



f Olga's canal-working days, as we saw in Part 1, 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.

Our story now moves to a brief reference to her by Margaret Cornish in her book *Troubled Waters*, on 4 March, 1944: 'Olga and Elsie said they would like to go on the training boats with Daphne and they have already left.' (Daphne French was originally one of the trainers, but was now just working a pair of boats as skipper.) And later that month after a diary entry of 20th March: 'We caught up with Daphne at Buckby where both pairs tied up at the top of the locks. It would be easier to work the four boats down between us all. Olga shared the butty cabin with Daphne, whilst Elsie enjoyed the motor cabin to herself.' So, here at least, in trying to build the picture, we know just whom for certain Olga was boating with at that time - though who Elsie was, we almost know nothing, not even her surname.



**TOP: 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*)

**TOP RIGHT: Trainees at Bulls Bridge:** With trainer Kitty Gayford (L). A somewhat posed photograph including Kitty carrying a windlass, the others variously a boat hook, Buckby can and coil of rope, with bicycle to hand (*Waterways Trust*)

**LEFT: Good to be afloat again:** After the plaque unveiling to the Idle Women during the Stoke Bruerne at War Weekend in September, 2008, veterans Olga Kevelos (L) and Sonia Rolt, escorted by a Captain Mainwaring lookalike. (*Tim Coghlan*)





# Olga's Boat Song

Part 2



**Tim Coghlan concludes his look at the truly remarkable life of the former 'Idle Woman' Olga Kevelos, who recently died. She began her working life as an astronomer, and became a working boatwoman during the war. We now follow her life through her remaining war-years, after which she 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.**

**Push off:** A posed propaganda photograph in about 1943 of *IW* Audrey with a long shaft and Evelyn Hunt peering through the hatch on the *butty Dipper*.  
(*Waterways Trust*)



**ABOVE: Anything goes!** A now unknown trainee with dungarees, boyish hair, no makeup and sporting a pipe. 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'.  
(*Waterways Trust*)

**BELOW: The Greyhound Inn at Hawkesbury Junction in about 1947** This inn just north of Coventry would have been well known to the *IWs* as it was a social stopping point before going on to load at one of the many local collieries. The inn also owned the adjoining shop, where provisions could be bought, and the tap outside where the three gallon Buckby can could be refilled. It was quite acceptable for the girls - or towards the end of the war single girls, when only two girls worked a pair of boats - to go into these boatmen pubs on their own and drink a pint of the home-brewed beer, whilst the other stayed onboard to wash in the small boatman's cabin. (*Sonia Rolt/Longden*)

It is understandable that some of the 'IWs' came from the gay community. There was a considerable attraction for the women in dressing in mens dungarees and hobnails boots, with short hair, and no makeup. But bringing the love-element onto a pair of boats crewed by three women - not all necessarily of that persuasion or sympathetic to it - did cause its problems. On a lighter note there were cat-fights at Bulls Bridge, which the boatmen still remember with mirth. But there were more serious turns. Margaret Cornish recalls: 'Daphne had heard the rumours (of Jo with her wild accusations and rages) and she had been asked by several of the boatwomen that Jo

should not be allowed to stay on the boats. An official letter from the MOT was sent to Jo but it was left to Daphne to ensure that Jo received the letter and complied with the order to leave. There were fearful scenes, she told me, and Jo had refused to leave until threatened at the office by police action. That evening she had waylaid Daphne and attacked her, 'I think she might have strangled me', said Daphne, still shaken by the memory. 'Luckily Olga heard the commotion and came to my rescue.'

This incident was picked up again in 2002, when travel writer Paul Gogarty made his *Odyssey through England by Narrowboat*, as recorded in his wonderful canal-read *The Water Road*: (Paul met up with Margaret and Olga at Margaret's suggestion in the graveyard at Braunston - 'Thought it appropriate as I'll be moving in permanently, shortly!')

'You were rescuing Daphne at the time from Billy who was threatening to kill her,' Margaret remembers.

