

TOM ROLT



# Tom Rolt CENTENARY

A personal tribute to L. T. C. Rolt – one of the founders of IWA - by former National Chairman John C. Fletcher

There are some days which stand out in the memory when perceptions are heightened - but those memorable days tend to belong more to childhood. A short time ago the call came from another organisation for "someone who knew Tom Rolt and would talk about his waterway influences". "But I didn't know him," I protested. "I only met him once."

*Guardian* about a group of enthusiasts who were trying to save a railway; one of the many narrow gauge Welsh railways that my father remembered from his adolescent years. "I'd like you to ride on it; it might not even exist next year."

In his, even then, ancient 1937 Ford 8 father drove me through Dolgelly (as it was then) and over the tops; down a steep-sided valley to Abergynolwyn. A train wheezed

on my own! My head was well below the level of the window so the guard came out, round the end of the carriage and took my shilling and I asked for "a child single to Dolgoch please."

The guard disappeared into his van and returned with the appropriate ticket – a white ground with two green stripes on it – and my change, which I think was 8 (old) pence (about 3p); took me to the next carriage;

MANY YEARS LATER I WAS TO SEE A PHOTOGRAPH OF TOM ROLT ON THE TALYLLYN RAILWAY – THE RAILWAY HE SAVED – AND REALISED THEN THAT THIS WAS THE FRIENDLY GUARD WHO HAD LOOKED AFTER ME ON THAT WELL-REMEMBERED DAY

Even in the early 1950s steam trains were something of a novelty for me. My usual train journeys were on the electric trains alongside the still active Bridgewater Canal between Timperley and Manchester. On an early post-war holiday in west Wales, however, my father wanted me to have a train ride. He had read in *The Manchester*

into the station on rails held apart by turf and only just over two feet apart. Dad had given me a shilling (5p) for my train fare and after the engine had shuffled round the three four-wheeled carriages, I went to the booking office window, built into the side of one of the carriages. It was to be my first railway journey

unlocked the door; reassured me; and locked me in. The whistle blew; the train gently lurched off, rolling from side to side down the uneven track. Meanwhile father drove slowly down the parallel road and when he came to a gate into the fields between the road and the railway he would wait for the train to catch him up - and



he would wave. It was perhaps 10 to 15 minutes later that we reached the first station, Dolgoch, and the guard came and let me out, and father was waiting to collect me.

Many years later I was to see a photograph of Tom Rolt on the Tallylyn Railway – the railway he saved – and realised then that this was the friendly guard who had looked after me on that well-remembered day. Later still I was to read and hear that he had then lived at Dolgoch, in a caravan, with Sonia, the love of his life, but I had little understanding of the uproar that this had caused in the deeply religious non-conformist Welsh valleys!

To me he was a kindly man looking after a little boy on his first solo train journey which just happened to be on a magical railway. And Rolt was doing an exciting job (I didn't realise how exciting) but he still had time to look after me.

As an adolescent I cruised on the Norfolk Broads with friends (including the eldest son of the family I had stayed with in west Wales) and later repeated the experience with my first wife Margaret. And then I had proposed touring all the 'Great Little Trains of Wales', but petrol coupons were issued and touring seemed to be less than a good idea. Instead we hired a canal boat from Adlington, just down the road from our home in Blackburn, and took it across the Leeds & Liverpool Canal to Skipton, where Margaret bought me a copy of Rolt's *The Inland Waterways of England*.

I enjoyed the quality of the prose immensely and it helped me to see the canal as Rolt might have seen it. During a holiday on the southern Oxford Canal the following year more Rolt waterway books were purchased, including a (then) recent edition of *Narrow Boat* and as my interest deepened, so I joined IWA.

Once I became active I met people who had known Tom in his waterway days – none more so than the late Martin Grundy who told me about meeting Tom during a family cruise up the Welsh Canal before IWA had been formed – and cruising on a working boat with Sonia Smith (as she then was). It was a story he was later to incorporate in an illustrated talk, and which, much later and along with his brother Crick, he was to deliver before IWA's Diamond Jubilee Dinner. That was a dinner at which Sonia, by now of course Tom's widow, sat next to me – on the evening my first wife died. Sonia's eloquence, as she wrote to me about it afterwards, matched Tom's – as did her kindliness. By then I had drawn on my role as IWA national chairman (the only time I did so) to evoke memories of that earlier occasion and take a footplate ride on the Tallylyn Railway, on the locomotive named *Tom Rolt* in his memory.

As ever, as organisations mature, those who remain involved did not experience the formative years – indeed I was only a toddler in 1946 when IWA was formed, and so we rely on others for a perspective of the contributions of various major players. There have been varying reports by those who were there about the contributions of Rolt and Aickman. Perhaps, like the four gospels, the stories vary according to the perceptions of the story teller. So can a more remote perception be any more accurate?

