Q: This is an oral history interview with Ken Dwan by Celia Holman on--, what day are we today? We are on Thursday, the 24 May 2018. Also present are Eva Tausig and Adrian Evans from the Thames Festival Trust. And Ian Jones, volunteer. The interview is taking place at Eel Pie Slipways on the boat called Windrush.

Q: So before I sort of launch into some questions, Ken, just to give you an idea of the structure of this interview, we’re going to ask you some easy questions to start with, it’s a bit like, you know, who wants to be a millionaire, you get to a thousand quite quickly. And then there’ll be various sections and the sections will cover your early years on the river, your early experiences of rowing, your apprenticeship and how rowing linked in with your apprenticeship, and then we’ll get on to talk about Doggett’s and--, and then we’ll talk about after Doggett’s. And after each of those sections other people here present at this interview might wish to kind of interject with a couple of questions before we move on to the next section, if you like. It’s probably a little bit more fluid than I’ve made it sound, but we’ll see where it goes.

A: Yeah. No, fine.

Q: Okay, thank you so much, Ken. Could you please state your full name.

A: Kenneth Victor Dwan.

Q: And what is your date of birth?

A: Sixth of the seventh 1948.

Q: And where were you born, Ken?
A: I was born in Rotherhithe.

Q: And what are your parents’ names?

A: Albert Dwan and Rene Dwan.

Q: And what were their professions?

A: My father was a docker and my mother worked in the warehouses, erm, I think she was sewing bags--, hessian bags and things like that. But she worked in the warehouses.

Q: And whereabouts did you go to school?

A: I went to school at Greenwich.

Q: And what were you interested in at school?

A: Not being there.

Q: So how long did you stay in formal education?

A: I left school--, I left school at 15.

Q: And I imagine that you left school at 15 to start your apprenticeship--,

A: Yes.

Q: Which we'll come onto in a second. But can you tell us a little bit about your family background--, the Dwan family background?
A: Right, well they--, we were all born in Rotherhithe, in Bermondsey, all worked on or around the river, in the docks, lightermen, watermen, all that sort of work. My father was the only child, there was 11 uncles with me grandfather, so it was one of them things that you were born into becoming what you become. As a kid you went up to my gran’s house--, every Monday you went up there and there was--, wherever anybody was working on the river they would go back there for dinner on a--, on a Monday, so you can imagine sort of 12, 13 people sitting down for dinner on a Monday lunch time. She didn’t know anyone was coming but she always cooked for enough of us. And so every Monday we were up there, every Sunday everyone went round there for tea, and my grandfather used to love--, she always got him crab and prawns and scallops and things like that. And everybody had to have a prawn sandwich on a Sunday night, and when I say a prawn sandwich, it was a prawn sandwich, one prawn between two slices of bread so that everybody got one of his prawns.

Q: So it sounds to me like you grew up surrounded by lightermen and watermen talking about their work.

A: Completely, you know, I was born in a pub in Rotherhithe so lots of contraband used to come in over the--, over the wall into the pub that me grandfather used to sell with the sandwiches and the food and things like that, and all the men would come in there for their drinks and things like that. So even from a tiny baby being left outside the pub with me arrowroot and me bottle of lemonade and the dog laying underneath--, Jack Russell laying underneath the pram so no one got near me, it was always waterage and lighterage people coming in and out there all the time.

Q: So your earliest memories of the river are very much linked to your family?

A: Completely, yeah.

Q: And what are some of your earliest memories about, I don’t know, going out on the river with your many uncles or cousins and--,

A: I spent a lot of time with me grandfather on the river, and I would go down when he was lightering to go onto the barges and help him, and I’m talking about eight and nine year old, out on the river sailing barges and things like that. And being with him and learning me trade from him really.
Q: And at what point in your—, in your youth, in your childhood if you like, did you first start rowing?

A: I started rowing—, well I was a coxswain first at nine, I went to a rowing club at Poplar and Blackwall and, er, on the Isle of Dogs, which was predominantly watermen and dockers were the people—, and boiler makers and people who worked on or around the river in trade. And I went to Poplar and Blackwall as a coxswain and started to learn to steer and things like that, but I was always too fat to be pulled along so they used to chuck me in a sculling boat—, go and scull, we don’t want to pull you along, and so I spent a lot of time there.

Q: So when did you actually—, when did you graduate out of the cox’s seat and start working the blades?

A: When I realised I was too fat to cox, I think, mainly. But yeah, I would go down with the other coxswains and we would take out sculling boats, and at that time the river was a very, very different river than it is now. You know, you had ships running around and you had barges and tugs, you had passenger boats and watermen’s boats, the river was just a maze of activity, ships going there, 3,000, 10,000 ton ships and there would be us nine year old kids in our little sculling boats getting in everyone’s way.

Q: And did you go out in like fours and eights and…?

A: I did—, I did go out in fours and eights ’cause you’ve got to learn your trade, so I did do quite a lot of rowing. A lot of the men that I rowed with were either preparing for Doggett's Coat and Badge or had won Doggett’s Coat and Badge or were just apprenticed getting into the frame of getting into the rowing for Doggett's Coat and Badge.

Q: And was—, was Doggett's very much a collective focus of activity, if you like, right from a…?

A: Erm, it was one of them things that my grandfather said I was going to be the first one to win Doggett's in the family, so it was just one of them things that I progressed into—, it was something I was going to do.

