

Gold Badge Citation - Rollo Woods

I am humbled to stand before you faced with the nearly impossible task of condensing the life of Rollo Woods into a few hundred words of prose. To do so in the context of this award I must neglect his considerable contributions to Norwegian culture and tourism, his pioneering work in the automation of library catalogue systems, and his conspicuous devotion to his family. I will concentrate only on his involvement in the folk arts; an involvement that began long before I was born and continues to this day. In the belief that it would assist me in this task, his family, friends, and Rollo himself, have generously provided a total of 45 pages of biographical text upon which to draw. Such a wealth of interesting material, all relevant, necessitated many difficult editorial decisions. I hope you are sitting comfortably.

Rollo was born in 1925 with roots firmly planted in the pre-war folk revival. He describes himself as a fourth generation folkie and still has his great-grandfather's signed copy of Baring Gould's *Songs of the West*, from which his grandfather also sang, and his mother's English Folk Dance Society badge. His mother had attended St Paul's Girls School, Hammersmith, where she learnt folk songs and dances from Gustav Holst. When the EFDSS started a country dance class in Barnet in 1937 his mother enrolled and decided that young Rollo should go with her. The class was taught by Miss Hilda Cornock-Keen, a former member of Cecil Sharp's dance display team. Lessons began with half an hour of basic Morris, for which she played on an English Concertina, followed by country dancing to a piano. What a start for a twelve-year-old.

After war service in the Friends Ambulance Unit in England, Norway and France, Rollo went up to Cambridge in 1947 to read Modern Languages, including Norwegian. Safe in the bosom of Jesus College, he seems to have escaped the attention of the Apostles and joined, instead, the Cambridge University English Country Dance Club, otherwise known as The Round. The motto of The Round, *Ducdame, Ducdame, Ducdame*, is, according to Shakespeare, an invocation to draw fools into a circle. Rollo seems to have taken this instruction to heart and has continued to apply it throughout his life. Further distractions followed in rapid succession, including the acquisition of a concertina, admission to the Cambridge Morris Men and sojourns in Norway that led to a lifelong collaboration with his wife Anne. With regard to the latter, Rollo has said 'I made the fatal mistake of marrying someone who wasn't a folkie' - but their marriage is recorded in the annals of The Round, and that is done only if both halves of the couple are members. Be that as it may, the 'mistake' has endured for more than sixty years.

Rollo served as Chair of The Round in 1953-4 and Squire of Cambridge Morris Men in 1954. In his own words, 'he danced well enough to be a useful member of a side' but at Cambridge he developed primarily as a musician. He had taken up the English concertina rather than the more percussive Anglo, yet he devised a way of playing that can exhibit all the 'punch' necessary to support the vigour of the Morris dance. A widely respected player then and now, Rollo is one of very few EFDSS members still living who have played in the company of William Kimber, 'Scan' Tester and Bob Cann. When the Travelling Morrice visited the New Forest in 1952 Rollo met the fiddler Stephen Baldwin and subsequently encouraged Peter Kennedy to record him, thus capturing an unbroken tradition of 18th century hornpipe playing just a few years before Baldwin's death in 1955 at the age of 83.

There were few country dance bands at that time, and folk dance clubs relied mainly on records. Rollo decided to redress the balance, and formed his first band in 1957. He has described this experience as very enjoyable, though he found it difficult due to his lack of proper musical training (a deficiency he seems to have since overcome). That band was short lived because Rollo moved to Southampton in 1959 to take up a position there in the University Library, but the seed was sown. Finding a local folk dance club but no band, he set to work and the Black Glove Band was born. According to Rollo, a black glove hoisted on a pole meant that a fair was being held and music was allowed in the streets. I have not been able to find independent confirmation of that story, but internet searches for 'black gloves' can lead to some interesting diversions. The band flourished during the ceilidh boom of the early 1960s and continued to thrive till Rollo's retirement from the University in 1987. A particularly strong musical partnership had formed when Ruth Askew, a musician from the tradition of village bands, joined the Black Glove Band. Rollo and Ruth remained in contact and played together whenever possible, often on the seafront at Sidmouth, until her death in 2009.

Another of Rollo's regular activities in the 1960s and later were the Folk weekends held at Avon Tyrrell, a large country house used as a youth club centre. At his first, he was asked to take a children's music session. As most of the children were too young to play a melody instrument they had to be supplied with percussion instruments. This precipitated an absorbing study of folk percussion from different countries, as a result of which Rollo made all sorts of things that could be shaken or hit. The respected EFDSS publication *Join the Band*, compiled by Barbara Wood, contains some of the music Rollo put together for the children at Avon Tyrrell.

