Q: Okay so this is an oral history interview with Ross Hunter on the 25th of October 2018. And so Eva Tausig is here as well and I’m Colleen Samuel and this interview is taking place in the Fishmonger’s Hall as part of the Thames Festival Trust’s the World’s Oldest Boat Race oral history project. So please could you give us your full name?

A: My full name is Ross Terrance Hunter.

Q: And date of birth?

A: Thirteenth of the seventh 1981.

Q: And where were you born?

A: I was born in Stepney Green.

Q: And what are your parents’ names?

A: My mother is called Joan Hunter and my father is called Terry Hunter.

Q: And their professions?

A: My dad was a teacher and a professor, he used to lecture at universities and my mum works at a university in the computer science department.

Q: So did you go to school in Stepney Green?
A: I went to junior school or primary school, whatever they call it now, in Mile End. And went to Malmesbury Junior School and then my parents moved to Romford, which is in Essex, and I went to senior school at Bower Park School in Collier Row.

Q: And were you particularly interested in rowing at that time or is that not on [inaudible 00:01:34]...

A: [Laughs] My brother is a couple of years older and he was very keen on rowing from about 13 and my father was a rowing coach, erm, on his sort of days off from work. He used to coach at Poplar Blackwall and District Rowing Club, erm, and my grandfather, John, was one of the coaches down there when my dad was younger and he helped set up their gym system, so the way they do their weights and the way they do their circuit training, so much more of their off the water training, and my dad was very keen on the on the water training, so the club was part of our growing up. And if I wanted to spend time with my brother and my father when I was younger, I had to go rowing. Otherwise I was at home with my mum doing boring things around the house and mingling and so if I wanted to spend some time with my family doing a sport, it was always going to be rowing.

Q: So your family connections, had they had a history of being connected with the river?

A: Yes, so my grandfather coached many Doggett's winners over the year and then my father did as well. And because Poplar Rowing Club is a very successful rowing club in regards to the Doggett's Coat and Badge, when I grew up at the club rowing, everyone around me was a working waterman and people that were either training for Doggett's or had already won it, so it was part of growing up. That was what I thought rowing was.

Q: So do you have any particular memories of first rowing on the Thames?

A: [Laughs] Yeah, I do. I started off as a cox and back then I hadn't had my eyes tested and I've got very bad eyesight and I was steering boats badly on the river and everyone just thought I was useless at it and it was because I couldn't really gauge the distances or the shoreline from the water. Because it was, you know, at low tide, quite muddy and very similar colour to the water, erm, so I would have a real hard job judging it so everyone just thought I was dreadful at it. So to try and get myself out of coxing, I decided to try rowing and at that point, because I was young, I was only allowed to go up and down the rowing club stretch, which is probably no more than about 500 metres, so when everybody else went out and did their long rows, for an hour or an hour and a half, I spent an hour doing 500 metres, turning around, doing 500 metres, turning around, doing 500 metres, until I was deemed competent enough to go further than the bends [laughs].

Q: So can you tell us about your membership of rowing, it was the Poplar and Blackwall Rowing Club, was it?
A: Yes, so that was the first club that I learned to row at and, as I say, it’s my family club. My brother rowed there and so did my dad, and because my dad grew up with a lot of working watermen because of the area he grew up in, and the rowing club that he was part of, he’d been a member of the club since he was younger, all his friends were watermen, so their kids would come down and we’d hang out with the Dwans and apprentices when we were kids and they were our best friends. So just being around the club and working on the river that just seemed like what people did, because you’re so young, you don’t distinguish between different jobs. That’s just the people I knew. They went rowing at the weekend and they all worked on the river. So that’s what I thought was life and no one ever told me it wasn’t.

Q: So how about the apprenticeship, what made you do an apprenticeship?

A: Again, my dad had always wanted Mark and I to apprentice on the river. That was his dream. He’d always wanted it himself but it wasn’t our family business, it wasn’t our family trade, so over the years, he had close friends and people that had said if the boys want to be apprenticed then we’ll bring them onto the river and we’ll look after them. And it’s very much a family business, or it was back then, but you needed people to almost vouch for you. And I was lucky enough that my godfather is Johnny Dwan and he is a working waterman and he, from a very early age, erm, always talked to me about the river, always brought me in on the school holidays to do a couple of hours on the boat, just to learn it, and he was very good at making it a comfortable transition to working on the river because for most people who don’t come from families on the river, it can be a bit daunting. You go in there not really knowing people and not really knowing how it works but I’d grown up around it and it just seemed very comfortable to me.

Q: So can you explain what it meant to gain your Freedom as apprentice?

