

Autumn Newsletter 2020

Sadly we are still in the grips of this terrible Pandemic and so the prospects of our dancing re commencing in the foreseeable future are receding fast.

All is not lost though and music groups and dance groups are thriving via zoom which is something we could never have imagined only a few short months ago. See Mary's excellent article for further information.

It is important to stay connected with our dancing friends as from what we are seeing generally people will be looking for new activities to fill their leisure time when we return to some form of normality. We need to have clubs for them to join when we eventually start dancing again.

Little Longborough are holding a regular zoom club dance on Wednesday evenings and are planning their second zoom dance with Rhodri Davies and their own Band for the end of December. Visit their web site for details.

Visit the web site 'Are You Dancing' and view a list of clubs who are hosting zoom events. You can join a zoom dance event anywhere in the world! Amazing!

We are not holding an AGM this November. See Cathy, our treasurer's financial report. Mary, Chris and Cathy are willing to carry on as MAD Folk officers for another year unless anyone else comes forward to take our places.

Finally – our dancing is not dead or dying as some are saying. During this period we may want to have a look at how we present ourselves and how we promote ourselves. We must change and adapt in a changing world because the saying 'change or decay' is as true now as it ever was.

Keep well and stay safe
Chris Warrington.

John P Smith

8th December 1935 – 17th February 2020

Oliver Goldsmith in his poem *The Deserted Village* describes the village schoolmaster:

“...While words of learned length and thundering sound
Amazed the gazing rustics ranged around
And still they gazed and still the wonder grew
That one small head could carry all he knew.”

Members of Bebington group remember John mainly as a knowledgeable caller, who explained clearly and encouraged new dancers. He would advance onto the dance floor, invite people to the dance and wait serenely, with every appearance of absolute confidence that people would join him. New dancers may have felt nervous initially, but soon realised John's aim was to share his interest, to educate and inspire newcomers with the joy and love of folk dancing. In the early years of the group's history, he called happily without a microphone, having honed his vocal powers in a teaching environment. In retrospect, the dances he called were (mostly) not overly complicated. John was not much attracted to the mind-bending esoteric dances which attract some callers. He preferred relatively simple dances, well danced.

He was himself an energetic and skilful dancer who could generate considerable momentum; being in the same set as him in Dorset Four Hand Reel was an exhilarating, if at times, terrifying experience. Yet who would have guessed that an honour or bow was different in the seventeenth century than the eighteenth? He knew. John's interest in folk dancing started in his university days, possibly on a (no doubt inebriated) tour with a group of Morris dances. His interest developed rapidly.

John was a principal caller for over 50 years at Bebington group, sharing the calling with Eric Lea and later with Eddie Henderson and later still with members of the group whom he had taught to call. He was absolutely committed to the continuation of the folk tradition and had the vision to see that the continuation of the group in the long term required more callers. Helped by others, he organised two courses for prospective callers. In committee, he was a force to be reckoned with, as he drew upon his extensive experience to support his views. At times implacable, he was also energetic in putting plans into action. John acted as treasurer to the group, and also to

Mersey and Deeside District, for many years, keeping a tight hold on the finances.

John was keen to spread knowledge of folk dance which he did by calling at a multitude of barn dances, sometimes using recorded music and later with the Bebington Band. Over the years, he supported the group financially from the earnings from the 'gigs'. He also choreographed and led demonstration dances and trained group members to dance at fetes and barn dances and notably at the Albert Dock and the Liverpool Garden Festival. The latter showed a chink in John's armour, when he attempted to sing along with the band using a microphone – a truly cringe-making experience for the dance team. John's music making ability was severely limited - he wasn't even allowed to play tambourine with the Bebington Band.

John (with Mary) built up a wide knowledge of folk traditions and the contemporary 'folk scene' through dancing together, reading and taking part in folk camps, EFDSS events and festivals and taking interest in the workings of the Folk Dance Society. They knew and were respected by a wide selection of dancers from other groups. After more than forty years in running Bebington group, he (and Mary) were awarded the Jubilee medal of the EFDSS in recognition of their services to Folk Dancing.

Having seen how folk camps worked John and Mary started to organise a series of annual folk camps, first at a small church at Tottlebank in the back of beyond in the Lake district, where water was brought in churns, there were fireflies in the churchyard and the toilet facilities were less than perfect. John was principal caller in the camp, seeming to have an enormous repertoire of dances. John had learnt the basics of making corn dollies, and taught himself some of the more complicated ones. He was keen to pass on his knowledge of corn dollies, giving camp an added dimension, interesting both adults and the children present.