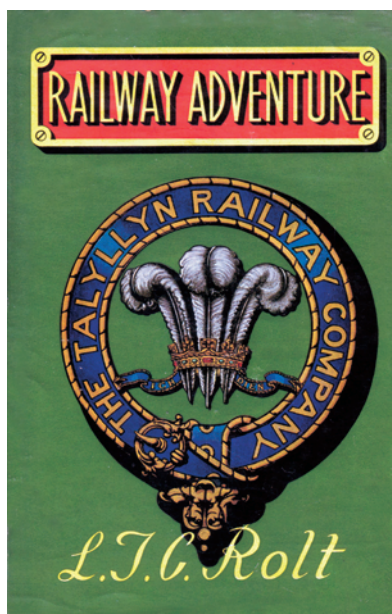
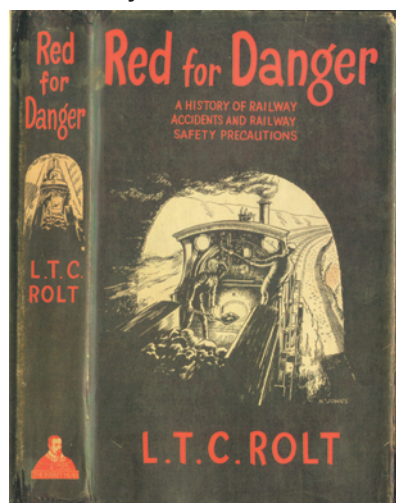
Tom most certainly was an engineer who could set down his observations with elegance, and the practical ways in which his interests took him, be that ancient sports cars, waterways, or anachronistic railways, were also elegantly related. Had Tom not decided to move around on the canals in the latter part of the Second World War and write about his observations and experiences, then Aickman would not have read it. Aickman would not have felt the urge to meet Tom and explore his knowledge and his passions and they would not have met at Tardebigge. Without the complementary talents and passions becoming evident at that meeting it would not have led to the creation of The Inland Waterways Association.

They both had big personalities, but those personalities found their expression in entirely different ways.



ABOVE: **The Tallylyn Railway – saved by Tom Rolt.**

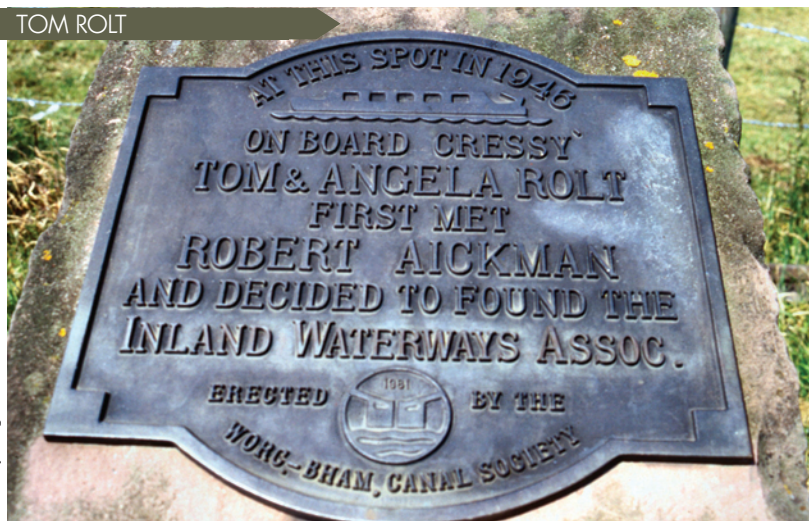
BELOW & RIGHT: **Two of Tom Rolt's best loved railway books.**







TOM ROLT



Waterway Images



Waterway Images

## Seeking pleasure on canals



Mr. R. F. Aickman (left) and Mr. L. T. C. Rolt, chairman and secretary of the Inland Waterways Association, taking water aboard their boat on the Aire and Calder Canal yesterday. They were leaving to complete a survey which will, it is hoped, lead to the use of canals for pleasure cruising and extended commercial use. A note on the proposal appears in *This World of Ours*. (A "Yorkshire Post" picture.)

ABOVE LEFT AND LEFT: The two plaques installed at Tardebigge on the Worcester & Birmingham Canal to commemorate the meeting between Tom Rolt and Robert Aickman.

But they created a campaigning organisation that was to meet the needs of the widest franchise of any group of waterway enthusiasts and supporters in the country, and to use the Audrey Smith analogy, to sire 'the waterway family' of the vast raft of waterway organisations that exist today.

Had the two founders not had far from different perceptions then, no doubt, there would not have been such a public falling out between the two of them, but would IWA as an organisation have been, and be able to continue to be, an organisation with appeal to such a wide range of specific enthusiasms within its membership? I think not.

As the years pass those who hold sway within the organisation lead it in varying directions and as an organisation it gains from that diversity of spirit. Neither founder would recognise much of the inland

waterway system we have enjoyed in the last decade, but surely with the wondrous benefit of hindsight, both would have recognised the contribution of diversity.

Although they were both writers, I suspect only Tom would have been able to chronicle the history with eloquence and the eye of an engineer looking at the on-going developments of the waterways that we all love, and so tenderly regret those aspects that have now gone forever, and which inspired him to write *Narrow Boat*. I am sure he would have forthrightly expressed his views when through ignorance or malice on the part of those managing and running the waterways, elements of the fabric of the waterway structure were deliberately demolished or replaced with little good reason.

