

Jo and Simon Harmer: Gold Badge Citation

Jo and Simon Harmer were presented with their Gold Badges in Shedfield, Hampshire on 18th November 2022.

The citation was presented by Jen Cox, with musical interludes from Lewis Wood as indicated in the text

It's a huge honour to be able to be here on this very special occasion to celebrate Jo and Simon and everything they've done for all of us.

With long and distinguished careers in dance performance, education and research, both Jo and Simon Harmer have made immeasurable contributions to the validity and depth of the traditions they love, with a wide-reaching impact both within and outside the folk world. The value of their contribution is worthy of recognition for the broad range and quality of their work, as well as for the extremely warm, encouraging, inspiring and convivial spirit in which they engage with all their projects. Although they have worked separately as well as together, their careers are so intrinsically linked that a joint Gold Badge award seemed most fitting.

Jo and Simon met in Portsmouth on May Day in 1981, when Jo first saw Simon clog dancing at the Railway Folk Club and asked him to teach her: that's where it all began... Simon was a founder member of the Portsmouth-based Mary Rose and Royal George Street Dancers, which Jo then joined, and both contributed to the team's innovative choreography.

After marrying in 1983, they became members of Devil's Jumps Clog dancers, learning directly from dancers like Sam Sherry, Pat Tracey, Alex Boydell and Alex Woodcock. From 1990 until 2018, they were part of the Chequered Flag Appalachian Team and from 2000 to 2004, Simon choreographed for MetalloBocca, a teenage Appalachian side.

Simon continues to innovate and perform as a step dancer, but they are both now happiest when "having a step" in informal pub sessions like here tonight.

♪ The Third Wednesday

Both spent their professional careers in education. Simon was a deputy headteacher in Special Education and Jo taught in primary schools,

before specialising in music with Hampshire and Portsmouth Music Services. They both incorporated folk song and dance in their teaching.

Their teaching skills transferred easily across to their own folk dance involvement, and they became respected stepdance workshop leaders covering English clog, Appalachian and Canadian styles.

Jo visited Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, in 1993 and was amazed by the vitality and dynamic connection between music and step dancing within the culture. She met and collected family steps from fiddler and step dancer Jackie Dunn, which she began sharing and promoting in workshops from 1995 onwards. On further Canadian trips with Simon they were welcomed into the village dances, where dancers of all ages improvised through the same simple set figures all night with no caller, to the playing of irresistible jigs and reels. This was dancing heaven, but a long way from home!

♪ Trip To Windsor

Their move to Bishop's Waltham in 2006 coincided with a general interest in researching Hampshire folk traditions, being the centenary of Gardiner's song collecting. As a Hampshire Music Service (HMS) teacher, Jo was keen to raise awareness of traditional English folk music and dance in schools and had been running CPD sessions for teachers at Music Service Conferences. With folklorist Paul Marsh, Jo eventually produced the "Singa Songa Hampshire" resource for HMS. Paul Marsh's Forest tracks website was to prove a treasure trove, as was the EFDSS Take 6 online resource which predated the Full English materials.

In 2008 the Harmers became active members of the Instep Research Team, a charity which researches, notates, curates an online archive and actively promotes English step dancing.

Through Instep in 2009, Simon and Jo were asked to interview and collect steps from Brighton step dancer Valerie Shipley, who is from a settled Traveller background and was then in her late 70s. The gulf between Val's dancing and the performance-based clog routines they were accustomed to couldn't have been wider. Val's steps took her across the floor, improvising to recordings ranging Southern English jigs and polkas to upbeat James Brown tracks, while recounting memories of her relatives stepping in pre-war Brighton pubs and at family gatherings. Val's own personality and musicality shone through her dancing.

Meeting Val began their involvement with informal improvised social step dancing which had they known it, had always been on their doorstep ... this was “coming home”.

♪ Bang Up

Through Val, they met Janet Keet Black, also from a settled Traveller family. Janet, with the support of Kerry Fletcher and Rosie Davies had recently set up the monthly stepping sessions at the Swan pub in Falmer, which Val also attended. With Will Duke at the heart of the music, the session provided a social context within which stepping was encouraged. “You can’t get this wrong!” was the philosophy when starting people off: one that Jo and Simon always promote. The Swan sessions effectively initiated the revival of what has become known as Southern English Stepping. For both Val and Janet, they just “stepped” in the way their families had always “stepped” in this informal heel and toe stepping which would have been common across the wider population.

Jo and Simon began looking for stepdancing within Hampshire and met the glorious Peter Ingram who has become a great friend. Paul Marsh was hugely supportive, taking them out to the music night running in East Boldre and they learned from Paul that the Barleycorn pub 20 yards from their house regularly hosted traditional musicians and steppers until the early 1980s.

A May Day concert in 2010 celebrating Hampshire songs and music was the first time Jo and Simon heard Jigfoot. They were playing Hampshire stepdance tunes researched by fiddler Cath Watkins, in an irresistibly dancey way! Before long Cath and Simon were using an article from Paul Marsh’s website to explore Alice Gillington’s publications which included songs, tunes and dance descriptions collected from Hampshire Traveller families in the early decades of the 20th century.

♪ Jacky Robinson

Members of Jigfoot were introduced to the Falmer sessions, then Jo, Simon and Deb Lewis, with Jigfoot, spent time developing Alice Gillington’s tunes with her vague descriptions of social dances into simple couple dances. Gillington wrote that the dancers stepped through these social dances. Having danced with Val Shipley and Janet Keet Black, adding simple heel/toe stepping into the figures felt natural.

