Q: So this is an oral history interview with Chris Livett by Ryan Holt on Monday, the 21 May 2018. Also present are Eva Tausig from the Thames Festival Trust, Walter Rothon. The interview is taking place at Livett’s Group London as part of the Thames Festival oral history project. So Chris, could you just state your full name.

A: Christopher John Livett.

Q: And what is your date of birth?


Q: And whereabouts were you born?

A: I was born in Dartford, Kent.

Q: And what are or were your parents’ names?

A: Ronald Livett and Rita.

Q: And what were their professions?

A: My father, Ron, was a tug master and he owned his own business, towage and passenger--,
Q: And whereabouts did you go to school?

A: Erm, I went to school in my early years in New Zealand, because we emigrated to New Zealand in the '60s, and we came back in the late '60s to Erith in Kent and so my schooling was around the Erith area--, Erith School.

Q: And can you tell me a little bit about your education, what were you interested in at school?

A: My education was brief and I wasn’t particularly interested in anything apart from getting out and getting away and going to work.

Q: So, were you--, have you always been interested in the Thames, is that something from when you were at school you’ve always want--., you’ve always seen your future in?

A: Yeah. So I’m a seventh generation waterman and I used to spend, when I was young 10, 12, 13 year old, a lot of time, certainly during my school holidays, on board tugs and barges. And I would be taken to work by my father early hours of the morning and then literally passed from one tug to another. And I could perhaps start at Greenwich and go to Teddington or then go down to the Mucking Flats or into Tilbury Dock or into the King George V Dock, so that whole part of my life, those early years, was spent with lightermen, with watermen, with tug masters just generally bumming around and watching the trade.

Q: And so you said your father was a waterman and then was his father a waterman, how far does it go back?

A: Yeah, so seven generations, yeah. And there’s now an eighth generation in the family, my son, Edward. Traditionally my forebears were tug masters so I can remember back as far as my grandfather and going out on board his tug, but we are around about 160 years back now, something like that.

Q: And could you explain a little more about what a tug master--., what it involves?

A: So, erm, not so much in my generation but certainly my father and my grandfather’s generation, there was a different--., a class of person who was a tug master, and he was
different from watermen and lightermen because he was—, he had more control, more
command, he was respected more than the other two—, two classes in many ways, his skills
were different—, the skill sets were different. And tug masters in those days were focused on
two areas of business, one was the towing of lighters, barges, up and down the river and the
other one would’ve been the towing of ships, under some circumstances some companies did
both. And they were a highly skilled breed because the equipment they had in comparison to
what we have today wasn’t as powerful, it wasn’t as technically advanced, it wasn’t as safe
and the locations that these guys used to have to work in were a lot closer and a lot tighter
than we have today. So in those days, if I went back to my father’s and certainly my
grandfather’s day and said to him hey granddad, where’s your risk assessment for doing this
particular job, he’d look at me as if I was stark barking mad really [laughs], ’cause there wasn’t
a risk assessment, it was a skilled—, it was a dynamic risk assessment going through his mind
through his training and he just took it on as a day—, part of a day’s work. He used to tow
petroleum barges through central London during the Blitz, write a risk assessment for that.

Q: And so what are your sort of first memories looking back to when you were sort of really
young, what were your first memories of the river? Was it out working with your dad, or—,

A: Yeah, out working with my dad, getting up very early in the morning, stopping off at the little
corner shop to buy a bottle of lemonade and a packet of crisps, and then going on board first
thing before it was light. The hardness, I guess the toughness of it, the dangers, you know, I
was always being told, you know, don’t put your hands in your pockets, don’t stand there,
mind it’s slippery, don’t jump, always, you know, one hand for yourself one hand for the [rope
00:05:21], that sort of upbringing. The men were gentlemen in many ways but in other ways
they were very tough, very hard, it was a tough environment, you know, when you walk around
Docklands now and you see this gloss of the glass buildings and the lovely paving stones and
the trees coming out, you know, 50 years ago you wouldn’t want to be down here, in the dark,
grey, black and tough. So the river has changed huge [inaudible 00:05:52] even in my time,
since I’ve seen it, you know, I’ve seen it coming to its—, on to its knees and then I’ve seen it
coming back up again.

Q: And when did you first start rowing?

A: Er, when I was first apprenticed, so I was apprenticed aged 16, that’s 49¹ years ago if I can do
my maths right. So—, maybe longer than that, yeah, so it was part of, erm, rowing and indeed
barge driving, which is a type of rowing, for a lighterman it’s how one propels a small lighter

¹ This was actually 36 years ago
with 20 foot sweeps, so I was barge driving at a very early age, as a 16 year old competing and in actual fact I had a business where we were the last people to commercially drive barges on the River Thames for gain, and so yeah. It--, I think you should see rowing and barge driving or the use of the wind and the tide as one of the first principles of watermanship, if you haven’t got that then realistically you shouldn’t be out there because if all else fails that’s the only thing you have got.

Q: And were you--, were or are you a member of any rowing clubs?

A: Yeah, I was a member of Globe Rowing Club in Greenwich. Interesting situation down there really because the water and lightermen tend to gather around certain clubs and Poplar and Blackwall Rowing Club was always seen as the waterman and lighterman’s rowing club and there were a few of us that had been to Globe and stayed at Globe, and I was one of those. And we were a bit like Millwall really, you know, no one likes us but we didn’t care. And we would subsequently compete for Globe, we did reasonably well but the truth being, if you wanted to get up the ladder of rowing you would go to Poplar and Blackwall because the standard and the calibre was better over there, it was a bigger club and indeed if you wanted to continue [inaudible 00:07:52] move up to Putney and if you were that good you’d end up in Henley.

