Gold Badge Citation, Les Seaman

Going to the Stratford-upon-Avon Festival with his mother in the early 1950s was Les's introduction to folk dancing at the age of 12. He continued to go to classes in Sheffield with his parents, these were run by local YHA of which his parents were both staunch supporters. It was also at his time that Les became a member of the class demonstration team who performed for the Maltby Street Youth Group with the hope of getting new recruits for the YHA class. He even remembers who his partner was, a young lady called Amy Briggs! They also danced at the YHA 12th International Camp at Tring, Hertfordshire in 1950.

Les attended, throughout the 1950s, various weekend schools which were run by the Sheffield Teachers' Folk Dance Club because they had access to schools in Sheffield for nothing, the original "free schools". The teachers were nearly always society teachers, Douglas Kennedy, the MacNamara's, Willie Ganiford, Nibs and Jean Matthews.

In 1955 he joined the Whitby Road folk dance class which was run by Harry and Norma Pitts. Harry was the Captain of Handsworth Traditional Sword Dancers who was awarded the EFDSS Gold Badge in 1995. It was only a short while before Les was approached to become a member of the sword team joining in 1957. His mentor in the team, as with most of the other members, was Jim Goodison who began dancing before the war; he was also the team's link with the pre-war team. Thus began an association with traditional sword dancing which continues to this day.

Les was conscripted into the army and apart from three months he spent in Germany he served his time at Catterick. This enabled him to be available to dance with the sword team on a regular basis even managing to get to some Monday evening practices.

By 1963 the team had recruited enough members to contemplate a Boxing Day Tour and Les was instrumental in setting this up. The Boxing Day Tour has continued ever since. It saw the introduction of a mumming play at the final stop at Handsworth Parish Church. The first one chosen in 1971, was the Handsworth version of the Derby Tup. Over the years this has led to the performance of different plays some traditional and some specially written but nearly always based on St. George and the Dragon. Various sword-dances were incorporated into the play for added interest. In 1981 the singing of the local carols was added to the repertoire at the church. These were led by Kenneth Loveless until his death; since then they have been led by one of the Handsworth musicians.

With this increased membership it was felt that just performing the sword-dance was not enough to give a show. It was decided to learn some Morris and occasional Morris is still performed, then in 1968 to learn some rapper which was relatively short lived. Les had learned some of his Morris when he was a member of Grenoside Morris Men and has had a long association Leeds and White Rose Morris Men.

Les attended his first Ring Meeting in 1965, which was the same year which saw them organising a Ring Meeting in Sheffield, based at the Sorby Hall, the University of Sheffield. Since this time Handsworth have regularly attended Ring Meetings in various parts of the country. They were admitted into membership of the Morris Ring in 1969 and organised their second Ring Meeting in September 1974. Les was elected to the Advisory Council for the North Midlands area in which capacity he served for the ten years.

It was also at this time that the English Folk Dance and Song Society issued the first of four invitations to dance at the Albert Hall Festival in the modern era, Handsworth had previously danced at the forerunner to the Albert Hall Festival in 1927. One anecdote from the 1966 visit to the Festival, on the Friday evening the team danced on boards which unfortunately parted and broken limbs were envisaged so they decided not to use them for the remaining performances. On the Saturday morning the team marched performed the clash and the slip ring, everything going well, four steps into the run round and the feet of the dancers couldn't be seen for the dust which was rising up from under the carpet. It is most difficult to dance when you can't see your feet.

The team began to travel abroad to festivals and Les was invariably the leader of these excursions. The first one being to Leuven, in Belgium in 1987, they went again the following year. Their farthest festival was to the 2nd Babylon International Festival in Iraq. This was before the rise of one, Saddam Hussein. These visits abroad continued throughout the 80s and are still ongoing. From Copenhagen to Antwerp to Dunkirk to St Niklaus and in 2009 to Ireland.

In 1988 after acting as leader on many of the foreign visits the team invited Harry Pitts to become the life Captain of Handsworth Traditional Sword Team and they asked Les to be the Captain of Sword, they also elected a Squire of the Morris. Les was the Captain of Sword for the next ten years when after a rest he took on being the Morris Squire for a couple of years.

In July 1991 Sheffield staged the Student Games and Handsworth Sword Dance was part of the opening ceremony which was televised round the world.

Les has lived a parallel life. I hinted at the beginning of this citation of his love of the environment and the outdoors since the beginning of the 21st Century he has been able to devote more time to these activities. He has always had a love for the YHA and the Clarion Ramblers but since 1982 he has been a member of the Sheffield Campaign for Access to Moorland and since 2002 he has been the chairman, at the same time Les has been the Access Officer for the Sheffield Group & the South Yorkshire and North-East Derbyshire Area of the Ramblers' Association. These days he also leads walks around the Peak District and the environs of Sheffield.

Without the love, support and encouragement of his wife, Margaret and the children Les would have lived a far different life. Knowing both his mother and father and Margaret and the children I am sure they are all so proud that the English Folk Dance and Song Society decided to honour Les Seaman with their highest accolade, 'The Gold Badge'.

Gold Bade Citation, Les Seaman 21.9.2011