A: For me, it was an amazing thing. At one point during my apprenticeship I was really struggling, erm, I decided to do my A levels at the same time I was doing my apprenticeship and also I was training pretty hard. I was at that time, trying to be part of the GB Rowing team and I started off doing that for the Junior World Championships and then the under 23 World Championships and then the Senior World Championships, and trying to be a semi-full time rower and do my A levels and do an apprenticeship, which is a task, all at the same time, was really [laughs] challenging and at one point, I was just failing all three badly. And it took a little bit of help from the guys on the river, so people like Kenny Dwan, and my master, Johnny Dwan, Gary Inness, Peter Hickman, Bobby Prentice, Milky, sorry, Paul Prentice, Robbie Coleman, it took those guys around me to give me some guidance and to help me out, more than they probably helped most people, because they want you to succeed. They want you to be part of this club and this society and sometimes it is hard, but they were brilliant and I couldn’t have done it without any of them.

Q: So what does being a waterman now mean to you?
A: Er, it means a lot to me. It’s hard to put into words, because it just feels like a family. It’s part of my community, it’s my group of friends, my group that I spend time with, and it leads onto other things, being a waterman, but it can just be a job. You can just make it a job, where you go to work and it’s a great job, you work on the river, its fun, the guys are characters. You work with a crew and you might have a 65 year old and you might have a 16 or 17 year old in your crew and everyone just works together and it’s a really nice environment, different from other jobs I’ve had but I think the bits on the edges, the outside bits, erm, the time you spend together socially, the way that you look after each other and the way you take an interest in each other’s lives, erm, I find that really special, and as I get older I appreciate it more and more because they ask about my family and how’s your dad, and they tell me stories about growing up with my dad that I didn’t know about and you know, I remember when you were a little baby and changing your nappy, and you forget that they’ve grown up watching you as well, so it’s a really nice community. Yeah, I feel very privileged to be part of it.

Q: So what are your early impressions of Doggett’s?

A: [Laughs] My first impression was who are the guys in the red suits? Because I didn’t really understand it when I saw so many of the rowing club that I was at had so many winners. So I just thought that everyone won Doggett’s, I didn’t realise until I got a bit older how special it is to be a winner and then when I was about 14, 15, I was starting to train alongside the guys that were training to win Doggett’s, so the guys that were actually getting ready for the race. They were a few years older, but we all trained together. So you’d see what they went through on a day to day basis, how much time they put into it and how much it meant to them and you got a--, I was probably a bit young to really appreciate it then but as I got closer and closer to the time when I would be competing, erm, I started realising that actually for me, it was probably a bit different. I wanted to win Doggett’s because of all the people who helped me, and I felt like it was something I could give back to them. Erm, I think some people might feel like that and some people might feel like they want to win it for themselves because it’s something that they can have and that’s an achievement for them, but I was very much aware that I wanted to win it for my godfather and the guys on the river who helped me over my career, my dad, my brother who never got a chance to race, so I just felt it was very much something that it was a lovely thing I could sort of do for the people that cared about it as much as they did.

Q: So you’ve done other races, so what makes the Doggett’s so special and different as a race?

A: [Laughs] The first thing is every race I’ve ever raced as an international athlete would have been cancelled the day I raced Doggett’s, it was too rough to row, but Doggett’s doesn’t get cancelled. So, you race, whatever the conditions and I remember sitting on the start line thinking how are we going to get down the course in one piece, but that’s the race. It’s not about rowing, it’s about completing the course and being a waterman and your skills to manage the conditions and to get down the course without any hiccoughs or accidents is part of it. If it was a dead flat 2k race, like every other race I do, then anyone would win it but it takes more. It takes confidence in what you know about the river and how you judge the race and how you perceive the best course to be on that day that was one thing that was interesting. Erm, the other thing was the nerves, not of
whether you were going to win the race, but whether you were going to put on a good show for the people that were watching. Because a lot of people watch Doggett’s and I’ve raced at World Championships and I’ve raced at Henley Royal Regatta and more people watched me race Doggett’s. There might be more people at those events but they’re not watching you. People at Doggett’s are there to watch you. They’ve come to watch you. There’s a boat full of your family and friends that came only because you’re racing, erm, and that makes it, yeah, it’s a unique experience.

Q: So tell us about when you found out that you were going to be competing.

A: [Laughs] Erm, yeah, I tried not to think about it too much. At that point I’d finished my exams, I got my Freedom and then the race was coming up and yeah, it kind of all just sort of happened without me making a big decision about the race. I think it was always assumed that I was going to do it and like I said, the people around me wanted me to do it, erm, and obviously I wanted to do it but I just never really thought doing the race and I think if I had, it probably would have spooked me out a little bit more. I was actually preparing for the 2006 World Championships at the time and I was racing-- and luckily they were in this country so I was training for the World Championships and I then talked to my coach with the GB rowing team and asked him if I could have a day off so I could race Doggett’s and he said that was an unusual request two weeks before the World Championships, but I explained to him how much it meant to me and how important the race was, and my team mates who were in my crew, they understood it as well and they said that they would move around their schedules and we would all plan to have the same day off and they would come and watch me race. So yeah, I got to race the Doggett’s Coat and Badge on my day off [laughs] and not many people can probably say that.

