



# Sonia Rolt OBE

## 1919-2014

**Tim Coghlan** looks back at the life of the WWII volunteer canal boatwoman whose second husband was the canal and railways author Tom Rolt, and who always remained actively involved with the inland waterways

Sometime in 1943 three young ladies, who had earlier learnt acting together at the London Theatre Studio under Michael St Denis, were living in a flat in Beauchamp Place in London's fashionable Knightsbridge. They had enjoyed a brief theatrical career before war intervened and, being over eighteen and not mothers, they had been compelled to sign up for war work in some way, the choice was theirs – and joining the estimated seven million British females who did.

Together they got a job at the Hoover factory, in west London, which was now making components for the aircraft industry – principally the Avro-Lancaster bomber which had come into service in 1942. The work was arduous and tedious, but it allowed the girls to live in central London, and not go into uniform, or work on remote farms.

One day one of the flatmates spotted an advertisement in *The Times* calling for female volunteers to work narrowboats on the Grand Union Canal. This was due to a combination of the much-increased wartime carrying on the canals and the crew shortages caused by some of the younger boatmen being called-up to work on landing craft and the like. In response to their letter of enquiry, the girls would have received the standard reply,

which included the following: 'When considered proficient and able to operate boats without supervision, trainees will be appointed to boats of their own, a crew consisting of three women, there being no objection to friends going together.' It seemed an ideal escape for the three of them and the girls decided to go for it. But the advertisement cautioned, 'Only women of robust constitution and good health should enter this employment.'

Sonia later recalled, 'We were all quite physically fit and thought we could manage it. We didn't know anything at all before we went to be trained. I don't think any of us had even seen a canal.' At her interview with Rita Currie at the Ministry of Transport in Berkley Square, Sonia was shown her broken fingernails and told of the tough work required, working very long hours for three weeks without a day off. (Rita Currie had worked less than two months on the canals before she managed to get this desk-job, which caused much resentment amongst the other volunteers. After the war, she married the Duke of Grafton as his third and final wife.)

Sonia & Co now went for their initial training run with the great Kitty Gayford. She had co-founded the female canal volunteers in 1942, who in 1944 were given a special badge to wear with the initials IW – for Inland Waterways – but gave rise to the nickname Idle Women. The girls joined Kitty on her pair of boats at Bulls Bridge near Uxbridge. The foursome went to load in the London docks before heading north to Birmingham. Then it was a loop back to Coventry to load coal and so back down to London, a round trip of about three weeks, after which they were on their own.



As they had passed this brief training period, in which they had learnt only a fraction of what the boatmen had taken a lifetime to learn, they were put in charge of a pair of Grand Union Canal Carrying Company (GUCCC) boats, the *Moon* and the *Phobos* – which were to become at once their home and workplace for the next two years. Sonia commented, ‘I found the work exhausting but liberating. Perhaps because I was an orphan with a nomadic upbringing, I thought the boatmen had something I hungered after. I soon made friends with the boaters and the people along the bank.’

By 1943 German bombing raids were few and far between, mainly concentrated on coastal ports, so there were none of the dangers of going into the London docks or Birmingham and Coventry that the working boatmen had faced in 1940-41. It was only from mid-1944 onwards with the arrival of the V-1 and later V-2 flying bombs that things became somewhat dangerous again. Sonia took it all in her stride. She recalled that when once in Limehouse Basin she watched the flying bombs going off and the resulting fires and her thinking it was ‘a great light show’. Casualties amongst the boatmen in WWII were very light and only two boatmen are known to have died – none of them female volunteers – only one of whom came close to being killed, when a flying bomb exploded beside City Basin, Islington and badly damaged her boat with her in it.

The greatest danger was falling in the canal, especially when working through the locks at night in winter, when they and the boats were covered in frost. Sonia fell in the locks at Hillmorton, near Rugby in just this way. ‘I was wearing Dutch wooden shoes of quite a large size and certainly wider than the gunwale. I have never forgotten it.’

