

OBITUARY

Sonia Rolt: champion of Britain's heritage

PETER FROST pays tribute to a woman who pioneered preserving our waterways

SONIA ROLT, who has died aged 95, made a massive contribution to the preservation and appreciation of Britain's industrial and cultural heritage.

Perhaps best known as the grande dame of Britain's waterways, she didn't just campaign for the preservation of canals but also fought and agitated for better wages and conditions for those families who worked the boats.

The trading narrow boats were her first love but she also involved herself in the preservation of steam railways, historic ships and old buildings.

She was born in New York to British parents and orphaned when young. After a convent education she trained in acting at the London Theatre Studio. She lived with two other rather posh young ladies in London's Beauchamp Place, next door to Harrods.

The second world war's directed labour scheme sent this unlikely trio to the elegant Hoover factory at Perivale where they were trained to solder wiring in Lancaster bombers.

At this time the Communist Party was busy organising female labour in the engineering factories of west London. Perhaps because of Sonia's reputation as a left-wing firebrand she was interviewed by Special Branch about communist influence in the Hoover factory.

When Sonia and her comrades saw a Ministry of Transport advertisement seeking women to work boats on the Grand Union canal they volunteered, attracted by the outdoor life and the fact that they would be paid by how much they carried, and under nobody's orders.

The Ministry of Labour, already somewhat suspicious of Sonia, at first said No. She was threatened with imprisonment for what they said was an unpatriotic attempt to change jobs.

In the end a Ministry of Labour psychiatrist said she and her flatmates could go. They were perhaps glad to see her away from the politics of the factory floor.

Sonia with her two flatmates was sent for brief training on the water. It was the first canal any of them had ever seen. They became Idle Women, the rather unkind joke on the IW badges they wore — the IW really stood for Inland Waterways.

They certainly weren't idle. The trio worked long hours and lived on a pair of cramped and unhygienic narrow-boats carrying 50 tons of metal from London to Birmingham. They carried coal from the Midlands collieries on the return journey.

The work was hard, conditions harsh and cramped but the three women loved the life and Sonia in



particular fell in love with the canal boat folk, their way of life and the beauty in the locks, bridges and buildings of the waterways.

It was her first introduction to the wonders of Britain's industrial landscape.

It didn't take long for these three young women to attract the attentions of the young male boaters working with their parents on the canals. One such was a handsome young boatman with amazing blonde curls called George Smith.

Smith was illiterate, perhaps because he had lived all his life on the cut. To Rolt he seemed to know everything about waterways. The unlikely couple fell in love.

Rolt and Smith were married in 1945, and together they worked a pair of boats. They also encouraged canal workers to join the union and fought for better conditions on the canal ways.

The couple also campaigned for Labour in the July 1945 election that brought an Attlee landslide victory. A contemporary photograph (above) shows her chalking election slogans on her boat Phobus.

They made a handsome couple, so handsome that they featured in some of the early documentary films made to celebrate canal transport in the immediate post-war pre-nationalisation period.

It was at a screening of one of these films in Birmingham she first met Tom Rolt. Rolt had published his book *Narrow Boat* in 1944. It would be the most important foundation stone for what would become the canal preservation movement.

The book was an account of his life and cruising with his first wife, Angela, aboard their converted narrow boat Cressy. Rolt became one of the leading campaigners for canals, co-founding the Inland Waterways Association (IWA) in 1946.

Sonia and Rolt soon started campaigning together. He thought her a scary left-wing blue-stocking. She thought him soft, having a bath aboard his boat Cressy. As time went on they got closer and closer

both as activists and then as a couple.

Sonia became an effective spokeswoman to the government and trade unions. She and Rolt campaigned for better working conditions, especially after the canals were nationalised in 1947.

In 1951, the IWA split. Rolt was expelled. His wife Angela had left to join Billy Smart's circus as its first ever female ringmaster.

Sonia and Smith drifted apart although she stayed friends with him all her life. Smith died in 2012 and Sonia dedicated her 1997 book, *A Canal People: The Photographs of Robert Longden*, to him and his second wife.

In 1952, now both divorced, Sonia and Rolt married.

Tom was by then chair of the Talylyn railway in mid-Wales. He had been behind the idea of saving this narrow-gauge steam railway, which became the first preserved railway in the world.

The Rolts moved to run the railway together. He became the mechanic and engineer, while Sonia did everything else. They moved into his family home at Stanley Pontlarge, near Cheltenham. The 14th-century house had no roof, paraffin lamps and open fires.

Sonia took advice from the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) and was soon a member of its committee.

Later she would advise on the restoration of HMS Warrior and Isambard Kingdom Brunel's steamship Great Britain.

The founder of the conservation charity the Landmark Trust, John Smith, asked her to help furnish rescued buildings. She did and also helped the National Trust in the same way. Sonia got an OBE in 2011 for services to heritage and industrial archaeology.

However, if you seek a better more tangible honour, take a walk along your nearest canal towpath or a ride on a preserved steam railway. They wouldn't exist without the efforts of pioneers like Sonia Rolt.