Q: And so the Globe Rowing Club, was that sort of in your family, is that something--,

A: No, my brother--, my brother, he’s a waterman as well, he rowed with me there because he competed in Doggett's Coat and Badge as well before me--, before I rowed it. So we both were members down there.

Q: And did you used to compete with your brother?

A: No, we used to row as a crew actually, in a four--, the fours heads and so forth. And then I--, I would start my sculling training--, singles scull training for Doggett's and I started that at around about aged 19 I guess, 20, because I left Globe for a bit, I went to sea for about 18 months and then came back and then started to do my Doggett's Coat and Badge training and get prepared for that.

Q: [Inaudible 00:08:47].
FS1: Yeah, that's fine. I forgot to say, obviously we have to be quite quiet. It's a bit of weird [inaudible 00:08:56], do you know what I mean?

A: Yeah, no, I get it. Yeah [inaudible 00:08:58].

FS1: Usually when you're talking it's like oh yeah [inaudible 00:09:00], you know.

A: Yeah, that's fine.

FS1: So just to let you know.

A: Yeah, okay.

Q: Sorry about that.

A: That's alright.

Q: So what made you originally sort of want to start doing your apprenticeship? Or was it something that was…?

A: I think it was, er, just a passage of duty really. I think I was always destined to come on the river, my family always believed I would come onto the river. To be perfectly honest with you, I wasn't faced with a lot of alternatives, so therefore I naturally progressed into it.

Q: And how much was rowing a part of your--, of your apprenticeship?

A: As an apprentice it was a significant part--, and certainly the training for Doggett's Coat and Badge took up a good 18 months, two years of my life constantly, you know, that was training practically every day of the week, six days a week and you had to commit to it. And again, when I was training in those days, the rowing environment was different--, the boats were a different type, they were more timber than plastic, the sculls were a different design, it was a lot more rugged than it is today and indeed the river's changed in its--, in its character as opposed to when I was rowing. I could go out on a Saturday morning or a Sunday morning early and--., well most weeks actually, and assuming the tide was right, i.e., there wasn't a lot
of commercial shipping or traffic around, it was a lovely peaceful place to be. Now unfortunately, because of the [commerciality 00:10:33] of the river, because of the high speed river services that are out there, it's quite a hostile place to be. So that whole dynamic has changed over those years.

Q: And what does being a waterman [actually 00:10:51] mean to you?

A: Oh gosh, it means lots, doesn’t it? So I started at 16 as an apprentice, I’ve worked my way through the ranks, I've worked for people, with people, I now have a--, I have four businesses on the river, I employ up to 80 members of staff, I have apprentices working for me, I have my son in my business who's a waterman, I have a daughter she's a waterman but she’s a teacher over at Charles Dicken’s School. She has a daughter who hopefully will become part of the waterman scene one day, my wife who’s in the business is the daughter of a waterman, what else? [Laughs]. I live and breathe the stuff, you know, I live on a boat, I've spent more time on the water than I have on land as a person, erm, I've got numerous boats, I am engaged in the Company of Watermen and Lightermen, I started, as I say, as an apprentice and I’ve worked my way through to a craft owning freeman, to a member of the court, to a warden, to the master. I was the youngest master of the Watermen's Company, I think I was the youngest master of any City livery company, I was the right side of 40 in those days, I'm now a shipwright and liveryman and also a Younger Brother at Trinity House and this year I was appointed Barge Master to Her Majesty The Queen. So I guess that just about is enough, is it? [Laughs]. That's without my charitable activities which is board member of the Thames Skills Academy which assists apprentices in the river, a board member of the Totally Thames which supports culture on the river, I support Ellen MacArthur’s charity for children with cancer and I also support Sea Challenge which has a new sailing barge being built which will take underprivileged children out onto the water. So yeah, I’m pretty dedicated I think.

Q: Alright, I wanted to go more sort of specifically on to the Doggett's and I kind of wanted to get on to what your earliest impressions of the Doggett's were, when were you first aware of the race?

A: So you’re made aware of the--, you obviously know of the race as you go--, it’s one of the subject matters of working afloat, yeah? And when I was young, going on with my father and my grandfather, previous Doggett's winners would be like folk heroes, and one particular name is Ken Dwan who rowed in the Olympics in Mexico. And you hear his name being brought up and you hear about his achievements and his victories and how good he is and--, and you’d kind of think I want to be like that one day or could perhaps be like that one day. And you’re also as you start your apprenticeship you’re, you know, you’re shown how
Doggett’s works, you talk to people--, oh, come down the rowing club. And slowly and surely, drip, drip, drip, you get more and more embroiled into it and the next thing you know you’re out there doing it. So yeah, it’s very much a part of the fabric of a waterman’s life.

Q: And so who of your family before you have been in the Doggett race?

A: Well actually none of them, I was the first--, well no, sorry, correction, my brother was the first one before--, before I went in, and Steve rowed it three years before I did, not very successfully unfortunately, he wasn’t quite as serious as he should’ve been. But he participated because we want to keep the race alive and if watermen do not participate in it the race could possibly die. So we believed, and still do believe, that it’s your duty if you’re to be a waterman to row in Doggett’s Coat and Badge and indeed participate in any other extracurricular activity that may come your way. Doggett’s is such a special race, it’s such an historic race, it has significance and one shouldn’t allow that to slip and let go, so therefore even if you’re not an Olympic oarsman, as long as you can row and as long as you can acquit yourself in a way that’s professional in racing, then you should participate. And that’s a lot--, I think you’ll find a lot of people have rowed Doggett’s under that premise, not necessarily enjoyed rowing, not necessarily wanted to be part of that rowing scene, but actually just wanted to keep the culture and the heritage in place.

