



# Olga's Boat Song

Part 1



**Tim Coghlan looks at the truly remarkable life of the former 'Idle Woman' Olga Kevelos, who recently died. She began her working life as an astronomer, became a working boatwoman during the war, then went on to become an international motor cycle racing champion, a publican, and finally a Mastermind challenger, and serial TV quiz star. And despite all of this, she never lost her femininity, remaining glamorous to the end.**

My first encounter with Olga was at the unveiling of the plaque to the 'Idle Women'

outside the entrance to the Canal Museum at Stoke Bruerne, Northamptonshire, during the first Stoke Bruerne at War Weekend in September, 2008. She was one of only four survivors able to attend the ceremony, from the thirty or so young girls, who had volunteered to become boatwomen during the war, and had also seen it through - there were many more who had hardly survived beyond the six week initial training. It was a poignant occasion indeed, perhaps underlined by the two non-attendees who, through sudden ill-health, had cried off at the last moment. Of those four who came, I knew Sonia Rolt very well - she was a frequent attendee at our Braunston Historic Narrowboat rallies, amongst other things. I certainly knew of authoress Emma Smith,



having read her classic account of her war years in her book *Maiden's Trip*; and I had heard mention of Jean Peters, who had joined the IWs towards the end of the war. But who was Olga? I knew nothing of

her. I asked Sonia discreetly, but she was most unhelpful, 'I never really met her and knew nothing about her. I thought she was quite strange - and those high cheek bones, that's what I really do remember.' David Blagrove, Chairman of the Friends of Stoke Bruerne Canal Museum, knew a little more - 'After the war, she got involved in motor racing, and then retired to run a pub with her brother at Kings Sutton, near Banbury, but I don't know much more than that.' I took the opportunity to photograph her a couple of times, and had meant to follow up on all of this, but never did. Then of late, I heard sad news that she had died on 28th October, following a stroke at the relatively young age of 85 for what appeared to be a fit and healthy woman. After all, I thought, Sonia had turned 90 this year, and was still firing the shots, including another attendance at our Historic Narrowboat Rally, where she once again rather took over. I was determined to find out what I could about Olga, and the more the story unfolded the more fascinating it became. Hers was no 'idle life', and I was reminded of that saying of the 18th century German poet Goethe, 'He only earns his freedom, who takes each day by storm.' Olga certainly earned hers.



**Clockwise from top left: We'll meet again!** Four of the original thirty odd *Idle Women* who saw it through the war, reunited at the Stoke Bruerne at War Weekend – October, 2008. L/R Emma Smith, Jean Peters, Sonia Rolt (as ever at the helm) and Olga Kevelos. (John Watts-Robertson)

**Essential War Work** The plaque incorporating the IW badge, after its unveiling. Note the water-wavy logo and *IW* to indicate *Inland Waterways*, but which became better known as *Idle Women*. Kit Gayford's badge was given by her to the museum, where it can be seen. Olga's was accidentally lost when it 'thrown away with the pullover it was pinned on' by her mother when home on leave. She thought the pullover 'too disgusting to be washed'. (Tim Coghlan)

**Former Idle Woman Sonia Rolt aged 90 and still firing the shots.** Seen here on *President* at the opening of the 2009 Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally (Paul Bennett)

**After the plaque unveiling at Stoke Bruerne in September, 2008:** Tony Hales (centre) Chairman of British Waterways talks to veteran IW Olga Kevelos and her brother Raymond, with whom she ran a pub from 1970 to 1992. 'Keeping cargoes moving along the waterways during the war was no easy task,' said Tony Hales. 'The young ladies had to contend with limited rations, difficult living conditions and sometimes appalling weather including being ice-bound. They worked relentlessly... In truth they were anything but idle.' (Tim Coghlan)



Calendar of Good Nights for Observation of Meteor Showers.