Q: Why do you think your grandfather said that?
A: I think I was his eldest grandson and he was with me all the time, and he would watch people row and—, my grandfather did like a drink every now and then and far too much, and they always used to say when he get half-drunk down at Tilbury there was a pub on the—, the Six O’clock House on the top of the waterway that went into the dock, and when he’d had too much to drink he used to strip off to his vest and pants, they’d turn a bench upside down, give him two broom handles and he would row his Doggett’s Coat and Badge race. So he was into that [sort of 00:08:33], craziness world that he lived in at that time. So I was the natural one who was going to have to row Doggett’s, none of the others [were interested 00:08:42]—,

Q: Right, so there was a certain inevitability about that?

A: Yeah, completely.

Q: And you mentioned the club that you belonged to, were there other rowing clubs that you could’ve joined or…?

A: Erm, yeah, there was rowing clubs all over the river, but I lived at Greenwich at that time so it was walk through the foot tunnel and you was there, so no reason to go anywhere else. And because I sculled more than rowed I didn’t have to leave Poplar to go and race for another club to be with better oarsmen.

Q: So you mentioned the Doggett’s race that was very much a kind of focus, it would appear, of all the sort of watermen and the lightermen around you. Were there other competitions that you as a young boy were aware of that you might be working towards or that other watermen and lightermen were, or was Doggett’s like the gold standard?

A: No—, no, they always had things like the National Dock Labour Board Regatta where all the docks from around the country would come up Putney and race at Putney, and most of the minor regattas, the town regattas, they would always have a waterman’s race, so there was something for you to do.

Q: So this is you, early days rowing on the river but in combination with that you would’ve started your apprenticeship.

A: Yeah.
Q: Can you tell us a little bit about that process of becoming an apprentice?

A: Right, well I was apprenticed to my grandfather for seven years—, seven year apprenticeship, and it was his job to find me work, being my master. And we went to Waterman’s Hall and signed up all the paperwork and then when you go up for your bindings, you go up and they make out the scrolls and the old masters of the company sign the thing and then it’s ripped in half, and then you keep half and your master keeps half. And it’s got wordings on it like I mustn’t fornicate, I mustn’t go into ale houses, play cards, I mustn’t lose my master’s money, I had to respect him and respect everybody else and make sure that, you know, I was a good apprentice to my master. So that was the two bits of paper, and then when you get your—, then after two years—, so I then started for a company at Hay’s Wharf called Humphrey and Grey, which was a lighterage company, as boy in the tug. I was—, we was doing 16 hour shifts, day on day off, and as boy of the tug you made the tea, you had to be in the right place with the fender when it was needed, you learnt you didn’t, you know, get in the way of anything, you just sat and watched and did, erm, and watched what the freemen were doing so that you could then progress after two years you went up for a licence. And then that made you eligible to be able to be used for towing around with small barges or delivering barges at wharfs and rowing barges and things like that. And then after the seven year period was finished you would go up and you’d become a freeman to the company.

Q: And during your apprenticeship you were working exclusively with your grandfather as your master, or—,

A: No, no, I worked with any freeman that was about, so I worked for Humphrey and Grey for a while and then when I got my licence—, the two years licence, you could—, they used to call them attached men and unattached, so if you was an attached hand you stayed with that company all the way through. But I felt I needed to go to learn more of the river, so I made myself unattached and you then go on to what was known in them days as a pull. And the firms that were busy—, bear in mind the Thames was very seasonal trade, you know, the summer when all the Baltic ports was free from ice you had all the timber trade, you had the Caribbean fetching in all the fruits and the vegetables at the time, the banana ships, and general cargoes that was going here, there and everywhere. So after the two years I decided to become unattached and then I started getting sent to every different firm for a week and then you’d be put back on the pull. In fact rowing ruined me work afloat because I used to—, they used to say to me do you want to go to work or do you want to go rowing? And I’d say well I think I’ll rowing, shall I? So I used to go rowing probably from the age of about 14, 15—, no, 15 when I was working, I would probably train about seven hours a day, seven days a week. And the companies that I worked for and the men that I worked with knew that I was
rowing and the rowing was, you know, encouraged. So I would go to a company--, on the Friday night they’d send me to a lighterage company or someone, here, there, wherever, and they’d say to me now do you want to go to work or do you want to go rowing? And I’d say well how busy are you? Not all that busy, alright, well I’ll go rowing for the week. And I would just go rowing for the week. But then what would happen, by the Friday I’d have forgot where I was working in the first place, or who I was working for, and then forgot to ring up the orders for Monday and Monday morning I’d be scratching my head thinking now where was--., who was I working for? And I would realise I was working for this company, oh, [inaudible 00:14:19] or Thames and General or whatever, ring them up on a Monday and they went you’ve done it again, ain’t you--, you’ve done it again. What, I said, you never rung us on Friday, I said no, I forgot or I was at Henley or wherever I was.

Q: And were you unusual in that respect, Ken, or were there other people--, other watermen like you who were similarly dedicated?

A: Oh, there’s was lots--, lots of people doing rowing, yeah, because it was... yeah. Lots of people training really. And bear in mind, you know, you work the tides, so if the tide was out and the barge was high and dry on the ground, you couldn’t stay there and do anything, the dockers was unloading it or loading it so it was six hours rowing, wasn’t it, it was sort of--, and off you went and did your rowing and come back when the barges needed to be shifted or whatever.

Q: So at the end of this seven year apprenticeship you gained what is called your freedom--,

A: My freedom, yeah.

Q: And what did that mean to you, gaining your freedom, how did it change your life or...?

A: Well that meant that you could--., it didn’t change my life at all really, it meant that I could be a captain of a passenger boat or captain of a high speed vessel or a tug captain or, you know, mooring ships up, in charge of my own barges and things like that. So it just gave you more freedom really.

