

## Sonia Rolt - obituary (Telegraph)

**Sonia Rolt was a conservationist with an abiding passion for canals who worked to preserve Britain's industrial heritage**



Sonia Rolt

Sonia Rolt, who has died aged 95, devoted her life to Britain's canals, to its industrial heritage and to the preservation of historic buildings.

Her interest in canals began during the Second World War when she happened to notice a Ministry of Transport advertisement in *The Times* calling for women volunteers "of robust constitution and good health" to work on the waterways at a time when many male canal workers had been called up for active service.

Seizing the chance, she and two flatmates escaped London for a canal boat plying the inland waterways, which were operating at full capacity in wartime. In 1944 the canal workers were given a special badge to wear bearing the initials IW (for Inland Waterways) which wartime wags soon changed to "Idle Women". In fact, they were anything but idle. Only a few women volunteers survived the initial training and lasted more than a couple of trips; even Sonia Rolt found the work exhausting, if liberating.

The canals became an abiding passion and, after marrying a working boatman, George Smith, in 1945, she became an advocate of the interests of the boating community, striving especially to organise better education for their children.

From 1945 she shared many platforms with Tom Rolt, with whom she campaigned to prevent canal closures, co-founded the Inland Waterways Association, and wrote about 40 books, many of them about canals, generating huge public interest in the use of these waterways for leisure. They became close, and their relationship led to the breakdown of her marriage to George Smith in 1950. She and Rolt later married and had two sons.

In 1950 Tom Rolt campaigned to preserve the Talyllyn narrow-gauge railway, which ran seven miles from the slate quarry at Bryn Eglwys to Tywyn Wharf on the coast of Merioneth. He co-founded the Talyllyn Railway Preservation Society in 1951, which ran the first privately owned preserved railway in the world, with himself as general manager and Sonia in charge of the ticket office and much else.



Sonia Rolt (left) in 2006

In 1953, having established the railway, they moved to Stanley Pontlarge, Gloucestershire, to a charming 14th-century house of ecclesiastical origin, which had been bought in 1921 by Rolt's parents. The collapse of a large portion of the roof encouraged Tom and Sonia to apply for assistance to the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, the organisation founded by William Morris, of which Sonia became an active and energetic member. She became a member of the SPAB Committee in 1980, and chaired its education committee from 1991 to 2005. A visit to Sonia's home at Stanley Pontlarge became one of the highlights of SPAB scholars' year-long tour of Britain.

After Sir John Smith founded the Landmark Trust in 1965 to preserve small historic buildings by converting them into holiday homes, Sonia Rolt worked for 20 years finding furniture and books for their interiors, later doing similar work for the National Trust.

She was born Sonia South in New York on April 15 1919. Her mother, Kathleen, had come from a well-to-do colonial family in Barbados and had married a civil servant working in the Far East, but had had an affair which led her to leave for New York and then return to England with a new baby. Sonia never knew her father.

After education at Farnborough Hill Convent, Sonia went to the London Theatre Studio to be trained for the stage by Michael St Denis. Her acting career was terminated by the outbreak of the Second World War, when she was called up to work in the Hoover factory in Perivale, west London, fitting electric wiring into bombers.

After Tom Rolt's death in 1975, Sonia promoted new editions of his many books, and in 1997 published her own, *A Canal People*, a record of the boating community centred at Hawkesbury Stop, the junction between the Coventry and Oxford canals, illustrated by photographs taken by Robert Langden in the 1940s

and 1950s when the canals were still in commercial use.

Sonia Rolt was for many years on the Gloucester Diocesan Advisory Committee, which restricts unwelcome development in churches and churchyards, and encourages the preservation of historic churches.

A woman of great enthusiasm, humour and self-deprecating modesty, when she was presented with her OBE for services to industrial archaeology and heritage, she exclaimed to the Queen : “I simply don’t know why I have been given this!”

She is survived by her two sons.

**Sonia Rolt, born April 15th 1919, died October 22nd 2014**