Q: And so did you know any of the other competitors?

A: Yeah. I knew them all. And this is what is also special about the race, is you’re not racing the people that you’ve thought about beating for your life, it’s not some foreign country, they’re the Italians or the French that you’re trying to beat and it’s not some crew you’ve raced all season, these are people you’ve grown up with. We were 16 year olds getting apprenticed together, we’ve worked together on the same boats, we’ve talked about life and girlfriends and families and we’ve spent probably weeks, holidays together, over the course of the five or six year apprenticeship that you do, you become very close to these people and erm, it’s not about-, Doggett’s isn’t about winning it. It’s about racing the race and doing your best. And a lot of the guys that were racing me, I’m sure they didn’t expect to be turning up and having to race someone who was going to the World Championships that year, but that was the race they got and they didn’t complain about it. You know, they took it on the chin and they went, well, let’s give him a good race and if he makes a mistake or if we perform better on the day, then we’ll beat him. And that’s also what’s quite cool about the race is that you don’t get to pick who you race, you don’t get to decide, you just turn up and if they turn up, that’s who you get.

Q: And your family, were they there and supporting you?
A: Yeah, they were, all there. Yeah. I think my granddad, my parents, my cousins, aunts, uncles, my brother who I’m very close to, he was there. And he actually never raced Doggett’s so he did his apprenticeship and he gained his Freedom but he didn’t have time to do the race. He was actually preparing for the 2004 Olympics and it didn’t tie in, so he couldn’t do the race and get his qualifications in time to do the race before he had to go away, so he never raced Doggett’s. I think that was a shame but in 2008 he became Olympic champion so he’s got his gold medal and I’ve got Doggett’s.

Q: So what about the training regime? Was it different from the one when you were doing the World Championships?

A: [Laughs] Very different. I’m training with the GB team, it’s a 2000 metre rowing race, it’s very structured, you have lanes, you’re separate, it’s a flat course, there’s no steering, it’s a very isolated event and you race other people but you don’t interfere in any way because you’ve got your own lane. With Doggett’s you start at the same point on the same line and you know, after that race, start, everyone’s doing what they want to do and you can steer where you want and you can get in each other’s way a little bit and erm, it’s more tactical. Erm, it takes more concentration, because actually people can affect you, erm, in normal rowing races nowadays, you don’t affect anyone, if they’re faster, they’ll win; if you’re faster, you’ll win and there are plenty of Doggett’s races over the years that you hear the old guys talking about erm, and those races were won or lost by mistakes or by people doing something that people didn’t expect or things not going the way they planned, and that’s a different type of race.

Q: So your rowing club, presumably, was very important to you. Do you want to say anything more about that?

A: Poplar, yeah. It was a lovely place to grow up. To be in a rowing club where there are generations of families, where people work together and everyone puts in a lot of time and a lot of effort to try and make sure the club gets by, erm, clubs like that don’t exist that much anymore. They’re sort of family run clubs and now it’s a lot more--, the sport’s changed, there’s less family run clubs, it’s more that this club does junior rowing so there’s not time for the seniors. People don’t bring their kids down and coach them, they send them to a rowing club and they get taught by someone else and it’s very different nowadays but that was a real family club. Erm, and when I left Poplar-- I say left, I went to row at a different rowing club, Leander Club in Henley on Thames and I went there for my career in rowing because that’s where the national team spent most of their time training and I wanted to be part of the national team, I went there to train with them, but moving to Henley on Thames, on a lovely flat bit of non-tidal Thames is a big shock and a big change from rowing at Poplar where you’ve got two choices, you row up to Tower Bridge or you row down to the Thames Tidal Barrier. Yeah, very very different environment but erm, no, I loved my time at Poplar and you know, the club there made us who we are and that’s, you know...

Q: And your master, what role did he play in your training?
A: Johnny? He is, erm, funny, caring, a bad influence, erm, childish, erm, troublesome. He is the worst choice for a godfather I could ever imagine. I can’t understand why my parents thought that he should be responsible for me if anything happened to them [laughs], but he is, yeah, he’s fantastic. He’s a friend of mine, you know. He was texting me on the way here, did I want to meet for a drink before we go to a function later and erm, we socialise together. I’m good friends with his children, and no, it’s very much a different environment, a different relationship than any other friend I have with their godparent. I mean, Johnny and I are close. We talk every week. We eat together. We go for drinks, we you know, spend time together. He’s been, yeah, like an older brother, I suppose and it’s a unique thing and I think that comes from the way he was brought up on the river where people looked after the families and the friends.

Q: So how important was it winning the race, given that you were only two weeks away from the World Championships?

