



## TRANSFORMED BY WAR 1939 - 1945

### Canals and the “Idle Women”

Many canal barges were out of use, partly due to call up and crews leaving for better paid war work.

In 1942 the Grand Union Canal Carrying Company, with support from Ministry of War Transport, launched a Boatwomen’s Training Scheme, drawing on the experience of the March family and their barge “Heather Bell”.

Trainees made 2 trips under instruction between London and Birmingham or Oxford carrying grain, coal or metal ingots and after 6 weeks could be considered competent. No uniform was provided other than a National Service badge with IW for Inland Waterways on it. The boatmen turned “IW” into “Idle Women” which was then proudly adopted by the women.

The work was gruelling – 7 days a week and often 18-20 hours a day. Over 100 women joined the scheme.

Typical of inland ports seeing increased traffic was **Stourport Heritage Harbour**, an important junction giving access from the Severn to the inland network.



Canal boat “Heather Bell”  
Images: IWM D7646, 7638



*Sonia Rolt, an actress who had gone into an engineering factory and her flatmates saw an appeal for the training scheme and went for an interview at the Ministry of War Transport in Berkeley Square.*

*“They wanted threesomes. We thought we would all go as a team. None of us knew anything about canals. Lots of girls were very enthusiastic about going on the boats and they had to work out who would stay the course. In fact the more spirited, more bohemian girl seemed to do better. Later, when it became a directed occupation that was not such a success...”*

Juliet Gardiner in “Wartime Britain”



Daphne March, the lead IW Trainer  
Images: IWM 7650, 7653