



*Tim Coghlan recently met George Smith, the now 96-year-old former working boatman and briefly the first husband of Sonia Rolt. George was in great shape, living on his own in his little bungalow near the Coventry Canal. He was still the legendary canal charmer and raconteur, with a truly astonishing memory. He related this tale of his first visit to a London theatre. And also some other remarkable adventures to be published later in Canals Rivers + Boats.*

***‘APART FROM THAT,  
HOW DID YOU  
ENJOY THE PLAY?’***



**OPPOSITE - *You shall go to the theatre!*:** The young unmarried Sonia South in about 1944, when working as an *idle woman* for the Grand Union Canal Company, and very much with stars in her eyes. She is steering the butty boat *Moon*, towed by the motor *Phobos*. Sonia worked the pair with her two close friends and former flat mates from Beauchamp Place in London's smart Knightsbridge. They were 'Chattie' Salaman and Meriol Trevor, who took the photograph. Chattie – whose real name has been lost - became a film director. Meriol wrote what is still considered by some to be the definitive biography of Cardinal Newman, but she never wrote of her canal days. Note the butty's wash, and the girls' non-traditional painting on the cabin slider. (*Sonia Rolt*)

S ometime in 1946, and with the war well behind her, the former *Idle Woman* and working boat-woman Sonia Smith received some exciting news when she collected her mail at Hawkesbury Junction, a focal point for the Midlands canals, lying as it did a little to the north of Coventry. There was a letter from an old girlfriend from her pre-war acting days, who had just landed her first big role in a West End theatre production. Would Sonia like to come to the first night, which was now only a few days away?

Sonia still seemed to live a life in both camps; the educated, informed and comfortable life of the professional London middle classes into which she was born, and the tough illiterate life of the working boatmen, into which she had now married in the summer of 1945, and about which she would exclaim, 'I was never born for that!' The prospect of a London first night filled her with enthusiasm to be there.

Her handsome, golden-curved boatman husband George - Robert Aickman had once called him the Adonis of the canals - was always only too pleased to try and help her enjoy something of her previous thespian life. After all, he had once been briefly in the limelight when he had appeared as

**ABOVE, LEFT - Boy George:** The golden-curved George Smith, 'the Adonis of the canals, probably in the summer on 1946 aged about 32, a year after his marriage to Sonia, and about the time of his visit to the London theatre. (*Sonia Rolt*)

**ABOVE, RIGHT - Locking up:** The *Warwick & Cairo* returning north empty after delivering coal to London in about the mid-late forties. George is winding the paddle. As they just worked the boats on their own, Sonia had the use of the butty cabin for all her personal possessions including a large quantity of books. (*Sonia Rolt*)

an extra in the propaganda film made in the summer of 1944 called *Painted Boats*, and knew at first hand the excitement of the acting world.

His role in that film was somewhat appropriately in that pub scene, which was made at Shepperton Studios, near the canal centre on the southern end of the Grand Union Canal at Bull's Bridge - and not in the *Boat Inn* at Stoke Breurne, where it was supposed to have been set, with the new lovers seen previously going into it, after an intimate encounter on a grassy canal bank - no doubt also in a studio.

For the two days of scheduled filming to make only a couple of minutes of film, George and any other of the boatmen waiting orders at Bulls

Bridge, were bussed daily to the studio. There was no need for them to go into costume. What they wore could not be more authentic. Alas for George, when he returned at the end of the first day's shooting, with endless drinking of frothy, coloured water, he found he had orders the next day to load at Limehouse, and that was the end of his acting career. He had been paid at Equity Extra's rate, whereas he would have earned nothing sitting at Bull's Bridge awaiting orders. But the pay was nothing special. In fact it struck him that film extras for all their glamour, earned no more than he could when working the canal.

But he is still there briefly somewhere in that film. It is now out on DVD, with its Ealing Studios sloppy story line; but with it, a unique insight in the world of working boats in wartime. Interestingly the canal-technical adviser to the filming was one Tom Rolt, who seven years later would take his wife.

