



Mary Wilson-Jones

Most recipients of the Gold Badge are used to seeing their name in lights above the title. Mary isn't. She served 14 years in that most anonymous of backroom jobs, as company secretary to the EFDSS. Most of the time, not hearing of the company secretary is a good thing – the organisation is working efficiently – but when you're trying to change how the organisation operates, the role becomes crucial. Mary saw the Society through some of the biggest governance changes in decades.

Mary Bailey had the advantage of growing up in Stratford-upon-Avon, where there was an annual dance festival before that upstart Sidmouth started. As a young child, she remembers sitting on the grass in the Bancroft Gardens watching Sam Bennett of Ilmington playing his fiddle behind his head. By the age of 15 she was taking a full part in the festival. At school in Warwick, where Mary of course was Head Girl, the Stratford girls were expected to lead the country dance displays, because they had learnt at the festival. Mary was in her element.

Mary has never been one to just let things happen. When she came up to Kings College London, Mary organised the 1963 Inter-Varsity Folk Dance Festival. When in the 1970s she felt that the events programme at CSH needed refreshing, she joined the EFDSS Folk Centre committee to make it happen. She had met Mike at the House, events needed to attract the next generation of Marys and Mikes.

They danced together in Whirligigs and in Sunday Club which later became London Folk. That meant many major display items in the Albert Hall and several foreign festivals with varying standards of accommodation and sanitation. It is typical of Mary that when Mike became Director of London Folk, she retreated to be wardrobe mistress rather than have Mike accused of any favouritism towards her. It was soon obvious that she should return to dancing; despite being one of the older members her dancing still had the joie de vivre of a 15 year old.

In her 30s Mary changed career from teaching to the Civil Service. It was no surprise to any of us when she joined the Office of Fair Trading. There is no surer way of getting Mary annoyed than to tell her of something she views as an injustice or unfair way of treating people. That sense of justice is no bad thing for a company secretary.

Mary danced North West Morris, first with Hampshire Garland then Kettle Bridge Clogs, commuting to practices from various places in the south east of England. Hammersmith call Kettle Bridge "grannies with bloomers". While Mary will never be the former, the bloomers are essential. She believes an audience is entitled to high production values, "it's only folk" is the wrong attitude, so details such as kit are important. Her kit is always the neatest and the freshest-ironed.

When Mary became company secretary, the then Chair thought it was a temporary appointment. A professionally-qualified person would be needed to see through all the necessary change. Mary soon demonstrated that she could do the job and her responsibilities steadily increased. Her changes to the Articles of the Society may seem a little arcane but they have set up the Society so that the Board sets strategy and allows the Chief Executive to get on with implementing it. As always with these things, changing the rules is the easy bit, what is important is changing people's attitudes. Mary worked with successive Chairs to persuade Board members that they could do more for the Society by setting strategy than by being hands on.

For 7 months in this period Mary was also interim Chief Executive of the EFDSS. She was appointed as a "safe pair of hands" and she was certainly that, but she also recognized that some major changes shouldn't wait so she got on with them. Naturally, she played a large part in the recruitment of Katy Spicer as Chief Executive.

Mary finally retired as company secretary this year after 14 years in the post, the longest-serving the Society has had.

Some things haven't changed throughout her dance career. There are few more reassuring sights than to see Mary's smile coming round the corner to meet you. You know you're going to enjoy it: she will get to the right place at precisely the right time for the next figure, she will embody that "bounce" that folk music is so good at and – a much rarer skill this – each foot will hit the ground right on the beat.

Finally, may I say how appropriate it is that this Badge has been awarded to Mary and Mike as individuals rather than Mary'n'Mike. They have achieved a lot together, and even where one of them got the credit you can often detect the influence of the other, but each of them has done a lot in their own right. Let us celebrate that.

Citation by Mike Bennett, who has enjoyed dancing and just being with Mary for 40 years. He started country dancing and calling as a student, and has danced and taught morris - with St Albans and more recently Winchester – for nearly as long.