Q: And so are you worried about the future of the Doggett race at the moment, or…?

A: I’m not particularly worried, I think the same problems exist today as they have done in previous years. When I rowed in 1982 we had heats and we were the first people to have heats for many, many years. So we had our heats between Hammersmith and Putney because there were more than six competitors. Since then there’s been peaks and troughs, I think that Doggett’s is in a good place at the moment actually, I think it’s got very good support, it’s got very good sponsorship, there’s been lessons learnt. It’s been shifted this year to September which I think is a fantastic move, it’s opening up, you know, people have more understanding of the race, so I think actually where we sit at the moment it’s probably not a bad place to be.

Q: And what actually makes Doggett’s so different from other races in the year?

A: Well it’s length obviously, er, the people who participate in it, the course, the track, you know, it’s not a 2,000 metre--, if you saw the Olympics and you saw rowing during the Olympics you know it’s not really a spectator sport until the very end, unless you’re into rowing obviously.
But with Doggett's Coat and Badge it can be quite a spectator sport because of the number of bridges that you've got to go through, the course that you may or may not choose, you know, you are literally side by side, ducking and diving, bobbing and weaving, so--, and it's a huge distance. So, you know, in the middle of London for goodness sake, with all that heritage behind it, fantastic.

Q: And can you tell us about the moment you found out you would be competing in the race--, in the Doggett's race?

A: Well again, I think I, you know, I naturally felt there was a passion, that was the way I was going, I would row it eventually. I--, I wanted to compete, again, for my--, to keep the heritage going and I tried very hard to do the ground work and the training. I was trained by a guy called Ray Easterling who was a very good oarsman, he--, he was a waterman and he ran part of the Globe Rowing Club at that time. And yeah, we would--, the process of rowing for Doggett's was that, you know, you should really start two years before--, training seriously two years before and then you start to compete in different levels. So you start with your eights and your fours, then you go down to your sculls and then you hopefully can afford to buy yourself a sculling boat and then you start to pick different races in the rowing calendar that you think you should be good at. You try and avoid races where you're rowing against your rivals 'cause you want to keep that in the locker until the day really. So there's quite a few tactics involved in it.

Q: So did you know--, did you know personally all the competitors?

A: Oh very--, I still do. Stan--, Gary Anness, who beat me, is a good friend, he's a Queen's Waterman as I am and he works for Cory's as a tug master, so yeah, we still know each other very well.

Q: I mean you said he was a good friend, I mean was there a lot of competition between families?

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, you know, that run into the race you wouldn't be talking to any of the other competitors, not that--, you'd be trying to find out how well they're running, you'd try to find out what sort of times they'd been doing, how well are they, you know, how they'd been training. So there was a huge amount of competitiveness there, and when you're on the start line and you're looking across, you know, you want to beat them, you're determined to beat them, it's a very, very competitive race.
Q: And then with that competitiveness is there also quite a lot--, quite a sort of a shared sense of identity or--., and sort of community?

A: I think afterwards there is, for sure. I think that, you know, it's a bit like a rugby match, you walk off the pitch and you'll hug and you'll have a beer. But during and up to, no. Pure rivalry [laughs].

Q: And what role did your family and different family members play in sort of supporting you leading up to it?

A: Well I guess my--, my father was very passionate about it and he wanted me to win. He assisted me with my first boat, my sculling boat, my brother would give me some advice as to where he went wrong and he wasn't too far short with that advice. My mother fed me and, yeah, off we went.

Q: Yeah, my next question was going to be how--, what role did women play in relation to your apprenticeship, was it--., was she closely involved in it, or…?

A: Oh gosh. In relation to my apprenticeship--., I guess in relation to my apprenticeship my mother was very supportive, she, you know, was the wife of a waterman, she was the wife of somebody who was--., she was used to getting up at two, three o'clock in the morning or used to people coming home at one, two o'clock in the morning. Used to that tidal cycle of working, used--., would understand the terminology, would know about things like neaps and spring tides and fog and things 'cause she'd hear it. So very much part of that community, a bit like a fishing community in many ways if [inaudible 00:20:15] comparables. Put my apprenticeship to one side and coming to my business life and my family life, you know, without my wife I wouldn't be here today, she's marvellous and she knows more about the river than anything else. She knows, you know, as much about the river as most people who work out there, so women can play a huge--., a huge part, very much so, yeah.

Q: And are women able to compete in the Doggett's race?

A: No, not in--., well I think they probably would've done, when I rowed if there was any--., if there had have been an apprenticed waterman or a waterman coming free of their time and she happened to be a lady then I'm sure she would've been able to row. But in those days women didn't really choose this as a--., as a career path, and even today I have to say, you know, we
try and employ ladies here and it's a challenge. For numerous reasons I think, because it's quite physical, it is [inaudible 00:21:11] I mean we have--, hard enough trying to employ men but, erm, for the same reasons, because it's antisocial, you know, we don't--., although that doesn't preclude women particularly. But we've had--, we've had ladies working for us and they bring a different skill set in to, or a different way of thinking about how the river works, which is very healthy and very useful. But recruiting is quite difficult.

Q: And going back to the Doggett's race, could you tell us a little bit more about your training regime?