Only a handful of women volunteers survived the initial training and lasted more than a couple of trips. In all something like 120 women volunteered, but only 30 or so made it through. It is therefore a great credit to Sonia & Co. that they were part of the small band that did survive. At best it is estimated that only 11 pairs of boats were operating at any one time, compared with the hundreds being run by the working boatmen, so the scale of the Idle Women’s contribution was quite small. Former working boatwoman Laura Carter recalled she hardly noticed them, and felt they had been given far greater credit than the endeavours of the working boatmen who never had a day off – whereas the Idle Women were able to take off one week in four.

However the Idle Women did leave a lasting legacy in that four of them published books on their experiences and other diaries are coming to light. The boatmen were an illiterate community apart, with a life that had changed little in 200 years, but was to fast disappear after the war. These accounts together give a unique insight into the boatmen’s way of life.

One of the reasons Sonia & Co did survive was the great help and kindness they received from the working boatmen, and in particular George Smith



ABOVE: **Tiller Girl** – Sonia Smith in about 1944 when working as an Idle Woman for the GUCCC.

BELOW: **Sonia with her first husband George Smith.**



## SONIA SOUTH

Sonia Mary Fleming South, to use her full maiden name, was born in New York in 1919. She appears later in 1919 on a passenger list travelling to England with her parents and two brothers. After her arrival in England, her father then rather disappeared from her life, and what became of him is now unknown.

Her mother was Kathleen Louise Matheson South, nee Boxhill, who was born in Barbados to a well-to-do colonial family. Kathleen led the life after WWI of the English equivalent of the Great Gatsby set, travelling a great deal, and appearing on numerous shipping passenger lists. Her later life was lived in much reduced circumstances in England, where she was cut off from her family, and worked as a matron in a boarding school. Towards her end, one of her two sons was accidentally killed on his motorcycle whilst serving with the army in France in the early months of the war. She finally died in 1942. Tom Rolt wrote in *Landscape with Figures*: 'Sonia was an orphan. She had never known her father, while her mother died just before the war in tragic circumstances, which affected her outlook on life profoundly.' (Rolt is incorrect about the date of Kathleen's death.)

Because of her parental position, Sonia was rather taken under the wing of her kindly maternal Catholic grandfather, who was a doctor in Barbados. He decided that the best thing for her was to send her off to England aged 10, to attend the very fashionable newly opened Farnborough Hill Convent, where she would get a good education and meet the right sort of 'gals'. The good nuns of the French Order of Religious Christian Education had recently acquired the house where the Empress Eugenie, widow of Napoleon III had lived from 1880 until her death in 1920. A passenger list of 1929 records Sonia and her mother travelling from Barbados to England, but research has failed to find Sonia on any other. That trans-Atlantic crossing seems to have been a one-way ticket.

Sonia enjoyed her time with the nuns, and unsurprisingly learnt excellent French, as well as gaining a very good general education. Rolt described Sonia as 'highly intelligent and much better read than I was'. That awareness of her knowledge and intelligence was felt by anyone who met her since. Her range of intellectual activities even in her nineties was quite astonishing. As an antidote to the good nuns, Sonia then went to the London Theatre Studio to be trained for the stage by Michael St Denis.

– whom Sonia went on to marry in September 1945  
– and his brothers. In her hand-written message read for her at his funeral, Sonia wrote, 'He always welcomed the new and gained enjoyment and amusement from it. The trainee boat women of the time could vouch for his kindness and helpfulness.'

Just where George met Sonia, he could not exactly recall. But he does remember pulling the girls off the mud at some notorious bend, helping them here and there with engine problems, and meeting up in some of the canalside pubs and having drinks or dinner with them. Sonia would never talk in any detail about their courtship, which must have been very brief and intermittent, as both were working pairs of boats for the Grand Union Canal Carrying Company with little time for meet-ups. Sonia & Co continued canal carrying until the very end of the war, being paid off after completing their last delivery post VJ Day which was on 16th August 1945.

