

Pauline Woods-Wilson EFDSS Gold Badge Award 2025 – Citation

Written by Eliza Russell

Eliza Russell, Membership Communications Officer for The Morris Federation and editor of The Morris Federation's FedExtra magazine, has been involved in morris dancing for 28 years, since the age of 3, and in her time has both danced and played melodeon with a selection of teams and enjoyed a variety of styles including Cotswold, Border and North West.

Today we are here to present Pauline Woods-Wilson with an EFDSS Gold Badge award, recognising her outstanding contributions to Folk. I feel it is right that, not only do I explain just why she has truly earned such recognition, but that I also provide a bit of background information on her morris history, spanning 46 years, too.

History of Pauline Woods-Wilson

Pauline was born in 1960 in Kingston-Upon-Thames, Surrey, where she was raised. Her mother a Legal Secretary from Croydon, and her father an Accountant from Burnley, and both keen to raise their only daughter to have opportunities which they hadn't had, encouraged her to focus on education, go on to university and be successful. Pauline attended a selective grammar school and successfully gained entry to the University of Manchester in 1978 to study Mathematics.

In 1979, age 19, and in her second year, Pauline was invited to go to a Freshers ceilidh where the university team, Medlock Morris Men, gave a performance. She had never been to a ceilidh or encountered morris before this, having had minimal exposure to the folk scene whilst growing up and, when Medlock Morris said they were setting up a women's North West team, she decided to go along to practice and give it a go, despite having no idea what North West was. After a few weeks, several of Medlock left to join Manchester Morris Men and the team transitioned to dancing Cotswold and, following some encouragement from a fellow member who had danced with Great Western, Pauline joined Downes Morris (based in South London) in the holidays, learning to dance Fieldtown in the Great Western style, catching two trains to practice in order to do so – the start of her life-long habit of travelling distance to dance with morris teams! She experienced her very first folk festival, Sidmouth, with Downes Morris in 1981, and took the Fieldtown style back to university where she helped teach it to Medlock.

After completion of her mathematics degree, Pauline moved to Southampton in 1981 to undertake a Masters in Operational Research. Here the lure of morris was too strong to resist and she joined Red Stags, the Southampton University team. Following her graduation, Pauline went on to dance with Jackstraws in 1983 whilst working in Farnham for the Forestry Commission, and remained a member of Downes Morris, continuing to dance with the women's team whilst working in London for the Civil Aviation Authority. She also became the women's Foreman, taking on a leadership role for the first time within a morris side.

In her 46 years of dancing, Pauline has danced with a selection of teams from across the country, performing a variety of different styles and traditions. She is recognised by many today as a keen North West dancer, currently dancing with Chiltern Hundreds, Rivington Morris, and Liberty Hill, although her first true experience

of North West wasn't until 1986 when she moved to Leeds for work as a Senior Programmer for the University of Leeds Computing Service and joined Briggate Morris, having discovered there was no local women's Cotswold team. She then joined Wakefield shortly after, in about 1987, having been introduced to the team via a member of Briggate, and was informed they "dance across the music". Pauline states that it "took a fair while" to learn how to enjoy North West, having been a Cotswold dancer up until that point, but the passion grew, and she soon fell in love with the tradition.

Pauline's enthusiasm for joining teams continued into the 90s when, in 1991, upon learning that the men of Downes had formed an offshoot known as Downes On Tour, with no fixed abode or regular practice location, some of the women of Downes Morris decided to also start dancing together again. Thus, the joint team of Downes On Tour started, with Pauline getting together with her partner of 34 years, Dennis Taylor, in the process, through their shared love of morris.

In 1995, Pauline joined Windsor Morris after moving back down south to be with Dennis. Dennis was also keen, as he had previously been invited to join by Windsor's original musician, Alan Whear, some years earlier, and so they attended some taster sessions and joined the team together, with Pauline later going on to become Foreman.

In around 1998 Pauline found herself joining Chiltern Hundreds, encountered for the first time during a very wet Windsor Morris day tour. They performed Portland Hill upstairs in the Liberal Club, ripping up the wet floor in the process, and her fate was sealed. She continues to dance with them to this day, becoming the furthest-travelled and one of the longest-serving members of the team, alongside Dennis, having now been a member for over 25 years.