Sonia and George had arrived at Hawkesbury Junction in the afternoon after loading coal that morning at nearby Bedworth Colliery, with orders for

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**RIGHT - Wash around the lock:** The recently married Sonia doing her washing on the butty Warwick whilst George worked the lock. (*Sonia Rolt*)

**BELOW - Painted Butty:** Boats from the Braunston based Samuel Barlow Coal Carrying company were used in the making of the film *Painted Boats*. Tom Rolt, who was appointed technical adviser to the film, wrote in his autobiography, *Landscape with Canals*, 'For the purposes of the film, one Barlow butty boat was repainted and re-named *Sunny Valley*. Rather a stupid and uncharacteristic name, I thought privately, but the boat retained it until the end of her working life.' The butty survives so named to this day and is a regular attendee at the annual Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally. A copy back cabin, made by Barlows for the studio filming, also survives at the Stoke Bruerne Museum. (*Ealing Studios*)



**RIGHT - The hour of splendour in the grass:**

The new young boatman lovers. It was probably filmed in Shepperton Studios, given the angle of the lighting. The lass appears very similar in dress and hair-styling to the beautiful Audrey Harper, featured in our *Evelyn's War* series, whose image by 1944 was known nationally through appearing on government war posters. (Ealing Studios)

**BELOW - After that it's off to the pub:** The new young lovers celebrate with a visit to the Boat Inn at Stoke Bruerne. What happened next was filmed in Shepperton Studios. (Ealing Studios)

**BELOW, RIGHT - 'E's payin', so what's you 'aving luv?':** A very different scene from today's canalside inn, including the use of a paraffin lamp. (Ealing Studios)



Croxley Mill, north west of London. But the problem they then discovered was that first thing on the morning after the next day, there would be about a week's emergency stoppage on the lock at Leighton Buzzard. If they were going to clear that lock and make it to London, they would have to leave there and then, and travel non-stop for twenty-four hours. George said he was up to it, if his wife was, and this they agreed to do. The pair of them then set off immediately with their fully-laden boats, the motor *Cairo* with George at the helm, and the butty *Warwick* with Sonia steering.

It was not all full-on; in the long wide pounds of the Grand Union Canal, the butty could be towed on a pair of crossed short snubbers - or towing ropes - which would remove the need for it being steered. This allowed for breaks when a meal could be made to be eaten underway, or alternatively one or the other of them could snatch a few hours of precious sleep. But it meant the boats went slower, with the butty immediately in the wash of the motor, rather than on the normal long snubber, with the butty steered out to one side.



The next evening, after an uneventful run, they reached that lock at Leighton Buzzard, where they found much activity going on. There were already a number of other boatmen about, anxiously wanting to get through, and others arriving behind them. When they thought it was their turn, George began moving his two boats in together, whilst Sonia worked the lock. But just as he had loosened off the butty and pulled it forward, so that the bows of his pair could enter the lock together, another boatman arrived claiming it was his lock. To make his point, that boatman then rammed his motor between the sterns of George's now untied boats, the butty of which was being towed in on a long rope by Sonia from the lockside.

The result was to jam all three boats into the lock mouth, with all then unable to extricate themselves. The local lock-keeper, whose house was immediately by the lock, was called out by Sonia to come and adjudicate. The offending boatman had a reputation for his aggressive behaviour, and the lock-keeper quickly found for George and Sonia. It was however some time before the boats could be finally separated, allowing Sonia and George to proceed, the lock-keeper giving grudging assistance.

Finally the lock was filled and Sonia opened the top gates. George began driving the motor out of the lock, with Sonia now on the butty, attached by a long snubber - the working boatmen did not close the gates behind them. As George left the lock, but before the snubber was fully extended, the offending boatman deliberately opened one of the bottom gate paddles. This malicious action had the effect of running water out of the lock and slamming the top gates onto Sonia's butty as she was now leaving the lock under tow, and jamming it. Mutual howls of abuse ensued until the offending boatman closed the paddles, allowing the lock to fill, which once done, the top gates were opened again, and the butty was towed out of the lock. George and Sonia were at last away, and clear of Leighton Buzzard Lock and its impending stoppage. They could now stop for a good night's well-earned rest.

But before this, George had already thought through his revenge. Half a mile up, there was a notorious right-hand bend on the non-towpath side which was always badly silted up, and had to be avoided at any cost. George tied up his two boats together breasted-up on the towpath side at that very point, so narrowing the canal. But he only tied the stern line to the bank, leaving the paired-bows free to pivot on it. Then he waited.

Soon the offending boatman came charging down, with his butty strung somewhat behind on a long snubber. He was no doubt anxious to pass George as quickly as possible, in the narrow working channel and also to rock George's boats with his wash. But he fell straight into the trap. His wash pulled the bows of the paired *Cairo* and *Warwick* out into the gap between his two boats, and bang into his oncoming butty, pushing it straight across the canal and into the sticky slime. With the offending boatman's motor still going full ahead and now going round that right-hand bend, his butty was pulled ever deeper onto the mud, until both boats came to a grinding halt. Whilst having their tea, George and Sonia had the pleasure of watching the man trying to extricate himself, and begging assistance from boats heading north to beat the stoppage to pull his butty back out. These passing boatmen were told by George just what had happened, and they left the boatman to his misery. George's revenge was sweet.

