

**T**he table in Sonia Rolt's range-warmed, beamed parlour is overflowing with invitations and letters. This year marks the centenary of the birth of her late husband, industrial heritage pioneer Tom Rolt, and Sonia is utterly delighted and rather surprised to find herself at the centre of celebrations.

"It's been so strange. I've been a widow for such a long time now, and although I've tried my hardest to keep his books in print over the years, I never really thought about his centenary."

Sonia gestures towards the table where piles of correspondence await attention. "There is so much interest," she says. "His centenary has arrived and it seems that everyone wants to speak to me or invite me somewhere. Tom would have been astounded – he was never someone who looked back."

Sonia's own feelings have changed from apprehension to sheer enjoyment. "I thought it would be horrendous," she admits, "but, in fact, I'm having a wonderful time."

We meet on an icy day in February when cold, grey light throws the ancient features of her breath-taking 14th-century home at Stanley Pontlarge, near Cheltenham in Gloucestershire, into sharp relief against the sheep-spotted fields and hills around.

She is fizzing with purpose and excitement after having just returned from a trip to Tywyn in Mid Wales, where in the early 1950s, against all the odds at the time, Tom managed and ran the little steam railway with Sonia's help and support.

Like many other locations throughout the country, Tywyn was eager to mark the LTC Rolt centenary, and Sonia was central to the celebrations. It is a part of her life that she recalls with great fondness, her memories evoking shades of the 1952 Ealing comedy "The Titfield Thunderbolt".

"We worked the railway together," she explains. "At one point I was the guard and I was pregnant to boot! It's quite amazing looking back. He was the engineer and I was the clerk of all things. Then, when our son Richard arrived, Tom would be working on the railway and we could be on the beach. It was heaven."

The recent event in Wales had obviously stirred good memories. Sonia says: "I've just had the time of my life at Tywyn. We laughed so much. I must say, this centenary is making me very happy."

And there is much to celebrate. LTC Rolt, always known as Tom, was an engineer and author. He was one of the first people in Britain to draw attention to the value of neglected canals and railways. It is largely thanks to his pioneer spirit and his evocative writing that great chunks of Britain's industrial heritage were recognised as important and worthy of preservation.

Long before the current green movement, Tom Rolt was aware of the importance of the environment – as far back as the 1930s he was writing about the relationship between modern technology and the natural world.

It was certainly "modern technology" that led to the couple's first meeting in Birmingham in 1945. Sonia and Tom were both invited to the screening of the film "Painted Boats", a black and white documentary-drama about the families who worked and lived on Britain's canals – an aspect of the industrial past with which Sonia was very familiar.



KATE GRIFFIN

# Water and earth, but above all, fire

**Sonia Rolt is a SPAB treasure – a tireless enthusiast for old buildings whose work for the Society over five decades has helped preserve the spark. But aside from the passion for architecture, Sonia has led an amazing life, much of it with the legendary Tom Rolt, champion of steam, canals and the nation's industrial heritage. She talks to [Kate Griffin](#)**



Facing page, Sonia Rolt at home at Stanley Pontlarge, Gloucestershire (pictured above). It has been her home since 1953, when she moved in with Tom. Dating back to the 14th century, the house is likely to pass into the custodianship of the Landmark Trust

Indeed, although this year's celebrations focus on Tom's achievements, Sonia's own story is equally fascinating. Today she is one of a diminishing "crew" of women who took the place of working men on Britain's canals during the Second World War. The Inland Waterway (IW) women (or Idle Women, as they were unflatteringly dubbed by the remaining old hands on the network) took on the back-breaking work of ensuring that essential cargoes of grain, oil, coal and even jam continued to be transported by water between major cities when the men who usually did this were in reserved occupations.

Sonia explains: "I was sharing a flat in London with two friends. It was in Beauchamp Place, Knightsbridge, which wasn't at all smart in those days.

"We were all employed under the Government's directed labour programme, and I was at the Hoover factory at Perivale working on the insides of Lancaster bombers. I was quite bright at it, actually."

