

Woodberry Down SDC

There have been and still are many great Association clubs. To my mind, however, (and I mean no disrespect to any other clubs) in the fifties, one club stood out like a beacon. Almost an association within itself, that club was Jimmy Morris's Woodberry Down, yet the club had modest enough beginnings. Jimmy Morris was initially a ballroom dancer. In 1951, he attended classes run by Bob Franks, a well known caller of the day. He was studying to take an exam to become a member of the Imperial Society of Dance. One day, after one of the lessons, Bob Franks invited Jimmy to say behind and attend a square dance class that he was teaching. Jimmy agreed and was immediately hooked. He found square dancing much easier than ballroom dancing and much more fun and relaxing. Always a go-getter, Jimmy quickly realised that it was the calling and teaching side that appealed to him. He wanted to start calling but Bob Franks objected. Jimmy decided that the only way to go was to start his own class. He hired a hall on the Woodberry Down Estate at Manor House, and a great club was born. The club remained at Manor House for about two years.

In 1953, Jimmy moved to the Earl Haig Hall at Hornsey, but the name Woodberry Down was retained. At that time, Jimmy Morris worked in a men's tailors in Oxford Street, together with another man who was to become a very good caller, Len Janka. At that stage Len wasn't interested in calling. He danced in Jimmy's demonstration team and took money on the door.

I first visited Woodberry Down at the end of 1953, and became a member in January 1954 when the club was renewing all memberships. I was the seventh person to join and I still have my membership card from that time with the unique number of 007 (not however a licence to kill). In those early days the world and his wife went to Woodberry Down. Sunday evenings were more like major dances. Many of the popular callers of the day attended. Tommy Cavanagh, Jack Unwin, Jack Smith, Pete Sansom, Canada's calling personality, Gerry Dulay and Wally Spratt, to name a few. In those days it was the custom to ask guest callers to call. The Woodberry Down demonstration team toured far and wide presenting Californian style square dancing to the public. Jimmy was a hard task master. He insisted that the square be kept small and that the girls should use their skirts when dancing. Sunday evenings at Woodberry Down were always great fun. One thing Jimmy disliked however was horsing around in the square. I once felt the sharp end of his tongue for twirling a girl during a promenade.

Club caller and leader Jimmy Morris, Association founder, and its first ever president, took Woodberry Down to such heights that he was known throughout the square dance world as Mr Woodberry Down. During its long reign, Woodberry Down staged many great events. One of the greatest was the glittering square dance cavalcade held at the drill hall, Albany Street, on Saturday February 27th 1954. The drill hall was the venue for many of the greatest events of the fifties, and seldom had it seen a greater night. Over 600 dancers packed the hall to dance to the Woodberry Down band and an impressive array of callers, Jimmy Morris, Jack Unwin, Wally Spratt, Pete Sansom, Jack Smith etc. Calling on the programme that night was the Isle of

Wight's yodelling caller, Bob Guy. At the end of the evening Bob issued an open invitation to attend the Isle of Wight Jamboree, which was held in June that year.

In addition to major events Woodberry Down also staged many smaller events. Probably the most hilarious of these occurred on the evening of Friday, May 21st 1954. Accepting an invitation to be the guests of the US Airforce at their base at Brize Norton, Oxfordshire, a coach load of Woodberry Downers left London around 6 pm. We were told that we would reach Brize Norton at around 8 pm, and could expect to be back in London by midnight. In the event, the driver lost his way and we reached the airbase around 11.30 pm. The Americans still welcomed us with open arms, and we danced till around 3 am. One of the most hilarious events of the night occurred when a very large American sergeant stepped up to call a dance with the grand sounding name of Around the Railroad Tracy. The sergeant was very drunk and he called the dance with a very large cigar in his mouth. Suddenly, he took the cigar from his mouth and thrust it, still alight, into his back pocket and carried on calling. We were amazed to see columns of smoke pouring out of his back pocket. He finished the call absolutely enveloped in smoke, and looking as though he were about to burst into flames. We eventually arrived back in London at 5.30 am, having had a thoroughly enjoyable and hilarious night.

On 31st July 1954, Cal Golden burst onto the British square dance scene at Oakwood Square Dance Club. That was his first official appearance before British square dancers. His first actual appearance was at Woodberry Down on July 4th 1954. The Earl Haig Hall was packed to capacity. Cal's style of calling and his friendly easy going personality soon won the crowd over. The weather outside may have been dark and gloomy but this was one more glittering evening in the history of this great club.

Throughout 1954, Woodberry Down grew in leaps and bounds. In addition to its own band the club also had its own magazine. The Woodberry Down demonstration team toured round presenting Californian style square dancing to the public. Under Jimmy's guiding hand the club became almost an association within itself

On 24th March 1956, Jimmy married his fiancée, Beryl, in what was undoubtedly the square dance wedding of the year. A square dance wedding would not be complete without a square dance, and that night several sets of dancers danced the night away and later that same evening Beryl and Jimmy set off on their honeymoon.

