Q: So, this is an oral history interview with Sean Collins by Nicole Beauchamp on the 2 July 2018. Also present are Eva Tausig from Thames Festival Trust and Colleen Samuel. The interview is taking place at Trinity Buoy Wharf. Please could you state your full name?

A: Sean Charles Collins.

Q: And what’s your date of birth?

A: Twenty seventh of the seventh 1968.

Q: And whereabouts were you born?

A: I was born in Bromley in Kent.

Q: And what are your parents’ names?

A: My father is Kenneth Charles Collins and my mother’s name is Sylvia Ann Collins, maiden name Shortland--, Sylvia Ann Shortland.

Q: And what were their professions?

A: My father was a waterman and lighter of the River Thames and my mother was a dressmaker.
Q: Can you tell me about your education and what you were interested in?

A: I was educated in--, a junior school in Downham in--, on the borders of Bromley and Lewisham and I then attended--, that was Launcelot School, I then attended Queenmore School in London Lane, Bromley and then went on to Bishop Challoner School in Shortlands, Bromley.

Q: Great. And does your family have a connection to the river?

A: Yes, they do. I’m the third generation of my family to work on the river, er, first generation was my grandfather, Harold Collins.

Q: And what did he do?

A: He was a waterman and lighterman as well, predominantly performing as a lighterman, as many were back in that day, with cargo in the-- , that era was more prominent than passenger.

Q: And how about your father?

A: My father, once again, he was predominantly a lighterman, certainly in his younger years and career. However, he did move into the passenger boat industry towards the end of his career.

Q: What are your first memories of the river and how old were you?

A: The first memories of the river for me were going to work with my father, I can remember being lowered down stepladders and walking across-- , across gangplanks and getting into small work boats to get off to the roads and going to work on the tug with him, whether it be up the River Lea or on the river. I remember going from-- , all the way from Tilbury Dock to Brentford with cargo, with barges loaded with paper and wood going all the way up to Brentford Dock, and I remember it, you know, in a very, very busy form, albeit towards the end of-- , of that era for, you know, for freight, where ships were still manually discharging-- , when I say manually, you know, was discharging cargo that wasn’t in a container [laughs].

Q: Right.
A: And so, you know, relatively loose cargo. And, erm, yeah, and I just--, just about remember the, erm, West India Docks still working and certainly the Royal Docks. And I guess then it then progressed into--, into rowing, my father was a rower, he was introduced to the sport by a colleague of his when he was off doing his National Service and he was stationed down in Evesham and his colleague, who was another river man, said why don't you come rowing, I’m going to go rowing at the weekend, and my father did and that’s where he was first introduced to rowing. So he wasn’t necessarily introduced to rowing as a result of being an apprentice, but he took up rowing whilst doing his National Service down at Evesham and when he returned back he continued to row for Poplar and Blackwall, listed rowing club on the Isle of Dogs, and then that’s where I learnt to row. Started off as a coxswain but, you know, you used to have boats that were not as fine as what they are today, more clinker type sculls, still [inaudible 00:05:30] and outriggers, and my father used to perch me on the well just before--, just behind the back of the stretcher, which is where you put your feet, and he used to sit me in there with a lifejacket at the age of eight or nine and go out rowing with me sitting there [laughs]. So, you know, I had a very early introduction to rowing [inaudible 00:06:00]--,

Q: What was the atmosphere like when you were doing that?

A: It was great, you know, I just--, it was like going for a boat ride [laughs], you know, and obviously after a little while I used to get a bit fidgety and start moving around and I can remember him shouting at me saying ’sit still, you’re upsetting the boat’ [both laugh], it was upsetting his balance a bit, but yeah. And--., and it was, er, you know, it was tough back in those days because there wasn’t that many, you know, sculls around for people to use, they was a very expensive commodity, so there was more crew boats than singles and, you know, you used to have to use or borrow a club boat back then. It’s all, of course, changed now, most people own their own singles, and indeed I did when I was 16 that was the first time I owned my own boat.

Q: And when did you first start rowing?

A: I started at 11 and--., but I think my first race was over the River Lea at Springhill rowing centre or Lea Rowing Club as it was then known as, and it was a junior 13 sculls, yeah, that was my first--., first race.

Q: And did you take to it immediately?
A: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, yeah. I think I was--., I think I was only 12--., 11 or 12 at the time, so I was racing below my age, but yeah, no, took to it really, really well and just thoroughly enjoyed it. And, you know, to be honest with you, you asked me earlier as to what my ambitions were at school, and it was just to row, you know, it was--., it really was. Unfortunately I didn’t really concentrate as much as I should’ve done academically, you know, and I look back now and think, you know, really lost some opportunities but, you know, I did what I did, as I say, I really focused on rowing. It was funny the other day because I said to my son, who both of them have just started rowing, and literally this Easter was their first sort of proper rowing course, they done a rowing course during the Easter holidays at Ardingly School--., sorry, Ardingly reservoir, and they, you know, they’re thoroughly enjoying it, they go most weekends. And I said to him, you know, [David 00:08:42], do you think you’re going to carry on, ‘cause if you are, you know, maybe I’ll look to get you a single each or get a double, and he said well I will for a bit. And I said okay, well how do you know that you’re not going to carry on at this stage? And he said well, I’m going to have me exams in a few years’ time, he said, and, you know, I need to concentrate on them. And I just had that little flashback [laughs], and thought yeah, that’s the right thing to do, dad didn’t do it quite as right, the rowing came over the exams. But I went on to row at the National Championships, I rowed at the--, I done the single sculls at the National Championships as a junior, winning a couple of silver medals as a junior 16 and junior 18, and, you know, that was pretty much the form back in those days down at Poplar and Blackwall, there wasn’t a big contingent of youngsters, but we--., so we tended to--., and if there were there was quite a few age gaps, so we tended to single scull most of the time. So it was renowned--., Poplar was renowned for producing great single scullers and around my age group was the Spencers, Roger and Chrissie Spencer, who were both Doggett’s winners and, erm, and so, yeah, you know. We was--., we was actually brought up together because our fathers rowed together and for many years we used to spend, you know, one of our main family holidays down in Devon rowing on--., in the Head of the Dart--., our fathers used to row in the Head of the Dart and we’d all end up getting a coxing slot somewhere with one of the crews that were going down there from the club. But, you know, and we spent pretty much the weekend--., May bank holiday weekend down there and--., well it stretched pretty much the full week and we used to have some great--., great holidays down there as kids.