A nice touch in the early days of the camps was that at the end he would solemnly announce the profit, and the amount which would be paid back to campers. He saw this as a useful piece of practical psychology – you felt almost as if you had been paid to go.

John enjoyed travelling. Having visited Canada, he returned with Canadian dances to expand the offerings at camp, including dances of lumberjacks – no reflection on the skills of Bebington members! The superior facilities at the

scout hut on Cartmel race course were discovered through the determination of Mary and John to continue the camp when Tottlebank was closed to us.

In conversation, John had a wealth of anecdotes and information which could be drawn on to illustrate a discussion on a huge range of topics, not just Folk matters. He was well read and informed, with firm opinions and tenacious in defending a position. Nevertheless, he could appreciate the humour of a situation.

John built a successful teaching career teaching Physics, mostly at St Anselms College (otherwise known to Birkenhead people as ‘the Anslums’), where he gave practical assistance to lighting plays and running the bar for fetes, and assisting on school trips to France. He was eventually appointed as Deputy Head, having amongst other things to draw up the school timetable – no mean feat.

He was strongly committed to his local church (Holy Name, Oxton), which was his spiritual home. Ever the practical man, he worked for the SVP helping to organise a boy’s camp for many years, and also visiting the elderly or infirm. His faith was the rock on which his loving family life was built with Mary and the children Michael, Helen and Katy. When the grandchildren arrived, John found new opportunities for play, education and care.

Sadly, in the last few years of his life, John found physical movement more and more difficult and slowly lost his ability to call. Eventually he had to stop altogether. He was supported strongly by his family as his health declined.

Knowing John has enriched our lives and we remember him with affection and his passing with sadness.

Olly Allen

Zoom!

I don't know how old the word 'zoom' is, but in the old days BC (Before Coronavirus) it had several uses, either the sound of an aeroplane taking off, or the enlarging of an object with a camera lens or on the desktop, not the top of a desk but a certain kind of computer. Maybe 'enlarging' could be a guide to its ultra-modern meaning of meeting other people, virtually, on a screen, thereby enlarging or enhancing your social life.

For those of us who have indulged in zooming during the current crisis, it has been a way of expanding our horizons beyond our own four walls. We have met up with friends, perhaps made new friends – I came across a comment that the lady concerned had never had such a busy social life, and her diary had never been so full!

We have even been able to keep up with our dancing. That's crazy, you say, it's not possible! I was one of the doubters but let me assure you that it is possible. I only dance once a week, but you can dance every day, and several times a day, all over the world. Some club callers started by hosting a meeting for their own club, other people have heard of it and asked to join in. When I joined one based mostly around south Lancashire there were only a few of us. Now we have friends joining from such places as Wirral, Gloucestershire, Yorkshire, North Wales, California and Iowa; no doubt it will expand further, and we have in turn been invited to join their meetings, as far away as Tasmania.

We have a caller, we have music and we have imagination! It is surprising how easy it is to imagine the other couples in a set or a longways dance, it is not quite so easy to imagine a partner. The dances have sometimes been slightly adapted, but if you think about it, one couple, usually the first couple, does most of the dancing in a round of the dance, so you stay as that privileged couple. A dance in which it works very well is Fandango, and we even danced Levi Jackson's Rag which was really enjoyable.

I am sure many of you have come across other activities, you can attend band workshops, festivals, exercise classes, church services, coffee mornings, lunches, even go Folk Camping – I am sure the list is endless. There are a lot of videos on platforms such as YouTube which illustrate the various activities, or if you would like more information please get in touch with me.

Mary Smith

David Anderton

Died early August, 2020.

David was one of a group of like-minded people who founded the St. Helens Folk Dance Group in the period just after the end of WW2. He was an active member of the group for many years as a dancer and MC as well as calling at local dances.

For several years David and his wife Audrey attended Burton Manor summer schools which were organised by Ethyl Anderson and they became Ethyl's number one couple in all her folk shows.

David was also an accomplished Morris Dancer as a leading member of the St. Helens Morris Group. David set a high standard for his dancers and in 1965 the group danced at the Whitby Folk Week which is quite an achievement.

David was one of the 'old school of dancers' who were taught by Ethyl Anderson. They were very much aware of dance technique and etiquette and he wanted to see those standards maintained at his club and public dances. He sometimes ruffled a few feathers but he always had the best interests of the dancers at heart.

David became less active in the dancing world in his later years but still kept in touch with his friends who I am sure will miss him greatly.