Q: Right, so, that’s a little bit of your apprenticeship, and we’re going to move now on to just talking about--., you mentioned some of the competitions such as Henley and so forth, did
competing in those more well-known competitions, did that happen during your apprenticeship or after your apprenticeship?

A: Yeah, no, it happened during my apprenticeship. I, erm, obviously I was doing an awful lot of rowing and it was something I could do, it was something that never came hard to me, it was just something that I did but I did a lot more hours than a lot of other people. So at 19, bearing in mind I come out of me apprenticeship at 21, I started racing, I think, when I won my first sculling race, I was about 15, I think it was one of the Thames regattas and things like that. And I travelled the length and breadth of the country racing, and from the day I won my first race, the first race I lost was the Olympic final in Mexico, I never ever lost a race. And I sculled every weekend really, raced every weekend, racing was a day off from training. And I worked at that time under the work regime nationalisation came in, Devlin--, Devlin report, where everybody had to be full time employed. And I was sent to a company called F T Everard and Sons, an old family firm, you know, and they looked after me so well, I used to go away and they’d say are you racing, you know, rowing? I’d say well what programme have you got this year? So I’m going to do this, I’m going to do that and they used to pay me six months money in advance, wages, to enable me to go and row, so I would spend a lot of time in St. Moritz training, used that as a training camp because of being at altitude. And then come down for a couple of days to race and then go back up, basically preparing myself for Mexico City which was at altitude.

Q: And all-- and during all of this, you know, travelling all over the country, doing your rowing, were you supported by your club in anyway--, I’m just thinking of the kind of finances of you’re all over the country.

A: No, the club-- the club never did-- they helped me but they didn’t sponsor me in any particular shape or form. It was all done with what I was earning at work and me family really. So, erm, yeah, so that was when I sort of--, so as an apprentice, even before I’d ever rowed Doggett’s, I’d rowed in an Olympic Games and I was World Champion as well. So when it come to racing Doggett’s it was obviously going to be very difficult for people to race against me because they-- their attitude was well, we ain’t going to win anyway. And I ended up, there was three boys that raced against me and, yeah, it was-- that’s how it was I ended up winning Doggett’s. And the presentation for Doggett’s is probably one of the best in the world really, you know, you’re presented with your Doggett’s uniform.

Q: Well we’ll talk in more detail about your actual experience of the race, but you were quite late to doing Doggett’s-- well--,
A: 21.

Q: You were 21.

A: Mmm.

Q: And there’s--, is there a sort of narrow timeframe in which you can--,

A: Can only row one--, when I rowed you could only row once. After that year, because the docks were shutting and the river trade was changing, lots of people were being apprenticed but couldn’t find work so ended up going ashore, and there was really people hanging around with nowhere to go to work. And the decline of docklands to the changeover to what it is now with the development, there wasn’t an awful lot of work about. And, yeah, it sort of just changed so much, and after that they then started letting people row two years, but you had to be finished your--, you had to have raced Doggett’s before you was 24 and then they had to get all new rules that came in which they changed it all. And you had to do so many days working on the river, you had to do this, you had to be qualified in this, you had to get your BML, you had to get your waterman and lighterman’s licence, and then you were--, you got your freedom because you rowed Doggett’s the year you come out your freedom.

Q: It sounds like amongst the kind of watermen and lightermen community, especially given those rules--, those changes in rules and how, you know, they’re trying to make it as clear cut as possible, it sounds like it was quite a sort of highly contested prize.

A: Oh it was, it was, you know, most Doggett’s Coat and Badge winners were never out of work and they always ended up with the jobs that most, you know, the labour masters, the foremen, the tug captains, they--, it just elevated them. And it opened a lot of doors, you know, you went into places that you would never have dreamed of being able to go into, you know. Palaces, you mixed with royalty, you mixed with this, that and the other. So it did open an awful lot of doors for you.

Q: So it wasn’t just about the winning of the race itself--,

A: Oh no, no, no, Doggett’s elevated you a lot.
Q: Within the sort of waterman--,

A: Within the trade, yeah.

Q: Hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm. So you say you--, when you competed in Doggett's you had already been an Olympic finalist, do you think that affected the men who chose to go up against you or…?

A: Erm, well there was always boys that wanted to row it and there was always a chance that I was going to fall out the boat or this, that and the other. And as they say, you’re never the winner until you cross the line, so it was a fair competition, but I’d have had to have made an awful lot of mistakes not to have won it. Especially in the years of preparation to get there, you don’t make mistakes on the last day.

Q: Because I was going to ask you if you had any sort of special training regime, if you like, that led up to the race, but it sounds to me like it was--, was it something that you just sort of slotted into--,

A: It was something that I slotted in, the hardest part you found was the fact that you had to row in a Doggett's boat as opposed to rowing in your own fine boat. The Fishmonger’s Company supplied boats for Doggett's and they were a--, because there was an open section of people, some who could row and have done a lot of it, some who hadn’t rowed at all and some who’d done a little bit, so they designed these boats that were a little bit wider, more like a coastal boat, to give a chance for people to get to the finish really. And what I found is that I--., because, erm, I think I had a World Championship coming up or something like that, or a European Championships coming up, so I had to rig the boat exactly the same as I would’ve raced in my own shell. And what happened, because of the extra weight and the extra span and things like that, I couldn’t pull hard in it because all my arms seized up. So I had to sort of paddle over the course to make sure that I didn’t seize up, because if I seize up then someone’s going to beat me. So I remember sitting there just paddling along nice and gently and thinking to myself well I don’t want to get too far in front of these because all the boats will overtake them and that’s not nice for Doggett’s, so I paddled gently and then--., then nearly hit Vauxhall Bridge I think, which would’ve been a nice--., nice thing to do.

