Gold Badge Citation

Ricky Forster

Ricky Forster's Gold Badge was presented by EFDSS Board member, Tamsin Austin, at the North-East Rapper Championship organised by the Sword Dance Union in Hexham on 6 October 2013. The citation was written by **Phil Heaton**.

When Cecil Sharp went to the far north, looking for sword dancing traditions, his notes gave a few names of the dancers, but they rarely mention that most important feature of the continuing tradition, namely the families who kept the dances going. Ricky Forster is a member of that sword-dancing family tradition.

Ricky, born in May 1945, is the third Frederick Forster in the family line. His grandfather, Fred, born in the late 1880s, taught the dance to the boys of High Spen village in 1926 and named them the Blue Diamonds. Fred was taught by his mother's relatives, named Gibbons, and danced with the Vernon Troupe and Amber Stars in the early years of the twentieth century. Ricky's father Freddy, born in 1919, was Tommy in the first team and later ran the Blue Diamonds for almost 30 years following Fred's death.

Ricky was drafted into the family dance tradition along with his brothers, in turn Joseph, Edward and Colin. Hilda, the only girl in the family, learned to step and certainly knew the family dance. Ricky was often a spectator as the 1950s Blue Diamonds, led by Freddy and taught by Fred became famous television stars.

Ricky began dancing with High Spen Excelsior and competed in Durham, Darlington and Newcastle. He practised with lads he didn't really know in the High Spen Club. He wasn't allowed to dance with his own friends in case they decided to skip practice together. The team was rewarded with a shandy if the stepping went well. In 1956, he danced with the Excelsior and was photographed with father Freddy and grandfather Fred when the Blue Diamonds appeared at Northumberland's Wallington Hall. Afterwards, Professor Bill Cassie of Newcastle University published the dance story of High Spen Blue Diamonds in *English Dance and Song*.

In 1960, Garesfield Colliery in High Spen closed and the family, with Ricky the eldest at 14, moved to Birtley in Co. Durham where Freddy began work at Durham Chemicals. Ricky became an apprentice painter and decorator. Freddy taught some youngsters the High Spen Rapper in Birtley and the Blue Diamonds continued to dance, mainly as a family team, with Dave 'Ozzy' Osborne as an occasional member. Ricky could dance in any of the positions when the need arose; however, Freddy was finding the dancing hard going, and the team faded.

Meanwhile, Ricky met and fell for Pat Laverick and they were married in 1964 in Birtley. The Forsters were all putting deeper roots into the town and Ricky and Pat's children, Frederick, Gary and Gordon were born.

In 1972, Sallyport Sword invited the local teams to an ale. High Spen, known to most only by reputation, danced and proved the highlight of the event. Unfortunately over the next few years, family upheavals meant that the dance was rarely performed.

In 1980, the Blue Diamonds reformed with outsiders to support the family who also sharpened their skills. The new team performed at Dancing England in Derby to great acclaim. Ricky at number one, Edward at number three and Ricky's son, Gary, as Tommy were in the dance. The Blue Diamonds went on to great things with Ricky as leader and arbiter when it came to questions of the 40 figures in the Forster repertoire. Later, Joe, Colin, Gary, Gordon and Joe's son Lee joined the family tradition.

On Freddy's death in 1989, Ricky assumed full leadership of the Blue Diamonds. He became a rapper teacher and visited many schools in the Tyneside area. Grasp the Nettle, a team taught by Ricky, are currently north-east junior champions. Ricky also teaches a women's team, the Pink Diamonds. His calm, enthusiastic but always didactic approach and delivery has ensured that many youngsters and adults have been taught the High Spen Blue Diamonds' sword tradition.

In many ways, Ricky is an echo of his father… they both 'had to learn the dance' when they were boys and took on the mantle of leadership when called. Ricky sought sponsorship and the team well remember being presented with shirts, jackets, caps, bags and badges from the Federation Brewery. Other sponsorships came from Thorn EMI and the National Lottery in the shape of a team mini bus.

For many dancers, Ricky has become *the* great authority on the traditional sword dance from the north east. The first sight in crossing his threshold in Birtley is of a sword dance gallery with pictures, trophies, awards and medallions which name every dancer ever involved with the Blue Diamonds up to the present day.

In honouring Ricky Forster with the award of the Gold Badge, EFDSS have recognised the strength and importance of the High Spen tradition. Ricky will acknowledge that it has been earned, not only by himself, but by his father Freddy, grandfather Fred and his High Spen Gibbons uncles, all dancers who down the years have played their part in keeping the last rapper tradition so very much alive.

Phil Heaton, born in Co. Durham and now living in Derbyshire, is the author of Rapper – The Miners' Sword Dance of North East England. *He was one of the founders of Dancing England, and is a holder of the EFDSS Gold Badge.*



Photo: Bob Wilson

Tamsin Austin and Ricky Forster