, later, Brian dropped out, and Denis became a member. Subsequently Nan, Pat and Denis became the Countryside Players. Their highly successful mixture of folk music on the concert platform, such as 'a feast of maggots', 'folk gems from the operas' and 'three whiskies', has delighted audiences everywhere. Nan and Denis's rendering of the Symondsbury Mummers' tune – The Singing of the Travels – at the annual carol concert directed by Pat Shaw, was so atmospheric and is still magic to those whose memory goes back to those heady days in the Sixties and Seventies.

The concert venues varied enormously, from black tie evenings in Oxford colleges, to the Festival Hall, and, with the growth of the folk song revival, to many smoke-filled upstairs rooms. One unusual concert line-up at the Central Hall in Westminster had The Countryside Players, the Band of the Coldstream Guards and Arthur English!

As a solo musician Denis has played for numerous clubs travelling abroad and for musicians' workshops at festivals galore, helping to develop other musicians to emulate his exacting standards and unique style. He has been a stout supporter of the festival scene, appearing at the first Sidmouth, and regularly at Whitby, Broadstairs and Eastbourne.

In the Fifties he played for classes instructed by Maud Karpeles and Marjorie Sinclair. He worked frequently with Ethyl Anderson for courses in Howth, the Channel Islands and at Burton Manor. For several years he played for the Royal Ballet School, working with Thora Watkins. This was at the instigation of Dame Ninette de Valois, who was passionately keen that the ballet school should be exposed to English traditional dance, seeking to imitate the way the Russian classical ballet had developed from its folk origins.

He has 'guested' with numerous bands, including McBains, The Country Dance Players, the Ranchers, the Southerners and Blue Mountain.

There has never been a 'Smith Family Band', although there could easily be. Lynda, his wife also plays accordion; Jenny their daughter is a fine violinist, particularly enjoying Scottish fiddle playing; and Matthew often accompanies on guitar.

Denis has two prime interests in his busy life. His work as an industrial historian and his love of folk music so often coincide and inform one another. He is always keen to share his enthusiasms and his knowledge and to bring the folk interest to the fore. There are not many lecturers who, while discussing the merits of the ironwork of the gates to Clarance House in Thaxted, will also ensure that any folkies in the audience are aware that this is the Clarance House for which Pat Shaw, also a Gold badge holder, named his dance.

Denis gives total commitment to everything he undertakes, and, during a long, distinguished and continuing career in folk music, this has come through strongly in his musicianship, research and scholarship. All contribute to make Denis Smith a worthy recipient of the Society's highest award, the Gold Badge. For the words which Denis wrote of his dear friend Nan Fleming-Williams can equally be applied to him, for he too has "the gift of seeing what lies behind, beyond, the mere notes of a tune".