



## **Michael Wilson-Jones**

When asked, Mike describes himself as a dancer. But over the past 60 years he has proven himself much more than that: a teacher and choreographer; a researcher and director; an innovator and a communicator.

He first came into contact with the folk world at Weston-super-Mare Grammar School in 1956 where one of the teachers, Peter Boyce, invited him to join the newly-established Mendip Morris Men and its boys' side. In 1960 the boys' team was invited to perform at the National Gathering, where they danced the *Upton-on-Severn Stick Dance*. Peter and Mike had learnt it from Nibs Matthews who taught the dance "as collected", admitting "it needed some work". The version they devised and danced then is now largely the version performed everywhere today.

There was plenty of folk activity in Somerset in those days, and Mike rapidly became engrossed in English and Scottish country dancing as well as the morris. He even ventured into Playford, then largely the province of elderly ladies.

He went up to Southampton University, where one of his first acts was to convert the old time dance society to English and Scottish dance. He also joined the Winchester Morris Men, benefitting from the teaching and experience of Lionel Bacon.

On graduation he found a job in London, and set about identifying the best places to dance. These included Westminster Morris Men – he is now a life member after 50 years with the side – and The Whirligigs, led by Marjorie Fennessy, a dance club strongly associated with Pat Shaw. Without troubling the audition process he strolled into Sunday Club – which later became London Folk – and the London Branch Demonstration Class of the RSCDS under Bill Ireland, a noted hard task master.

Perhaps the most important benefit of his membership of Whirligigs was that he met Mary, his partner for more than 50 years. They danced together at the Royal Albert Hall festival in 1966, and at just about every other festival there for the next 20 years. At one festival Mike danced English, Scottish and morris, and his strongest recollection is of some very rapid costume changes.

Sunday Club, founded by Douglas Kennedy to provide a demonstration side, became London Folk and Mike was one of its leading lights from the beginning. In 1978 he became the director of London Folk and producer of the Society's annual festival at the Royal Albert Hall until 1984, followed by one at the Dominion Theatre in 1985.

All those who took part in London Folk and Albert Hall festivals in those days will remember Mike's style. Friendly and cajoling, he nonetheless insisted on the highest standards of both dancing and presentation. He wanted the music and dance he loved to be shown in the best possible light.

He was also responsible for some inventive set pieces of choreography, including *Off With His Head* to mark the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tower of London, and which was performed before Her Majesty The Queen. He also celebrated English Maritime Heritage Year with an extended piece on Nelson's victory at Trafalgar, which even used the 1812 cannons in the Albert Hall.

Mike enjoyed a close working relationship with Pat Shaw, helping out on the legendary Holland weekend courses at Christmas, and popularising many of his dances including *John Tallis's Canon*, *Long Live London*, and *The Waters of Holland*. After Pat's death in 1978 Mike, with a close group of friends, revived the annual carol concert in Cecil Sharp House, which Pat himself had originally taken over from Ralph Vaughan Williams. These ran on until the mid-1990s, transferring to other venues when the house had to be closed.

His organisational abilities, allied to his vision of the best in music and dance, led him to plan two unique concerts, in which traditional folk song and dance was set against the works of classical composers who had adopted it. The first, in 1996, featured music by Percy Grainger, with an Irish dance group stepping to *Molly on the Shore*, Scottish dancers with *Scotch Strathspey and Reel*, and Westminster performing *Mock Morris*, all with a full orchestra and choir.

A couple of years later, in Cecil Sharp House, a similar event focused on Vaughan William's music, performed in the presence of his widow Ursula. This time the emphasis was on song rather than dance, and Peta Webb and Felicity Greenland led the traditional singing which was then picked up in the orchestral arrangements.

Alongside his practical achievements in dancing, encouraging others to dance and producing events, Mike has also been busy behind the scenes of the EFDSS. He first joined the National Executive Committee in 1970 – at the age of 25 probably the youngest ever member! – and has served on one or more of its committees in 31 of the past 46 years, managing to avoid the traumas of the late 1980s and into the 90s.

In 2001 he succeeded Philip Bloy as the Society's treasurer, and has served in that role or as a member of the General Purposes Committee since then. He introduced improved financial systems, used his systems analysis experience to assist with the new membership system and the recording of Gift Aid, and he set up the first version of an online Folk Shop.

He has also devoted time to the darker corners of the library collection. Laura Smyth, Library and Archives Director for the EFDSS, said:

*His knowledge of the society is immense. Who better, therefore, to organise our archival records? For the past few years he has undertaken the mammoth task of sorting through EFDSS archives. What was once a collection to be avoided has now become a regularly used and informative collection – although there is still lots more to be done.*

*He also listed and transferred our vast collection of dance records, dating back to the 78 rpm era, and more recently he has helped index some of our photographs featuring dancers at the Royal Albert Hall.*

*Without his input, so much information would have been lost and our indexes not half as comprehensive. He is a real asset to the library.*

Mike Wilson-Jones has danced for the Queen of England and King Olaf of Sweden. With Westminster he danced in Japan; and he led London Folk to Finland and Poland, Israel and Canada. He has given new life to historical dance recordings, and he has opened up the archive, right back to the minutes of the meeting in 1911 that established the English Folk Dance Society.

In research, in dance, in production and direction – and with Mary at his side – he has always strived for excellence.

*Citation by Dick Hobbs, another (and only very slightly younger) product of Weston-super-Mare Grammar School. Best known as a bass player, he first met Mike on London Folk's tour to Israel in 1973 and, although Mike never managed to get Dick to dance up to standard, the two are still firm friends after 44 years.*