On Sunday, 8th April 1956, Mr and Mrs Woodberry Down, alias Beryl and Jimmy Morris, returned from honeymoon to find a packed Earl Haig hall waiting to greet them. A bridal arch of paper streamers was held by members, who also held a card with letters printed on it. By positioning themselves into a V, the words Woodberry Down Square Dancers were formed and over the stage, in silver on a white background, the words "Welcome Back" overlooked another V of members whose cards spelt Beryl and Jimmy and on the stage was a mock wedding cake in three tiers. There followed an evening of very happy dancing in a tremendous atmosphere. Although it was a week past Easter the club held its annual Easter bonnet parade. There was a large entry and the judges had a hard time picking a winner from

the very novel and seasonal entries. The ladies' was won by two well known dancers of the day, Phil Nussle and Ella Brazier with lovely Easter creations. Larry Sherman won the men's with a hat in the form of a church with a light inside and a bride and groom at the front. The runner up was Alf Oliver with what I thought was an equally brilliant creation, a set of square dancers with a band on a stage, all made with coloured pipe cleaners. I can remember many great evenings at Woodberry Down but that evening of April 8th 1956 must surely rank as one of the greatest.

On 1st July that year the club organised an outing to Southend and this was very well supported. In those days the main attractions were in the grounds of the Kursaal, the scenic railway, tunnel of love, water chute etc. Pete Sansom and I decided to go on the water chute. I suggested to Pete that if we sat right at the front the water would go over our heads and the people at the back would get the soaking. How wrong can you be! Pete took me at my word and we copped the wave full in the face. He was carrying a rolled up magazine and to this day I can still feel the belting round the ear he gave me.

In addition to club nights and major functions Woodberry Down also held callers' courses. Many good young callers of the day cut their teeth on a Woodberry Down caller's course.

At the Drill Hall, Albany Street, in November 1956 Woodberry Down celebrated their fifth anniversary in style. Dancing was to the Woodberry Down Band and a whole host of callers of the day as well as special guest callers Mildred Buhler, Cal Golden and Major Moose Holland.

1957 was the year that saw Woodberry Down reach its peak, with the visit of Bob Osgood. The year was off to a lively start. Jimmy and the Woodberry Down Band were soon in action, with a dance at Holborn Hall, Grays Inn Road. A very lively crowd danced to the calling of in addition to Jimmy, Jack Unwin and special guest caller, Cal Golden. On March 24th, 1957 the club celebrated Beryl and Jimmy's first wedding anniversary, with a really swinging night, similar to the welcome back dance of a year earlier.

It was, however, with the visit of Bob Osgood to Britain that year, that the main interest of the club was centred. It was from Bob's Sets In Order magazine, describing an association of clubs in California, that Jimmy first hit on the idea of forming the BAASDC. Details of Jimmy's correspondence with Bob, and the subsequent forming of the Association, are to be found in the 'Hall of Fame' series. The 'Welcome to Bob Osgood' dance was held on Saturday October 19th, 1957. The notice advertising the dance read: "Woodberry Down Square Dance Club, on their 6th anniversary, and in association with the British Association of American Square Dance Clubs, proudly present Bob Osgood, the world's most famous caller". For Jimmy and for Woodberry Down, it was the peak.

1958 began much the same as usual, and then inexplicitly, there came a slump, and crowds began to dwindle. A rough element began to creep into the dancing, and big name callers such as Pat Mcquaid, Jack

Unwin, Lucky Beason and Pete Sansom were lost to the British square dance scene.

Through all this the good ship Woodberry Down sailed on undaunted. One of the main events of the year was the hoedown on the farm, held at Reigate, Surrey, on the 20th July, 1958. With music by the Woodberry Down Band and a whole host of guest callers, this event was a huge success.

With the club still highly successful, it came as a huge shock, when Jimmy announced that he and Beryl were leaving for the States in January 1959. By this time, even Woodberry Down was feeling the effects of the slump. I was present at the last sad night of Sunday, November 23rd, 1958. Barely two sets danced to Jimmy's calling, in a gloomy atmosphere. A far cry from the heady days of the mid fifties, when the Earl Haig hall echoed to music and laughter. Jimmy's disappointment was reflected in his remark to me "I hate coming every week it's like this". A sad ending to a great club

If November 23rd was a night to forget there were many great nights to remember; Cal Golden's visit in July 1954 and the Welcome to Betty Casey dance in May 1955.

One that sticks in my mind, above all others, was Woodberry Down's Christmas Party on December 18th, 1955. I don't think I can ever recall the Earl Haig hall being so crowded. Comfortable dancing was impossible and the Woodberry Down members themselves provided the entertainment. A well known club member of the day, Ted Britten, performing some very funny skits, band guitarist Brian Hart, with his yodelling cowboy songs, and a very lovely young lady, with an equally lovely voice, singing "Suddenly There's a Valley".

The club's days may be long over, but in the annals of square dance history and in the memory of former club members everywhere, Woodberry Down will live forever.

Tony Pears
Feb - Jun 2005