

Nibs and Jean Matthews

Status: Deceased
Specialty: English
Range: English



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Sidney Alfred "Nibs" Matthews was born on November 19, 1920. He grew up in Bishop's Stortford, where his mother was a school cook and his father a painter and decorator. All his life he was known by his nickname of Nibs. At school he was thought of as a bright lad and sang in the church choir in a strong treble good enough to perform solos.

Nibs began folk dancing in England in 1931 at the age of eleven. In 1938, he was awarded the Advanced Folk Dance Certificate of the English folk Dance Society. In 1939, before the Second World War, he danced to William Kimber's playing in Bampton and Thaxted. By the time Matthews was 14 he was dancing a solo morris dance at the English Folk Dance and Song Society's annual festival at the Royal Albert Hall, and was thus to meet the second great influential figure in his life, Douglas Kennedy, Cecil Sharp's successor as director of the Society.

Aged 18 he had joined the Territorial Army, was called up and became Sergeant Matthews. He applied for and received a commission. He completed his military service from 1939 to 1946. When war ended Matthews returned to civilian life. It was then that Douglas Kennedy intervened and suggested that Matthews should join the soon to be expanded staff of the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS). He was appointed to the National Headquarters Staff, and represented the Society in the Western Area as its Organizer, eventually becoming its Artistic Director, then Director.

Nibs joined the English Folk Dance and Song Society at a time when the whole nature of the folk revival was in the process of radical change. Simple dances to strong lively music, learned at dances rather than classes, were bringing in a much larger public. When, in 1951, a photograph of the Queen (then Princess Elizabeth) and the Duke of Edinburgh square dancing in Canada appeared in the national press, everyone wanted what the society had to offer. Nibs became first a popular local "caller" and then nationally known as "caller" for the BBCs radio and later television programmes from Bristol, based on English and American folk dance and song.



Matthews agreed and was sent to train in the West Country. A young lady, Jean Forsyth, was appointed to show Matthews the ropes. Working first as a teacher in Cornwall, which he adored, he moved to Cheltenham in 1950, where he married Jean, and became responsible for the work of the society in the West Midlands.

The Sidmouth festival, started in 1955, was run by the EFDSS with 100 attendees under Nibs Matthews as dance director. Nibs also led the first Halsway Manor Morris Weekend in 1964. The festival celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2004.

From 1960 on, he took the part of the "Caller" in the West of England Country Dancing Programs and occasionally in the Midland "Dancing English." He has frequently appeared on British Broadcasting Company (BBC) television programs. From 1960 to 1962, in addition to his regular Society work, he was "Squire" (president) of the Morris Ring, an national organization of men's Morris Clubs. As a member of the EFDS team, he attended numerous international festivals and has taught groups in France, Ireland, Italy, Scotland, Spain, and the United States.

Colin Hume said of Nibs, "I remember Nibs Matthews complaining about people clapping as they turned out of the right-hand star in "Morpeth Rant" because that wasn't the way it had been collected." Rosemary Tawney mentions, "I recall with great pleasure the effect (temporary, unfortunately) that a visit from Nibs Matthews had on our local club. They suddenly realised that dancing is not merely a somewhat desultory physical exercise, but that they were actually taking part in a social function with members of the opposite sex!"

Jean Matthews studied music at the Royal College of Music and was an Associate of the Royal College of Music (ARCM). From 1946 to 1960, she worked for the EFDS as a specialist in youth club dance leadership, then became a youth club leader and a member of the Society's Folk Music Festival Committee.

Matthews became vice-chairman of the movement and dance division of the Central Council for Physical Recreation, for which he was appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE). But it was as a dancer and a teacher that Matthews will be best remembered; having learned from masters, his Morris was classical and his teaching clear and authoritative.



In 1963 and again in 1964, Nibs and Jean Matthews traveled to the United States to teach dancing. The CDS (Country Dance Society) had invited the Artistic Director of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, Nibs Matthews, together with his wife Jean, to be on the staff of the Dance Weeks program at Pinewoods Camp. Nibs had been an active Morris dancer and was a past Squire of the Morris Ring, a loose federation of Morris teams in England. But he had never seen American Morris dancers, and probably did not expect to find any whose style and ability were comparable to those of the English teams. That Americans could dance at that level must have been completely unexpected. At Nibs prompting, even though it did not meet all the admission requirements, the *Pinewoods Morris Men* from the United States team joined the English Morris Ring and toured around the United Kingdom.

He retired in 1985. Illness that made it harder for him to walk brought an end to his dancing. When he became frail his greatest pleasure was to visit, with a little help, the Whit Monday Morris dancing at Bampton and Headington, where the Morris is probably at its finest -- although he spent as much time reliving memories with old mates as he did in watching the dancing.

Jean died of a stroke in 1994. Sidney Alfred "Nibs" Matthews, MBE, TD, folk dancer, and former director of the English Folk Dance and Song Society died on March 3, 2006, aged 85.

Among Nibs' publications and recordings are

- Article. *Root & Branch 2*. Nibs Matthews. (This issue explores aspects of the folk movement in the decades after the Second World War and particularly looks at a fascinating period from late 1940s through the 1950s leading into the 1960s folk revival and sets the scene for the revival to go ahead.) April 2000.
- *Caller's Choice 1*. Nibs and Jean Matthews.
- *Eight Morris dances of England and "Flamborough sword dance*. Nibs Matthews.
- *What a Lovely War*. British Soldier Songs. Nibs Matthews, et al. Vanguard VT121.

Dances Jean and Nibs taught include Bacca Pipes, Bishop, Blaydon Races, Bonny Breast Knot, Cottagers, Cumberland Reel, Cumberland Square, Dorset Four Hand Reel, Durham Reel, Fandango, Flamborough Sword Dance, Flowers of Edinburg, Haste to the Wedding, Jack's Maggot, La Russe, Mararet's Waltz, Morpeth Rant, Newcastle, Patacake Polka, Ploughboy, Quaker's Wife, Queen Victoria Country Dance, Ribbon Dance, Rig's O'Marlow, Rose Tree, Royal Albert, Sicilian Circle, Soldier's Joy, Steamboat, Stoke Golding Reel, Three Hand Star, Three Meet, Three Sea Captains, Tom Pate, Trip to the Cottage, We Won't Go Home Till Morning, and Yorkshire Square Eight.

