

Fay Hield's EFDSS Gold Award presentation - 14th December 2025

Professor Stephanie Pitts

It is a huge pleasure to have been asked by my friend and colleague Professor Fay Hield to present her with this EFDSS Gold Award today. This well-deserved nomination was made by Fay's former PhD student and Soundpost colleague, Dr Nic Beazley, along with Stuart Young, a graduate of the MA in Traditional Musics and a Soundpost regular, and so it is in itself an indication of how much Fay's influence is valued by the people she teaches and works with. Since I'm not a folk musician myself - in fact everything I know about folk music I have learned from Fay - I'm drawing heavily on her nomination today, as well as on my attempts to contact some of Fay's musical collaborators, of which more later.

Nic and Stuart described in their nomination how Fay "has made exceptional contributions to the folk scene in England, as a standout performer and interpreter of traditional song. She has a long list of award-winning recorded output spanning several decades, and has graced many of the main stages of the folk scene in England, where her storytelling performance style and delivery of traditional material is always performed from the heart."

To find out more about where this journey began, I've had help from Bryony Griffith, one of the Witches of Elswick with whom Fay made her first strong impression on the folk scene. Bryony told me how "Twenty-five years ago, Fay moved into a flat in Elswick with me [Bryony], Becky Stockwell (now Graham), and Gillian Tolfrey, when she came up to Newcastle to study. We would sing together, just for fun, back at the flat, but it was Fay who suggested we could do some proper arrangements and get some gigs. Before we knew it, and with support and encouragement from the much-missed Maggie Boyle, The Witches of Elswick were touring the country in Fay's little Ford Fiesta, singing and teaching hardcore a cappella folk songs with a recording contract under our belt."

Bryony and Nic used almost the same words to describe Fay, as a "thinker and a doer" who "gets stuff done, makes things happen and inspires others to do the same." Some other examples of this include the groundbreaking 'Full English' performance project, part of the EFDSS national archive and education programme, which generated an acclaimed album and an extensive tour. One such major collaboration would be enough for some people, but Fay has gone on to lead -

amongst other things - the Modern Fairies project, which brought academics, writers, musicians and artists together to reimagine the role of folklore and the supernatural in the modern world. We should all be warned that Fay knows how to sing us into the form of a hare, should she be so inclined!

One of the musicians who has been with Fay throughout many of these projects is the bass player Ben Nicholls, who offered his thoughts for this occasion: "Fay is a fearless musical collaborator and promoter of traditional music as a community activity. She is always an enthusiastic advocate for folk traditions but never shies away from pushing the boundaries of what that means. Her energy reverberates out to all those who share stages or work with her."

Fay is now a Professor of Music at the University of Sheffield, and her uses of that position are strongly community-focused. Her own PhD on 'English Folk Singing and the Construction of Community' prompted the founding of Soundpost, now a flourishing folk arts organisation, running popular youth and adult groups, study days, schools' projects, and the annual Carols at Winter Garden sings. Fay was awarded another major research grant to lead the 'Access Folk' project, to explore ways to increase and diversify participation in folk singing in England. With her project team - Esbjörn Wettermark, Rebecca Draisey-Collishaw and Helen Grindley - she has developed a co-produced approach to research, consulting with the communities that she aims to understand, and so ensuring that the research is ethical and relevant.

Nic and Bryony summed up these qualities beautifully too, in their accounts of Fay's life and work. Bryony reminds us that "Fay's ideas have a real effect on the community [and] her fearless determination and ambition have opened up the joy of folk song and music to many people, of all ages and abilities." It is fitting for Fay to receive this award here in Sheffield and specifically in the Winter Garden, where we have today celebrated being part of 'the capital of folk.' With many of Fay's projects coming into their second decade, her impact and her ethos have contributed enormously to the wider English folk scene, and she is a more than worthy winner of this EFDSS Gold Award for 'Those who have rendered distinguished service to the aims of the English Folk Dance and Song Society through their exceptional contribution.'