A: Yeah, so training would've been, as I said, every day at least, sometimes twice a day. In the winter months it was mainly gym work, stamina and strength work, and then as soon as the clocks went back and it started to get a bit warmer we'd be out afloat and you would just do mile after mile after mile after mile, keep [tacking 00:21:57] those miles up. You'd choose different regattas to go to and to test yourself, heads were very popular in the early part of the year, which were long distance races, so you'd certainly want to be into three or four of those a year if you could. And yeah, you'd be focused on it, no drink, early nights, you've got to be very focused.

Q: And I think you mentioned your master before, what role did they play in your training?

A: The…?

Q: Your sort of--, did you have a sort of a master?

A: My father--, yeah, that's my father. Yeah, so it's a supportive role. And as I said, he was never an oarsman, my father, he was a very good tug master but never an oarsman. So he couldn't support it in terms of advice on how to row and how not to row. But he--, in actual fact, he would--, his support was more of a disciplinarian, he knew what it was like to have to do things and to get up at five o'clock in the morning and to get out by six o'clock and be home by nine o'clock. So he would make sure that happened with me.

Q: And how--, how did the race--, can you describe a little bit about the actual race--, your race?

A: Yeah, I guess--, well the race was without--, certainly wasn't incident free, we had quite a lot of incidents. So I was over on the north side of the river, on the north station, and the start is
very important because if you get a good start away you’ve got a great advantage. And as we--, as we started we were all nipping in and out of arches and we got to Blackfriars and I won’t mention any names but one particular competitor didn’t look where he was going, as rowers tend to do these days, [inaudible 00:23:30] it’s the only sport you do backwards, isn’t it? And he managed to hit a lighter head on and he bounced--, the boat went under the lighter, he went under the lighter, he bounced underneath it, boing, boing, boing, and fortunately popped out the other side and he was rescued, so he was out of the ball game. And then we get to Waterloo Bridge and Gary and I were more or less neck and neck, and we’re really--, it was quite a competitive race actually, one of the closest Doggett’s races I’ve seen, certainly been involved in.  And as we come round the corner I’m hugging the south side, Gary’s more to the middle--, middle of the river, and someone [inaudible 00:24:05] look up, look up, and we look behind us and blow me down just coming through Westminster Bridge is the Bow Bell--., the infamous Bow Bell. And we thought the river was closed, but it obviously wasn’t or the Bow Bell didn’t think it was. So we then had to make a decision as to which way we would go on the Bow Bell, which, you know, do we go across his bow or do we stay down to the side. And I took the decision to stay to the south, Gary went across over to the north, that was the better route to take and the reason I didn’t go across is ‘cause I didn’t think I’d get there in time. But by the time the Bow Bell went through Gary popped out and he was probably four or five lengths ahead of me then, and once you’ve got that commanding position it’s very difficult for the person who’s behind to catch up. So I tried my damnedest to catch him but I couldn’t, and he was deservedly so the winner. And well done him.

Q: And how do you feel about coming second now, do you feel like you could’ve done it, or…?

A: Oh, do I feel--, you know, hindsight--,

Q: Does it feel quite, erm, obviously you were probably devastated on the day.

A: I was actually--., I was sobbing. I was very upset about that, because you do put so much time and energy into it, so much effort. And the prize is such a glorious prize, so, you know, to win that prestigious coat and badge and to be one of those few lucky people to be in the group [inaudible 00:25:24] is very special. So--., but it wasn’t to be. Gary won fair and square, Gary was the, and is the deserved winner, so do you know what, that sort of makes it right. It would’ve been slightly different if it had been a fluky win, but no, no, he won fair and square and take nothing away from that, he trained as hard if not harder than me and he was the better oarsman on the day. So I take it, I accept it. And that’s part of the reason why I was one of the first groups to be able to row the race more than once if you wanted to, and I declined the second time on several grounds. One is because I’m quite a traditionalist and I
think one bite of it is good, the other is that I knew how much time and energy and resource I had to put in to it to go again and in those days I was just starting my businesses off and I thought if I do that my businesses aren’t going to go very far, so I said no, I’ve done it, I’ll keep the heritage going, I’ve given it my best shot, move on. And yeah.

Q: And were you aware of any sort of sabotage techniques or sort of tricks that people would sort of play at the time?

A: Well there’s always little tricks that people do--,

Q: Yeah.

A: No sabotage, I don’t think that exists, but there are things like, you know, sanding the fins of the boats down and tweaking the blades slightly. There’s loads of advice kicking round, you know, if you talk to any person that’s rowed Doggett’s Coat and Badge, or any waterman come to that who knows anything about rowing they’ll say oh, go this side of that buoy, go that side, you’ve got more tide over here, you’ve got less tide over there, and there’s all those sorts of things coming into it. So, you know, there’s a load of judgement to be done depending what the wind’s doing, how fast the tide’s running, depending on what works are out on the river, what boats are moored where, you know, sometimes there could be--, there might be a boat moored somewhere that you didn’t expect it to be. And so from a tactical perspective there’s lots of tactics in play.

Q: And what boat did you race in?

A: It was an old--, well, I say an old, it was a wooden--,[it wasn’t a clinker boat 00:27:24] it was a fine boat, I can’t remember the name now you know. It was a few years ago [laughs].