A: Erm, crossing the finish line it was relief, relief that I hadn’t made a mistake and let people down and yeah, the finish line is a different experience from most rowing races. There are people cuddling you, because you know, they’ve seen you grow up and they’re happy you’ve won the race. There’s champagne being poured over you and there is a lot of noise and a lot of excitement. It’s great and then it calms down and then about two or three months later you get measured for your uniform for the first time. And then you get re-measured and then you argue about how much weight you want to have in the suit, just for a little bit of give when you start getting a little bit older and you need the extra wiggle room, erm, and then you get your uniform and for me that’s when it starts. When you get presented your uniform at Fishmonger’s Hall, where we are now, that was a surreal night. It just went by in a bit of a daze, to be honest. It was just a lot going on and very exciting and happy to be part of it and you, this whole evening, it’s a big fancy dinner and it’s kind of for you but it’s more for the race and for the history of the race, so that people keep celebrating it. And then after that, you actually start doing the Doggett’s functions where you get invited to be part of certain traditional events or certain functions and then you actually turn up in your uniform and you’re there representing the Doggett’s winners and the companies, and that’s the experience that I think is the most rewarding because the more you do, the more fun you have, it’s a great--, I love putting on my uniform. I love going to events wearing it. I love talking to people about the race and the history and I find that that is something that I am probably a little bit more excited about than I ever thought I would be. Winning the actual race itself was probably not the most exciting part of being a Doggett’s winner. Wearing the uniform year after year, event after event, and yeah, we’re a club and we’re a collection of erm, odd human beings who are brought together by our jobs, obviously, but by this one race and we’re all very unique, we’re all very different but that one race is the thing that connects us all and we are a very close unit of people, but only because of that one race. And that’s what makes it quite special, because actually, how often would any of us spend time together if it weren’t for the fact that we all wear a red uniform whenever we get asked, and sometimes when we’re not [laughs].

Q: So can you say a bit more about the actual race day.
A: The race day, yeah, so I turned up, erm, I can’t remember now, it was mid-day race. I turned up about seven o’clock and I was with my godfather Johnny and my dad and they were giggling and laughing and making jokes, trying to relax me and I couldn’t relax because I was so tense. They were trying to get me to eat something for breakfast but I couldn’t. It was too rough to go for a paddle before the race, which is what I would normally do just to calm myself down. And then we finally decided to get boated. I actually was on a small launch and they brought my boat down to just inside the Belfast and I got boated just inside there and it was the only bit of flat water I could find on the river and I just did a couple hundred metres, backwards and forwards, so it felt like I was a little kid at the rowing club again [laughs]. I just came a hundred metres that way and back and then it started to get a little bit flatter, but not much, and then Bobby Prentice came into view on the Empire’s launch, the other scullers appeared and he asked us to all make our way over to the middle of the river to get underneath the arch and get ourselves ready, and all of a sudden the race is going and you think there’s going to be this big build up and it’s going to be this you know--., and it wasn’t. It just felt a bit frantic and a bit panicked, and I was the most experienced rower in the race so heaven knows how they felt. Erm, and it was very rough and I remember doing probably the first 20 strokes and then realising I hadn’t taken a breath and I was holding my breath, which I never do in a race, erm, thinking more about my steering than I’ve ever done and I’ve been up and down the river a thousand times at least, without thinking about it, just knowing where everything is, but this one day, I forgot [laughs]. I didn’t know where I should be, I started losing my head and I just took a moment to just try to calm down in the race and then found a little bit more of a rhythm to my rowing and then after that, things just started to unfold and I started to realise I was way ahead of the other people I was racing. I started to think that actually the hard part’s done, I’m in front now, all I’ve got to do is stay in front, which is easier than trying to get in front, and then I realised how long the race was going to be and I hadn’t really thought about that that much [laughs]. Erm, so I started thinking about markers down the course that I could set and it was, can I get to Blackfriars, can I get to Westminster, can I get to Lambeth Pier where I used to work on the boats, and every time I got to one of those points it calmed me down because it started to feel more comfortable because those were the things that I knew. Those were the parts of the river that I worked on so much that I just know, that’s here, this is there, you know, how the river’s going to bend and where I’m going to go. And beating the other competitors in my year was not so much of the challenge but trying to keep myself calm and not panic and then about, it must be probably about five minutes into the race, I just started to go underneath Waterloo bridge and I just took a moment to have a look and it’s stunning [laughs], and I’d never really thought about it when I was working on the river, but I’m in a single scull and I’m tiny and fragile in this big river of working boats and big bridges and arches and walls and things on the bank and there’s the whole of London just going on their business, just doing what they normally do and I’m in this really unique position where I’m going to win this special race and I’m rowing through London, which I haven’t really done before, in a single, yeah, it was just lovely, and the sun came out a little bit. Maybe it didn’t but I thought it did, erm, yeah, and I just started thinking about all the good things that had happened to get me here and all the people that were going to be at the finish line waiting for me and yeah, it was special. And as the race went on, the water got calmer, it seemed to get sunnier, and I just, yeah, feeling excited about getting to the finish line so I could be with my family and friends and celebrate it with them, probably more than I was thinking about the race but the race had more or less taken care of itself as I’d hoped that it would. So that was--., it was good, yeah, it’s the only race I’ve ever really felt so many emotions in because it’s so long and yeah, there’s only you in the boat so there’s not a lot of time to worry about anybody else, you just have you and your thoughts to get you through it.
Q: And you had how many other competitors?