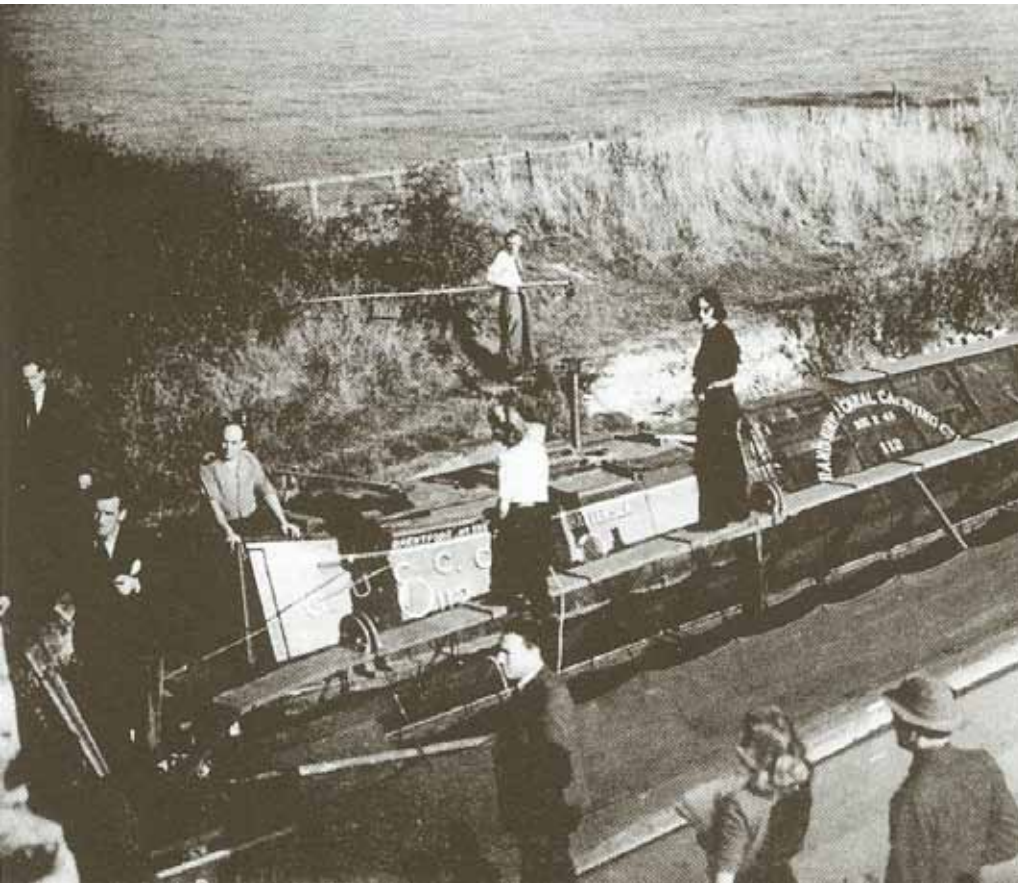
'God, yes. She went beserk with an axe, trying to smash her way back into the cabin after Daphne had told her she had to leave the boat. Billy was so strong. I wasn't in the least surprised when she eventually got her sex changed.'

'Is that Jo from the book, Margaret?' I asked.

'Yes. I changed her name to protect her but she's dead now.'

'She sounded interesting.'





**BELOW: Trainer Daphne French on the Cleopatra.** Olga and her friend Elsie were later to join Daphne on the training boats towards the end of 1944 when further training was not required. After the war, Olga worked a pair of boats with Daphne on their own – Elsie having left to train as a hairdresser. (*Waterways Trust*)

**LEFT: After the war was over:** Working pairs of IW boats being filmed in September 1945, when Olga was still working. It is just possible that the Michael Jackson lookalike on the centre right is her. If so, then it is probably the only surviving photograph of her in her 'IW' days. (*Waterways Trust*)

There is an interesting entry from Margaret, still on the Cut on the 6th December, 1945: 'At Noble (Newbold) '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.'