Rollo never saw himself as a performer - more as a provider of music to serve the dancing. He has a prodigious memory for tunes and spent much time researching and arranging music from a wide range of sources. The line-up of the Black Glove Band changed over the years as members left to form their own bands, taking with them copies of Rollo's sets. Recognizing a wider demand for tuition, Hampshire County Council's Education Department eventually invited Rollo to run an evening class entitled *Playing in a Folk Band*, which ran for many years. Other bands sprang from these classes and his tune arrangements soon became common currency in bands across Hampshire and Dorset, and further afield.

The move to Southampton enabled Rollo to join the Winchester Morris Men, led by Lionel Bacon. In the introduction to his seminal work *A Handbook of Morris Dances*, published in 1974 for the Morris Ring, Bacon records his particular thanks to Rollo Woods for making his extensive collection of tunes available. Rollo remained an active member of the Winchester team for more than twenty years but after several muscular injuries in the early 1980s he reluctantly withdrew from dancing.

On retiring to Swanage in 1987 Rollo gathered together a new band, taking the name Greenwood Tree to honour Dorset's Thomas Hardy – of which more later. As in Southampton, many people found encouragement and were helped to develop their own skills through playing with Rollo in this band and at other local sessions he attended. Greenwood Tree folded after more than twenty years but, following a short break and then aged 88, Rollo started Maiden Oak, a band he continues to lead today. Apparently, Maiden Oak is a species of European oak exhibiting considerable longevity and valued especially for its dark, heavy, tough, elastic wood – thus serving as a perfect metaphor for Rollo at the concertina.

Thus far, I have addressed Rollo's activities primarily from the point of view of dance. As a folk musician and former Morris dancer, I share with you the debt we owe him. But now I turn to the subject that, more than any other, has formed a bond between us – West Gallery music. To quote a leading authority on the subject: *West Gallery music is the name commonly given to the music of country churches and chapels in the period 1740 to 1860 where the music was led not by an organ but by a small band, which in many churches sat in a gallery at the west end of the church.*

That leading authority is, of course, Rollo himself. Following the chance discovery of a set of band manuscripts from Widecombe in 1971, Rollo started researching the music of the church bands that used to play for services. There is a strong association with folk dance music here; the church bands often having a dual function as the local dance band and indeed playing at other civic events. The demise of such bands is described with much affection in Thomas Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree* and Rollo combined his research with a study of Hardy's other writings and the Hardy family's own musical history.

Earlier academic writings dismiss this rural church music as being of the lowest quality and a disgrace to the church. Consequently Rollo made no attempt to edit or perform his findings till, in 1975, he ventured to show some to David Kettlewell, then EFDSS representative for Hampshire. Kettlewell immediately saw quality in the material and organized an Early Victorian Evensong at a village church near Southampton, using Rollo's research and arrangements and drawing together a motley collection of singers and musicians for the purpose. The pieces Rollo had selected showed the true potential of the material and led to the foundation of a permanent group of singers and instrumentalists. In 1978 that group, by then called The Madding Crowd, performed at Sidmouth with Mike Bailey conducting and set in train a new and continuing festival tradition. Since those early days The Madding Crowd has given hundreds of performances and built up a vast repertoire of West Gallery music.

In 1990 Gordon Ashman convened a meeting of interested parties in Ironbridge, attended by Rollo and others, which culminated in the formation of the West Gallery Music Association. At the time, Ashman was working independently on a West Gallery manuscript from Shropshire that had been found among papers in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library and brought to his attention by the librarian, Malcolm Taylor. Representatives from the BBC were present at the Ironbridge meeting and, seeing the Madding Crowd performing in costume, suggested a West Gallery Songs of Praise for that autumn. Rollo was charged with assembling the performers for the broadcast and, from that group, went on to form what became Purbeck Village Quire, joining the band himself on bass concertina or flageolet.

Before I close, other things must be mentioned, if only in passing: Rollo has become an expert on English Carol music and is currently compiling an archive of his collection of carol tunes. In 2008 he and I both appeared on television in *The Truth about Carols*, a BBC production presented by Howard Goodall that was broadcast on Christmas Day – though it must be said that he was far more prominent than I. His authoritative book on West Gallery music, *Good Singing Still*, was published in 1995. It has long been out of print but Rollo is currently working on an updated edition supported by fellow members of the WGMA. In 2000 he co-edited *Praise and Glory*, the WGMA's compendium of psalm tunes from the era of the church bands, and his collection of secular church band tunes, *Never on Sunday*, was published in 2009. I could go on ...

The EFDSS awards its Gold Badge not to commemorate endurance or longevity but to acknowledge the depth and breadth of the recipient's contribution to the preservation, performance and development of our rich heritage of folk arts. In presenting it to Rollo Woods today, I am confident that it is justly deserved.

Jack Crawford

Chairman: West Gallery Music Association

Former Director and Trustee of the English Folk Dance and Song Society