Q: That’s fine. Can you describe the morning of the race, can you remember kind of getting--,

A: Yes, so it’s--, well, it’s all about the night before actually, or the week before. You know, everyone--, it’s a bit like getting married really I suppose, [inaudible 00:27:50] to think about, because people are saying well Doggett’s next--, Doggett’s next week isn’t it, how you doing, Doggett’s two days’ time, Doggett’s in a day’s time. And you’re making sure your diet’s right, you’re making sure you’re sleeping well, you’re coming off the training regime and that’s all that’s on your mind. And it’s a very nerve racking experience because you’re expected to do
so well, because of the, er, you know who you’re up against, you know, and the prize, so you are very, very nervous the night before, the day before you just want to get on with it, you want to crack away and go and--., go and have that fight, you know. And whilst you’re checking the boat, how many times do you check the boat, ten times, okay, you know? How you--, how do you feel? Great. A lot of psychology coming into it. And then you get in the boat and the boat’s your friend, isn’t it, so you want the boat to work, you’re looking at the weather and all the people are shouting out come on, you know, you’ll do well, don’t worry, good luck and all that sort of stuff. And there’s a sort of numbness--, this lull before the storm and you just--, all you want to do is go--., just go, go, go and then you have this adrenalin rush. And then by the time you get to sort of Blackfriars I guess, about ten minutes into the race, slightly less than that maybe, you start to hurt, yeah, and you really, really start to hurt and you really, really want to try harder and then you’ve got to focus your mind on trying harder and so it’s a challenge, good test.

Q: And you mentioned there’s a sort of a diet you had to keep to.

A: Yeah, so obviously, you know, even way back in 1982 we knew a little bit about diet, so protein’s important obviously. You wouldn’t be going out and having your great big fry ups or anything that could upset you the day before, you try and keep your strength in there, loads and loads of water, beer uh-uh, none of that stuff.

Q: And did you have any rituals for the--., in sort of preparation for the race?

A: No, I don’t think so. I think the Thames and I have got quite an affinity anyway, so we had an understanding and I think we can--., we have a relationship so--., which might sound a bit bizarre to say that but do you know what, I spend so much time on it we understand each other. So you’d probably ask it to be kind to you and to, you know, be lucky for you and look after you, that’s it. It’s, you know, it’s Mother Nature sitting there, isn’t it, and this race is all about what Mother Nature can and cannot do to you, and has so much influence. So for me it was just purely looking at the river and saying be kind.

Q: And who was there to support you on the day?

A: I had all my family there, yeah, and my coach was there, and the Globe Rowing Club, good support from there. My fellow watermen, a lot of guys that I know who work with me in the--., I think I was in the passenger boat business probably then, so there was a lot of people who knew me. I remember we had one of the guys who took a [inaudible 00:30:45] lighter up to
the finish for one of the other competitors and that was quite an amazing sight to see. So yeah, you know, the river community is an interesting one, it’s--, there are certainly sort of three elements to it, the upriver guys, the central river guys and the--., and chalkies as we call the Gravesenders. And in our race there was a combination of all three of those, so you had the whole river, basically, turning out to--, to come and support and cheer on.

Q: And what did you do after--., after the race? Did you just want to just go home--,

A: I cried first of all and then once I’d finished crying and pulled myself together, erm, I went over to the pier and met the Barge Master of the Fishmonger’s Company who told me off, gave me a rollicking and said I had a load of money on you, Chris [laughs]. I said sorry about that, Algie--., Algie Thomas. And then we had a pint each with Gary, hugs, shook hands and I think I then went on a passenger boat for a period, had some more beer and then eventually then I got drunk in some City pub I guess and waddled home, licking my wounds [laughs].

Q: Was betting a big part of the Doggett’s race?

A: I think it was on board the boats, yeah, I think then there’s [inaudible] going, and I’m not a gambling man so I don’t particularly participate in that but I think, yeah, I think people do have a little flutter from time to time.

Q: What was it that made you want to win the race so much, was it getting your coat and badge or was it--., was it like the sort of physicality of having that or was it more…?

A: I think that, you know, life throws up so many opportunities, doesn’t it, and it was a question of grasping one of those very special opportunities, it’s a unique thing to compete in, it’s a unique thing to win and once you’ve won it the benefits of winning carry on throughout your career. Erm, you become part of an elite band of men, it shows discipline, it shows determination, I think the coat and badge is a fabulous prize, so there was all those things. And, you know, for a waterman you want to be--., well I certainly want to be the best, and that is being one of the best.

Q: And how seriously did you take your rowing, did you want to sort of compete at other levels?

A: Well I did, I competed at other levels whilst I was training, so I think I made it to Senior B standard in the sculling world for Globe. So--., but afterwards, when I finished Doggett’s Coat
and Badge, then my rowing activities more or less ebbed away, because of my business and because of what I wanted to achieve in my other life.

Q: Erm, and I kind of wanted to ask you about there’s—, there’s sort of talk about being a divide between gentlemen amateurs and working class professionals with rowing, and I kind of wanted to have your view on that.

A: Erm, gentlemen amateurs, well, are we amateurs? I should [remark 00:33:55] on that front. I think we’re all competitors and as long as we compete on a level playing field then that’s fine, but I think that the gentlemen amateurs sometimes have a psychological advantage on others, erm, we are—, I’d question that, I’d say that we’re probably more professional—, professional than anything else. But you—, maybe the difference is between gentlemen amateurs and career rowers, and perhaps that’s the question that you should be asking because, you know, if you think of—, there’s a lot of oarsmen out there who dedicate their whole lives to rowing and have some tenuous link with the Waterman’s Company, and therefore allows them to row in Doggett’s Coat and Badge, but gives them a huge advantage because they are—, they’re very, very good oarsmen. You have to respect them for that, that’s what they do and that’s the challenge, I guess, because that—, they’re so good that they take out the watermanship of the race. So, you know, a lot of the race—, or the race traditionally was about watermanship, was about choosing the right arch, the right station, picking up the tide, missing the buoys and all that sort of thing, but if you’re such a good oarsman that you just go a lot faster than anybody else, when you get in front it doesn’t really matter. So there’s the challenge. But nevertheless, if—, when they do compete it adds sparkle to the race because you get some real good quality coming out there, so I think it’s—, yeah, it’s quite interesting really. You know, there might be one coming through the—, through the—, in future years and go well so and so, yeah, he rowed in the Olympics, well let’s see him row then, let’s see how good he is. You know, particularly, erm, you feel a bit sorry for those competing against him because he does have such a great advantage if he’s doing it for his job, whereas the other guys are driving boats or tugs and barges for their job then it’s a bit unbalanced there.

