

Sonia Rolt - obituary (Times)

A small advertisement in *The Times* in the early 1940s changed Sonia Rolt's life forever. On answering its call for women to work on the canals of Britain to help the war effort and to take the place of men who had gone to fight, Rolt began a love affair with the canals and waterways of Britain that was to last a lifetime.

But becoming one of the so-called "Idle Women", as the trainee boatwomen on the canals were at first disparagingly known, was far from the only notable feature in Rolt's extraordinary life. At various times she fought not just for the survival of the canals and waterways as a founder member of the Inland Waterways Association, but also for the preservation of the architectural heritage of Britain – both industrial and residential - through her work with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.

She helped to establish the first heritage railway at Talylyn in west Wales and she was passionate about the English landscape. In later life Rolt was particularly concerned about the need to maintain and preserve ancient orchards. Other interests included furnishing houses and providing libraries of books for both the Landmark Trust and the National Trust.

As Tim Rolt, the younger of her two sons and a writer and film-maker, put it: "The thread that united everything that she did was her enormous appetite for life and her great interest in other people which led her into all sorts of different areas. She had a love of a certain quality of England and its countryside and she valued things that were not necessarily being valued by others at the time."

Rolt was living in a flat in Beauchamp Place in London with fellow aspiring actors when she saw the advert for women to work on the canals, a notion that was viewed by many men as faintly ridiculous. In fact the Idle Women (the name was coined by sceptical boatmen because the women wore an "IW" Inland Waterways badge on their overalls) would go on to become highly proficient at boat handling and worked on the canals and waterways throughout the remainder of the war. Their exploits would be covered in Pathe newsreels, national newspapers and even Life magazine which carried a large feature on them just before D-Day.

At the time Rolt was already doing her bit for the war effort at the Hoover factory at Perivale in west London where she was employed installing electrical wiring in the cockpits of Lancaster bombers. She was pretty good at it too, making the best use of her small and nimble fingers. So good in fact, that the powers that be did not want her to leave as she recalled in a recent interview.

“They wouldn’t let me go so I had to have a fearful interview and there was the threat of prison (if I absconded),” she said. “Finally a psychiatrist person saw me from the Ministry of Transport and they said ‘this woman has a pioneering spirit and must be allowed to go her own way and do her own stuff.’”

And go her own way she did. “It was extraordinarily surprising because I had not seen any canal as far as I know at any time, anywhere, and when I applied for the job it was going to be a huge surprise – Canals, what are they?”

A strong featured and physically capable woman, Rolt learnt her new trade fast helping to take barges loaded with steel to Birmingham, then heading to Coventry to load coal and taking that down to north London, before setting out again. Along the way she fell in love with the canals and the people who worked on them and determined she would do all she could to preserve a way of life already under threat by the emergence of mass road and rail freight transport.

It was from the perspective of a canal boat’s stern that she came to love the industrial architectural heritage of the Britain’s great cities. “I think it was then that I began to look at buildings in a very serious way,” she recalled four years ago. “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; men working with shovels. What I saw was highly industrial and totally alive.”

Her love affair with the canals was best summed up by her “wonderful, but very short” first marriage to a canal boatman called George Smith who could neither read nor write. The pair stayed on the canals after the war as Rolt began campaigning for better conditions for those who worked on them. Later she married the industrial heritage pioneer Tom Rolt who’s 1944 book *Narrow Boat* is credited with inspiring the movement to save Britain’s canals.

Sonia Rolt (nee South) was born in New York in 1919. Her father was a doctor who lived with his wife in Barbados until an affair led her mother to leave for New York and then return to England with her new baby. Rolt was educated at Farnborough Hill Convent School in Hampshire while her mother worked as a matron at various public schools. Rolt then trained as an actress at the London Theatre Studio in Islington under Michel Saint-Dennis and George Devine. In 1939 she toured with the London Village Players before the war interrupted and she began work in Perivale under the government's directed labour scheme.

It is not clear when her marriage to Smith officially ended but she met Tom Rolt in 1945 at the premiere of *"Painted Boats,"* a film set on the canals, and eventually married him in 1952. In addition to Tim they had Richard who now runs his own design and engineering business.

The pair were initially very active in the campaign to save the canals and in setting up the Inland Waterways Association (IWA). In 1950, however, Tom fell out with the IWA and he and Sonia decamped to the seaside town of Tywyn, north of Aberystwyth, where they helped set up the Talylyn Railway Preservation Society. This was dedicated to ensuring the survival of what was then a decrepit narrow gauge railway and it became the template for similar projects all over the world.

"We worked the railway together," recalled Rolt. "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."

With the railway's future assured, Tom and Sonia moved back to his parent's house at Stanley Pontlarge in Gloucestershire where Tom would write some 40 books under the name LTC Rolt, dying aged 64 in 1974. Sonia lived in the medieval Cotswold stone house for the remainder of her life, eventually becoming affectionately known by the locals as "Lady Pontlarge" or the "Potentate of Pontlarge."

She lived amid elegant chaos with a collection of furniture, none of which matched. But her taste appealed to others, not least Tom's

friend John Smith (later Sir John Smith) who set up the Landmark Trust in the 1960s dedicated to the preservation of small but architecturally worthwhile buildings. The novel idea was to give these properties new life as holiday rentals and then plough the revenue back into the organization. Smith asked Rolt if she would look after the furnishing of the houses and she did so for more than 20 years, later taking on a similar role for the National Trust.

It was when she needed to do repair work on the roof of the house at Stanley Pontlarge that she first came into contact with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings which helped secure funding for the project. She went on to become an active committee member of the society and was chairman of its education committee between 1991-2005.

Rolt became vice-chairman of the IWA and was for many years an active member of the Gloucestershire Diocesan Advisory Committee offering assistance and advice on applications for work on churches in the county. She was a stalwart of the Institution of Structural Engineers and in 2011 she was made a fellow of the Newcomen Society. Over the years she edited and wrote introductions to many of her husband's books and in 2009 published her own book, *A Canal People, The Photographs of Robert Longden*.

Until the end Rolt made the best of a sharp mind. She was passionate about the causes she believed in and was a powerful and direct speaker who knew how to get a point across and she did not suffer fools. "She was forthright in her views which meant some people caught the sharp end of it but everybody loved her," said Tim Rolt.

In 2011 Rolt was awarded an OBE for services to industrial archeology and to heritage. She was thrilled and not a little perplexed to be honoured and on meeting the Queen at Windsor, where she received the award, exclaimed: "I simply don't know why I have been given this." The Queen is said to have replied: "Perhaps you should think about it." Rolt then replied in turn: "It could be because I live in an old house." The Queen was having none of that: "I live in one of those too," she said.

Sonia Rolt, champion of Britain's canals and architectural heritage, was born on April 1, 1919. She died on October 22, 2014, aged 95.