Then on 1st September, after a brief stay with friends, Sonia met up with and married George in the Northampton Registry Office, George having just unloaded in Northampton. George recalled that they were on their own and had to ask someone they met on the street to act as the witness. Once married they were immediately away on their boats. No one amongst the remaining female volunteers seemed to know anything about it. Fellow volunteer Margaret Cornish wrote in her diary, in early September, 'Daphne has told us the gossip, that Sonia is to marry George...We half envied her the superior status of mate to a real boatman.' By then they were already married.

The marriage at first was a happy one, and Sonia saw herself not only as a proper working boatwoman but also someone to campaign on their behalf for better working conditions – something she had already started on in the Khaki General Election of July 1945, when she had covered her boat with slogans like VOTE LABOUR and A FAIR DEAL FOR BOATERS. Margaret Cornish, who continued working the waterways for some months after the war, noted in her diary of 6th December. 'George and Sonia tied up alongside and came round to see us. All of us piled into the butty cabin. Much talking – Sonia has great plans for the amelioration of the boatpeople's conditions. Everyone has left already.' It was this radicalism that was to doom their marriage.

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LEFT: Sonia in June 1945 drawing political slogans on the cabin of her GUCCC motor *Phobos*. It was her political activism that attracted her to the newly founded IWA.







## Meeting Tom Rolt

When and where Sonia met the author Tom Rolt and her future second husband is debatable, but it surrounds the making in the summer of 1944, of the classic Ealing Studios canal film *Painted Boats*. The outside scenes were filmed on location between Braunston and Stoke Bruerne in Northamptonshire, and the indoor scenes and close-ups at Ealing Studios. One of those indoor scenes was a recreation of the interior of the Boat Inn at Stoke Bruerne. For the extras, boatmen awaiting orders at Bulls Bridge, Uxbridge, were invited and then selected to participate, being paid about the same wages as when carrying. George, with his youthful good looks, was amongst the chosen, who were then bussed down the following day to Ealing Studios, having been told to dress as they did when working. At the studio they spent a whole day sitting around on the set, once they had been allocated a slot – George’s being by the bar. Then at a prompt they had to pretend to be jolly boatmen, drinking fizzy brown water, but being forbidden to smoke. George was pleased when he returned to Bulls Bridge to find he had orders for the next day. Thus ended his brief life in the limelight. It is questionable if he appeared in the final version. It is not possible to identify him with certainty.

George recalled that there were some 200 boatmen awaiting orders that day, including Sonia and her team, at which time she and George were apparently just good friends, though there was some attraction. In that funeral address, she says, ‘He was an amazing man, handsome, strong and well set up.’

The technical adviser to the film was one Tom Rolt, whose book *Narrow Boat* had recently been published, and because of it, he was invited to help as technical adviser to the filming. Tom had been married since 1939 to Angela Orred, which marriage had had its dramas – her wealthy father strongly objected to her going to live with a penniless author on a narrowboat, and cut her off financially and from her family. Angela that day was probably on their boat *Cressy* moored at Tardebigge, near Birmingham.

George remained convinced that all three protagonists – of what, for the next five years, would become a tragic love triangle between



TOP LEFT: **George and a very youthful Sonia in the early days of their marriage.**

TOP RIGHT: **Troubles ahead – George with his pair of boats, *Cairo* and *Warwick*, with Tom Rolt and his wife Angela at a promotional rally at Little Venice.**

ABOVE: **A reflective Sonia Smith in the hatchway of *butty Warwick* with husband George – cigarette in mouth – and his brother Michael, together with friends Michael and Polly Rogers.**

himself, Sonia and Tom – had met that fatal day at Bulls Bridge. Tom claims that he met Sonia and George a year later at the Birmingham premier of *Painted Boats* by which time George and Sonia were together, and probably married. Regardless of which day it was, it marked the beginning of George’s fatal encounter with Tom that was to destroy his short happiness with Sonia and his canal world as a working boatman. As Tom was later to write, ‘What caused Sonia and myself so much distress was the future of her husband, that simple, blameless man who could neither read or write.’