Q: Can I fast forward you to your apprenticeship and talk about maybe how much rowing was a part of your apprenticeship?

A: Yeah, so my apprenticeship commenced in 1984 and I was really keen to be apprenticed, I always wanted to work on the river, my parents didn’t [laughs], they said it was a dying trade and you’ll never make any--., you’ll never make a good career out of the river. And they worked extremely hard, especially my mother, doing many extra hours on the sewing machine to send me to private school the last three years of my education and, you know, I’m very,
very grateful for that because, you know, that probably put me in a slightly better position academically than what I would’ve been, although I don’t feel that I—, I really didn’t take full advantage of it. Because I did always intend to come and work on the river, it was something that I really wanted to do and, you know, there was nothing else from a career perspective that really interested me. It’s funny, ‘cause I look back now and there potentially are things that I think well, you know, if I didn’t do this I may have done that but, you know, back then it was—, it was just purely focused on my apprenticeship and rowing, and more so the latter, you know, every minute that I wasn’t at work I was on the water rowing. By this stage I’d moved to London Rowing Club at Putney, just to make things a little bit harder for myself to get from Bromley in Kent to Putney, and I used to cycle that—, I used to cycle that most times, or if not it was a train to Waterloo and then out to—, out to Putney. And it was, you know, it was a challenge just to do the journey, but it was worth doing. And I done that to sort of try and get more involved in crew rowing and row around people of my—, of the same age and, erm, weight, so it was, er, ended up a lightweight rower. And I, you know, thoroughly enjoyed the club, thoroughly enjoyed rowing on those stretches of the river, and I had the luxury of meeting some of, you know, the legend rowing waterman—, rowing families. Dick Phelps was often at London Rowing Club talking to Bill Colley, having a cup of tea with Bill Colley, the boatman and boat builder. Bill Colley was one of the last standing wooden boat builders in the UK, or probably in the world, ‘cause we was all just moving over to plastic boats at that stage, at which I actually, you know, my first boat was a composite boat and Bill used to ridicule me for that and from Dick Phelps’ perspective it was just totally alien [laughs], they don’t build them how they used to was the common word. But what was interesting throughout the whole of my apprenticeship, Dick used to, you know, often walk down to the waterside and see me scull off and, you know, he was in his—, I think he was in his 90s at this point, and he used to reflect on all the stories of years gone by and, erm, and he always said ‘I won’t be around when you row Doggett’s, but…’ and then there’d be a story on the end of it. And sadly he wasn’t, he died literally three months before [sounds emotional].

Q: Oh, so close. So you had access to some really influential people obviously, what does being a waterman mean to you?

A: It was part of a, you know, a tradition—, a family tradition. As I said, I was third generation, so had stories of, erm, of my granddad and my dad, my dad was Ken Collins, was very well known, he was a joker, a prankster, total opposite to me, didn’t take life seriously whatsoever [laughs]. He just, you know, he just loved life and lived it to the full and, you know, as I say, he was—, he was—, the amount of stories that people tell me of my father, of him playing a joke on someone or doing something funny or saying something funny. But, you know, he too equally loved the sport and actually was just getting ready to go rowing the day he died, you know, he was just getting ready to go down the rowing club. He was retired but often went down the rowing club a couple of times during the week and of a weekend and, you know, literally was
just--, I think just had a shave ready to go down there one evening during week and dropped dead. So I guess that's a nice way to go, sudden and preparing to do something that he loved.

Q: And your father won Doggett's, didn't he?

A: He won Doggett's in 1956, I think it was, have to check on that [laughs].

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your early impressions of Doggett's, kind of what you--, when you were first aware of the race? You mentioned that--,

A: I think the first--, I think the first Doggett Coat and Badge that I went and see was won by, erm, Fred Burwood--, Freddie Burwood. There was--, just to complicate things, I think there was three Freddie Burwoods and they was all, you know, it was grandfather, father and son [laughs]. So it was the Fred Burwood junior and there was a fourth Fred Burwood who's the young guy still working on the river today, in actual fact he worked for me when he first was apprenticed on the river, he actually worked here at Thames Clippers. But yeah, that was the first--, the first winner that I see for the Doggett Coat and Badge, and I was on an old passenger boat that we boarded at Greenwich Pier and, erm, and I thought it was a fantastic day, you know, it was really--, really lively and buzzy and a great atmosphere and looked forward at that point to taking part myself. Couldn't wait for it to be honest with you.