Date	Shower	Characteristics.
June-September	$\gamma$ Draconids.	Slow; with Trains.
July-18-30	$\alpha$ Capricornids	Very slow; Bright.
July 25-Aug. 4.	$\alpha, \beta$ Perseids	Swift; streaks.
* July 25-30	$\delta$ Aquarids	Long paths; Slow.
* Aug. 10-12	Perseids	Famous shower; Swift.
Aug. 12-Oct. 2.	$\alpha$ Aurigids.	Very swift.
Aug. 10-20	$\kappa$ Cygnids	Medium.
Aug. 31-23	$\sigma$ Draconids	Very slow.
Aug. 21-31	$\zeta$ Draconids	Bright.
Sept. 7-15	$\epsilon$ Perseids	Swift.
Oct. 2	Quadrantids	Slow.
* Oct. 9	$\epsilon$ Arietids	This shower is scheduled to return. <span style="float: right;">1940.</span>
Oct. 12-23	(head of Draco)	Very slow; Fireballs.
* Oct. 18-20	Orionids	Swift.
Oct. 30-16-17	$\epsilon$ Taurids	Slow; Fireballs.
Nov. 3-15	$\epsilon$ Taurids	Very Slow; Bright.
* Nov. 13-15	Leonids	Famous shower <sup>disappeared in recent years.</sup> Famous shower <sup>disappeared in recent years.</sup> Slow, like's Comet.
* Nov. 17-27	Andromedids	
* Dec. 10-12	Geminids	Fine shower; white.
* Jan. 2-5	Quadrantids	Good; Medium speed.
Jan. 17	$\kappa$ Cygnids	Slow; trains.
Feb. 5-10	$\alpha$ Aurigids	Very slow; Fireballs.



**Stars in her eyes:** Olga developed an early passion for astronomy, as shown here by her surviving school exercise book. She kept many school books to her end but almost nothing from her canal years.

Olga's story begins with her Greek father, who was born in a mountainous village in the Peloponnese, near Sparta to a middle class medical family. He was well educated, but did not want to do medicine, and instead set off on his travels, first to America and then to England where he studied English at the Pitman College in London, after which he worked for a trading company in Sierra Leone. In Nice, he met and married an English widow, and moved to the well-to-do suburb of Edgbaston in Birmingham, where he became a stockbroker on the Birmingham Stock Exchange and there spent the remainder of his working life. As his son Raymond put it, 'Wherever you plant a Greek, he will put down roots!' His wife's first husband was an Indian Army doctor who was gassed in 1915 on the Western Front at Ypres, from which he later contacted TB and died. Olga was the first of three children to the new marriage. She was born in 1923, followed two years later by a brother Victor, and then seven years later by Raymond in 1932.

Olga was well educated at the George Dixon Grammar School for Girls, in which she took some pride. This was shown by

the several of her exercise books that survived in her possessions, including her 'Astronomy. Notes etc', where in a well formed hand are tabulated amongst other celestial facts, 'Calendar of Good Nights for Observation of Meteor Showers.' The study of astronomy was to feature twice again in her life. Another hint of her future path was the unauthorized roller-skate race she organised in the school hall, for which she was severely censured by the headmistress.

One of the subjects Olga had studied was metallurgy and, after leaving school, and with the country now at war, she worked for a time at the laboratories of William Mills, manufacturers of the famous Mills Bomb. But with her passion for astronomy, she was lured to London by the offer of a job at the Royal Observatory at Greenwich. Unfortunately, air raids forced the closure of the observatory soon after her arrival and caused its evacuation to the Admiralty in Bath.

Her arrival here dismayed at least one member of the senior staff, Donald Sadler, who later wrote in his memoirs that





**Below: Women Trainees:** The 19 year old Emma Smith is second from right. According to authoress Margaret Cornish, Olga is on the far left, with her later trainer and later skipper Daphne French just behind. Olga considered it probably right that the picture was of her – if so it is the only surviving wartime photograph of her. But most think it was Sonia Rolt, including that lady. (The author has just checked this again with her.) (*Waterways Trust*)



'Olga Kevelos... could not do arithmetic and terrified people by stalking around with a large knife in her belt... Most (members of the clerical staff) were reasonably competent and one or two were exceptionally good, but a few were hopeless - Olga Kevelos could not add *plus* and *minus* signs together.' However he did observe that '...she seemed an interesting woman, and after the war, became a motor-cycle racing champion!'

Olga did not enjoy her time in Bath, where there was no star-gazing, and instead just daily mountains of clerical work to climb. Then one day in early 1943, she read Kitty Gayford's famous advertisement in *The Times*, which attracted so many others - including Sonia Rolt and her two other theatrically trained flat-mates, living in Beauchamp Place, in London's fashionable Knightsbridge. (All three of those stars-in-their-eyes girls had

been called up to work in engineering factories, from which they were desperate to escape). The advertisement was placed under the name of the Department of War Transport, calling for women volunteers to become boatmen for a minimum weekly wage of £3-£2 during training - with the caution that 'only women of robust constitution and good health should enter this employment.' The need arose because the canal fleet operators Grand Union Canal Carrying Company and Fellows Morton & Clayton were laying up boats for lack of crews, due to the men being called up.