Q: And do they--., is Doggett’s race still run in a fishmonger’s boat, they provide them still?
A: They supply the boats, yeah. The boats have become more shell like now, so they’re finer, but there are a little bit of alteration than an actual fine racing boat.

Q: And what can you tell us, can you tell us any more about the day of the Doggett’s race?

A: I found Doggett's Coat and Badge race one of the hardest races ever to be in, because of what it stood for and because it was a family orientated thing. So pressure wise there was far more pressure in racing Doggett’s than there was in the Olympics because you were racing the rest of the world in the Olympics and in Doggett’s, you know, everywhere you went on the river, wherever you went in a dock, when it was your year, how’s your training going? I hear so and so’s going well. And you have all this going on in your head that builds up till sort of July when you’ve got to get in the boat and go and race. So you, you know, your preparation is different, you know, the same--, you have the same preparation on a race day, I knew what I was going to wear and I knew what I was going to do and I knew I was going row this way or that way. So it was a bit different but, you know, I know a couple of days before I’d train--, I’d been training really hard and I remember my coach, he said to me best thing you can do for the next couple of days is take your girlfriend down to the coast, have plenty of booze and see how lucky you are, he said, and then come back and see me a couple--, a day before Doggett’s and we’ll--, we’ll make sure… So his idea was he could see that I was under stress and I was getting more and more nervous, but the idea was to fetch me back down, take me off the boil and have a relaxing weekend and then come back so that he then had something to work with, to prepare me for the next bit.

Q: It’s interesting that it’s a race that meant, you know, that much within the community.

A: Oh, it was--, yeah. And I should think--,, anything in life I was the nearest thing to a nervous breakdown before Doggett’s than I’ve ever been. It was that stressful.

Q: And did you go and scope out any of your competitors, did you go and--,

A: No, I knew them ‘cause they was apprenticed with me the day we got apprenticed, so I knew them, I rowed with them at Poplar and Blackwall Rowing Club and they were personal friends of mine, so it was--, I didn’t have to do any of that psyching out.

Q: I mean was there--, is there any skulduggery attached to the rowing of Doggett’s at all?
A: Erm, there wasn’t in the latter years, but in the early time when there was big prize money, erm, and when they think there was-- in the-- I didn’t realise until later on that in the early years of Doggett’s--, ‘cause there are certain families that have won lots of Doggett's Coat and Badge, the Phelps and the Barrys, and I used think well how the bloody hell-- there’s-- they reckon something like 5,000 apprentices would be eligible to row Doggett's in one year. And you think well how-- how did they all get into the final? There must’ve been someone who wasn’t as good as that one or he wasn’t as good-- and he was better than him and… And it turned out that you entered Doggett’s but your name come out of a hat for the final, so it wasn’t done on merit, it was done on a luck of the draw. And because of what it meant to win it there was quite a lot of interest in winning it. So you might get someone out of the hat who hadn’t rowed before and he might-- and one of the Phelps’ might be sitting on the bank and not entered. So they used to buy their place into Doggett’s, and it was into them points where a lot of them little cottages at Putney that go on the streets up from the embankment were the backhanders from different families for buying--, to get into the race, there was that much money involved in it.

Q: And when you say there was prize money, what kind of--, can you…?

A: I forget what the prize money would’ve been, but you got a boat, you got a skiff and you got prize money and you got the Doggett's coat and badge. So then as the years went on it then got to a race where you entered and you had heats and got through to the final that way.

Q: And it was like that at your time?

A: It was like that at my time, in fact they couldn’t find six people to row because, as I say, the docks was in decline, people weren’t-- there weren’t that many apprentices.

Q: So would anyone else like to ask any other questions about the actual race day and Doggett’s itself?

Q2: So this is Adrian Evans. So Ken, we’ve heard about some competitors in Doggett’s, you know, they race and someone wins and completely falls out with someone who has come second or third, you know, it means that much that it’s kind of forced friendships apart or even, you know, uncles and, you know, whatever, within the family. Do you think that, you know, what’s your impression of that, did you-- have you come across people--,
A: Oh yeah, obviously it happened quite a lot. And then you had the thing between Gravesend watermen and London watermen and Brentford watermen, you know, never the twain shall meet. But-- but no, there were quite a few people I, you know, I fell out with a few people over rowing. But in latter life you see them at Henley and you have a drink with them now and it's all forgotten, isn't it, it's a different world. But yeah, there was a lot of bad feeling and people that had lost Doggett's that should've won it, never ever forgot the fact that they didn't win.

Q2: Were-- was the selection of the stations particularly important? I know that there's a-- there's a point at which you're given your colours and you're given your station, is that strategically important for a rower to be in the Sussex side--,

A: It is, yeah. Well let's put it this way, in all racing it's never the best one that wins, it's the one that makes the least mistakes. So therefore, if you're given a better station for the start it gives you that much confidence. And if by having that better station you get yourself in front early then they're always looking over their shoulder for where you are and you're watching them all the time. So stations do count quite a lot, and they are to the advantage to the north shore from the south shore. And if you--, I rowed red, which was station one, north shore, and if you get in the boat and you look--, and I think we had the old London Bridge there then at that time, but the actual tidal stream at London Bridge and Cannon Street and Southwark is--,

Q2: The Thames itself has got--, has got so many kind of tidal foibles, going through the arches and--,

A: Yeah.

Q2: Do you think that rowing helps you as a-- as a waterman, understand the foibles of the tidal Thames?