Margaret continued working with Virginia into the Spring of 1946. But 'there were fewer and fewer orders... We began to feel that to stay on was unfair to the boat people whose livelihood depended on a constant supply of work. As in so many other wartime jobs the women were only filling in the gaps until the men returned. So the scheme of women trainees - and we were never more than

'Anatomically interesting too,' Olga pipes up in her flat Brummie accent.

'She proposed to me, you know?' Margaret says matter of factually.

'Was that before or after she proposed to Virginia and Daphne?' Olga asks.

Margaret doesn't laugh. 'She was schizophrenic and paranoid and very strong despite her gamin looks. Excellent boat woman but volatile. She once picked me straight out of the water and I wasn't the smallest of women.'

Over lunch at the Admiral Nelson, Olga 'underlines the war-time priorities "Finding time to eat and sleep were always the preoccupation... The overwhelming feeling was hunger and tiredness... Worst thing I recall was my botched attempt to kill a duck I caught for the pot. Bungled one murder attempt after another. Bashed it on the head, wrung its neck, tried slitting its throat. In the end I just plunged it underwater to shut it up and eventually it stopped fighting. Funny. Didn't know a duck could drown."

Olga continued carrying after the war in Europe ended in May, 1945, and was still doing so at least until the September, 1945, when she is

recorded on the Cut by Margaret for the last time: 'On our trip south back in early September we had met up briefly with Daphne and Olga. Daphne had told us that the gossip of the time was that Sonia was to marry George. Speculations about the union were lively and sanguine and we half envied her the superior status of mate to a real boatman! (Sonia married George Smith in 1946. In 1950 she began a relationship with author Tom Rolt, and divorced George Smith in 1951. That boatman marriage was childless.)



'trainees' to the boatpeople - dwindled to an end and we stepped back into our predetermined roles. There was no final celebration, or thoughts that we would ever return to the Cut. All the other crews had left, and we felt the desolation of being the last to go and now only wanted to be gone.'

Towards the very end of her book, Margaret wrote: 'I look at letters, brown with creases, which are tucked away in the back of my 1944-5 diary. One is from Daphne back in Cork refitting her boat the *Embla*, and she writes that Olga was with her persuading her to join in a smuggling campaign to bring in brandy, laces and perfume from France.' (Daphne refused and the scheme never materialized.) Daphne lived the remainder of her life in Cork and never married. Elsie left the boats and was last heard of as an unmarried hairdresser. Margaret is still alive, now in a nursing home in Ipswich. She was briefly married and then returned for a while to live on the Cut, and wrote her book.

As for our Olga, as one door closed, another opened. After her momentous war, she was awarded a government grant to study French and medieval history at the *Cite University de Paris*. She returned to start her own travel agency business in Birmingham. She also became attached to a motorcycle racer, Phil Heath, and became interested in the sport herself, which led to a motor racing career of over twenty years, including winning, two Gold Medals on a Norton in the International Six Day



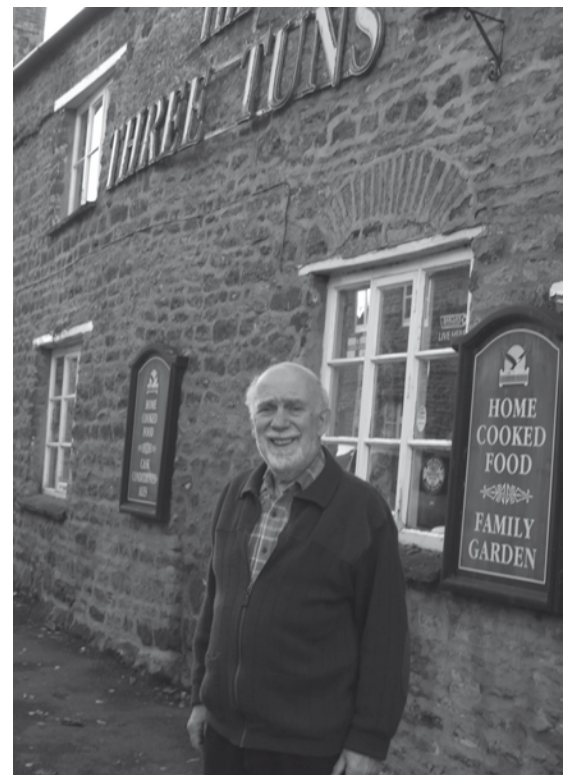
**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Girl on a Motorcycle Less than four years after leaving the Cut, Olga at her first Scottish Six Days Trial in 1949 talking to the legendary Bill Nicholson (*Raymond Kevelos*)