It is quite likely that Sonia would have continued at Perivale if the girls hadn't spotted a small Ministry of Transport advertisement announcing: "Women may volunteer for the carrying of goods by canal".

The advertisement indicated that volunteers would be free of management and very much in charge of their own work.

"Of course, this appealed to us frantically," Sonia says, "even though I'd never seen a canal in my life!"

Despite facing enormous disapproval from "higher ups" who were loathe to lose a trained and talented worker at Perivale, Sonia was eventually able to join her friends on a working boat.

It was the beginning of a life-long affair.

"Tom's great passion was really the railways, but I fell in love with the waterways," says Sonia, who continued to live and work on narrowboats after the war ended. She freely admits that the warmth of the canal people and the strong sense of

belonging appealed strongly to a young woman whose own colonial roots had led to a somewhat nomadic childhood.

Travelling by secret, watery, back door routes into the hearts of great industrial cities also awoke Sonia's keen instinct for architectural observation. She recalls: "I think it was then that I began to look at buildings in a very serious way. I looked at the modest ones, the working ones, and I saw beauty in them. Going into Birmingham, at the end of some dark, blackened channel you'd see flaming red and men working with shovels. What I saw was highly industrial and totally alive."

Given Tom's deep love of Britain's industrial and engineering heritage, it was perhaps inevitable that their paths would cross.

When the couple first met at the screening of "Painted Boats", Tom was already known to the canal people through his account of experiences of life and

Right, Tom and Sonia afloat on Britain's waterways in the 1940s. Wartime saw canals become a vital part of the industrial network – and Sonia did her bit for the war effort, and women, by volunteering to crew the boats. Tom's great love was steam railways, and his enthusiasm led to the opening in 1951 of the very first steam heritage railway, the Talyllyn Railway, near Tywyn.

Below, the Tom Rolt locomotive at Tywyn station, named in honour of the founder



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travels aboard the boat Cressy, published as "Narrow Boat" in 1944.

Sonia recalls: "We thought he was a bit soft, to be honest. Cressy even had a bath, which was very shocking. And for his part, Tom apparently thought that I was a terrifying blue stocking because I'd turned up to the meeting with a copy of the 'New Statesman' under my arm."

From this first wary meeting, the couple's friendship gradually developed into something deeper over several years as they campaigned with others for the future of the canals, leading to the establishment of the Inland Waterways Association (IWA). Today, Sonia is a revered Vice President of the IWA, the Waterways Trust, and other waterways bodies. In 1997 she published "A Canal People: The Photographs of Robert Longden", an evocative reminder of a lost ways of life, reissued in paperback last year.

In 1950, at an IWA meeting Tom and Sonia shared the platform to lobby the Transport and General Workers Union to assist with the battle for better conditions for boaters.

"So, in fact, I found out that he was far from soft and not terribly quiet," says Sonia, wryly, adding, "He was such an unusual man in so many ways, but I think the key thing is that he was very good at loving England, really understanding and appreciating its heritage to the point where he was prepared to fight for it, but not to the point where all the life is sucked out of it."

This love was bred in the bone.

In 1921, when Tom was 11 and a boarder at Cheltenham College, his parents moved from the Welsh borders to be closer to his school, buying a tangle and mysterious fragment of England's past in the form of the cottage at Stanley Pontlarge – a golden Cotswold stone house that traces its roots back to 1375, when an edict of the Bishop of Worcester granted the Cistercian monks of nearby Hailes Abbey "the living of Toddington Parish with its chapel at Stanley".

This monkish connection explains the faintly ecclesiastical atmosphere of the house where Sonia and Tom came to live and raise their own family in 1953, and where Sonia still lives.

Most pertinently, the house was the catalyst for Sonia's long and valued involvement with the SPAB.

In an article for the SPAB's magazine in 2002, she wrote: "We arrived to live here with paraffin lamps, no heating except for a coke stove and open fires. Many things were failing, including the big roof, whole sections of which would slip with a clattering roar into the lane."

