

‘Nibs Matthews’ – Sidney Alfred Matthews

Leading folk dancer and administrator

By **Derek Schofield**

Obituary in The Guardian

Monday 17 April 2006 00.33 BST

Starting as a schoolboy in Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire, Nibs Matthews, who has died aged 85 in hospital from a heart attack, became the outstanding folk dancer of his generation, rising to become the director of the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS).

Aged 12, he joined the local folk dance class, where his natural ability was noticed by his teacher, Beryl Frere. She taught him morris and social folk dances, and he danced a solo jig at the EFDSS's Royal Albert Hall festival in 1935. Although he was too young for the folk dance vacation schools, the rules were waived and he was chosen to give displays alongside the director, Douglas Kennedy, and attended specialist dance classes at Cecil Sharp House in London.

In 1939, Nibs visited the morris dancer and musician William Kimber, whose meeting with Cecil Sharp in 1899 had put in motion the folk dance revival. Kimber's Headington Quarry Morris Dancers had temporarily disbanded, but Nibs and his friends from Bishop's Stortford danced to William's accompaniment at the traditional morris displays in Bampton, Oxfordshire, on Whit Monday.

Born in London, Sidney Matthews - he had no idea where he acquired the nickname "Nibs" - was the son of a decorator father and a mother who was a school cook. He left school at 14, and worked in a shop before the second world war took him to Egypt, Italy and Greece. On demobilisation, he joined the EFDSS's staff in 1946, working in Devon, then in Cornwall. There he married his colleague Jean Forsyth, and they later moved to Cheltenham.

The folk dance revival was in the process of radical change. Instead of a classroom-based staid atmosphere, the emphasis was on greater access, the simpler traditional dances and the dance "caller". The policy was a great success, especially when the Queen, then Princess Elizabeth, was photographed square dancing in Canada. In the resulting square dance boom of the fifties, Nibs became a nationally recognised dance caller. He emerged as a radio and television personality through the BBC's regular folk dance programmes.

In 1955, Nibs became the first director of the Sidmouth Folk Festival, establishing it as a major event in the folk scene's calendar. He was Squire of The Morris Ring from 1960 to 1962, and then he and Jean spent a year in the US leading the folk society's sister organisation, the Country Dance and Song Society. Following Douglas Kennedy's retirement in 1961, there were several attempts to restructure

the EFDSS, and on Nibs's return to Britain, he became the national adviser on folk dance, before being appointed artistic director in 1966, and director in 1975.

This was again a period of great change, based on the renewed popularity of folk song. Coping with this popularity was beyond the resources of the EFDSS, and there was resistance to change from its established membership. Nibs tried valiantly to steer a middle course between the demands of the members, as expressed through the national executive, and the wider responsibilities of his national organisation.

His ability as a superb dance teacher continued throughout his employment by the EFDSS. His dance technique workshops were a successful feature of many festivals, and he often produced the annual festival in the Royal Albert Hall. Nibs was a vice-chairman of the movement and dance division of the Central Council for Physical Recreation, and he adjudicated at international folk dance competitions, including the Llangollen International Eisteddfod. In 1977 he became an MBE for his services to folk music and dance. He was a major in the Territorial Army from the 1950s and was awarded the Territorial Decoration.

Illness restricted his folk dance activities after retirement, but Nibs became a regular visitor to Bampton and he was always a guest of honour at the Headington Quarry Morris gatherings.

Jean predeceased him in 1994: they had no children.

- Sidney Alfred 'Nibs' Matthews, folk dancer and administrator, born November 19 1920; died March 3 2006