Q: And how is your perception of the Doggett’s changed over time, do you sort of still see it as you did when you were a youngster?

A: Erm, I sometimes see races where I think we could do better, I think that sometimes people could put more energy and effort into it and make it more of a race, make it—, give it that little bit more competitive edge to it. And I also—, it saddens me sometimes when we haven’t got the full complement of rowers, scullers, racing and I, you know, I call out to all of our apprentices and all those that are young freemen to actually think about that very hard and not
allow it to slip. But the race itself in terms of content, you know, London Bridge to Chelsea, is the same. Closing the river off, I sometimes question that 'cause--, and I sometimes question the--, trying to make it into a sort of a Henley style event where it is a traditional working man’s race, yeah, so. But you’ve got to get the balance.

Q: Mmm. And how do you see the future of the Doggett’s, do you see it living for another hundred years?

A: Yeah, why not? I think it’s a great tradition, it’s got sort of heritage and I think it’s very good for the young. Even if, you know, all the sponsorship and that dried up then I think people would still do it, you know, yeah, why not? Keep it going.

Q: And how important is it to you that Doggett’s keeps being raced?

A: I think it’s very important, I think it’s like other events and other things that happen up and down the river which are very--s, we should be banging the drum about it, no one else has got it, you know, and as I said earlier, it’s far too easy to allow it to slip and just to keep competing in it. So no, the more the merrier and, yeah, keep it going.

Q: Alright. I--, so I wanted to sort of move away from the Doggett’s and ask you what is your current relationship with the river?

A: [Whistles]. Erm, okay, so from a--, from a professional perspective, all of my businesses, so I own piers, we have a business that works in the marine film industry as marine film coordinators, so we do things like James Bond, Harry Potter, Sherlock Holmes, Mission Impossible, just recently done one of those. We consult, so we help people build things like the Thames Tideway Tunnel and bridges and wharfs and jetties. Erm, we have work boats that go off and we use those for filming and survey work, I have a fleet of passenger boats which are used for private charter. I have a fleet of tugs and barges which we have the newest fleet of tugs and barges on the Thames and we’ve just picked up the contract for Thames Tideway to dispose--s, transport and dispose of 800,000 tons of spoil over the next five years, so that’s sort of my professional bit. Outside the professional bit, and yes I’m a Past Master Company of Watermen and Lightermen, I am a board member of Totally Thames, board member of Thames Skills Academy, Younger Brother of Trinity House, Liveryman for the Shipwrights Company and Barge Master to Her Majesty The Queen.
Q: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about being the Queen’s Barge Master, could you tell me a little bit more about your role or…?

A: Yeah, sure. So I’m the sixth Barge Master to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth throughout her reign, Barge Masters date back to the—, we believe that the early records of Barge Masters were around about the Magna Carta. And traditionally, say, in Henry VIII time, for example, the Royal Palaces were dotted by the river, Hampton Court Palace, Chelsea, Westminster, Whitehall and Greenwich. And the method of transport was by barge, so the Crown had their own watermen and indeed their own Barge Master who would look after the barge and row the Crown up and down the river, yeah? And be a protector of the Crown in many ways. And that has translated itself to modern day now where we’re the guys that ride on the back of the carriages for the State Opening of Parliament, I’m the person as the Queen’s Barge Master that takes the Crown out of the carriage and passes it into the Houses of Parliament, we attend State visits. If ever there’s a Royal visit to water—, to the Thames, we’re the people that are there escorting members of the Royal family. Yeah, it’s an ancient role and one that I’m very proud of.

Q: And I wanted to ask you about the Livett’s Group, what do you enjoy most about your work?

A: As I get older now I get a big kick out of seeing my son doing well in the business, that’s really, really good. I get a really good—, I love to see apprentices coming through and getting better at what they do and being trained and, erm, starting to enjoy their work. I get involved in lots of challenges, so over the years we’ve done some very special things like, for example, the Diamond Jubilee pageant, I was very fortunate to be on board the Royal barge with Her Majesty for that one, I drove David Beckham—, sorry, correction, David Beckham drove himself down through Tower Bridge for the Olympics. We’ve done some fabulous stunts of bikes doing 360 degree loops, jumps over Tower Bridge, planes going through Tower Bridge, people walking on water, all sorts of weird and wonder things. So I get quite a big buzz out of that. And I also get—, I’m very happy when people come on to the river that don’t know the river and I start to talk to them about the river and open the river up to other people, so that’s why I get involved in Totally Thames, because there’s so much connectivity there. From a cultural perspective, you know, you’ve got people living no more than a mile away from the Thames and they don’t even know it’s there, and when we start to put on events and art and the spoken word, that talk of the river and show people the river then I really—, really think that’s a fantastic thing to do. I like to act as an ambassador for the river and try and promote it for all its good.
Q: And you’ve kind of mentioned how much the Thames has changed and you’ve had to be sort of quite dynamic as a sort of a businessman, I mean like your father was a tug master. But where do you see the future of the Thames and how do you think its needs will sort of develop?