Disappointingly, the house was initially refused a local authority grant, but, almost miraculously – with SPAB's intervention and guidance from SPAB Scholar David Nye – the Historic Buildings Council made a grant of £500, estimated to be half the cost of re-roofing the oldest section.

For their half, Tom and Sonia sold Tom's father's guns – a beautiful pair of Holland & Hollands... "Without too many regrets," says Sonia, adding: "And a relationship began for us with some of those concerned with the real care of and attention to historic buildings."

Although Tom was now established as an adviser on industrial buildings to organisations including the National Trust and The Royal Commission, it was Sonia who cemented the bonds with SPAB, possibly through meeting something of a kindred spirit in Monica Dance, the legendary SPAB Secretary.

Sonia recalls: "I was in London one day and

wanted to check on our SPAB membership. I also had some questions about the house. I knocked on the door at Great Ormond Street. It was a characteristic moment, I think. 'Come in dear. Just sit down and let me think about it all,' said Mrs Dance. Later, head to one side: 'I think I'll just make a call to Rodney Melville. Here he is, speak to him, I'm sure he will be able to help you.' He did."

In their own spheres, the two women espoused a direct and very practical approach to all things, and soon Sonia was attending courses and meetings, always asking questions and eager to learn more.

"I think I was practically a SPAB Scholar without actually being one," says Sonia, who has hosted many parties of SPAB Scholars at her fascinating house over the past three decades.

As a longstanding member of the SPAB Main Committee and also Chairman of SPAB's Education Committee from 1991 to 2005, Sonia continued to bring her practicality, inspiration, enthusiasm and wisdom to the charity, helping it to steer a true course. Her commitment to both Scholarship and Fellowship programmes gave them an enviable impetus over many years. And it was this contribution that led to her being given the Society's Esher Award.

Nor has Sonia's involvement with buildings been restricted to her work for the SPAB. From 1985 to



TIVEDSHAMBO



RONALD GRANT ARCHIVE



BFI ARCHIVE

Far left, a scene from the 1945 docu-drama 'Painted Boats' – poster, left. Sonia and Tom first met at a screening in Birmingham

2003 she was a member of Gloucester Diocesan Advisory Committee, offering wise comments on a flow of applications for works to churches. She remains a stalwart of the Institution of Structural Engineers History Study Group, and with her friend Clayre Percy spent more than 30 enjoyable years choosing the carefully selected libraries to be found in all Landmark Trust properties.

It is only fairly recently – she is now into her 90s – that she has taken a step back. With Tom's centenary currently taking her to canals and railways across the country, however, Sonia is far from unoccupied. Moves to secure the future for her house promise to be another cause for celebration. It now looks likely

that the Landmark Trust, with which Sonia has enjoyed a long and happy association, will take the property on and run it on behalf of her sons, Richard and Tim. "I know that they would do it splendidly," she says. "And I do like to think that there are some LTC Rolt fans out there who would want to sit at Tom's desk and look out over his view." After a moment, she adds: "It is a wonderful house. I've simply glued it back together as best I could using what appeared to be sensible, but I'm leaving it alone now.

"I've been here for over 50 years, but I do feel rather like a swift that has nested for short time. Do you know, I think I would like to move out into a little cottage at Winchcombe? I'm quite ready."

With Stanley Pontlarge about to play host to guests of the Landmark Trust, I ask if the house had ever had spectral visitors. Sonia is non-committal. "Some say they have seen or felt something, but I don't think I have." She looks at me thoughtfully: "But I think people are haunted, not houses."

Sonia, like Tom, looks to the future. It is a future packed with events, invitations and celebrations. "Excitement is breaking out all around me," she exclaims, "and I have to say that I am loving it!" ■

Gillian Darley on LTC Rolt's definitive biography of Brunel, see Key Read, and Philip Venning on a great industrial heritage victory, see Back to the Battle.