

## **Carolyn Robson – Gold Badge Citation**

The award of the English Folk Dance and Song Society's Gold Badge – the Society's highest award – is made for unique or outstanding contributions to folk music, dance or song and/or exceptional contributions to the Society's work. To my mind, this is one of those rare occasions when the award could have been made under either category.

The Gold Badge was instituted in 1922, and in almost 100 years only just over 150 awards have been made. Today Carolyn Robson joins a roll of honour that includes the likes of Cecil Sharp, Ralph Vaughan Williams, The Watsons, Ewan McColl, Peggy Seeger and Shirley Collins.

Born in Northumberland, and still fiercely proud of her north east roots, Carolyn frequented folk music clubs and sessions around London while studying at the Royal Academy of Music and then becoming a qualified teacher. The fact that she is a trained singer yet retains the authenticity of her Northumbrian and Scottish borders singing voice is greatly to her credit and, I suggest, is indicative of her awareness and love of the tradition.

In the early 1990's the Tall Ships Race visited Tyneside. Carolyn, who by now was Education Officer of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, recruited local schools for a folk dance project. I was one of the folk artists involved with a brief to get children dancing and for each school group to devise its own folk dance. Folk dancing in schools was not so unusual, but getting children to create their own moves and make them into coherent dances was typical of Carolyn's innovative approach to her job.

I remember one school – it might have been in Byker – where the teacher was very keen for every child to do something different in their dance, so for 8 bars each time the first B music came round children were pulling on ropes, turning capstans, hoisting sails, saluting, hauling in nets etc. etc. One girl did what she thought was most appropriate and each time for exactly 8 bars was seasick in 6/8 time.

Carolyn went on to devise training programmes for teachers and to persuade her employers to publish a series of resource packs showing how the folk arts could provide a thoroughly enjoyable activity while addressing the requirements of the National Curriculum.

As regional folk development initiatives started to develop and grow, a group of us, including Carolyn in her EFDSS role, would hold regular meetings as part of the fledgling Folk Arts Network. The BBC's national folk music programme was based at Pebble Mill, and Jim Lloyd, the presenter, and Geoffrey Hewitt, the producer, used to host our meetings there. It was an exciting time, and Carolyn's involvement meant that the rest of us started to see the EFDSS as a key partner in what we were doing.

After leaving the EFDSS, Carolyn's career blossomed both as a solo artist and as a singing amateur. Through the Natural Voices network and the Voices Foundation she did much to spread the notion that singing is everyone's birthright, regardless of musical experience or ability.

A few years ago we were working together as part of a Sing Up project in Bridgwater. Carolyn was particularly involved in rescuing a teachers training programme that had been long promised but long awaiting delivery.

A chance meeting with Mike, the man from the local authority, brought us into the project. Although he knew nothing at all about music of any sort he was passionate about his schools and community and horrified at how little singing was happening in schools. We knew that Carolyn was the man for the job and Mike, who wasn't very hot on remembering names either, sent out a gleefully enthusiastic email announcing that Barbara Dixon would be running the training course! 12 weary teachers tuned up to the first session and, as we would all expect, it was brilliant. At the end one of the teachers said quietly "That was just what we need, thank goodness Barbara Dixon couldn't make it!"

Carolyn was at the forefront in setting up community choirs in the Hampshire/Surrey area, and still leads the Alton Community Choir (who made the first moves for this award to be made and who are now in their 21<sup>st</sup> year), Petersfield Community Choir, Winchester Community Choir and Winchester's Take Note Chamber Choir. The quality of their singing speaks volumes for the quality of her leadership.

Nearer to home, Carolyn's family has been a folk development project in its own right. Anna, Freya and Nonny make more than a decent fist of singing in close harmony. Paul is more than a half decent fiddler and pipe maker. The family unit makes a decent folk dance band.

Craig Morgan Robson won friends and admirers wherever they sang, and Sarah Morgan's untimely death meant that Carolyn was able to diversify in partnerships with Moira Craig, Kevin Dempsey, Karen Tweed, Kathryn Tickell, Paul Hutchinson, Martyn Wyndham Read and Iris Bishop among others.

As she gets older Carolyn's singing seems to get younger, with her enthusiasm for singing undiminished. She has sung all round Britain and in the USA, Australia and New Zealand and will continue to sing for as long as people want to listen to her – which, of course, will be for ever!

There can be no more worthy recipient of this coveted award than Carolyn Robson.

Eddie Upton  
19<sup>th</sup> September 2021