

Jackie Toaduff Gold Badge Citation

The presentation was made to Jackie Toaduff at The Sage Gateshead on 6 October. The citation was written by his old friend **Ron Smedley** (pictured right), and Katy Spicer made the presentation.



Photo: Derek Schofield

Jackie Toaduff was born in 1933 in the mining village of South Moor, Stanley, Co Durham. Like his three brothers and his father, he was destined for the dangerous, underpaid and unhealthy, but honourable, trade of a pitman. But from the age of five, he showed a strong interest in, and an outstanding ability as, a dancer, and in Jackie's case a tap dancer, with a good singing voice. But like Billy Elliot's, his parents, particularly his mother, did not approve – at all. Dancing was for lasses. But he persisted, first with local tap teacher Jocka Richardson and, on Jocka's death, with Mabel Allinson, always known as Tiny. Tiny Allinson had been taught clog dancing by champions Harry Robinson and Dicky Farrell, but it was tap dancing that she continued to teach Jackie, at her dancing school.

Aged 14, Jackie left school. On Friday afternoon he was a school boy. At 4am the next Monday he was a pitman. Jackie left Tiny's dancing school but continued as a performer: a dancer and a singer, mostly in working men's clubs and pubs at what were known as 'Go As You Please' evenings. The prizes were £2 or £3. He asked the pit manager, Mr Meek, if he could work the unpopular early shift, 4am to 12 midday – permanently – so that he could continue to Go As He Pleas.

So after work, Jackie went home for a bath and his dinner, then – several times a week – three hours sleep, off to a pub or a club, and home for another four hours' sleep. Luckily he often won a prize. If there was a good singer on the bill, wisely, he just tapped.

One fateful day, he met Tiny in the street; there was to be a revival of the Durham and Northumberland Clog Championship, staged by the English Folk Dance and Song Society.

Jackie had to enter, said Tiny; the prize was a cup.

There were only four problems: Jackie had no clogs, he knew no clog steps, the style was entirely different from tap and the competition was in three weeks' time. This meant three weeks of daily lessons from Tiny – who herself went back to Harry Robinson for a refresher – a trip to a Sunderland clog maker, and very little sleep.

Well, Jackie did win first prize and the cup. He had learnt Tiny's very demanding championship steps. Jackie's speed and skill, relaxed body and ankles, free arms and smiling face were a total novelty which took the roof off the Hexham hall and astounded the judges. He now had the ten steps and double shuffles that he was to dance for the rest of his life. He went on to win the junior championship again next year and then, the year after that, the junior and the senior, beating his teacher, Tiny Allinson.

The Championship had been revived, in the name of EFDSS, by Peter Kennedy, son of the Director, Douglas Kennedy. Peter was member of the Society's staff for the north east. With Peter's support and encouragement, Jackie was to perform his clog at local and national Society festivals, on local radio, on the national *Children's Hour*. The following year he danced for the first of many times at the Royal Albert Hall, at the Society's annual festival. And he was also to join Peter's team of young dancers at international festivals in Denmark and, later, South Africa.

In 1955 he was asked to dance at Cecil Sharp House for Princess Margaret, then Patron of the Society. The Princess led the applause for the double shuffle and sent a message that she wished Jackie to dance one of the evening's country dances with her

– which he did. Who would believe this in Stanley? He need not have worried. On the following day every national newspaper ran the story – the tabloids on the front page – of 'The Princess and the Miner'.

And a miner he remained. In 1957 he went on holiday to Blackpool with eight of his work mates. Money was running low at the end of the holiday and Jackie was persuaded to enter 'Peter Webster's £30 Talent Contest' on the Central Pier. Even though he had no tap shoes or clogs, he danced and sang and won the £30 – no mean sum in 1957, even divided among eight others. But that's not the end of the story. He had been spotted – by Frank Swift, goalkeeper for Manchester City and England. Frank's brother, in show business, would book him for, 'The Command Performance of Clubland' at the Winter Gardens, Blackpool, 24 January 1958.

This was the turning point where, in a way, we folkies were to lose our Jackie – for a while. At the Winter Gardens, he was seen by Colin Edwardes and Roland Roy. Roy, a former Sheffield tailor, had won BBC's *Bid for Fame*, which was *The X Factor* of the 50s and had turned professional with Colin as his manager and pianist. He had been booked as top of the bill at the Jersey Summer Show that year.

Jackie too was to turn professional, also with Colin as his manager – thanks to that meeting at the Winter Gardens. Jackie left the pit a year later and entered what he called a technicolor world. He and Roy became a double act, song and dance, that was to last for 40 happy years, under Colin's skilled and unselfish guidance. They were never out of work. They toured the world – top of the bill and standing ovations – and the act was always to end with Tiny Allinson's ten steps and double shuffles, usually on the top of a small table. Jackie has written his autobiography, *Coal Dust to Stardust*, so you can read the rest of his amazing story for yourselves.

Cecil Sharp claimed that the dance he saw most of, country-wide, was step dancing – but he never collected it; either because he didn't know how to or because it reminded him too much of the music hall which, as an Edwardian gentleman, he despised. So it was Jackie who was to bring step dancing back to our attention in the late 40s and help clog dance to become the popular dance form that it is today.

Jackie no longer dances but talks and lectures about his career, donating any fees to charity, and has done his best to pass on his steps to students and to grateful academics. He was certainly the best clog dancer of his generation – perhaps the best there's ever been.

Ron Smedley worked for EFDSS before joining the BBC, where he became Deputy Head of BBC School TV and, later, producer of Grange Hill. He produced several EFDSS Royal Albert Hall Festivals. He is a Gold Badge holder.