In about May 1946, George and Sonia left the employment of the GUCCC, which was already in steep decline and heading for nationalisation – the latter the very thing Sonia had campaigned for. They moved to canal carriers Samuel Barlows who were based at Braunston in Northamptonshire, and were principally coal carriers from the Warwickshire coalfields down to London and Oxford. The company escaped nationalisation and remained active long after the new British Waterways Board had closed all



its carrying operations. Sonia girlishly explained the move by saying that Samuel Barlows boats had the prettier livery.

George and Sonia were at first given a pair of boats, the motor *Cairo*, and ironically the butty *Sunny Valley*, which had been used in the film *Painted Boats*. George disliked the *Sunny Valley* for its poor handling, and it was changed for the *Warwick*, which pair George and Sonia worked for the four or so remaining years of their canal carrying. The boats were to make them famous in the canal world.

## Formation of IWA

In that same year the Inland Waterways Association was formed with the principal objective of saving the canals, its co-founders being Robert Aickman and Tom. The headquarters was Aickman's house-come-office in Gower Street, London. Tom invited Sonia to join the committee, which met during the winter months to represent the working boatmen. Aickman offered sleeping accommodation to those who had travelled far, which provided the ideal breeding ground for the problems that were to come.

In addition to their canal carrying, George and Sonia helped the IWA cause by bringing their spruced up pair of boats down to London in 1947 for the Festival of Britain, during which they ran boat trips on the Regent's Canal. They were to repeat this at the first IWA National Rally at Market Harborough in August 1950, by which time both Tom and Sonia's marriages were in trouble, and Tom had fallen out with the energetic but domineering Aickman.

In 1951 Tom's wife Angela walked out on him leaving him on his narrowboat *Cressy* at Banbury, and going off to join Billy Smart's circus. His canal world was falling apart. He canal cruised on his own, but the wooden *Cressy* was showing its age, and he finally abandoned the boat near Stone in Staffordshire and 'moved on the bank' as the old boatmen would say.

Things were also going downhill for George and Sonia's marriages. He became more and more concerned by the constant flow of letters between his wife and Tom. In about April 1951, after unloading somewhere in London, George and Sonia had an enormous row at Bulls Bridge, and it was agreed

they would take the empty boats back to Braunston where Sonia would leave. The journey was hasty and in almost total silence. They stopped half way up the Buckby Flight, where Sonia left most of her possessions in the cottage of a retired boating couple they knew. In helping her to unload, George was astonished by just how many books she had stored around the boats.

Then they went on down the locks to Braunston, where, at what is today the A45 bridge – then the Rose & Castle Bridge – Sonia stepped ashore in the bridgehole and walked up into Braunston where she had arranged to stay with a friend. George took the boats in tow on his own towards Sutton Stop, Coventry. He glanced back as he departed and saw Sonia walking up the hill into the village in the evening light. He would not see her again for another 44 years. George tried boating on his own, or with a mate, for another few months and finally gave it up. He disappeared into Crouch End, north London where it is believed he joined a former working boatman and found work as a building labourer.

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TOP LEFT: Sonia at the IWA Market Harborough Rally of August 1950.

ABOVE LEFT: Sonia cleaning the cabin side of Warwick in about 1948.



## Sonia's New Life

After Sonia had left George, she soon met up with Tom and they quickly began their new life together, but away from the canal. Their first major project was saving the Talyllyn Railway, and there were many other extraordinary achievements, including saving the Cheltenham Literature Festival in the mid-1960s. Though Tom had almost left the English canals, and there is only one record of a later visit which was to the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, he did continue to write extensively about them, including his *Landscape with Canals*, published in 1977, which covered his canal years up to 1951, but in which Sonia did not receive a single mention.