During her five years as Foreman for Windsor Morris, Pauline longed to bring the patterns of her now-beloved North West into the Cotswold traditions and alongside partner Dennis, created two Brackley, 8-person dances, 'Lust for a Sailor' and 'Alexander's Demise', written in an X formation by Pauline and to tunes arranged by Dennis. They also co-created the 3-person stick dance 'Gin and Lemon', inspired by the sticking movements of Downes On Tour Men. The dance was written with Badby styling and the figures modified for three people. When initially demonstrating the new dance, one person stated they felt "like a lemon" and another said, "I'd rather have a gin and lemon" and thus the dance was named. These dances are still part of the Windsor Morris repertoire to this day and form part of not just Pauline and Dennis's personal legacy but also the history of the team.

Pauline and Dennis moved north to Dent, Cumbria in 2003. After frequent trips to the Lake District for walking holidays with her parents as a child, along with Dennis's dream of living somewhere quiet and picturesque, and with Dent a frequent destination for trips away and location of their holiday cottage, they decided to make the move permanent. Despite being "away" members of both Windsor and Chiltern Hundreds, along with Downes On Tour, they went to watch Rivington Morris, based in Blackrod near Bolton, perform one mid-week evening at a pub by a canal. Along with a beer festival and a curry, and after admiring Rivington's straight lines and precision in dances for 12, plus being the serial team-joiner that she is, Pauline felt the pull of Rivington and, of course, became a member.

In 2010 Pauline was indoctrinated into the world of Rapper, when she joined Sisters in Arms Rapper, based in Preston, and then around the same time both Pauline and Dennis joined Crook Morris, their local team based in Kendal, after being invited by friends who were already members. Crook dance a mixture of Cotswold, Border and Rapper, and with Pauline as Tommy, went on to win the DERT Open competition in 2014.

In around 2017, whilst working for Lancaster University as Head of Project Management and Planning and having developed a taste for Border morris and its kit, Pauline joined Stone the Crows Border, based in Leyland, Lancashire, a shorter drive from her place of work.

In 2021, now retired from paid work, volunteering as President for The Morris Federation, and with only five current teams and plenty time for more, Pauline was approached to teach Cotswold Morris to the newly formed Lancaster University team, Red Rose Morris. Having worked at the university for a number of years, and with past teaching experience, history of dancing with two university teams herself, and a keenness for bringing folk traditions to future generations, how could she say no? She embraced the opportunity, bringing morris traditions to students from a variety of backgrounds.

Pauline saw an advert by newly formed, Midlands-based, North West team Liberty Hill in 2023, offering taster sessions. The opportunity to join another North West team, and one which had broken into the folk scene fully-formed and comprised of seasoned dancers, performing with a high energy style, was very alluring and, despite the long-distance travel to practice, and Dennis questioning the sanity of the situation, Pauline found herself dancing out with them for the first time in 2024.

The Morris Federation

In 2019, having retired early from working in IT, most recently as Head of IT Project Management at Lancaster University, Pauline decided she would like to dedicate her newly found free time to the Morris Federation in order to “give back” to the hobby she had enjoyed for 40 years. Following her long and varied career in IT and Project Management, she was used to managing projects, teams, and events, felt her work experience and skills stood her in good stead and applied for the role.

Following a successful campaign, she won the election and took up the post on January 1st, 2020, with three personal aims:

1. To continue expanding the web site with relevant information for member teams,
2. to assist younger/new teams with whatever they need (even just the admin of setting up a new team),
3. to communicate directly with individual dancers/musicians/performers via different media to involve them more in the work of the Morris Federation.

It was then she realised that being President was slightly more involved than just giving after dinner speeches as the role quickly took over not only her life, but Dennis’s too, whose ideas of a peaceful retirement were scuppered and instead replaced by lovingly supporting Pauline, allowing her time to carry out her new role to the best of her ability.

Covid-19 and events

With the first Covid-19 Lockdown announced on the 23rd March 2020, Pauline threw herself enthusiastically into her work, making it her personal Lockdown mission to keep people as engaged in folk as possible through otherwise bleak times, becoming “totally consumed” with the idea of taking morris events online to keep people interested and active despite restrictions on daily life.

With the idea of creating “Isolation Instructional” videos to share via the Morris Federation’s YouTube channel, to keep people dancing and engaged during the first lockdown, Pauline set about coercing fellow dancers and musicians into creating content. The first Instructional video was created by Owain Boorman and was for the Cotswold jig Nutting Girl, in the Fieldtown tradition. This proved hugely popular, being the first of its kind, and today is still the Morris Federation’s most viewed video, standing at 8500 views currently.