The Smiths then progressed south without further incident, and unloaded at Croxley Mill, after which they went on to the canal depot at Bulls Bridge near Uxbridge. From there, on the due day, and suitably scrubbed up, they took a bus to the West End, on a bus route that still runs to this day. (The bus sign still reads BULLS BRIDGE as it trundles westward along the Uxbridge Road, but the site of the old yard is now a large Tesco). The Smiths had made that first night.

When I had learnt from the 96 year-old George about this adventure to get to a West End theatre first night, I asked him if he could still remember the name of the play. No, he did not, but he did remember that he had found it rather long and somewhat bloodthirsty. 'There's this bloke what 'ad 'is eyes put out with a red hot poker, and then goes wandering around the countryside quite mad, and in the middle of the winter's night.' Was it *King Lear*? I prompted. 'Yeah, that's the one!' 🍷



**ABOVE - Somewhere in the crowd there's you:** George Smith is in there somewhere, back to the camera, but not identifiable. It took two days to film the pub scene, with George only there for one of them. Tom Rolt was not present at the filming of this scene. But he describes in *Landscape with Canals*, how on another occasion he 'watched them filming over and over again one short sequence lasting not more than a minute and involving two lines of dialogue. I must have watched at least six takes before I became bored and tiptoed away. Those who hanker for the glamour of the movies and those rare mortals who act in them must realize in their saner moments what a tinsel world it is.' (Ealing Studios)

**BELOW, LEFT - A hard act to swallow:** A group of working boatmen playing their part so well - except the drink was coloured water with added froth. George is not in the group. *Equity* the actors' union allowed non-member boatmen for this scene, but those close-up scenes on the canal of working boatmen going about their tasks had to have *Equity* members. It meant that winding gear had to be momentarily disconnected to the lock paddles so they could be seen to be wound at the boatmen's speed. (Ealing Studios)

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** In writing this piece special thanks go to George Smith and to our mutual friend, the former working boatwoman Alice Lapworth, who arranged the meeting and came with me, and was then of enormous help in 'getting the story right'.

As regards that play, I have made a web-search of post WWII 1940s performances in London's West End of *King Lear* and could only find one. This was an Old Vic production at the New Theatre, St Martin's Lane (now Albery) in 1946. (The Old Vic Theatre was bombed in 1941 and moved itself somewhat long-temporarily here). The performance starred the young Laurence Olivier, fresh from *Henry V*. Unsurprisingly it was not success, and was short-lived - though Olivier returned later in life to make a great performance of the play. Sonia Rolt, to whom I read this story to, and is happy with its content, told me that at 91, she really can't remember anything more about the play. But she never cared for Laurence Olivier. She did however remember going on another occasion with George to a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which 'a very special friend played Oberon, the King of the Fairies'.



**LEFT - Back on the Cut:** George Smith with his second wife Anne at a Coventry Canal Society Rally in about 1988.

The modern narrow boat *Outlaw*, was built by Colecraft, with strong traditional lines for the Coventry based Brian Saunders, a then prominent member of the IWA, and friend of George and Anne. The couple met in 1957, when George worked as a steerer for a pair of hotel narrow boats, and had an evening off when tied up at Camden Lock. He went to the nearby Camden Palais dance hall and met Anne in the ticket queue, and the rest they say is history. Born in Lincolnshire, Anne had moved to London and was working as an unqualified midwife's assistant at the Hampstead Royal Free Hospital. Whilst she was alive she would not allow any discussion of Sonia in her presence, and she was seldom out of George's company. It was a very close union. Today George is happy to talk about his marriage to Sonia, and its breakup, without bitterness or regret, as seen here. Both George's marriages were childless. *(George Smith)*

**BELOW - Still smiling through:** George Smith (96) outside his bungalow in north Coventry, near the canal, with former working boatwoman Alice Lapworth, who kindly arranged for the author's visit and accompanied him on it. She also provided a lot of help in explaining George's vernacular in recounting that remarkable voyage to the theatre, and ensuring the accuracy of the account given here.

*(Tim Coghlan)*

*George Smith, aged 96, quipped...  
"Being a working boatman took 20 years off my life!"*