Olga did apply, also persuading two friends to join her - the scheme calling for 'a crew consisting of three women, there being no objection to friends going together.' Of Olga's original three, one was the daughter of a Harley



**Left: Kitty Gayford at the helm:** Seen (L) in her distinctive cap, she was the driving force in setting up the *Idle Women* for which she was awarded an MBE. After the war, she lived on a Thames houseboat at Chelsea Reach, even charring to make ends meet. She never married. 'Ah well', she is recorded as saying, 'I did have my moments, but I simply could not find anything that a man could do for a woman that a woman could not do for herself.' (*Waterways Trust*)

Street doctor, a family friend. Details of the others are now lost, as are the names of both of them.

For all three, it was their long-sought ticket to freedom. As Olga later recalled, 'I give thanks for the war, otherwise I would never have escaped from home. Although I loved it, I wanted to live in the outside world.' Her feelings were shared by many other volunteers. The 19-year-old Emma Smith, who was working for the War Office in a hut in the grounds of Blenheim Palace, later wrote in her canal memoirs *Maidens' Trip*, 'I didn't want to be in uniform! (The IWs provided their own clothes). My sister (in the WAAF) was all brass buttons and saluting, and she horrified me. I was grateful to be liberated from my upbringing. If anything I feel guilty for enjoying my war so much... I was one of the original hippies, in bare feet and dungarees - cut off below the knee because we always wanted to be respectable. We didn't want to shock the traditional boat people whose women wore long black skirts.' As to Olga's attire, according to Margaret Cornish's book *Troubled Water* - where there are occasional references to her - She 'took the biscuit. She was the youngest of the recruits and wore strange and erotic gear. She was a flamboyant person with colourful trousers and a Mexican-type hat... In the forties we were an alien race - women who wore trousers! Scandalous!'

As to Olga's canal-working days, very little is actually known apart from what odd comments were recorded here and there. She never kept a diary, no letters to parents, family or friends survive, and it is questionable whether there is even one photograph of her - she certainly had none in her possession when she died, as the author can confirm from a recent search of her papers with her surviving brother. All of this is in dramatic contrast to her days as a champion motor cycle



... racing driver, where there are endless press and magazine articles on her, and hundreds of photographs, as she caught the imagination of the nation, beating the men hands down.

... We know that Olga was trained by Kitty Gayford, whom Emma Smith described as 'very hoppity-skippity on and off boats, but had no swankiness about her at all.' Olga would probably have had at least one training round-trip of three weeks from Bulls Bridge near Brentford in west London to Birmingham carrying goods from Limehouse Docks, and then to the Warwickshire Coalfields above Coventry to load for the run south to London. Sometimes the training went to two trips, after which the girls were on their own. Margaret commented on the challenge 'to

... sustain and survive the rigours of the work and not to be one of the many drop-outs who did not survive even the six weeks of training... What had we been trying to prove to ourselves? Was there over compensation for past failure?'

... She continues elsewhere, 'There was the story of the trainee who lost the butty in Braunston tunnel. The light on the butty had failed - another loose connection? - and the steerer on the motor failed to realise the butty was no longer in attendance until she emerged from the tunnel. We secretly thought that the steerer must have been somewhat unobservant not to have missed the pull of the butty.' Margaret later learned at a reunion of 'bargees' - in Bad Salzuflen of all places - that 'Olga was on the butty. She was terrified.'

... That three-week round trip experienced



**Top: 'You had to tie the boats in tight to the shoot'** Longford Wharf in about 1947, and just as Olga would have known it. Thanks to the hoppers,

two pairs of narrowboats could be loaded quickly at the same time, as seen here where GUCCC narrowboats are being loaded. The nearby gasometer was not used during the war as it was considered too conspicuous, but it surprisingly survived all the Coventry bombing raids. (Sonia Rolt/Longden)

**Right: Apsley Mill in wartime camouflage:** One of the mills to which the all-female crew delivered regularly during the war. (Waterways Trust)