With the advent of Zoom, Pauline organised, advertised, ran and hosted a total of 41 zoom events during lockdowns between November 2020 and May 2021, and these had an engagement rate of 3088 participants. Due to isolation and restriction to going out during COVID Lockdowns, many people were lacking in the ability to partake in adequate physical activity, and thanks to Pauline’s initiative, the organised Zoom events and instructional videos provided such people with an opportunity to stay active, promoting both physical and mental wellbeing in a time where people were both socially and physically isolated.

Having successfully persuaded people to give up their time for free to run workshops on specialist subjects, the online events Pauline organised were across a very broad range of topics related to Folk and Folk Arts and included talks on various subjects such as making Rapper swords, Clog Making, Whittlesea Straw Bear, Pipe and Tabor, fiddle and melodeon playing, Using Information Technology to help your side, as well as dance workshops on Morris Jigs, North West solo dances, and a Border solo dance which was actually written by Pauline and Linda Glanville for the specific purpose of teaching to a Zoom audience.

It helped keep a wide variety of Folk traditions, including Morris dance, alive, and from encouraging people to engage on Zoom, many teams were able to survive and rekindle their love for dancing together when we came out the other side of lockdown.

Nothing like Lockdown had happened before, and we were all thrown into the unknown together, and thus Pauline was a pioneer in paving the way for creating online and free resources, events, talks, and dance workshops. It was an untested and untried way of connecting folkies together, but she ran with the idea, and it brought joy into people's lives – connecting them through the shared joy of Folk traditions, via a computer in her remote cottage in Cumbria. The outreach of the Zoom events and workshops was huge, reaching beyond the UK to Europe and the USA.

The Free to Everyone offering produced a large and varied outreach, with the highest number of participants for one workshop (Rhys Boorman's 'Returning to Dancing Fitness') attracting 289 participant screens. The Morris Federation's Zoom workshops were shared far and wide on social media and many morris dancers and folkies from outside The Morris Federation logged in to join in the workshops offered, happily making a donation to the speaker's chosen charity in order to attend. Neither the Morris Ring nor Open Morris had a programme of online zoom events during COVID, so this was completely unique to The Morris Federation, but the online events attracted people from the other Organisations.

The success of the Fed's online programme eventually sparked interest with the JMO, leading to a collaboration between the Morris Federation, Open Morris, and the Morris Ring in hosting a virtual JMO in 2021, with a day dedicated to Zoom events for both dancing and music. It is thanks to Pauline's initiative, passion and dedication that many teams from all three organisations continued dancing and managed to survive Lockdown with her ingenuity and determination to keep people engaged paving the way for The Morris Federation to create more hybrid events and embrace technology usage; to date she has organised Zoom events which have captured an audience of 5111 participant screens total.

Schools Project

One of Pauline's personal goals when taking on the role of President of The Morris Federation was to assist younger and newer teams, helping the next generation into morris and the folk scene. She engages enthusiastically with youth projects and is keen to secure a future in morris for generations to come, always looking for new ways to encourage participation of younger dancers and those of all backgrounds.

Pauline channelled this passion, along with her IT and Project Management skills into setting up the Buzzing Britain schools project, and in 2024 helped The Morris Federation win a successful Arts Council bid for £27000 of funding. This saw The Morris Federation connecting with 18 primary schools across 3 regions (NE Derbyshire, Kirklees, and Preston) to bring Morris dancing and Folk into schools. These areas were chosen because they had been recognised as "Levelling Up for Culture" regions and had diverse communities, as well as often a lack of funding for cultural activities. Many of the children who were engaged in the project had never heard of Morris dancing before and the project helped them not only engage with traditional English Cultural Heritage and Folk Traditions, but also to discover the local traditions which were right on their own doorsteps!

The project involved creating video and teaching resources which were then shown to and used for the children in schools, and The Morris Federation employed FOLK3D and Breaking Tradition to go into schools and directly engage with the children in workshops which mixed traditional Morris dancing with modern music and dance. The Morris Federation created 18 kit bags of sticks, bells and hankies and provided these on free loan to the schools taking part. The children were encouraged to then make their dances their own, choosing sticks, hankies or both, choose the music for their dances (tunes included The Wellerman and Baby Shark) and even design sashes and badges to wear for their performance, and this feeling of ownership helped engage them. The schools from the different regions then came together to perform in three “showcases” where they performed for each other, along with providing moral support, positive feedback on each other’s dances, and the chance to see a selection of Folk and other styles of dance in action including Step Clogging, Break Dancing, Rapper, a traditional Cotswold Morris team, and a fusion of Morris Jig with Martial Arts!