A: Completely-- completely. If you can sit someone in a rowing boat and send them out on a stretch of river, within a short period of time you will learn where the good places to be is and where the bad places to be is, flood and ebb, which is all part of the--, of the learning thing. I
remember when I first used to go up to--, my grandfather was on the passenger boat and as a five, six year old kid he used to put me in a skiff at Festival Pier and they put a long rope on it and they let me float right out and I'd float out till the rope got tight, which would be probably somewhere down near Blackfriars, and then have to row me way back, and, you know, against the tide and things like that. But it, you know, it got you to learn the, you know, it's the finest way of learning any river is being on a boat with a pair of oars.

Q: You touched earlier on, Ken, about the sort of ceremony at Fishmonger’s Hall after the winning of the race, can you tell us a little bit about that?

A: Well you get there and you line the stairs, the newest winner stands at the entrance, and I don’t know whether there’s royalty there or anything else, they all come in, they're going in for dinner and they have their dinner. And then the presentation they have--., it’s a big fanfare of trumpets and ‘Hail the Conquering Hero Comes’ they play, and you walk in with all the past Doggett’s winners and they all go up the centre and then round and line the hall sideways. And you walk up the middle and they read out in old English really, the way the race went, and then the Prime Warden, he’s got a silver cup there, he drinks your toast and then you drink his toast and then you come out and everyone pinches all your ale that you’ve got in the cup, and then you go down and have dinner.

Q: And at this point you’re in your--,

A: You’re in uniform.

Q: You’re in your Doggett's coat and badge?

A: Yeah, yeah, you’re in your uniform.

Q: And it always fits?

A: When you win it they always fit. But I do smile, when my--., ‘cause my two sons won Doggett’s, you know, and when the first son won Doggett's I thought well--., we went over to the place where they make the uniforms, I won mine, 21 year old fit athlete, and I said to the guy who was making the uniform, I’ve got to have my uniform altered I said, because I want to be the one that walks him up the aisle to get his coat and badge. And the tailor looked at me and he had a little smile, and I said what’s the matter? And he says well, he said, can you try
your uniform on. So the breeches went on no problem whatsoever, when it come to putting
the coat on it was a sort of a deep breath, round shoulders to do the top buttons up, move me
body about so me belly went in so I could do the next lot of buttons up, and as I got to the last
button my son made me laugh. Well the buttons come off this tunic like Exocet missiles, they
went in all directions, and the tailor said well, he said, I think sir, he said, you’re either going to
have to have some surgery or we’re going to have to make you a new uniform. So I said well,
I’ve got to walk up that aisle, so let’s have a new uniform. So they made me this new uniform.

Q: And on what occasions would you as a winner of Doggett’s badge being wearing your uniform,
I mean you’ve described the banquet at Fishmonger’s Hall with the other Doggett’s winners--,

A: With all the other--, most functions at Fishmonger’s Hall and at Waterman’s Hall have
Doggett’s winners, Lord Mayor’s Show there’s always Doggett’s winners walk in front of the
State coach, erm, and yeah. Some you do private parties and things like that, you go to some
wonderful places, you know, it’s--, you have some really good days out with it, and get paid as
well, so it’s even better.

Q: And is there a sort of, you know, do previous Doggett’s winners have an annual--, I mean
obviously there’s the banquet at Fishmonger’s Hall, but is there a sort of informal network--,

A: We have a Doggett’s--, we had one Doggett’s boy that became very ill and he didn’t have an
awful lot, so we decided that we would have this dinner to raise money to help him with his
medication and his bits and pieces. So we started having a dinner at Waterman’s Hall, which
we have every year now, a bit strange sort of dinner [inaudible 00:36:44], you wouldn’t take a
grown up to it.

Q: [Laughs]. Can you describe what you--, can you expand on that thought, Ken?

A: No [laughs]. What stays on tour--, what goes on tour stays on tour. But no, they’re--, a
raunchy night.

Q: So you mentioned earlier that post Doggett’s, Doggett’s winners would have prestigious work
on the river or more work on the river, what happened in your life subsequent to winning
Doggett’s?
A: Well I carried on rowing after Doggett’s and a lot of Doggett’s winners pack up after they’ve won Doggett’s, very few carry on to become international oarsmen. So I carried on and I went to another Olympic Games and I went to different World Championships and European Championships, and carried on rowing until—, until I’d sort of had enough of it really. And then packed it up overnight and I—I—, severance was out for the docks in them days and I took £3,000 severance to give up my licence and I ended up buying in with my cousin and we bought a small passenger boat and we started running the small passenger boat.

Q: And what year was this approximately, Ken? Sort of mid ’70s wasn’t it?

A: Yeah, mid ’70s, late ’70s. And we just bought a passenger boat and then we bought another passenger boat and then it went on that I worked in the passenger boats, so I packed up lightering. Had a family and then bought into—, bought this place out and then because we’d bought it I had to come up here and run it, it wasn’t something I knew, but someone had to run it and my partner run the passenger boats and I came up here and started running Eel Pie Island Slipways.

Q: So before you packed up rowing, as you said you did in the sort of mid, late ’70s, you mentioned that you were competing at a sort of international level and also at a national level, and you made mention of Henley and you seem to have quite an early involvement with Henley. Can you talk to us a little bit about the difference between what were known as gentlemen amateurs and working class professionals?

A: Well I was one of the first working people that was allowed to race at Henley, because prior to that you had, as you say, gentlemen row—, any college rower, school rower, that sort of thing, they competed in Henley Royal Regatta. And people like me who’d come from a trade were in the tradesmen’s regattas. And I think it changed at Henley when a Russian crew—, a Russian eight came over and they were all working men on the railway, and they won the grand and there was an oh ah about whether they were going to be allowed to race or not. So the rules—, the world was changing and therefore it opened it up that tradesmen could actually then row at the Royal Regatta. It was a strange period, because the hierarchy of the rowing world were predominantly college people, Oxford, Cambridge, and you were never really accepted—, never really accepted into that world. And they did make it obviously known that you really shouldn’t be there and it was one of the reasons why I packed up rowing, because the only thing that they couldn’t do was beat me. And I said well all the time I’m winning they can’t do anything about what they’re trying to do, but the minute I think I’m, you know, past me best I’m going to pack up. And I packed up rowing—, decided to pack up rowing on the Sunday, sold me boat on the Monday and have never really been back.
Q: But your sons have been back.