Q: [Laughs]. So when you got time to train for the Doggett's did you have a particular regime, did you…?

A: At that point I was--, I was fulfilling an international rowing career, so I--, the year I rowed Doggett’s I was actually in a double scull for most of that season--, in a lightweight double scull with a guy named Steve [Chillmaid 00:18:56] who’s a few years my senior, he was about, erm, about eight, nine years older than me at that point. And we--, he too was an international lightweight and he was sort of coming towards the end of his career, and we teamed up in a double and it was very successful. We went very well together, we, erm, a couple of years got round to the latter stages of Henley Royal Regatta, we were the fastest lightweight double in the country at one point, and we actually went to Lucerne International Regatta, which is a sort of pre world championship regatta in Switzerland, the weekend prior to me rowing Doggett’s. So I think that week of Doggett’s I ended up racing something like six times because I was racing in Lucerne, which my dad wasn’t happy about, he felt that I was going to be burnt out what with travelling and racing and then coming back. And so we returned on the Monday, I
had the Tuesday off and then raced Doggett's on the Wednesday, and it was--, it was an evening race and it was a really, really hot day, and because I was rowing lightweight you had to get down to weight, which I didn't necessarily find that easy. So I had to be at 90 kilos average--", sorry, 70 kilos average in the double, so I'd been weighing in all that previous weekend so I was pretty light and slim and it does take, you know, the dieting and racing that many times does take it out of you, so I was a little bit--, little bit nervous. But I jumped back in the single, I had a guy coaching me, Bill Mason of Imperial College Boat Club, which was the--, almost the opposite--, the rowing club at the opposite end of the Putney Hard, and he coached me whilst I was in my single, er, dipping in and out of the single, er, the single and the double [inaudible 00:21:25] all year. And, you know, he rigged me up well, he gave me a very different rig to what you would normally have and--, so the combination of the boat and size of the boat and the fact that I was rowing in the double as well, and it really paid off, you know, I felt very, very comfortable in my Doggett's boat. And just to add to the challenge, it was an ebb tide row, which is very, very unusual, so it was against the out coming tide and, you know, we was all trying to stall it as much as we possibly could on the start to get a little bit of flood, but unfortunately that never happened and of course, as the race progresses you're getting, you know, stronger and stronger tide because, you know, you're getting to--, further up river, so there was no let up. And, you know, the shore was--, it was quite low as well, so the shore was showing in quite a lot of places, which unfortunately my main competition, Jeremy McCarthy, fell foul of just upstream from--, from Parliament, just at [inaudible 00:22:43] he caught the shore and actually had to get out of his boat and push it off, which allowed me to sort of then move further ahead. But it was a very, very close race off the start, Jeremy had the south shore and I had the north shore but one, so it was--, it was going to be a very, very tough position for me because the slack water is on the south shore, so to move up that south shore was going to be very, very--, and stay as close to that south shore, was going to be very important. And so I decided to try and stay in the slack as much as possible on the north shore till I cleared Southwark Bridge, so I took the twos at Cannon Street and Southwark and then headed across to Bankside, back then you still had the jetty there for the power station, so you had to navigate round between that and the Bankside buoy, which I did and I remember just coming across the bow of, erm, of McCarthy's boat with less than half a length clear water, but that was an important move to make to make sure I was in front. And I'd spent a lot of energy at that point, so I sort of sat there and sort of just concentrated on stretching that out and taking my breath and got to--, went up the inside of Coin Street moorings and then when I got to Waterloo Bridge I then started pushing on again, and it was at that point that I started move--, move out and put some space between us. And it was--, yeah, I was out in front on me own then for pretty much the rest of the race.

Q: Such a long race, isn't it?
A: It is, yes. And it was--, I remember, it was a day like today, it was so hot and, you know, it was an evening--, as I say, an evening race so we’d had a long hot day.

Q: And after your travel and after you were racing in a double for so much of the time, what did the moment of winning feel like?

A: Oh it was fantastic, yeah, it really was. I mean I--, unfortunately I--, it nearly came--., despite having a really long lead I nearly came foul of that, of--, I hit a massive piece of driftwood that was actually--, actually stuck--, one end of it was floating and the other bit was on the--., on the bottom, and I struck it with my--, with my rigger and it literally threw me backwards and nearly threw me--, nearly fell out of the boat, but I got myself back together and carried on. And it was quite funny because one of the stories that Dick Phelps used to tell me was to the camaraderie and, erm, and respect for their race colleagues, he was telling me about one of his relatives that had shouted out to one--, to his competitor that was in front of him that was winning ‘watch the driftwood’ and he warned him of a piece of driftwood that he’d looked round and seen but the other one was going towards. So yeah, it was--., that sort of story sprung up at that point [laughs]. But yeah, fortunately it didn’t impede me, I did go over the line first and it was, yeah, a great--, great victory.

Q: And so many years on the details of the race are still crystal clear in your head.

A: Yeah, yeah, I was--, and to be greeted at Cadogan Pier by my father, Ken, and my uncle Alec, who was also a Doggett’s winner, so--., so I was greeted by both of them at--., I think me dad had been following it on a bike.

Q: Shouting.

A: Yeah [laughs].

Q: How significant has winning Doggett’s been to you [kind of now you’ve moved on so many years 00:27:10]?

