

The Inland Waterways (I W) Service



One of the smaller wartime organisations was composed of trainee boatwomen for the Inland Waterways. This select band of about 90 women worked on the canals and waterways - but do they impinge on our parish? Well, slightly because the Oxford Canal runs along part of our eastern boundary and it was operational during the war transporting essential supplies and, secondly, because a lady in nearby King's Sutton, Olga Kevelos, was one of their number. Olga later became landlady of one of the pubs in the village. She died in October 2009 and it was her obituary which drew this organisation to our attention.

Those women who answered an advertisement in the national press in the early 1940s found themselves, after six weeks' training, operating narrow boats which each carried up to 50 tons of essential supplies. The so called 'idle women' derived their nickname from the initials 'IW' on their badges. This stood for Inland Waterways, but the territorially jealous boat people - born and bred to the canal system - called them 'idle women.'

Between 1943 and 1946 some 45 women, aged from 18 to about 35, worked on the canals and waterways replacing men who had joined the services. They transported aircraft parts and machinery from the London Docks to Birmingham; then collected coal and took it to London. After a round trip of some three weeks transporting these and other vital supplies, they had the option of a week's unpaid leave.

Teams of three women managed a pair of boats and, unlike the Land Girls, they didn't get any extra rations. They lived on cocoa with condensed milk, national loaf and peanut butter and, when possible, they scavenged swedes and potatoes from the fields as they passed. It was essential to be able to accept living rough. Many women weren't used to it, and it was very hard ... lighting fires, using buckets for loos, cooking on black ranges, sharing a tiny back cabin. In addition to living in very cramped conditions, the girls had to load and unload the cargo, repair the engine, navigate locks and tunnels, empty the bilges, scrub hatches, chop firewood and prepare meals - 'idle women'?

Olga KEVELOLOS (1924-2009) was a war-time volunteer living in London who was in the IW. She travelled regularly along the stretch of the canal linking London and Oxford to the Midlands. In 1983 she returned to the area to help her younger brother, Ray, run the Three Tuns Pub in Kings Sutton. She was also a leading lady motorcyclist. Emma Smith wrote about her experiences in her book, *Maiden's Trip*, as did Susan Woolfitt in her book, *Idle Women*.