**The Three Tuns at Kings Sutton** Where Olga worked from 1970 to 1992 joining her unmarried brother Raymond, who survives her and is seen here recently. They 'lived above the shop' during those years. (*Tim Coghlan*)

**Mastermind** In 1978 Olga famously took part in this BBC's ultimate quiz competition, in which she won her first round and narrowly missed winning the next. Her subject was Genghis Khan, and she was formally photographed for the competition reading *History of the Mongols*. (*Raymond Kevelos*)

Trials, one of which was in Czechoslovakia in 1953. The event was widely acknowledged as the longest and most strenuous of all motorcycle competitions. She also raced Formula 3 cars. She later listed the qualities of racing success: 'Balance, anticipation, concentration and fearlessness.'

In 1970, aged 47, she retired to join her unmarried brother Raymond in running his pub, *The Three Tuns* at the village of Kings Sutton, south of Banbury and near the Oxford Canal - which canal she in fact had never worked. She remained co-pubican for 22 years, they both retiring in 1992. In 1993 Mikron Theatre, the travelling canal theatre company put on a performance of its play *Imogen's War* in Kings Sutton, which Olga attended. It was



based on the memoirs-*various* of the Idle Women – the I W initials of the play's name being intentional. Olga was very pleased with it, and it was a fitting compliment to her that they came to perform in her old pub.

In 1978 Olga famously took part in BBC's *Mastermind*, in which she won her first round and narrowly missed winning the next. Her subject was Genghis Khan, with her second subject, astronomy - her great childhood love. (Years later she met the then Prime Minister Tony Blair who was fascinated by her interest in Genghis Khan. Afterwards she quipped: 'I think he wanted tips on how to successfully invade another country!') For the remainder of her life, she was as passionate and competitive about quiz competitions as she had once been




**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Climbed every mountain and not yet at the peak of her career** Olga seen here during the Scottish Six Days Trial in 1954, riding a James 250 cc. She was later to win this ultimately challenging competition, against the men, riding a Norton. She later listed the qualities of racing success: 'Balance, anticipation, concentration and fearlessness.' (Ray Biddle)

**Television quiz '15 to 1'** For the remainder of her life, Olga was as passionate and competitive about quiz competitions as she had once been about motorcycle racing.. (Raymond Kevelos)

**Beats a narrowboat anytime** Olga on a 350cc Norton at Goodwood in 1951 (Raymond Kevelos)

about motorcycle racing, including appearing in the TV quiz *15-1*. Her pub team won the *Oxford Mail* Trophy and on two occasions the Northamptonshire County Competition - the village is on the border of the two counties.

In her interview for the television programme *The One Show* in August, 2009, Olga said of her time as a wartime boatwoman, 'It was a kind of freedom that some of us might never have known until we'd got married.' Ironically she had remained single, although her name was romantically linked at various times to at least three or four major names in motor sports including a famous commentator. One of her quiz team, local sport expert Taffy, told the author over an appropriate pint of *Spitfire* at *The Three Tuns*, 'There was no man whom she knew who was big enough to tame her!' Olga remained a free spirit to her end. 

**Authors' note:** Special thanks to the following in strict alphabetical order: David Blagrove, David Bridson, Mike Constable, Paul Gogarty (for freely allowing me to quote from his canal odyssey, *Water Road*), Sonia Rolt, Taffy Sharpe – and very especially Raymond Kevelos.