A: Erm, it’s probably more significant today than it was back then, I mean, you know, I did take it very lightly and with very little respect as to the, erm, disappointment of my father because he really didn’t want me to be racing in a double the weekend before. And in fact, you know, literally the next day I was off to Nottingham to race the National Championships, which
started on the Friday and culminated on the Sunday, and we won a silver medal in the lightweight double sculls. And I actually blamed Doggett’s for us not winning the gold [laughs], because I literally just was totally--, totally drained by the end of that week of racing.

Q: Quite a week.

A: Yeah. But it was fun, and it was, you know, it was a challenge. And, you know, going back to what I was saying about education and focus on rowing, you know, for me I think rowing was a very, very important lesson for me throughout my life. And one of the things that I’ll say to anybody that--, that would be thinking of just starting rowing or taking up any sport of significance that requires that focus, that drive and dedication to training, you know, and any apprentice that was starting work on the river, I’d certainly encourage them to row and spend as much time as they could rowing. Because, you know, getting up at all hours in the winter and getting out on that river when it’s still dark and sleet, you know, it is--., it’s tough and takes discipline. You know, and finishing work and, you know, cycling to Putney to go in a gym, it takes discipline and, you know, to do that you’ve got to, erm, you’ve got to apply yourself, and for me that has--., I believe that was what--., what has really helped me apply that same approach, respecting others, teamwork, that has resulted in me being successful with MBNA and Thames Clippers. And, you know, I believe that rowing played as big a part in that as any--., any further education could’ve done for me.

Q: Just one last question, kind of looking back, were you aware of the distinction between gentlemen amateurs, erm, or were they treated differently to working class professionals on the river?

A: Sorry--,

Q: In the races, where you had the amateur kind of races that were sort of gentlemen’s races or the working class professional races.

A: Yes, I mean obviously that was--., that was before my time. But, you know, being close to the Phelps and the Barrys rowing, you know, in the upper reaches, you know, I heard those--., I heard a lot of stories of those wagers and, you know, and I actually took--., although it was never a wager, I actually took part in the Wingfield Sculls, which is the British sculling championship. And, you know, it was an amazing thing to do and I can imagine that those wagers back in the day was just brilliant, you know, what a thing to do, to be able to earn a good living out of racing a scull, I couldn’t think of anything better [both laugh]. But obviously,
you know, that put them at a significant advantage over the working apprentice that, you know, that didn’t have that luxury. But to be fair, you know, you know, it didn’t—, anyone could’ve done that if they wanted to, you know, it would’ve taken a lot of dedication and would’ve been a lot harder for them to have not come from one of the, you know, the main families of that day but, you know, and I would’ve actually have seen that as a challenge, breaking the mould [laughs].

Q: A reason to do it.

A: Absolutely. But yeah, no, it must’ve been a very interesting era and an era that I would’ve loved to have been part of and taken part in one of those wagers, ‘cause as I say, you know, other than Doggett’s the Wingfield Sculls for me was an experience and I can imagine that that’s exactly what, erm, one of the old wagers was like.

Q: So looking ahead now to the kind of future of Doggett’s and the future of the river, do you encourage your apprentices and staff to row? What do you think the future of Doggett’s is?

A: Yeah, absolutely, I—, I very much encourage any youngster that wants to row to row, we help them as much as we possibly can, in fact, my very first apprentice that I employed, I actually ended up apprenticing him as well. It was funny because I received this call from Alan Bennett, who started up Bennett’s Barges, he was a lighterman and started up his own business and Bennett’s Barges is still going today, it’s under the umbrella of Foster Yeoman now. But he phoned me up and he said I’ve had this young man come down for an interview this morning to come and start working for us, he lives in Deptford and he’s turned up in a pair of plimsolls and no coat and, you know, I might’ve told him that he was going to work for the week after his interview straight away. He said, but there’s no way I could put him to work dressed how he was, he said, and I don’t think he’s really cut out for this—, this sort of work, I think he would be much better placed on one of your passenger boats, he said, so I’ve given him your number and I’ve told him to come and see you. Anyway, this young guy by the name of Jude McGrane, he’d never worked on the river, he had no family connection with the river, although he did start to row at Globe Rowing Club, so he did row with them. And I said to him well I’ll—, after an interview and a chat with him, he went away and he came back and he said right, you know, I’ve been thinking about what you said, I would like to work with you and—, or for you, and, you know, what’s the next steps? So I gave him a job and I said to him I’ll give you the job—, I’ll give you a job but I’d like to apprentice you as well, but I’ll only apprentice you if you promise me one thing, what’s that? I said you row for Doggett’s, erm, and you win it [laughs].
Q: That’s quite a condition.

A: I said I don’t want you to just row for it, I want you to win it, and if you’re not interested in putting that amount of time in to it, don’t bother, but you’ve got a job. Anyway, he started work and then he started rowing more seriously and I’m pleased to say that he did win it first time and he was a very worthy winner and I was really proud of him. I’ve never actually apprenticed anymore apprentices since then, but we’ve had many apprentices work for us that have won Doggett’s, some of them are still here with us now and some-- , some that are working elsewhere. But-- , but yeah, we’ve had a good-- , good stream of apprentices and-- , and even when I haven’t been able to help them-- , even when I haven’t been able to help them personally for the full training, for the full training, I’ve got somebody else that will work-- , that can work with them and help them and, you know, the last apprentice that came to me and said, you know, I want to row Doggett’s, can you help me with some coaching, I’m going to go and row at Putney, and I said well don’t you live at Canterbury? And he said yeah. And I said well how are you going to-- , how are you going to train efficiently travelling backwards and forwards, I know work’s in between, I said but how are you going to efficiently train rowing out of Putney? He said well I’m going to-- , and I thought well he’s clearly dedicated and wants to do it and, erm, and so I said to him well look, I know somebody that might be able to actually help you down in Canterbury, my ex pairs partner is rowing master at King’s School, Canterbury, and he went, really? He said, erm, ‘cause they’ve got their own lake, haven’t they? I said yeah. Anyway, I linked him up and he done-- , he done extremely-- , extremely well, he was a good second, and he actually though, he didn’t start rowing until the year before he was due to race, which you can’t do, you really do need to put a good few years into it.