A: My boys have been back and I love rowing and I love everything about rowing and the people round it, and as you get older, you know, the people that weren’t particularly kind earlier on you put up with and, yeah, it’s a lot--, life’s a lot easier now. It’s not a lot easier now, they’ve changed the rowing world completely into--, it was always run by the universities, Oxford, Cambridge run all the rowing, if you wasn’t one of them you didn’t get in. And if you look what they--, because it went free and open you could go and race against anyone anywhere, and if you beat them they had to select you, they didn’t have an answer for not selecting you. But what they’ve done to the rowing world now is that they--, and I’m not knocking it, because we’re winning medals, we win more medals in rowing than any other sport in the country, don’t we? But they have made it another closed shop, you have to be selected to be part of the squad to progress forward to the Olympics, and there is no--, they’ve then formed this thing called the World Cup where they have a race every month and the rest of the world all come together and race. So the up and coming sculler now who wants to get to the top is not eligible to row in the World Cup because he’s not part of the squad, so they’ve closed the shop again so that they can control the oarsmen, and that’s why they say well the oarsmen of today, none of them are rowing with a smile on their face, it is just a regime of hard, hard work, but we are winning all the medals, so you can’t knock it.

Q: And do you think that, erm, I mean you came through from your rowing club and achieved what you achieved, were--, at the time that you were rowing, were there other rowers of a similar background to you who were achieving similarly or was it very much the rest of the closed shop who were--,

A: No, no, they were--, the universities still covered most of the--, but there were people that were good scullers and rowers who were actually now getting into the squad and taking part and competing. Yeah, no, it did open it up quite--, that period of time.

Q: And did you feel a little bit of a trailblazer, being at Henley, what was your--, can you tell us about your sort of first experience of--, had you been to Henley as--, to see it before you--,

A: As a spectator?

Q: Yes, as a spectator.
A: Yeah, oh yeah, I’d been there many times. I could never win at Henley--, could never get a bloody win there. I raced--, I’d race there on one weekend, couldn’t do nothing, go out--, go home on about the first day. The follow week go to Lucerne and win a World Championship race, you know, it’s just--, Henley to me was a lovely place, you know. I’m a lot wiser now, I’m only as good as I was. I go there now and I think I know how I could’ve won that, but no, it was different, it was--, I just couldn’t win at Henley. But I loved it, I love the place now, I go up and just take this boat up there every year now and we stay and put a marquee up on the side of it, we have a wonderful time.

Q: Oh, I’ll have to come with you next time you go.

A: Plenty of champagne, plenty of drink. I think I see a race every now and then.

Q: You mentioned earlier on a coach--, that you had a coach that was preparing you for Doggett’s, was that someone from your club or was that--, who was that?

A: No, again going back to me grandfather, when he was working on the passenger boats, the man who owned the passenger boats, a man called Joe Mears--, Chelsea Football Club, and--, and Eel Pie Island and bits and pieces. And he said about me going to train with the footballers at Chelsea, if I wanted to go and use the gym and things like that. And I then had to go and meet this man, his name was Wally Pearce and he was a boatman at St Paul’s School. And he was the one that took me under his wing really and took me through to the Olympics, and, er, lovely man, absolutely lovely. Very knowledgeable about rowing, but again, he was a boatman so he wasn’t part of the establishment. So I’d go to races and no one would--, no one would let him go because he wasn’t part of the team. And the dockers used to have whip rounds on the gate--, had buckets at the gate and as the dockers come out chuck money into the bucket to give to me so that the coach could go to the regattas with me.

Q: So it was very much a sort of community effort--,

A: Completely, yeah.

Q: And what--, you belonged to this club that you mentioned, the club--, in what way did the club support you in your sort of various rowing endeavours?
A: Erm, not an awful lot really. No, didn’t do an awful lot for me. You had the facilities there, but most of the time I didn’t train at the club. As I got a bit better I came up river to Putney and that’s when I came under Wally Pearce at St Paul’s School. So I very rarely went back to the club other than for social gatherings and things like that. But it’s been a lovely club, we used to have a lady there called Dorothea Woodward-Fisher, and they used to call her Old Mother Thames and she used to—, she used to make me go to the church every Sunday morning in the Tower of London, her and her sister, they used to have these big hats with feathers in and she always had this big Jaguar. And we would drive—, come on, you’re coming to church with me, and I’d jump in the back of this thing and we’d go up to the Tower of London. And in them days you could drive along the front of the Tower, across the cobbles, and as she turned to go in over the bridge where the chapel was she used to take the back wing off of the car, I used to have to jump out, put the back wing in the boot, bump. Next week round would come the Jag, you’re going to church with me, up we’d go, round the corner, wing off. Every week it was happening. But she was a lovely lady.

Q: So we’ve kind of brought Doggett’s almost up to sort of present day, you know, talking about your sons who both competed and were both winners of Doggett’s race and I believe your brother—,

A: My brother, my nephew. We’re training our granddaughter up now, she’s going to be the first woman to win Doggett’s.

Q: I was going to ask you about the future—,

A: And there’s going to be one—, there’s going to be one, and that woman who wins Doggett’s will be well elevated, in the City anyway—,

Q: And are women allowed to enter Doggett’s now?