Tom died in 1974, after he and Sonia had only been together for 23 years, and she was only 53. She dedicated her remaining 40 years of life working for the causes they had been involved in together and many more. Canals dominated them, and she was, amongst others, a Vice President of IWA, President of the Commercial Boat Owners Association, and Patron of the Mikron Theatre Company. Away from the canal she was actively involved with the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, chairing their Education Committee for nearly 15 years. She was a member of the Newcomen Society, and an honorary member of the Vintage Sports Car Club. She was also involved with the Landmark Trust and the National Trust.



LEFT: Sonia at the 1996 Braunston Boat Show – the first she attended – when she took part in the parade of historic narrowboats. David Blagrove is at the tiller.

BELOW: Signing copies of her new book *A Canal People* at the 1997 Braunston Boat Show.



A change was to happen to Sonia's life in 1993, when David Stevenson, who was Chairman of IWA from 1989 to 1994, persuaded the Council of IWA to reinstate as honorary members a number of former members who had been thrown out by the at times Putinesque co-founder Robert Aickman. One was Sonia, and she responded with conciliatory glee, and she was soon made a Vice President, and was very much in demand.

Sonia was to reward his foresight and friendship when in the spring of 2011, she invited him to join her and her two sons when she went to Windsor Castle to receive her OBE from the Queen – 'for services to industrial archaeology and heritage'. Sonia was by then too frail to walk any distance, and attended the investiture in a wheelchair. She afterwards quipped about her condition: 'I blame it on my seven years on the boats. I was never brought up to do that.'

In December 2012, she also asked David Stevenson to represent her at George's funeral, and read a neatly hand-written message from her: 'I am sad to think George Smith has gone. He was an amazing man, handsome, strong and well set up. The trainee boat women of the time could vouch for his kindness and helpfulness. I am sure these traits sustained him and persisted throughout his very long life. It will make him long remembered and spoken of. God Bless him!'

Sonia Rolt – known to many on the canals simply and affectionately as 'Sonia' – died peacefully in hospital on 22nd October, after a short illness at the age of 95. Her death has meant the passing of the last of the Idle Women who was still actively involved with the canals – the other two who are known to survive, and were once active, are now no longer so. Sonia by contrast, in her 96th year, attended the Hay Literary Festival in May last year, where the 70th anniversary of her late husband Tom Rolt's great work, *Narrow Boat*, was celebrated in style. For those who knew her, her energy and passion for life never ceased to amaze, and remained with her almost to her end.

Amongst her tributes was one from her good friend Tom Grasso, President of the Canal Society of New York State: 'She was the First Lady of the English canals.'

Sonia made many friends on the canals, not only in Europe, but also North America and Australia. Amongst her tributes was one from her good friend Tom Grasso, President of the Canal Society of New York State: 'She was the First Lady of the English canals.'

Sonia is survived by her two sons. Her first husband George died in 2012. Her second husband Tom died in 1974.





The 88-year-old Sonia Rolt, with celebrity protestors, attending one of the March 2007 IWA demonstrations against Government spending cuts affecting the canal network.

PAUL BENNETT



ABOVE: Sonia on *Nutfield* in the opening parade of boats at the 2006 Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally. At the helm is former working boat woman Laura Carter, who opened that year's rally. Sonia attended three Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rallies in all.



ABOVE: Sonia Rolt in 2008 speaking after unveiling the plaque to the Idle Women outside the Stoke Bruerne Canal Museum.

TIM COGHAN



LEFT: Sonia with friends at the October 2010 Cheltenham Literary Festival. Tim Coghlan – author of this article – is on the left.

RIGHT: Steaming up to open the 2007 Rally – Sonia Rolt on *President*.



DIANA COGHAN