Q: He did well to get that far.

A: Yeah, yeah, so he did-- , he did, erm, he did do extremely-- , extremely well, that was Jake. And then, you know, I was actually asked not long after my apprenticeship really, I must’ve been in my early 20s, about 24, 25, and I was asked to become the rowing officer at the Watermen’s Company, which was training and helping apprentices for Doggett’s, and I took the job on but unfortunately there wasn’t many that was consistently interested and keen to train at that stage.

Q: [Inaudible 00:38:54]? When was this?

A: It was in the mid ‘90s and, you know, and I think the Watermen’s Company [needed to see 00:39:02] that they needed somebody to sort of try and generate the interest and make sure that we had the candidates going forward, because it was a relatively new position within the
hall. But I only ended up with a handful of people that--., well less than a handful of people that was interested and it got to the point where--., and I was being paid for this, but it got to the point where I thought this is not a good use of money and that this could still be achieved by voluntary support. So I stood down from the position and told them to review the position from an expenditure perspective, but I would carry on coaching at that point the two guys that was interested, and it was Alex Hickman and Tom Woods, neither of them was competing against each other for the same year. And I got really close friends with Tom Woods and I ended up coaching him, you know, putting a lot of time into coaching him, and ironically it was through going back to his parents’ house in Greenwich, in Park Row, for breakfast one morning that his dad and I started talking about River Bus. Now River Bus was a very serious attempt of what Clippers is today back in the 1980s, and it was started off by a company called Thames Line that was sort of figure headed by Bob Crouch who was a Doggett’s winner, a Barge Master to the Queen and had his own business based at West India Dock Pier on the Isle of Dogs, and that was where Thames Line started from, and he was part of that. And I got a job there at the age of 18 so I was apprenticed--., I was still in my apprenticeship, I had my two year licences but I actually started my career there--., real career there, it was my first real proper job and I just thoroughly enjoyed the job. And it was very--., very quickly it started to suffer financially and River Bus was then--., sorry, Thames Line was then taken over by the River Bus Partnership of which Thames Line was part of, and it was a new funding mechanism and being put in place to try and make it survive and make a river bus service come to existence. And it was mainly funded by the builders of Canary Wharf, Olympia and York, which was two Canadian brothers, the Reichman brothers, from Toronto, and unfortunately in the early ’90s they too got into financial difficulty and Olympia and York went into administration. River Bus continued to operate under administration for a few years, a couple of years I think, but it was being run by P&O and the Managing Director was a guy called--., an ex-rower by the name of Bill [Edgeley 00:42:52] and he was part of the Bovis side of P&O and was put in to run River Bus, and he decided at that point there was no financial potential--., there was no potential for River Bus to be financially viable. So Alan Woods, Tom’s father, and I was talking about the demise of River Bus and how sad it was over this breakfast this particular morning, it then become a common theme discussed in River Bus pretty much after every training session that I went back to Tom’s house with him, and we decided that we would try and resurrect it, and that’s how Thames Clippers happened. So arguably, you know, Collins’ River Enterprises, Thames Clippers, came out of--., as a result of Doggett’s, because it was through coaching Tom for Doggett’s that the conversation started. And it was always dear to my heart and ironically it was only a year earlier that I was feeling pretty frustrated with my own rowing career--., or a couple of years earlier that I was feeling pretty frustrated with my own rowing career, and there was a really successful single sculler, you know, he was the Redgrave of the time, by the name of [inaudible 00:44:24] Chris Baillieu, he was an Olympic silver medallist, he doubled with Mike Hart, Baillieu and Hart. And I was getting out of the boat one day pretty disappointed with some recent squad trials results and the fact that I’d done extremely well in them but hadn’t made the boat that I wanted to get in,
and Chris said to me, he said, oh, he said, you do realise that, you know, rowing’s never going to give you a career and there will be one day that you need to go out there and think about a career and working properly for a living. He said, erm, he said I think it would be good for you to get--, hang up your sculls and get out there and resurrect River Bus. So there was two things here that was resonating with me, you know, one was the conversations that started as a result of coaching Tom and the comment that Chris Baillieu made that made me think do you know, this probably is the right thing to do, and ironically [laughs], here we are [laughs].

Q: You get a lot of people telling you couldn’t make a living on the river, and yet here you are [both laugh]. Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like when you founded Thames Clippers and what it was, you know, it was [in demise 00:45:56] and financial problems [inaudible 00:45:58].