A: There were four in my year. Yeah, and it was erm...

Q: So what was winning like, then?

A: The crossing the finish line? Relief. Relief I hadn’t made a mistake. I had a really nice feeling that I had something to share with the people that had spent a lot of time to get me where I was and I knew that they would probably, on the day, enjoy it more than I did because by the time I got onto the boat where my family were, all the food was eaten. All the drink had been drunk. And all I had was a bunch of full drunk people telling me how great it was and I was like, brilliant, I’m starving and thirsty, what are we going to do [laughs]. But no, it was lovely and it was unique, special obviously, but yeah, quite calming because when you get apprenticed, people talk about Doggett’s on the first day you get apprenticed and there’s whispers about it and people talk about it all through your apprenticeship and when you cross the line and you finish the race and you’ve won, hopefully, suddenly you realise that you don’t have to worry about it anymore. Now it’s someone else’s problem next year and there are 16, 17 year old kids getting apprenticed, it’s going to be a thing they’re worried about for five or six years and I did a really good job at not trying to worry too much about it over the five and six years but every now and then I’d have the thought of, oh, what if I’d lost it, what if I was the one who didn’t win it. Erm, and when you’ve crossed the line and you’ve won it, I think the relief that you don’t have to do it again [laughs], that you never have to be put in the situation where it’s so much to lose because you’ve put so much pressure on it and people talk about it so much that the race becomes this holy grail of rowing and it is special but I am very glad I never have to race it again.

Q: So what did you do after the race?

A: Er, spent probably an hour and a half on the boat with my family and that took time to see everyone and chat to everyone and thank everyone for all they’d done and then the Doggett’s winners were coming onto my family’s boat and—, Roger and Chrissie Spencer, erm, Milky, Bobby, Johnny, and they were all coming on, in their uniforms which I loved. They wear them for the day to promote the race and when you cross the line and you finish the race and you’ve won, hopefully, suddenly you realise that you don’t have to worry about it anymore. Now it’s someone else’s problem next year and there are 16, 17 year old kids getting apprenticed, it’s going to be a thing they’re worried about for five or six years and I did a really good job at not trying to worry too much about it over the five and six years but every now and then I’d have the thought of, oh, what if I’d lost it, what if I was the one who didn’t win it. Erm, and when you’ve crossed the line and you’ve won it, I think the relief that you don’t have to do it again [laughs], that you never have to be put in the situation where it’s so much to lose because you’ve put so much pressure on it and people talk about it so much that the race becomes this holy grail of rowing and it is special but I am very glad I never have to race it again.
Q: What was the experience of fitting of the coat and badge?

A: Yeah, it’s a bit unusual. People talk about it and the first thing that everyone says is make sure you get the suit built with a bit of room for when you grow into a little bit of a more robust person, a little bit more rotund.

Q: So when did you first wear it?

A: You first wear it on the night that you get presented it and that’s the first time you wear it and everyone asks how to put it on because it’s not as easy as it looks. There are a lot of buttons and ties and stuff to get you into, so yeah, assistance on the first time, that’s always key. It always amazes me, the shoes you get. They take a mould of your foot to make the shoes, they’re all made for your own feet erm, so if you put on the wrong pair of shoes you know about it pretty quickly, erm, and the uniform is made for you, it’s fitted for you and your badge has your name on it, it’s yours for life, erm, as long as you can keep fitting into it. So yeah....

Q: What about the presentation at the banquet. What was that like?

A: Just different. So surreal. You start at the top of the stairs, so The Fishmonger’s Hall here has a lovely staircase and if you walk up the stairs and you go towards the left hand side that’s generally the way people walk up to the function rooms and what they do is they place Doggett’s winners at certain steps, or certain parts of the staircase and the newest winner, the youngest winner, gets to stand at the very top, so he’s the last person people meet before they go into the room for the banquet. And everyone sort of asks you how your race way, because they know you’re the new winner because the new winner is always at the top, and I actually had a really horrible experience last year when I came here, all the younger winners were here and I was the oldest one so I had to stand at the bottom for the first time and I couldn’t believe it. You know such a short time from top to bottom and it was just because a lot of the older winners couldn’t make it that night so I just happened to be the oldest one of the younger group. Erm, so you stand at the top of the stairs and you meet everyone and then you go into a private dining room with your family and you have a very nice meal away from the dining room and then you get escorted down, on parade and taken through by the winners to the head table and they stand up and they read a scroll about your race and it sounds a lot nicer than it actually was, you know, on a lovely summer afternoon in flat calm and I remember it very differently but on the scroll it says that it was lovely and flat and that I won it comfortably. But I don’t remember it being that way, erm, and then they give you your cup and your prizes and stuff, but to be honest, everything is lovely but the uniform is the prize and I think that never gets forgotten by us. There are bits around the edges that they give you and they’re lovely little bits and they’re not to be ignored, but if it was just the uniform, then that would be fine. Because that’s what you raced for.