A: Yeah, they’ve got women racers.

Q: And so when do you think she’s going to peak?

A: Well she’s only three [laughter], but we’re training her early.
Q: Your grandfather has taught you well.

A: [Laughs]. Yeah.

Q: Right, is there anything that you would like to mention, Ken, that we haven’t touched upon to do with your rowing or your club or Doggett’s or anything like that?

A: No.

Q: Okay. I’m just going to open the--, open it up to the room, is there anybody else…?

Q2: Can you talk a little bit about the annual dockers’ regatta and what that was--., that was obviously very much a kind of working river regatta, you had dockers coming from all over the country up to Putney. And was that the occasion, if you like, for the tradesmen on the Thames to meet and row together, would you say?

A: Well you had tradesmen’s regattas--, if you know or studied the calendar of rowing, all of the boatmen--., bear in mind that they were all the coaches of all the top crews, and in the early days it was the Doggett’s winners, or Doggett’s men that would row the umpire in the--., before engines and things like that, you would have all the watermen that would row the umpire following the races for the eights. And therefore then the regattas, if you look, the regatta season starts at Putney, then it goes to Hammersmith, it then goes to Chiswick, it then goes to Twickenham and then goes on to Staines and blah, blah, blah, culminating in Henley. And the reason for that was that when the boats used to go on the trailers they would be drawn by horses, so that the boatmen would sit on the back of the trailer and the horses would take--., tow the boats up to Henley Royal Regatta. And then--., and even now, once Henley Royal Regatta has finished the rowing season’s virtually finished. But on the way back you had the tradesmen’s regatta, so you had Henley Town, Harlow Town, blah, blah, all the way back down to Putney Town. So it was all to do with the boats going to Henley and the boats coming back from Henley. So the tradesmen would do--., they’d be working all the way up and on the way back down they would have their tradesmen’s regatta, where they’d have the greasy pole and the--., win a pig or win a turkey or, you know, climb the greasy pole or whatever, all them sort of things, all--., fun regattas, you know, they’d have clowns in boats and people doing headstands and all sort of weird tricks in boats.
Q2: And when did that all come to an end? Was that part of the closure of the docks that--?, that those regattas really came to an end?

A: Erm, Dock Labour Board Regatta was a regatta that was held and sponsored by the National Dock Labour Board, and it was a wonderful affair. It was at Putney and they used to put a big marquee up in the park along by Putney, and all the VIPs would have entrances to the London Rowing Club and things like that. And then there would be meal tickets that you went for lunch up in the marquee. But because quite a lot of the watermen and Doggett’s winners were part of the [inaudible 00:51:55], as fast as you got a meal ticket you passed it to someone else under the tent, you know. And they used to--., supposed to cater for about 80 people and about 200 people later, right, they’d say I’m going to run out of food in a minute, you know. And then certain bits had free bar, some had pay bar, so you’d always find someone sliding into the--., into the free bar to get the free drinks. And it was a wonderful thing, and they would have races between [Gaul 00:52:23] and Devonport and Plymouth and--., and it was a real good fun thing. And obviously that finished when the National Dock Labour Board finished. ‘Cause we all worked for the National Dock Labour Board, we were all licenced by them.

Q2: I heard that there was always fierce competition between the Thames and the Tees.

A: Yes, well that goes back in history, doesn’t it? They always had the sculling races up in the Tees, the Newcastle Watermen as such. Yeah, a lot--., a lot of them were professional races then, weren’t they, they would have, erm, they had professional races. I think one--., one race I think only one--., was it Barry--., Ernie Barry or… Over 100,000 people at Putney to watch a sculling race, sponsored by the Evening Standard. Thousands of people turned up--,

Q2: Yeah. You talked about the--., about women in Doggett’s, so there’s been two women who’ve competed in Doggett’s. Do you think that women can compete, strategically if you like, can, you know, is it--., are they able to compete on an equal ground to male competitors in Doggett’s?

A: Erm, the answer to that really is no, its not--., it’s--., physically a lady is not as strong as a man, a big, heavy man. And it’s like take rowing with just men only to start off, a good big one will always beat a good little one. The only time the good little one has a chance of beating the big one is if it’s a tailwind, if it’s a headwind the big man will always pull stronger than the lighter weight. The other way round and then the big man loses the advantage of leaning into the wind and because the wind’s on his front the littler man can be--., more strokes, bump. So if you take that over then into women’s rowing, women’s rowing is still a long way off from being able to compete against--., you’re never going to be able to have men and women racing
against each other, but they are talking about having mixed crews now. The next Olympic programme is changing completely, and I must admit I’m not happy with it really. But they are going to start having --, they’ve done away with the coxless four, they’re going to have an eight, they’re going to have a mixed four and they’re going to do things like that. So therefore that will fetch, you know, again, they’re going to be good big ladies are going to beat good little ladies. But with Doggett’s it becomes quality of rowing, and the quality of rowing is only as good as the amount of work that the people have done to start with. So if the young lady or the lady that has been like me, that’s come on to the --, into the job from day one or, you know, come from a rowing school where she’s been rowing for a couple of years before she gets to the apprenticeship stage, and then carries it on and then the men that she’s going to race are not of the quality and power that she is going to carry, then the lady must win.

Q2: Mmm. Do you think --, I mean you’ve talked about how important Doggett’s is to the trade, winning Doggett’s advances you within the trade. And, you know, obviously what we all want is for the --, is for the trade to be, you know, representative of London, there should be as many women in the trade as there are men and so on.

A: Yeah.