A: It was like--, it was like one of those hardest 2,000 metre races that you had in a single [laughs], I felt very alone and--., and very, you know, very anxious of getting over the line--., trying to get over the line first. It was a race, it was a journey and it was fraught with problems, you know, just getting the initial funding for a service that had had so many failures and burnt so many millions of pounds and not been successful, you know. When you look back at River Bus they had 11 boats, they were operating from Chelsea down as far as Greenwich and it didn’t succeed, and it was definitely the right product but unfortunately the wrong time, you know, it was one of the biggest recessions that this country’s seen and the housing and property market just crashed and it was the wrong time. And the three new boats that was built for River Bus just prior to its winding up actually stayed in this country, ‘cause the rest all went out to the Philippines, the other eight went out to the Philippines but the three new ones stayed in this country and they went down to Devonport. And it’s a long story but, you know, they soon wanted to release one of those so it went on the market and we was lucky enough to get that right boat, albeit just one of them, because they--., it was the right craft and we believed it was the right time. And I remember I had a waterman by the name of Rob [Oatley 00:47:50] come up to me on Canary Wharf Pier when I very first started, the first day, and he went you've got to be mad, he said there has been so many failures and you've started this up eight months before the Jubilee line’s about to open that follows your route. And I said yeah, but you’ve got to look at the growth in the--., and density of development close to the piers in the east here, and the Jubilee line actually is a good ten, 15 minute walk away from them. And he said yeah, but you’ve got to look at the growth in the--., and density of development close to the piers in the east here, and the Jubilee line actually is a good ten, 15 minute walk away from them. And he said well what’s more you’ve got competition, you know, White Horse Ferries are about to start up and they actually, you know, had quite a significant amount of funding--., backing from their--., with their--., they’d started up sort of a PLC and they had Berkeley Homes and a few other property developers and the Holiday Inn Hotel had put some money into it, and I think they kicked off with about two and three quarter, three million and had six boats. So I did see them as a threat but my strategy was to run commuting in the evening and do charter transfers during the day, the Dome was obviously about to open and the Millennium
we had a lot of money spent on new piers, and my first strategic job that I landed was with HSBC and my approach to them was that because I’d heard that none of their staff wanted to come and work in Canary Wharf and I’d heard that they were going to familiarisation trips of the new building and getting people down to the wharf. So I said look, you know, what better way to sell Canary Wharf than take them there by boat, because all of their city offices was really close to the river and to piers. Anyway, I succeeded and landed the job of transferring--, so for two summers we brought the HSBC guys down to Canary Wharf. And, you know, and many other charters, in fact my very, very first charter that I got when I got the Storm Clipper, which was our first boat, was for P&O for Lord Sterling and we had him on board and we were flying the P&O flag and we got a phone call to say could you please take down the flag, we understand you’re flying the P&O flag and we’ve had a very senior member of management from P&O request that it be moved. And I said well we haven’t just put it up, I said we’ve actually got the Chairman on board, Lord Sterling, where they all went very red faced and quiet and said oh, okay [laughs]. And from that day Lord Jeffrey Sterling has been a great supporter, as many other people were, and I did--I did get some fantastic support from some really influential people because they could see what we could see, you know, and that there needed to be such service on the river. And I think the combination of that commuting in the morning and evening and the charter work during the day was the stepping stone to success because unfortunately White Horse Ferries just committed their self to transporting, they didn’t have the right boats either, they started the business on a shoestring and they went the same way as Thames Line, they went bust very, very quickly, within a year actually.

Q: So you started in 1999 with one boat.

A: Yeah.

Q: What was your vision of kind of the river as a working river and why is that important to you?

A: It was because--I was working for Cory Environmental at the time, prior to starting up, erm, Thames Clippers, Collins’ River Enterprises and, you know, it was--it was sort of doing the job of my dreams, you know, I always wanted to be a tug skipper, I always wanted to do what I can remember doing with my dad back in the age of nine, ten, going to work with him, so I was sort of doing what I wanted to do but I’d become dissatisfied with it. And, you know, being on the tug all the way from Mucking or Erith where we used to transfer, all the way up to Wandsworth, it just started becoming boring to me, and I used to sit there and just think--I just sit there in the [box 00:53:24] and just think and look at how empty the river was. And it was that--it was the emptiness of the river and seeing piers like Canary Wharf Pier sitting there not being used month after month, year after year and looking at the infrastructure that was put in at Greenland and at Masthouse Terrace Piers in Surrey Quays and Canary Wharf...
respectively, the vision that the LDDC had in putting those piers in just--, I just thought what a waste. And it was that emptiness that inspired me to do it and that and Alan Woods, who was my mentor--, a great mentor, and it was that that inspired me to deliver the vision that I’ve got today or deliver today. And we’re still only brushing the surface I hasten to add [laughs].

Q: [Laughs]. [Expansion plans 00:54:29].

A: But, you know, all joking aside, I do see one day that the Thames will be, you know, carrying as much as a tube line, you know, with--., with the development now to the east, that is what’s going to achieve--., going to allow the river to achieve that renaissance. You know, and it’s only going to happen with the support and the--., and sharing that vision from the Port of London Authority and Transport for London and all the riparian boroughs. But if everybody gets on board, that is what it will do.

Q: And what would you like to see them doing, what commitments do they need to make?

A: Erm, they need to be a bit more joined up, you know, they need to have a common goal, a common strategy of what they see and what they want delivering. You know, yes the river is becoming very busy, that does need to be managed, but it’s all within a mile and a half between Tower Bridge and Westminster Bridge, you know, which is a very, very small area. And there needs to be a delivery of pier access, pier management in that area and then outside of that area a common goal from all of the boroughs in making sure that a pier is put in wherever it’s going to have a strategic benefit, and that it’s supported by the property developer and the developers that are going to make those places all the way down the Thames corridor.