The result of the project was 18 groups of children who had fused Morris Dancing with Modern Dance, Break Dancing and Gymnastics, and were clearly loving it! Several of the 18 schools requested that The Morris Federation come back and teach the children again, and one school had even started up a dance club off the back of the project. A lot of the children in this particular school, and many of the others, had additional needs or came from particularly deprived backgrounds and had not been fortunate to have been given many opportunities, some having never been on a school trip prior to the showcase events. The project had broadened their horizons and presented experiences beyond morris.

One thing which really stood out was during the initial Showcase in Derbyshire when Pauline witnessed the result of the project for the very first time. Overcome with emotion it was clear to all that she was touched by the enthusiasm and success presented to her by the children, as they danced Wheatley Trunkles so proudly, keen to show what they had learned. It touched hearts, and the pride in her voice when she congratulated the children spoke volumes, with the passion for her work and pride in its success, not just as a dance activity but instead one with a deeper impact for a lot of the participants, clear to see. A second bid for Arts Council funding is now underway with hope that the project can run again to reach an even wider audience.

Digital Updates

One of Pauline’s goals upon becoming President was to update the Morris Federation’s website and improve methods of communication the organisation used. Well-versed in the use of IT, she drew upon skills from her working life and went about setting up what have now become the regular “What’s On?” Morris Federation Broadcast emails, taking more communication online to raise rates of engagement within the Morris Federation membership by advertising events and sharing relevant news and information via regular email broadcast.

Alongside this, Pauline added vital information and content to the Morris Federation website, including updating the old Member’s Manual guidance for teams and making it all available online, two new digital-only publications, and, following successful negotiation, digital archive copies of Rattle Up My Boys magazine, and many other pages besides. She changed the way the AGM packs went out, making them available to Morris Federation members online and through the website instead of in paper form in order to make these vital documents as accessible as possible.

Pauline also paved the way for online and hybrid AGMs, taking the Morris Federation’s AGM exclusively online in both 2020 and 2021, enabling the meetings to go ahead whilst Covid-19 restrictions were in place. Following return to life post-Lockdown, and keen to continue using technology now it had been embraced and proven successful, but with the possibility of a regular AGM with Day of Dance attached a reality once more, Pauline went about encouraging the committee to set up and embrace hybrid AGM meetings, allowing for members to not only attend in person but also for those further afield to join the AGM online via Zoom, or to watch via a

YouTube live stream, in an effort to make the event as accessible to the membership as she could and maximise attendance.

Improved Relations

As President, Pauline sits on the JMO (Joint Morris Organisations) committee as representative of The Morris Federation, taking turns to Chair the JMO Committee every three years. The JMO is a collaboration between the three major morris organisations: The Morris Federation, The Morris Ring and Open Morris. Within this Committee are sub-groups, including the EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) panel, of which Pauline is also a member. An advocate for making morris dancing as accessible and inclusive as possible, Pauline has worked to bring inclusive and improved language around gender to the Morris Federation website, working to update and modernise the language used in the Morris Federation's Teamfinder web tool to better respect our diverse membership and to reflect positive shifts in attitude towards language use.

In Pauline's time as President, we have seen vast improvements in relationships between the three morris organisations and EFDSS. She is a wonderful team player and has worked tirelessly to strengthen ties between the Morris Federation, Open Morris, and the Morris Ring. Relationships between the 3 morris organisations and EFDSS have never been as strong as they are now, with one Fed officer noting "we are now on hugging terms!". Along with the strengthened bond between the orgs has come a desire to work even more closely together, and, as a result, change in some long-held attitudes and practices, with the three organisations now working firmly together instead of separately, collaborating on policies and moving morris into the 21st century, strengthening it for the future.

Final thoughts

Pauline has worked tirelessly to get not only herself but also The Morris Federation to the point we are at today. Going into the 50th anniversary of the Fed, which was originally set up as the Women's Morris Federation in response to the Morris Ring historically allowing only male members, and being only the second Federation President, and only female one, to ever receive a Gold Badge, the other being John Bacon in 2018, it seems fitting that this is the year she should receive this award. I would like to congratulate her on behalf of The Morris Federation Committee and our members and thank her on behalf of the folk world for all she has done and continues to do.

I asked her what the highlights of her time working as President are and was touched when I realised that all her highlights featured bringing people together and improvements in lives. The Zoom workshops which brought people together during unprecedented times, the Schools Project which provided children with valuable life experiences, the strengthened relationships between the three morris organisations, and the joy she feels when meeting other people as enthusiastic and as passionate about morris as she is. Pauline, your humble attitude, positive outlook, dedication, determination, and passion for the things you love make you an outstanding and remarkable person, and we are so proud of you.