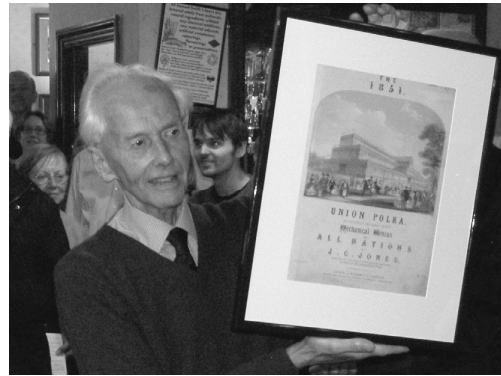


Denis Smith

MSc PhD DIC CEng MIMechE

1930–2017



Denis Smith was born in 1930 in Forest Gate in East London, the second oldest of six children. His father was a skilled metalworker. When the war came in 1939, he was evacuated first to Ipswich and then to South Wales. It was not a happy time and he seemed to have banished the memory from his mind as he was never able to say much about it. His childhood was fraught with danger in other ways: no one is sure how old he was when he built a house out of blankets draped over a couple of chairs, then decided that what it needed to make it really cosy was a real fire inside it, which he proceeded to light; he always did love a real fire! More seriously, in 1944 he was taken ill with acute nephritis and hospitalized in Ilford for months. According to his doctor he was ‘shaking hands with the angels’. He recovered, but never returned to school, although he used to say that one of the doctors took pity on him and brought him books to read. However, he left school with no formal qualifications.

The fact that he had missed out on schooling didn’t mean his education was over. While working he began a long process of study at home and in evening classes, until in 1955 he qualified and became a Chartered Mechanical Engineer. It wasn’t all work; in his early twenties he sailed across the channel and back in a small yacht, despite not being able to swim!

He became a lecturer in mechanical engineering and, married to Lynda with two young children (Matthew and Jenny), went on to complete a Ph.D. in Engineering History at Imperial College in London of which achievement he was very proud. After lecturing at West Ham College of Technology for many years, and making many lifelong friends, early retirement in 1984 gave him the opportunity to spend his time pursuing his twin interests in industrial archaeology and folk music. He co-founded GLIAS in 1968, becoming Chair in 1972: a position he continued to occupy until 2011. He was instrumental in GLIAS winning the BBC Chronicle prize for IA in 1972. He established a number of regular evening classes at Goldsmith’s College, Morley College, Cuffley, Birkbeck and elsewhere. He gave many lectures in the GLIAS lecture series over the years on topics such as Bazalgette which proved very popular. His ability to communicate his enthusiasm inspired his students, many of whom would loyally return year after year. His influence led to his students running their own courses, following their own research and writing their own articles. He became involved in a number of preservation projects, in particular Kirkaldy’s in Southwark Street which he had stumbled on quite by accident.

He continued his researches after taking early retirement from the college, which by then was North East London Polytechnic, publishing more papers and book chapters on engineering history including, as Chairman of the Board, *The Dockland History Survey*, *Civil Engineering Heritage: London and the Thames Valley* published by the Panel for Historical Engineering Works of the Institution of Civil Engineers and a chapter on the engineering of the Houses of Parliament.

He was President, 1997–99, of the Newcomen Society for the Study of the History of Engineering and Technology where he published eight papers. He also had a long term involvement with the Association for Industrial Archaeology from attending their Annual Meetings (‘camping in a magnetic field’ next to Ironbridge Power Station on one occasion) to giving the Rolt Memorial Lecture, ‘Landscape with Writers’, in 2004.

His enthusiasm for industrial archaeology comes across clearly in an interview from the Guardian in 2000, which quotes him as saying:

‘I think everyone loves bridges because they’re so easy to understand ... unlike most of civil engineering, which can seem very arcane and impenetrable to a layman, anyone can understand the principle of a bridge ... Just think of all those little stone bridges, built by rule of thumb by some medieval stonemason, designed to carry nothing heavier than a horse and cart, which now have juggernauts thundering over them every day – they’re miracles of design.’

However, this interest wasn’t just confined to the study or the lecture theatre. The interviewer went on to explain:

Dr Smith’s obsessive interest in bridges is regarded as slightly over the top even by his peers in the Newcomen Society. To him the object of any journey is not the destination but the bridges deviated to along the way.

These quotes show Denis’ passion for IA which was tinged with humour, with comments such as ‘you’re not here to enjoy yourselves’, to an evening class group in the rain, or ‘I’ll only be a hundredth of a second’, to a bus driver stopped to take another picture.

Denis’ other main passion in life was music, mostly English folk music. As with his academic career, he was largely self-taught, playing piano and accordion mostly by ear but always with great musicality and a sophisticated and absolutely distinctive harmonic sense. He was musician for the Westminster Morris Men for 50 years and could often be found on summer Wednesday evening outside Westminster Abbey where the Morris teams danced. In his only feature film appearance, he can be seen playing towards the end of *The Great St Trinian’s Train Robbery*, sharing a stage with Frankie Howerd, who pretends to be one of the dancers (it’s on YouTube! along with several of his documentaries made by Imperial College Television). Besides playing for Morris dancing he also played for folk dances all over England. He spent most Saturday evenings travelling the country playing for folk dances, sometimes as part of a band but more often as a duo with fiddler Jim Coleman. He also devised and produced ‘Iron and Steam’ a concert of music associated, some of it loosely, with industrial themes as part of GLIAS’ contribution to Industrial Heritage Year in 1993.

In 2001 the English Folk Dance and Song Society presented him with their Gold Badge for lifetime achievement to honour contributions to the music, and it was one of his proudest moments.

In 2006 Denis and Lyn moved from Woodford Green to Huntingdon in Cambridgeshire when the first signs of Alzheimer’s were starting to become evident – memory loss and occasional confusion over small things that were completely out of character. In 2010 he was officially diagnosed and a move was made to Scotland to be nearer Jenny and Matthew. A paper mill site in Penicuik was an appropriate choice and Denis and Lyn were warmly welcomed. People kept an eye out for him everywhere, if he was about to walk out of the Town Hall on a Saturday morning, someone would always be there to steer him back in. He hummed his way through choir practice, and enjoyed humming along with the Taizé group where Lyn sang.

In the last year he moved in to Aaron House nursing home in Penicuik, where he was cared for by the wonderful staff, to whom his whole family is very grateful.

Denis inspired many of us in many different ways and will be remembered with affection by those he informed, inspired and entertained.

Matthew Smith and GLIAS members