Q: And what about the future workforce, what challenges do you have in getting young people interested in working on the river?

A: Well that’s been a challenge since day one [laughs], and it hasn’t gone away. That said, you know, I’ve got an amazing team, I’ve got some amazing people that work for us now that have come up through the ranks, we’ve got, you know, both male and female captains, multi race captains and crew and there’s nothing stopping someone coming here serving coffee as their first job and being a captain five or six years down the line, and then becoming management. You know, and that has happened, we’ve got a barista that is now a captain and I’ve got--., well, my own apprentice, Jude McGrane, he’s a Senior Master, he’s sitting down there in the office today and, you know, I do--., and then there’s other guys that have been in management
roles for some time now that have come up through this business as an apprentice. So in answer to your question for the future, we’re actually just working on a plan now, we’ve got a five year plan, we know what our headcount’s going to look like in five years’ time and we’re just going to expand the training system that we’ve got in house here. So we actually train our apprentices ourselves, we’ve got accreditation from the MCA for the Boat Master’s Licence and other various endorsements that we train and carry out here, 70—, over 75 percent of our staff—, of our captains have progressed through our training programme to Masters and there’s probably another, you know, third of that number out working elsewhere. I mean, for instance, Jude—, Jude McGrane, my apprentice, he left me two years after getting his freedom—, two or three years after getting his freedom and winning Doggett’s and he went to work for the RNLI—, RNLI full time, you know, and he became a bit of a star there which was pleasing to see, and then the next thing he tells me that he was—, he’s upping sticks and he’s going to work on a luxury yacht, and then, you know, went to sea for a good few years. And then I heard he was coming back and see that he was working on and off for this one and that one and then he went back to sea again for a little while, and I said to him, you know, when you feel it’s right I’d love for you to come back. And he came back here about 18 months, two years ago now.

Q: Right. And the diversity of [inaudible 00:59:23] and people that you’ve hired, is that a deliberate choice, are you actively seeking… yeah?

A: Yeah, deliberate choice. I wanted to install a completely different culture to that has historically been on the river, you know, despite coming from third—, being a third generation and coming from a river family, I did sort of take notice of some of the things that my parents have told me—, said to me, and one of the reasons why I strongly believe that the river was held back and didn’t develop and grow the way it should’ve done was—, was the culture, was that negative, you know, oh, it’s dead, it’s gone, it’ll never come back. And I could really see that amongst the culture that I was working alongside, both during River Bus and then when I was working for Cleanaway and then Cory Environmental, towing barges of waste, and it was that sort of negative culture that made me think I need to change the way we’re going to employ people in order to get the right culture in the business. And I look back now and I look at the likes of British Airways and those long established businesses that are—, that are, you know, the leaders of their industry, but constantly struggling and suffering as a result of those early cultures in a longstanding business and, you know, it’s a fight to maintain that—, that positive culture, positive attitude and have engagement in a business. And, you know, you—, you continually fight to do that because whilst you’ve got new people that are relatively easy to develop, it’s like bringing a child up, isn’t it, you know, it’s easy to develop them if you’re giving them the right tools and the right support and everything else. But, you know, when you’ve got others that—, that have not come through that programme you’ve got to try and change them as well and make—, and make them realise the way of the future and the way it’s got to be,
and that was very, very hard, introducing, you know, mixed gender and race into the business. But, as I say, we’ve cracked that nut now and we’ve got great diversity and good respect amongst our team. In fact, there’s certain-- certain departments that is all female, you know, our fleet control down there, there’s six head fleet controllers and they’re all-- they’re all female, and effectively they’re managing the entire fleet, so [laughs].

Q: Oh, great. So yeah, your vision for the future of the river and for your company, you mentioned some expansion plans, you see there is capacity for more than there is now?

A: Yes, yeah. You know, there is-- when you look at how empty it still is, very many day parts, there is still a lot of opportunity to make use of the river for recreation as well as, you know, and it’s great to see the amount of people taking to the river in traditional rowing boats, the AHQY Centre out at Deptford there and, you know, the amount of people that row out of Poplar and Blackwall now, I mean it’s far more than what there was when I joined. You know, you could actually row in a crew now of people of your same age probably, down at Poplar and Blackwall today, because there’s so many people in the area that are taking up the sport.

And so, you know, I see, you know, the river continuing to be-- and certain areas of it continuing to have a big leisure and sport activity, but mix in that the commercial side of it, it’s definitely got the opportunity to have a massive renaissance. And I see, you know, freight coming back on the river more and more, you know, you look at the-- and, you know, and where there’s a will there’s a way, and you look at the approach and attitude of Thames Tideway, you know, they’ve been totally fixated on delivering-- delivering a major infrastructure project whereby in excess of 90 percent of, you know, the goods and movements of that project are going to be delivered by river. And that is going to-- equally that is going to hopefully breed a new era of watermen-- of lightermen, new ways and new techniques of doing things, you know, we’re beginning to see a lot more pushing being done which is a lot more efficient way to-- of today to move a barge or a pontoon, because they’re--

, they’re bigger and they’re single units. Years ago they used to tow barges because of the programme and the way things were, they had to get up the canals, so some of them was quite small and narrow, and so they had to be towed, they couldn’t be pushed in one unit, it wouldn’t work. So the river’s had to change and as a result of that, you know, you’re going to--