Q: So, how significant has it been for you to win this?
A: I would still be a happy person if I hadn’t have won it now but at the time I think I would have been miserable for a long time because I personally would have felt that I’d let people down, erm...

Q: And what have you gained from winning?

A: A second family. We’re close on the river but there’s that special little closeness that the Doggett’s winners have, just lovely little things that you get to be part of. These ceremonies that people have never heard of and you get to be in there and part of it, part of that tradition and that history.

Q: Would it have been different if you hadn’t won?

A: Erm, I think your relationships would be different because the relationships that you build up as a winner with other winners, because you spend time with them in these really unique special little moments of these functions and events and you wouldn’t have had that if you didn’t win it because you wouldn’t be in those environments to spend those quality moments. I think it’s almost like a nod to the people on the river, he’s a winner, he’s a Doggett’s winner, and the for me, it’s lead onto other things. So, I’m a Swan Upper for the Vintner’s Company and traditionally the Vintner’s Company only have Doggett’s winners as their Swan Uppers so I could never have been a Swan Upper for the Vintner’s Company had I not won Doggett’s and it’s just little things like that, little parts of your life are enriched by winning it. And I look at the older guys and how close they all are and in 40 years’ time that will be my generation of winners, where we’re meeting up in the pubs for a drink and suddenly ringing up our wives and saying we’re not coming home till midnight because that afternoon beer turned into a five or six hour catch up and, okay, I’m sure it’s frustrating but that’s lovely. I bring my dad to some Doggett’s events, erm, and he loves it, just loves it that he can talk to his friends who are all winners about the old times, and that’s unique and I can bring him to that. We have a dinner called the Doggett’s Winners Reunion Dinner erm, and the Reunion Dinner was actually two weeks ago and I took my brother, my dad and my two best friends to that, as my guests, and they get to sit in this special room with only Doggett’s winners in there with their guests and they get to be part of this tradition as well, so I bring in my people that are close to me into it as well.

Q: And has it affected your status as a waterman?

A: Erm, I think no, I think on the river it’s kept quite professional and it’s about what you can do in your job, because some of the guys who work on the river are brilliant watermen and lightermen, they’re not Doggett’s winners because either they couldn’t row or they raced people, like a Kenny Dwan who went to the Olympics and you know, you’d have to be another Olympian to beat him. So, I don’t think being a winner, professionally at work is that different. I think it’s the bits round the edges outside work that are a bit different. You know, what you get invited to and the functions you do and things like that. I think they’re quite good at separating it so on the river I think people are respected for their quality of work, not whether they’ve won the rowing race or not, but yeah, it’s still nice.
Q: And you’ve worn your coat quite a lot?

A: Yeah, I was talking with someone about this the other day. I was trying to get a chance to shut me up about the race to be honest, it’s difficult, so I probably wear it ten times a year. And I won in 2006, so a lot. Over a hundred times at least, yeah, as long as I can fit into it. Although it is getting a bit tight now days; I’ve noticed a couple of the buttons getting a bit stretched.

Q: So I know you’ve rowed at Henley and at the Olympics and you described a bit about how different it is from Doggett’s. Is there anything else you want to add on that?

A: Just to clarify, I didn’t row at the Olympics. Unfortunately. I won Henley Royal Regatta a few times, and I rowed at the World Championships but I never made it to the Olympics, unfortunately. That’s my one regret in my rowing career is that I never made it, but luckily it wasn’t that I didn’t win Doggett’s. Because I think that would be harder being around everyone if that was my biggest regret. Most people don’t make it to the Olympics because, you know, the chances of getting it right, but I had the opportunity to be a Doggett’s winner so to not take that opportunity would have been a massive failure for me. Erm, yeah, I think the race is a lovely, lovely part of history and I’m very privileged to be part of that and I think you’re a winner because you trained for it and you had the opportunity and you had an apprenticeship and you’ve won it but I think what you do when you’ve won it, afterwards, do you wear your uniform, do you go to events, do you make a point of telling people about the history of it and do you promote it, I think that’s more important than anything else. If you won it and you put it in a cupboard and you never wear it, what was the point of winning it? It’s about the tradition, it’s about the history and trying to keep that, as much as we can, in the public eye. And it’s not going to be promoted all over social media, ever, but actually I quite like that, but if someone comes up to me and asks me why am I wearing this red uniform, then it’s really nice to be able to tell them about all the things that are involved in it and why I’m wearing it.

Q: So you’re coaching at Leander now but Leander used to be an elite club, well is an elite club that excluded professional watermen, and seen as a distinct activity, are there any legacies of this felt today?