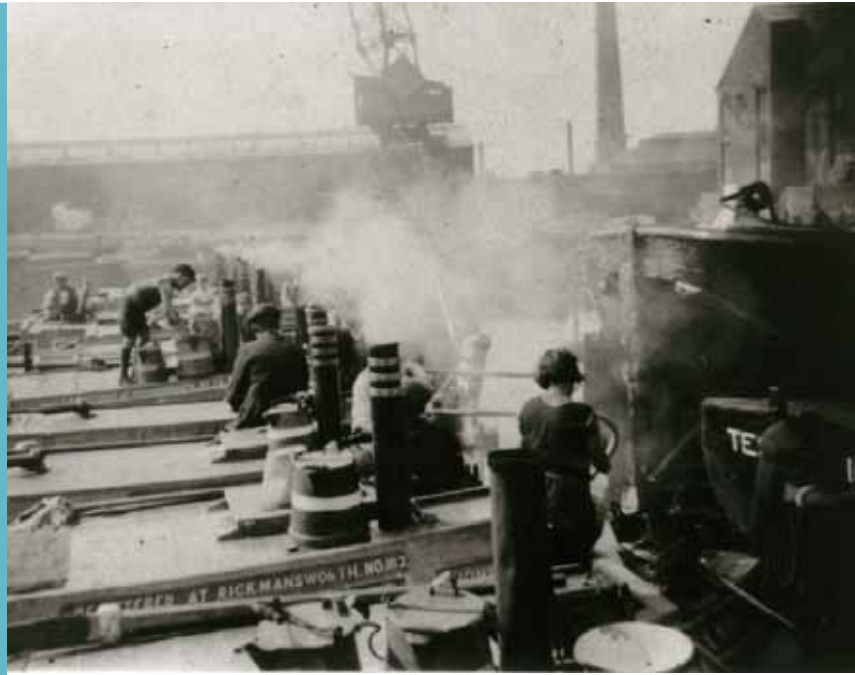
**Right: Limehouse Dock early 1940s:**

The narrowboats here are probably all of the Grand Union fleet. After completing a coal run to the mills and factories of west London, the *Idle Women* might well receive 'orders for Limehouse', which

would be awaiting them at the factories where they unloaded. These 'back-loads' were war materials for the manufacturing Midlands. This scene was a tempting target for the Luftwaffe, and the girls tried to load and get away before nightfall. (*Waterways Trust*)

**Below centre: Back-load for Brum** Trainees at Bulls Bridge. The butty in the foreground is loaded with aluminium bars. (*Waterways Trust*)

**Inset: Thoroughly modern *Idle Women*:** (L) Lorna York of Stoke Bruerne Museum on its narrowboat *Sculptor* with Sheila Bourne on her butty *Angel* at the 2008 Stoke Bruerne at War weekend (*Tim Coghlan*)



on training was then basically the canal the girls travelled thereafter. Margaret lamented, 'Our boats never explored the extensive network north of Brummagen and Coventry. We often wished to go exploring but that pleasure was delayed for me for almost another twenty years. We came to know every bridge 'ole where the lockwheeler would step off from the narrow gunwale, bicycle in hand, to go shopping in a nearby village store; the water depths at every tie-up where we could moor the boats either breasted up or singled out, loaded or empty, we were soon able to gauge to a nicety. Every twist and turn of the channel, kept open by the constant passage of boats, was recognized; to deviate from the channel was to get embedded in the pile-up of mud at the sides of the canal or on the inside of the bend.'

Later she commented, 'There was the obvious need to be accepted by the boatpeople themselves and on their terms.'

Initially the boat people treated us with suspicion but once you'd proved yourself and done a little time, they'd give a hand. I expect it helped that we were treated by outsiders as badly as they were - I always had a few lumps of coal ready for when the children threw stones or spat at us.'

In August this year, Olga fortunately appeared in a short television piece on the *Idle Women* in *The One Show* with Jean Peters and Emma Smith, aboard the Stoke Bruerne Museum's historic narrowboat *Sculptor*. In it she commented in her strong Brummy accent, which despite her good education, never left her:

'You had to tie the boats in tight to the shoot. (This was probably at Longford, just north of Coventry) Then they wound up all the shutters and all of a sudden you had about thirty tons of nutty slack come BANG down into the hold. It was up to you to trim it and we had to get shovels to shovel it from one side to another until the

boats was riding in a balanced fashion. You remember the nice bits. You remember the lovely summer days when you could sit there and play your recorders as we went along very ostentatiously. That was mostly in Paddington and Regents Park. They was the posh bits, when everyone came along to have a look! In an interview with the *Northampton Chronicle & Echo*



following the plaque unveiling at Stoke Bruerne in 2008, Olga commented, 'It was nice that they thought about us before it was too late, in order to remember the people and the efforts made. Idleness was something there wasn't time for; we were very busy. The days were 18 hours long and you just had to keep moving. It was a life-defining thing to do.'



*In Part II we continue with Olga's war and then her equally extraordinary life 'on the bank' that followed.*