, I believe you’re going to see what they always said was the demise of the river, containerisation, you know, you’re going to end up with container, you know, things being moved in boxes on this river in time, and it, you know, playing a bigger part. You know, it’s funny, things come round full circle, don’t they, and, you know, as we sit here now talking about [MBNA 01:06:06] Thames Clippers and-- and passenger transport on the river, that’s what it-- that’s what this race stands for, that’s what the Doggett’s Coat and Badge stands for, it was-- it was created as a result of a passenger that used the London taxi-- London water taxi and here we are again today carrying 4.3 million passengers on the clippers a year. And, you know, and as-- and I really meant it when I said that’s only brushing the surface and I can
see that being eight million in the next six or seven years, and, you know, the fleet growing. But equally, I can see the freight side of it coming back full circle as well because London’s going skywards, the density, it’s unsustainable from the road and so—, and then there’s the environmental element, so there’s got to be some clever thinking, and the river has got to be involved in that, it’s got to play part of that, this is why London was here and this—, this major artery of ours has got to play a part in that future heartbeat.

Q: Thank you. Would anybody like to ask any further questions?

FS3: I’d like to ask two quick questions. The first is how many Doggett’s winners have come through [Clippers 01:07:51]?

A: Er, a quick thought, we’ve had, er, four.

FS3: Four?

A: Yeah.

FS3: Great.

A: Yeah, and there were probably a lot more competitors, but yeah, we’ve had four come—, come through Clippers.

FS3: About how many competitors?

A: Oh, er, double figures I’d say. Yeah.

FS3: Okay. And how many winners have you had in your family?

A: Three, I’m the third.

FS3: Three winners. And who are the other ones?
A: My father, Ken Collins,

FS3: Whose name is-, Ken Collins.

A: Yeah, who’s deceased, and my uncle, Alec Collins, who is still very alive and I think--, I think is probably--, he may be the eldest Doggett--, living Doggett's winner at the moment. Yeah. He’s certainly the oldest attending most of the--, still attending events. He was out at the barge race on Saturday, which Thames Clippers won I’d like to add [laughs].

Q: Just tell us what a barge race is?

A: A barge race is a annually contested, erm, event on the River Thames, from Greenwich to Westminster, and it’s traditional barges that used to lighter ships of their cargo called a Thames Lighter, and before the day of power they was moved around by muscle power, they was rowed and steered and navigated up with the tide and moored at a wharf for discharge. And 43 years ago they decided that they would--, they would sort of mark the tradition by having a barge race, which I’m pleased to say has grown from strength to strength, it went through a period where, you know, a lot of the barges were being scrapped because they was falling apart, you know, no one was--, no one had the money or was prepared to invest in them, but that’s come round full circle as well. People are investing a lot of money in their barges now, in fact last year the Watermen’s Company built a barge to race the event and the Port of London Authority built--. pretty much rebuilt a barge that they had some years ago, so, you know, there is--. there is a lot of investment going into--, into barges and--. or into the barges and so I’m pleased to say that, you know, I can see a future in that--. for that event. And they’re manned by a minimum of five men or five oarsmen, one of which has got to be an apprentice, some of the bigger barges has to have two apprentices, so--. and in fact, my apprentice that I had last year was--. and three of our guys that work here at Thames Clippers were rowing the Watermen’s barge and then we had a barge that was solely crewed by Clipper--. Clipper staff.

FS3: If you’re working on the river do you have to do an apprenticeship through Watermen’s Hall?

A: No, no. We--,

FS3: Okay. Was that a choice?
A: We--, yes, it is choice now, you used to be able--, you used to have to. When the licences were issued by Watermen’s Hall and the Port of London Authority you had to do an apprenticeship. Today you don’t, you can come in to the river at any stage of life, it could be a complete career change and you can secure a full Boat Master’s Licence which allows you to... But having said that, you can still get apprenticed and bound to the Hall, and go through that traditional format and actually a close friend of mine, a Scotsman by the name of Peter Haining, who I’d like to add is three times world single sculling champion, chose to have a career change at 50 odd years of age and he’s now got a Boat Master’s Licence driving our boats. So, you know, but at the other end of the spectrum, I attended the Court of Bindings at Watermen’s Hall as a Court member--, well, as a Junior Warden actually of the Hall, and somebody that, you know, that’s been--, that I’ve known for many years, Stan Metcalf, who used to have his own passenger boat business on the Thames, come up to me who apprenticing his grandson, said I’ve got another grandson that’s also apprenticed that is now looking for work, is there any opportunities for him? And he’s sent his CV in and hopefully he’ll go--, go through the HR process, but hopefully he’ll secure a job here. So yes we very much encourage both apprentices to be bound through the Hall and mature people to get involved. As I say, Peter got bound in his 50s, but he wanted to carry out that tradition of being involved in the Watermen’s Company and we have supported that throughout.

FS3: And last quick question, you say you raced Jeremy McCarthy--,

A: Yeah.

FS3: Erm, two very strong watermen families--,

A: Yeah.

FS3: Competing each other, was there a sense of rivalry there?

A: Oh absolutely [laughs]. Yeah, no, absolutely, yeah. Prior to the race we were--, we were daggers drawn, as it were [laughs]. But that’s the same in any sport or any--., any, you know, it’s certainly the same in rowing, you know, I’ve sat on the start and looked across at a great mate and, you know, you wish them hell at that stage [laughs]. But then you get out the boat and it’s all over.

Q: Great. And thank you very much for your time.

[END OF RECORDING – 01:14:54]