Cath began playing for Jo’s folk education workshops, and Jo and Simon stepped at the music sessions Cath and Nic Bradford were hosting in

Southampton. With Janet Keet Black's encouragement they decided to set up a stepping session in Hampshire. Samuel's Rest pub in Shedfield was chosen because of its past links with traditional music and stepping.

Monthly stepping sessions have run here since May 2012. Jo describes what happens as encouraging people to "let the dance out" of themselves. The busy pub provides a "safe" space for trying things out: there's real joy in encountering amazing live dance music and being able to respond instantly, individually and naturally.

Cath and Nic have focused a core of musicians who delight in the dance responses and exchanges brought out through their playing. Cath says they play with, not for the stepping.

Jo and Simon, with Jigfoot playing, began running stepping workshops at festivals, usually with Janet Keet Black alongside them. From 2013 onwards, the natural extension was to initiate the 'Steppin' Time' music and dance sessions at Sidmouth Folk Week, as part of the Instep programme. These sessions have been brilliantly curated to allow different step dance worlds to meet, mingle and flourish alongside one another, with participants from a broad range of ages and folk backgrounds. The inspiration the Harmers have been able to impart through these sessions has a far-reaching impact, down into the next generations of dancers and performers.

♪ Uncle George's

Cath and Simon's research into Alice Gillington evolved into the performance piece, *The Hither Side of the Hedge*, incorporating stepping, song, social dancing and storytelling, and involving Janet Keet Black, Peter Ingram and Deb Lewis alongside Jigfoot and the Harmers. As well as folk festival performances, the show was taken to Thorney Hill in the New Forest, where Alice Gillington had lived alongside Gypsy families. Simon then collaborated with local artist Sarah Keen to produce the book "The Traveller's Heart Goes Home", combining Gillington's biography with some of her published poetry.

Jo has found stepping to be a fabulous vehicle for connecting people and encouraging wellbeing and community. In 2013, Cath Watkins invited her to collaborate in launching FolkActive, a CIC which uses folk dance and music in different settings to improve health and wellbeing, bring communities together and educate all age groups to connect and engage with their folk heritage. Cath's background in community music initiatives and her job as an advice worker with a refugee charity in

Southampton complemented Jo's experience and contacts in schools and with the local Music Education Hubs. Jo and Cath were later joined as Directors by musicians and educators Tom Gregory and Chris Nichols.

FolkActive is a diverse and dynamic organisation with a broad reach, and interestingly, stepping is used in most of the activities which include:

- Regular "active ageing" FolkActive Dances to live music and dementia friendly sessions using folk music, movement and song
- Community Workshops and Demonstrations, including sessions with asylum seekers
- Southampton Folk Orchestra and FolkActive Youth Ensemble
- School workshops and large ceilidh projects in collaboration with local Music Hubs

A highlight was the FolkActive collaboration with the Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service using Hampshire Music Service funding to deliver stepping projects in North Hampshire Schools, within which children from Traveller families form the highest ethnic minority. Again, Janet Keet Black was able to accompany Jo and Cath, in schools and onto Traveller sites. These projects left no doubt that stepping is still very much alive in Hampshire Traveller families.

FolkActive has contributed to and benefited from many of the Folk Education Network Conferences and Meetings organised by Kerry Fletcher, so it's wonderful to have her here representing EFDSS this evening.

Simon's retirement has enabled him to develop as a dancer and to devote more time to researching, always with a creative outcome. In recent years, Simon has worked with Funk Format, a CIC in Portsmouth that provides access to Street Dancing for both adults and children. With Sasha Biloshisky, he has led two 'Step Your Way' youth projects, exploring the similarities between the 19th century Hornpipe and contemporary Street Dance.

In 2019 Simon researched and presented a paper on Whistling Billy's Barefoot Hornpipe to the 'Stepping On' conference at Cecil Sharp House, accompanied by a stunning performance of the steps which he had choreographed with the help of Sasha Biloshisky. A video of an informal rendition of this dance, recorded here at Sam's, later went viral on social media! In 2021 Simon also revived, through research and performance another routine, Miss Gayton's Hornpipe.

♪ Miss Gayton's Hornpipe

Simon has also provided dancing for the albums 'Seaspeak' by Joe Danks, a song cycle resulting from Joe's year in residency at the National Maritime Museum, and the 'Footwork' project by Lewis Wood, featuring original music for various styles of English Step Dancing in both a recorded album and a stunning live stage show.

During lockdown, with Lewis Wood on fiddle, he taught clog hornpipe steps over the internet for the Old Songs Festival in Upstate New York. He collaborated with Canadian dancer and researcher April Verch, in a project entitled 'Steps from the Heart', which combined research, performance and education and has recently produced a teaching video of Southern English Polka and Jig steps with Cath Watkins playing fiddle for the Rejigged Festival 2023 in Halifax Nova Scotia. So the stepping connections and exchanges continue to develop!

♪ Unnamed original waltz (Lewis Wood)

In the last few years Jo and Simon have become an intrinsic part of the informal step dance workshopping event, Camp Clog, started by Toby Bennett and I. Their generosity of spirit, creativity and readiness to impart their enthusiasm have contributed to making the event a very special space.

♪ In The Toy Shop

Jo says that she would sum herself up as a teacher and communicator: using music and dance as a vehicle for involving, encouraging, connecting, and sharing joy. Simon has always loved researching, developing a creative outcome, usually with a performance element, and always pushing boundaries.

Their joy, inspiration and warmth does indeed shine out wherever they go, and they are universally valued and loved by all those lucky enough to work or spend time with them. The huge positive impact they've had on so many lives, truly makes this a very richly deserved award.