Q2: Now with that in mind, do you think that there ought to be some sort of --, that Doggett’s ought to change in some way so that women can compete on an equal footing, maybe it’s a handicap system or something or other. Do you, you know --,

A: No, no, I don’t --, I’m a dinosaur, so I think that rules should be rules and you shouldn’t tweak them to suit your --, your purpose. That is the will of Thomas Doggett, that six freemen row for Doggett’s once a year and that’s how it should stay in my opinion, I don’t see that we need to change anything. It’s like the Wingfield Sculls have now got a ladies’ race as well as a men’s race, fine, ladies Wingfield, bump. Whether you ever say we’re going to have a women’s Doggett’s Coat and Badge race and a man’s, different. That makes it equal. But, it’s whether the ladies can do --, well they can, anyone can --, a lady --, anyone can do anything nowadays, can’t they? And we’ve got quite a lot of women driving the high speed vessels now, haven’t we? Not many women seem to stay into the trade when they’re covered in mud all day long and barges are --, you know, that sort of thing. That’s --, and they have to do so many days at that before they’re eligible, now whether you can --, and it’s different with a lady dressing up and driving a boat, anyone can do that, but if she’s got to be sweeping out a barge full of sludge and mud and things like that, is that something a lady would want to do? Some would I suppose. And if they would that makes them eligible.
Q: Your granddaughter is certainly going to have to do that.

A: Well she’s lucky ‘cause she can do it by patrimony.

Q: Can you explain that?

A: Well the rules for Doggett’s is you either are a journeyman for--, a journeyman lighterman that has served your time working on the river doing ‘x’ amount of days a year for five years--:, or four years or whatever… Then you’re examined and if you pass that you then get your--, you’ve got to get a BML, a boat master’s licence, and then once you get your boat master’s licence you’re examined again to become a waterman and lighterman. So that is the criteria of becoming a journeyman freeman that are the rightful ones that can row Doggett’s. You then have got a system where under patrimony, that if your daughter or son are born after you obtained your freedom, they are eligible to row.

Q: And has that always been the way?

A: Always, yeah, that’s part of the Doggett’s will. So you’ve got patrimony, which is the son of. If they’re the son of a freeman they have to pick up their freedom, which is the one that gets a bit contentious because they become what is known as a craft owning freeman. We’ve got journeymen freemen, we’ve got craft owning freeman, so--:, or you’ve got freemen by patrimony. If you’re--:, if you want to apprentice your son and not work on the river then he has to get his freedom, which he gets basically because of his journeyman--:, craft owning freeman. Alternatively, by patrimony you--:, you take it because you’re family really.

Q: I saw the training regime that your nephew, Merlin--,

A: Oh, right, yeah.

Q: Undertook in order to win Doggett’s, it wasn’t successful first time round--,

A: That’s right, yeah.
Q: And he looked very, you know, determined, can you imagine what the path is going to be for your--, ’cause I think you’re quite serious about your granddaughter winning Doggett’s.

A: Oh, I certainly am, yeah, yeah.

Q: I really sense that you’re quite serious about that.

A: Yeah.

Q: Have you thought about what that path is going to look like going forward?

A: Well, first and foremost, she will do what she wants to do, won’t she, you know, that’s the world we live in, she’ll be whatever she wants to be and good luck to her. But anything sort of--. I’m an Olympian, her other grandfather’s an Olympian, my son’s a Doggett’s winner, his wife was an international rower, so it’s only inevitable really that they--, lots of their friends are rowers for the rowing circle. And they say that the people you row with when you first join a rowing club end up being your friends for the rest of your life, and that’s not far wrong really. So when they’re old enough to go and sit and pull a couple of bits of string and steer the boat they’ll be taken down on a Sunday morning to go out on the river and cox. And then, if they want to do it more it just follows on then, doesn’t it, it becomes a way of life. But she ain’t got a lot--, and the pair of them really haven’t got a lot of hope really, so...

Q2: So Ken, just one last question from me, you’ve had fantastic success as a rower in your life [inaudible 01:01:44], you’ve succeeded where thousands haven’t. Of all those races, which one do you value--, which one do you value the most?

A: Doggett’s.

Q2: And just--, I know you said that before, but it’s so hard to imagine for anyone who knows how important the Olympic Games, how world famous the Olympic Games is, and how little known Doggett’s is, why--, why Doggett’s?

A: Because it’s what I--., what I was told I was going to win when I was about five, you know, it goes back so long that it’s something I was--, yeah, Doggett’s to me was marvellous, it was--.
and everything about Doggett’s is lovely. Olympic Games you’ve got for four years, Doggett’s you’ve got for life.

Q2: Thank you.

Q: Yeah, that’s a good line, I like that, very much so. Does anyone else have any questions--,

Q3: I’d just like--, so it’s Ian, I’d just like to ask what do you think the future is for Doggett’s?

A: Erm, Doggett’s has got a very good future, I think it will keep going. I get a bit twitchy with the changes, erm, and I don’t know whether it’s for the right reason, but then as I said earlier, I’m a dinosaur, I don’t like change, I--., tradition to me and England and everything else is how it should be and Doggett’s wrote a will out and said how that should be and I think they should stick to that and not tweak it in any way to make it different. Let it stand on its own, it stood on its own for, what, 15--., what was it? 1715? It ain’t done bad really, has it? And I’m sure we’ll still keep getting rowers.

Q3: Let’s hope so.

Q: Do you have anything, Eva?

Q1: No, that’s great.

Q: Ken, thank you so much--,

A: You’re welcome.

Q: And there concludes our interview. I’m now going to turn off the recording device.

Q2: Ken, can I just say, that was the best…
[END OF RECORDING – 01:03:58]