A: Ironic, isn’t it? Yes, it is ironic that I’m working there now as a rowing coach, a professional rowing coach, erm, no I think times have changed and there was a time when the Leander Club didn’t have female athletes and I’m the head coach of the women’s squad there, so you know, things change very quickly. And I think what’s interesting about the history of rowing is when it was split between amateur and professional, I think that was probably not a sensible choice. I think that was the upper classes deciding that they didn’t really want to compete with people who were probably better than them because they felt that their social status was why they should be inferior whether they were good enough at rowing or not and now, I think there isn’t really social classes left in the sport, or in society that much. So I think it’s nice that times have moved on and the proof is there, you know, a working waterman is now coaching women rowing at the Leander Club who used
to frown upon letting professional watermen in and wouldn’t let women in, so, yeah, things have definitely evolved.

Q: Do you think a lot of people in the rowing world know about Doggett’s?

A: Yeah, I think they know about it. They know about it, in that there is a race called Doggett’s and roughly maybe the start or finish or where it’s run but probably the history and why the race is run and what keeps it going and what Doggett’s winners actually do is probably not that well known and again, so much more of the reason why we wear the uniform and tell people about it. Telling people about these quirky little traditional events that we go to is lovely and you know, people are very jealous of the social aspects of the winners that we get. There are people who I work with who are jealous of these dinners and these functions that I get to go to because I am a winner. Not because—, [laughs] because I’m a Doggett’s winner! I think, not in a nasty way, but it is jealousy, how lucky I am and I am incredibly lucky to have been in a position where I could do an apprenticeship and still do my A levels and my rowing and not have to sacrifice anything I ever wanted and able to get more or less what I wanted out of all of them. And that’s just no specialness from me, really, it’s my family were amazingly supportive, my extended family on the river, they’re brilliant, they would do anything for you and just the environment I was in. I was in a club where there were watermen, so I understood what it was and I got brought into the fold very early on, the opportunity to be an apprentice, to train up and work with people who helped me get qualified and then the support to do the race and then being in the group afterwards, it’s just been very lucky for me. I’ve been very fortunate and I can’t complain about many things in my life because things worked out pretty well.

Q: So how do you think the world of rowing has changed in the last 20 years?

A: [Laughs] It’s become more elite in terms of the performances that people are showing. So when I was younger, a club rower could be reasonably successful training three or four times a week and now probably a successful club rower trains at least every day and sometimes twice a day on some of those days. If you want to make it into the national team for a junior, you’ll be doing ten to twelve training sessions a week for a 16 to 18 year old. Now that is a lot of training, compared to what it used to be and that is just to be in with a chance, and the senior team, they train three times a day, seven days a week. That’s a lot of rowing training and 20 years ago, people were more likely to have jobs and row on the side and now there’s a lot of people that either have part time jobs around their rowing so they can be better at rowing or they are full time rowers funded by the National Lottery, or rowing at high end universities like Oxford and Cambridge and Newcastle and Durham and Imperial College UL, they have really top end rowing squads but they put so much money in and so much resource into it and the athletes give up so much that the whole world of rowing is, you know, back in the day, you talk about professional rowers, people are more professional [laughs] than we ever were.

Q: So what about the world of the waterman. Has that changed over the last 20 years?
A little bit. Yeah, I think it's become a little bit more, erm, slick. I think there used to be a lot of ways of doing things and now we've sort of set out that actually there's--, and it's for the good, health and safety and certain things that need to be in place now, you know, in a more aggressive work place there are accidents that can happen and we want to try to limit those so things are a lot more professional around the edges, but I think the banter that the guys have on the river, the way people train is still, I can't imagine it's changed over the past couple of hundred years. I think it's still doing the basics, learning the basics of the river before you go any further and giving everyone a hard time until they've earned their respect on the boat and the tradition of the apprenticeship is very important. I was talking to someone the other day about how I think the apprenticeships are probably slipping away a little bit now but actually how important they are. I've always had my apprenticeship and my qualification to fall back on, so I've always got a career as a waterman and a lighter and that gives me confidence in my career of coaching rowing, say, if things don't work out, I've got a job I love that I can go back to and that's a really nice feeling. A job I love, I job I can do, a job I'm good at and qualified in and that's because of the apprenticeship and I think that's really important. It is for me anyway.

Q: And do you think Doggett's has changed over the time or do you think it should change?