But would he be surprised at the direction waterways have been recently taking?

At the beginning of the final chapter of *The Inland Waterways of England* (published in 1950), he indicates that he is the sort of person who enjoys the remoteness of the waterways, but recognises that they cannot be maintained in navigable order for a handful of waterway-minded people. He comments how inextricably bound up are canals with other water courses and goes on to advocate the promotion of the use of waterways for leisure.

Charles Hadfield wrote on the dust jacket of one edition: "In *Narrow Boat* and *The Inland Waterways of England* L.T.C. Rolt gave us two books that will last as long as men and women love canals." And so he did, but perhaps above all the former title was the catalyst which set in train the formation of the Association. For me his later writings, including his autobiography, are just a glorious bonus.

OPPOSITE PAGE  
BOTTOM LEFT:  
**Sonia Rolt and  
IWA dignitaries at  
Chester, standing  
beside a plaque  
commemorating  
Tom's  
achievements.**

OPPOSITE PAGE  
BOTTOM RIGHT:  
**The memorial to  
Tom Rolt at St  
Michael's Church,  
Stanley Pontlarge.**



## CRESSY CRUISE RE-ENACTMENT

August 1939 saw a young, newly married couple, Tom and Angela Rolt, leave Banbury to cruise the inland waterways aboard their narrowboat *Cressy*. As part of IWA's Tom Rolt's centenary celebrations, Ron and Mary Heritage from IWA Oxfordshire Branch will attempt to re-enact the Rolts' iconic *Cressy* cruise, leaving Tooley's boatyard in Banbury at midday on 24th April in their narrowboat *Heron*.

Tom Rolt was also a founder member of the Talylyn Steam Railway and the Vintage Sports Car Club and it is hoped to have representatives from the latter – helping to give *Heron* a good send-off. Local dignitaries have already offered their support to the occasion. Meanwhile, pupils from the North Oxford Academy are planning to track the cruise route and also produce displays, carry out interviews and design publicity for the event as part of their International Baccalaureate studies.

From Banbury, the cruise heads north towards Braunston – the heart of the inland waterways system. Then the route goes on to the Leicester Arm of the Grand Union Canal and descends through Foxton Locks to Market Harborough, the site of IWA's first National Rally in 1950.

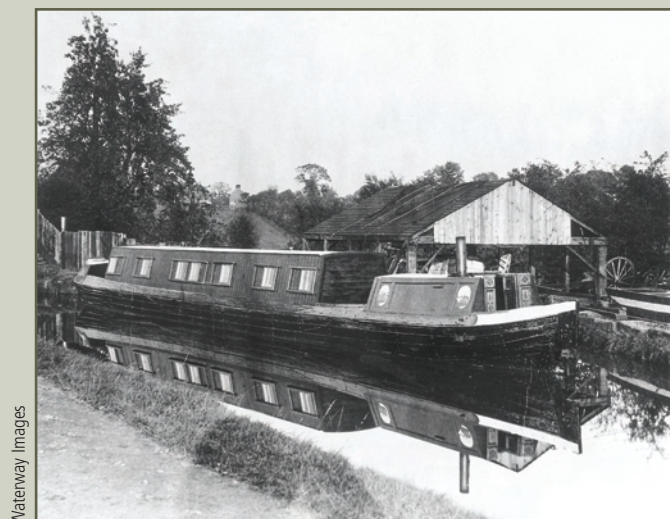
From Market Harborough *Heron* will travel north through Loughborough and along the River Soar, before joining the

Trent & Mersey Canal. Following the line northwards, *Heron* will reach Middlewich in time for the Folk & Boat Festival from 18th-20th June. From there she will cruise to Chester to join in the celebrations that IWA Chester Branch is planning for the weekend of 25th-27th June. Tom was actually born in Chester in 1910 so it is fitting that a Centenary Celebration Dinner is also planned for that weekend in the historic Chester Guildhall.

*Heron* will then rejoin the original *Cressy* route and cruise down the Shropshire Union Canal, then up the Staffs & Worcester before rejoining the Trent & Mersey. From there the route will take her along the Coventry Canal, down the Oxford Canal passing again through Banbury and on towards the Thames. *Heron's* cruise will finish at the IWA National Festival & Boat Show (*The Tom Rolt Centenary Event*) at Beale Park, Pangbourne on the River Thames over the August Bank Holiday weekend.

During her travels *Heron* will be decorated appropriately, telling the Rolt story and promoting IWA. Any boaters or other enthusiasts who may wish to join Ron and Mary for all or part of the journey would be most welcome.

For further information about the *Cressy* re-enactment cruise please contact [ronmary.heritage@btinternet.com](mailto:ronmary.heritage@btinternet.com).



Waterway Images

**Tom and Angela Rolt's narrowboat *Cressy* at Frankton on the Montgomery Canal.**



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***Cressy* is seen here at Market Harborough in 1950 during IWA's first National Rally.**



Waterway Images



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