EFDSS GOLD BADGE CITATION for

Geoff Rye

Geoff was the Borough Librarian in Weston-super-Mare for forty years and his expertise in this area has had profound influence on the development of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House and in the setting up of the Margaret Grant Memorial Library at Halsway Manor.

But Geoff was also very actively involved, with his wife Bessie and their family, in all aspects of the work of the Society for many years and was influential at District, Area and National level.

Geoff and Bessie started dancing in the mid Fifties as a result of looking for a recreational activity they could do together. They joined a Playford class in Weston that, interestingly, had been started in 1913, just after the founding of the EFDS.

There was a great surge of interest in folk dance in Somerset in the latter part of the Fifties. Peter Boyce, with Bill Moody, from their involvement in Bristol Morris, brought Morris to the school attended by Geoff's sons. A band was formed with members including Peter, Lynda Smith and Barbara Wood, and in 1959 Geoff was instrumental in setting up a new club in Weston, bringing together various dance clubs that had hitherto been meeting separately, to form the Weston Folk Dance Club. He was following the exhortation from Douglas Kennedy for groups to be more focused on introducing more of the community dances that would be attractive to a greater audience.

The Mendip Morris Men also started up at this time, following an initiative between Leonard Luckwill, a former Society NEC Chairman, and Peter Boyce, Bill Moody and Dave Fudge, giving the young dancers at school a chance for wider experience. Geoff was a founder member, initially playing the part of the Fool, a role that was considerably enhanced when communicating with an audience, because of his stentorian voice!

Joint Morris and country dance tours at Easter and Whitsun around the villages of Somerset were a regular feature, as was SYD 613, the Rye family Dormobile that helped to ferry many young people on these enjoyable outings.

The Rye family were well-known for their generous hospitality. Their house was never empty. The Spinners were invited to stay when they initially came to perform at the Weston Playhouse. Pat Shaw was a guest, plus the 14 bags of dance and music notation he always seemed to carry with him! When Otto Wood was visiting from the States, a set was formed in the sitting room for Otto to call Louisiana Swing, with Mrs Otto accompanying on piano. Geoff used the opportunity to record the occasion and create a unique sound archive. Many of those stationed at the nearby RAF camp at Locking came to the house and, under the influence of Geoff and family, became deeply involved in the world of folk music. Everyone who stayed at the Rye house, or had a close association with them, was invited to 'sign' the tablecloth, and Bessie subsequently embroidered the signature onto it. It even has the signature of HRH Princess Margaret, former President of the EFDSS, from an event at Cecil Sharp House when Geoff was Chairman of the Society.

With dancing all the rage in the late Fifties and Sixties there were plenty of courses and festivals. One such, originally an official EFDSS Wiltshire District course, was at Phillips House, Dinton, near Salisbury. Society plans to move it or close it down resulted in a decision, with Geoff at the forefront, for it to 'go private'. The Dinton Dancers continue to this day, now meeting at Pendrell Hall, Staffordshire.

Geoff and Bessie were both involved in a South West Area team that attended one of the earliest international festivals at Confolens in France in 1963. The friendship that developed with Henri Coursaget, the festival director and later head of the international festival organisation CIOFF, led to the Ryes leading another team to the festival in 1966. They also led a team to Helsingborg in Sweden in 1965 which danced for King Gustav VI at his summer palace.

Folk Camps largely grew out of family camps held originally by the Rye family and other folk friends. Bessie's suggestion that young families needed cheaper accommodation for folk courses other than the 'hotel' courses sparked off a new idea with Bill Rutter. Calling on Geoff for help in organising, the first Folk Camp was held near Bridport where there was a need on site for 'engineering' work with table tops and the like to create a level dance floor space!

The name of Bill Rutter is forever strongly associated with the EFDSS South West Area, and Geoff and others were driven to great efforts by his inspiration. Geoff was Chairman of the Somerset District as well as the South West Area. He had meetings with Bill and East Devon District Council on the development of the Sidmouth Festival, and he was closely involved in hands-on activity during festival week. He warmly recollects being the hostel manager for the visiting teams and acting as the money collecting coordinator. He was given the Sidmouth Award in 1984 for Services to the South West Area.

Halsway Manor was another of Bill Rutter's inspirations, arising out of a chance remark by Marjorie Hunt (one of the first managers at Halsway) during a folk trip to Poland that the Manor was up for sale. Geoff was one of the stalwarts that Bill always had available to call on as an organiser and to develop opportunities. It was Geoff who proposed at a meeting, held at the Manor, on 29 November 1964, with 59 EFDSS members present, that a society be formed to buy the Manor. The rest, as they say, is history. Geoff and Bessie were both members of the Halsway Council, and closely involved in every aspect from the outset, including buying furniture and making soft furnishings. Everyone who has visited the Manor will have been aware of the standing request for jam jars and fruit for 'Bessie's jam'. They were made joint Life Presidents for their outstanding contribution.

Geoff was responsible for setting up the Margaret Grant Memorial Library at Halsway. This had grown out of an original suggestion by Douglas Kennedy that libraries should be formed in each of the EFDSS Regions. After early beginnings in the South West Area office in Exeter, the acquisition of Halsway provided a wonderful new opportunity. With his professional experience as a librarian, Geoff spent endless hours as the Halsway Librarian setting up, indexing and cataloguing.

His professional experience was also greatly valued during his very long membership of the Library Committee of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House. He initially joined the committee in 1963 when he was also elected to the EFDSS National Executive Council. He served on the Library Committee until 1973 and again from 1979 until the late 1980's. Geoff was involved in the appointment of Malcolm Taylor, the current Librarian. Malcolm recollects how Geoff was a master at summarising the position at the end of, sometimes, lengthy debates in order to get the committee to reach a conclusion!

There was a break in his Library Committee service when Geoff, with Bessie, went to Malawi, as volunteers, for four years, following his retirement. He went to take up the post of Director of National Library Services, and set up a national library, including a flying library service to provide access to books for students and others away from the capital. Inevitably Geoff and Bessie also organised some English folk dancing for expats and were engaged in collecting the local dances.

Geoff was extensively involved in Society affairs at the centre. He served on the NEC from 1963 to 1974. He was Chairman from 1969 to 1972. He was on the Editorial Board from 1969 to 1973 and on the Sales and Publications Committee from 1969 to 1974. He must have needed a rail season ticket for those early days of the 1970's!

He gathered and maintained a vast collection of records, tapes, books and dances, which he was always willing to share to encourage others to develop their expertise. He also developed an interest in a number of traditional ceremonies and customs which he observed. Bessie met and became a 'kindred spirit' with Ruth Tongue, the Somerset folklorist and singer, who lived in Crowcombe, close to Halsway Manor. Geoff and Bessie supported and encouraged 'Tink', with Geoff ensuring that her work was included in the Halsway Library collection.

Geoff has been an inspirational and driving force in Society affairs for many years at local, Area and National level and eminently meets the criterion for the award of the Society's Gold Badge to:

"Those who have rendered distinguished service to the aims of the Society through their exceptional contribution"

I am delighted to make this presentation on behalf of the Society.

Michael Wilson-Jones
13 March 2005

The Gold Badge award to Geoff Rye was made on 13 March, near his home in Somerset. Geoff is now blind and has impaired hearing, making it difficult for him to travel far. About fifty friends and three generations of family members gathered to hear tributes from a large number of those involved in Geoff's past Society activities. The presentation was made by Mike Wilson-Jones, former Society Treasurer, and a long-standing friend of Geoff and the Rye family.