A: It definitely has changed. If you look at the original race, fixed seat, one attempt, I saw some historical documents a couple of years ago and there were people putting their name in to do Doggett's and then it was drawn out of a lottery system because there were so many people who wanted to race it, so you had to get drawn out in your year to win it. So it was highly sought after and highly competitive on the river and then it evolved over the years to more finely tuned racing boats, very similar to now Olympic standard racing boats with a sliding seat and also there's the option now that you can do, if you are the right age, you can do multiple years if you don't win. So if you don't win it one year, you can re-do it again the next year, which I think is smart. It's smart. Because people were less--, there were less numbers for the race and as there were less numbers you had to then give the fewer numbers a better chance to try to keep it running. I think there've been a few years where there's been four or five races, racing scullers, that's great, that's a really good number. Some years there've been two, maybe three and I think that's probably not so good for the race. And I'm sure the athletes involved mean that that's half as many people they've got to beat to try and win but I think everyone wants to see a full race if they can and I think 20 or 30 years ago there used to be heats because they had seven or eight people that wanted to race and they'd go up to Putney and they'd do side by side heats and the top two would go through to the race. So I think the race has had to move a bit with the times with the numbers maybe not as high as they used to be. And again, I think what's important about the race is that people want to do it. You can't force people to row Doggett's. It won't get you anywhere. What we need to do is to be encouraging the younger apprentices to say look, have you thought about doing Doggett's? Have you tried rowing, let's just try it. Let's just go to rowing club, join a rowing club, let's be part of a club, don't worry about doing a single scull, just join a club, get involved with a rowing club, have some run, do some races and if you like it, then think maybe do Doggett's but I think the daunting task for a lot of the apprentices and what puts them off is because of the history of the race, they're 16 and they've never rowed. And oh, are you getting ready for Doggett's? Well, no, I've never rowed, why would I be getting ready for a race I've never done? I've only just got apprenticed and they're like oh, are you getting your single? And what, go on my own and train on my own all the time and that doesn't appeal to younger athletes.
Q: So what do you think about the future of Doggett's?

A: I’d like to believe it’s going to carry on. In my heart I’d love to say that we’re three hundred years in and wouldn’t it be great if it just carried on every year forever, which I think it was one of the quotes someone had from Thomas Doggett was that the race would be run forever, erm, and that would be fantastic but I think probably we’re going to come to a point where we need to make some big decisions about how that can be done, how we can protect the legacy of the race and you know, if we’re going to change it, we need to keep the basic principles of the race intact. If it becomes just another race that people can enter and the only difference is that these people get a red suit, well it will go in their cupboard and they’ll never wear it and they’ll never talk about it and it won’t have any tradition for them and it won’t have any impact on their lives because they won’t be part of anything, so then the race is already dead, whether it runs or not, there’s no legacy in the race if that is what happens. So if they’re going to try and move things or try to evolve the race in some way, that’s great, all things have to change and evolve and you know, I’m sure that they’ve got some ideas but it just needs to be done in a way that still protects the core value of what the race is and why people want to win the uniform.

Q: So how important is it that Doggett’s continues?

A: Oh, you know, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want my children to one day compete, you know, I coach women rowers now and wouldn’t it be great if my daughter was the first female winner of the race. And I know that is probably not realistic and the chances of her, if I have a daughter, that she wants to follow in the footsteps that I’ve set, then that would probably be quite slim, with all the options available to people now a days but erm, yeah, I think the legacy of the race needs to be protected and I would feel very sad if it stopped; if I was one of the last winners, you know, the people that I’m seeing now in uniforms are the last ever ones to wear them, then obviously it makes my uniform a little more prestigious then, if there are less winners, but...

Q: Do you think women will actually compete in Doggett’s?

A: There’ve been a couple. Yeah, there’ve been a couple that have raced and erm, I think, Kate Saunders, she competed three times and completed the race three times and I think she came third once or twice maybe even second. So it is achievable, erm, and you know, there’s no reason why it can’t be competed on by both sexes and why can’t it be won by a man or woman, it’s just a race and it you start level at the start and things go your way and you’re the best athlete and you row the best race then you win, so, there’s no rule against it. Would it be more challenging? Possibly. I don’t think because of any impact that people would have. I think just because of the history that there’s never been one then this would create this big bubble of you know,
expectation and stress and pressure but, erm, there's always a first until there's not. So. Once one woman wins the race, then I'm sure there'll be a bucketful coming through but if we look at the makeup on the river, there's probably less female working watermen than there are men, so the chances are that there are going to be less people doing the race and you know, it would be great if that changes but I think it's probably a long process.

Q: So what is your current relationship with the river? How would you sum it up?

A: [Laughs] Er, it's different. When I was younger it was this big open space that I didn't really understand and now it's something I feel quite comfortable around. Most of my life revolves around the river. I was a working waterman, well, still am a working waterman, just not full time working, erm, because I'm a rowing coach, which again, is on the river and I think, erm, I will always have a special connection to the river, my whole family does, erm and I do, this river especially. Like I said, when I was rowing through the centre of London, when I was racing Doggett's, I just took a moment to look up, just in awe of the scenery and the beauty of it and I don't think I'll ever feel that passionate about any other river that I ever row on, so, erm, yeah, the river is what sort of binds us all together. We work on the river, we do this race on the river, erm, every hall that I go to, every function that I go to is around the river, you know, you can always see it, smell it, erm, so yeah, it's special.

Q: Thank you very much. Is there anything else that you would like to comment on or say?

A: No, if you guys are fine then, good.

Q: Okay.

A: I hope it was okay.

[END OF RECORDING – 00:51:07]