A: Yeah. I describe watermen and lightermen as London’s last community, so if you think about other historic trades that have been in London, like the fishmongers, the Covent Garden, Spitalfields, the meat market, print workers, all of those have been blown apart and satellited outside of London for one reason or the other. And we are one of the few that have managed to hang on in the middle of London, purely because people can’t move the River Thames. And I also describe ourselves as river chameleons, we need to keep changing our colours. And so I’ve seen Docklands fall on its knees and be a very, very bad place and I’ve seen, you know, the rise of the passenger boat market industry, the rise of moorings. I think that London—we need to keep changing and evolving, I think the types of boats will change, I think the Thames will become more of an environmental—, have more of an environmental role to play in London in terms of, erm, it could even feed London once again, once it’s cleaned up and people might think well, I’ve never eaten anything out of there, but believe me it’s clean enough to do that. I think it will certainly cool London because of its ability to, er, for air conditioning type things. I think it’s going to—, the renaissance is happening with marine transport, I think you will see courier companies coming out deliveries using the mode of transport and I also think you’ll see more bridges going across and there’ll be more connectivity as a result of it. Architecture is gradually changing on the river, so you can literally not go on the river for three months, go out there and you’ll see a new building pop up, fascinating building, certainly in the East of London. So the East London corridor’s going to develop, the river and the City are moving further east and the river will always be part of that. You know, history recycles—, always recycles, doesn’t it, what we’re seeing now is no different from when the Romans rowed up here all those hundreds and thousands of years ago. The river acts as a catalyst for growth and it will continue to do so for London.

Q: And so you mentioned sort of the amount of sort of development there is along the Thames, do you think this is going to affect—, are you worried about it affecting the look of the Thames or—, and the sort of heritage that the Thames has?

A: I’m not particularly worried about the look, ‘cause I think looks, you know, looks are interesting. But I am more concerned—, my biggest concern at the moment is the river being isolated and being choked, and that’s certainly happened over the last 20 years where we’ve lost working wharfs, we’ve lost slipways and we’ve lost boatyards, we’ve lost piers and moorings and we’re losing key pieces of infrastructure that the river needs to survive. So I’m concerned that the river becomes a benign stretch of water that is not useable because we’ve lost those access
points and those skills and trades. And I’m also concerned about the people that are living by
the river and what they expect and their aspirations are, because I think sometimes when you-
-, if you pick up the Sunday paper and you look at flats--, riverside flats for sale, they’ll show
you a sailing yacht going passed or not even that. It is still a commercial river and people that
work--, sorry, people that live by the river should understand that, that you will hear a clonk
and a bonk and a bang sometimes throughout the night because tides change. So--, and
there needs to be that understanding. So, you know, and they’re quite serious concerns
actually, because if development happens without putting something back into the river,
allowing the river to grow then we will be choked.

Q: Okay. Is there anything you two would like to ask?

FS1: Any other questions? Yeah, you sort of [inaudible 00:46:30] you were talking about how your
relationship with the river has changed professionally and then you were about to go into how
it’s changed personally and I was quite interested in that, sort of your relationship--,
you have a very close relationship with the river [it’s almost like a character 00:46:43]--,  

A: Yeah. So I wouldn’t be married if it wasn’t for the river, okay? So my wife is the daughter of a
waterman, we first met on Greenwich Pier, we spent a lot of time courting on--., in and around
the river. So from a personal perspective it means a lot to me. I spent most of my time with
my father on the river, not at home, and--, but that’s, you know, we’ve kind of moved on. And I
think now that we get more enjoyment from the river, certainly as a family we do, with me and
my barge and my daughter coming down to visit me and my granddaughter coming down to
visit me, the river’s a different--., more of a friendlier place, it’s smoother for me now. I don’t
get too, erm, how can I put this, I don’t get so anxious as I did when I was pushing the
businesses forward at a million miles an hour, you know, it’s a--., it’s… But the river is also--., I
have to say this, it can be a very unkind place, it can be a very brutal, harsh environment, and
I’ve seen numerous incidents and accidents, major accidents that have created fatalities and
that hurts, yeah? So the force of the river and, you know, we’ve just been walking along the
foreshore, it can bite and when it bites my goodness me it’s a tough place to be, you know?
So I have a huge amount of respect for it and I’ve seen in my years how it can grab and take
quite significantly, so yeah. Different--., I’ve got different feelings for it, but I have an
understanding of it.

Q: Going back to the Doggett race, do you still go and watch the race?

A: Occasionally, er, our Elizabethan was used as a spectator launch frequently, she isn’t any
longer because the hierarchy of the Waterman’s Company has changed so much that the now
Senior [Waterman 00:48:36] has his own boats, they use that one. If I don’t go on the boat to watch it in my capacity as a Court Member of the Waterman’s Company then I will—, if I’m out at a meeting or something I’ll just probably sneak over and have a look at it on the bridge. If it’s one of our guys or girls—, guys, our guys rowing it then we will obviously cheer them on, yeah. And if people who work for us row it we support them wholeheartedly.

FS1: And did you—, when you raced it, did you go to that ceremony at Fishmonger’s—, is that just for the winners?

A: The—, for the stations? Oh yeah, the dinner is just for the—, yeah, no, you’ve got to be a winner to be there, absolutely. Yeah, no. So, you know, there is the drawing of the stations, isn’t there, which is—, that’s quite an interesting one actually because if you’ve got good rowers there and you’re all, you know, there are certain stations that you want to be on. And if you grab one of those [inaudible 00:46:30] if you’re over on the other side then you’re oh dear me, you know, got a bit more work to do. But no, the actual winning, you know, the dinner that the Fishmongers have, if you didn’t win it you’re not in it, unfortunately.

Q: And do you want your—, or your grandchildren and future generations to take part in the race?

A: Well, here’s the thing, with my son and my daughter, we took a deliberate decision to try and keep them away from the river. So because of my, erm, education, or lack of it, we said that realistically, you know, we shouldn’t just narrow it down to the Thames as I had, you should be given the opportunity to do more. So with both of our children we—, they went to university and both came out with very good degrees and Edward actually didn’t join the business until he was 23 or 24, so he missed the Doggett’s thing. Yeah, he plays rugby actually. If my grandchildren want to become involved in it we will support that obviously. My daughter who is a freeman of the Waterman’s Company by patrimony has the ability to apprentice my granddaughter, Phoebe, and she’s told me that she would like to do that. So if you like, the bloodline will continue on into the Company but whether Phoebe—, hey, who knows. What I wouldn’t be is so prescriptive in saying oh that’s great, now you can row Doggett’s Coat and Badge and you can become an apprentice and you can come and work on the river, you know, that’s too narrow minded. And I would not be unkind in saying that, the world is a bigger place and she’ll make her own way, and rightly so.

Q2: How much has the South Bank and this part of the river changed over the last 50 odd years?
A: You wouldn’t recognise it now, if I was to--, even my father now, he’s been dead for five years, if I was to fetch him down now he wouldn’t recognise--, he wouldn’t--. The river has changed hugely and my grandfather, if I brought him a long and I said to him granddad, we’re not having any tide up here today because the barrier’s closed, he’d think I was stark raving mad. What do you mean the barrier’s closed, how can you control the tide, you know, that is a feat. If you come down at night and you see the different lights, you know, there used to be vast patches of darkness, black areas where the working wharfs were and when they closed down at night there was just black, no one there. You turn up now and you’re just--. There’s so much light pollution, people living in flats, restaurants, roads that have been diverted near the river, the whole vibe has changed so much. Even I, when I go out there and I haven’t been out for a bit, as I say, talk about new buildings springing up, you go to Canary Wharf now and you’ll soon lose, you know, [inaudible 00:52:20], albeit one level, you know, you pick your way through. Now it’s just a block, and there’s more and more of that happening. And I’m not criticising that, I think it’s, you know, from where we’ve come from, Tooley Street, where we are at the moment, Butler’s Wharf, you wouldn’t want to be here, it was a smelly, dirty, horrible grey place. And what we’ve got now is we’ve got interesting architecture, we’ve got some areas--. Pockets have got community, others haven’t unfortunately, but there is certain areas with community, it’s safe, you can walk the river walk. Yeah, so it’s a better place, all I would plead for is that you can get to the river more, you know, you don’t need the barriers that stop you from getting to the river. I went to an aspiration day in my daughter’s school last year talking to a bunch of new entry kids, who all live around Bermondsey area, she’s over at Borough Market, and the first question I asked each class I went into, who knows the River Thames [inaudible 00:53:19] right. And the second question I said so point to where you think it is, and all these fingers went in all different directions, all points of the compass, not one of them had a clue where it was, yeah? And probably some of them live a mile from it. And that’s our baseline, that’s where we’re at, and so we’ve got to get more people in to it, get more people to see it, and if you’re starting to throw buildings up that don’t allow that to happen, you know, there’s loads in terms of development around here and how it’s changed. Yeah, okay, when the working wharfs were around you couldn’t walk along the river because it was all private property and you were set back by probably 500 metres at least. What’s happened is that we’ve seen developers come in, they’ve taken that private property right and they’ve made it [long claims 00:54:06] of gated communities with concierge barriers and underground carparks and all these people are popping out like rabbits and actually at night they pop out of their hole, go up to the West End and pop back down again, well what’s that done for the river? Not much, you know. So, you know, I just believe that we should try and break those barriers down, and those people that have got those--. That are fortunate enough to live on the river should be contributing towards it. So things like Totally Thames, for example, they should be supporting it and they should be saying, no, let’s be very proud of what we’ve got, let’s open it up and let’s put some flags out, put some bunting out, put some money into the pot actually and support an art project, support a local school. Help clean it,
look at the plastic, look at all the bottles there, go on the foreshore every week with a group and start picking some of this stuff up, you know? Put something back into it, is important.

MS1: Speaking of plastic, is that something you’ve seen change on the river over the years?

A: The type of waste has changed without a shadow of a doubt. So we, you know, way back when we [inaudible 00:55:08] from those commercial, smelly, toxic waterway that you would often have bodies--., not necessarily in this order, but bodies, dead fish, dead animals, rope, plastic, driftwood floating around, to a river that now is not toxic and just the other day actually, I saw a seal at Tower Bridge, I was walking over Tower Bridge back to my barge and I saw this seal pop its head up and looking at me as if to say how [inaudible 00:55:36] this is great, isn’t it? But we’ve now got lots of plastic, erm, lots of human produced waste and of the most unpleasant kind, the rope is still there slightly but the driftwood is not as bad as it was because the commercial stuff has gone, so it’s changed slightly. And I think the plastic we can tackle, eventually, you know, I see it more and more socially people have got, you know, non-return bottles and stuff like that, so I think we’ll crack that nut with the [inaudible 00:56:09], some are coming along and I think that’s going to help tremendously as well. We’re going in the right direction, that’s for sure. Alright?

FS1: Fantastic.

A: Got it?

FS1: Thank you so much.

A: You’re welcome. That’s good.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: Hope it’s useful, how does it all pan out from here then, have you got all this--,

Q: Yeah.

[END OF RECORDING – 00:56:34]