Q: This is an oral history with Gary Anness by Eva Tausig on the 29th of August 2018. The interview is taking place at Watermen’s Hall as part of Thames Festival Trust’s The World’s Oldest Boat Race Oral History project. Could you please state your full name?

A: Gary Brian Anness.

Q: And what’s your date of birth?

A: The 4th of the 4th 60, but I look much younger.

Q: [Laughs] And whereabouts were you born?

A: Stratford, East London.

Q: What are your parents' names?

A: My mum was called Patsy Peach before she was married and then Patricia Anness. And my dad is Brian Anness.

Q: And where did you go to school?

A: St Francis at Stratford.

Q: And what were your parents, your parents' professions?
A: My dad was a waterman and lighterman and my mum, she done many things, but she always worked within half a mile of where she was born at Bow. And she worked at Clarnico’s sweet factory, Myra Knits Fabrics and then ended up as a civil servant. But she died quite young. She was 50 when she died.

Q: And can you tell me about your education, what kind of things you were interested in at school.

A: Education was--, it was an interesting thing. It was a Catholic school. Very brutal, now I look back and think about it, it was quite a rough upbringing. My interests have always been going by my dad’s side. And, I was a mummy’s boy. I had a fantastic childhood, I’ve got an older sister, Maria, and we was very loved, very looked after. No problems. And all I ever really wanted to do was follow my dad. I went to work with my dad from two to three years old. And, ended up working with my dad and ended up being in charge of my dad in one of the last jobs he had.

Q: So can you talk to us about your early memories of being with your dad afloat.

A: I can tell you of one, unbelievable, when they talk about health and safety this one will blow you away. My dad was a roadsman, which means he lived in a hut in the middle of the river in charge of the barges, so he would allocate barges at Silvertown, there was 400 barges. He would be in charge, have a big ledger, like a foreman in the middle of the river. Way before mobile phones so it was all done by shouting, telling, getting the barges ready and my earliest memory of my dad was standing on top of Silvertown jetty, Tate & Lyle’s at Silvertown which is still there, and my dad opening his jacket. And I used to have to get up inside his jacket, wrap around like a monkey, put my hands around his neck and then I would-- my dad would take me down the ladder about 30 foot into a boot. So, and he used to tie up the jacket so that I couldn’t slip out. And someone else would take his bag down for him and he would carry me on his back like a little chimpanzee. And I remember him saying, “Whatever you do, don’t let go.”

Q: And what was the atmosphere like in Silvertown?

A: The times in the years of black and white. So, this would have been 1963 and it was just vibrant and all the men, bear in mind I was just a baby, they were huge, rough, swore a lot and I always earnt a lot of money because they would always give you a sixpence or a threepence. And I’d go home with more money than my dad earnt that day. And they were
just beautiful, warm characters. Aggressive, tough men but with a little boy around they was just gorgeous and I loved every second of it. And I used to stay with my dad because he done night shift and we had a bunk bed and you’d wake up to the smell of bacon. I’d have half a bacon sandwich in the morning and it was just gorgeous.

Q: And what would you actually do for work? What would you do with your dad?

A: Oh, my dad. My dad taught me to swim in the river and my mum used to go crazy, ‘cause bear in mind in 1963 it was absolutely filthy and it stunk. And my dad used to put a rope round me, hang me over the side of the barge, I’d drift off and then he’d pull me back in and that’s where I learnt to swim at Woolwich. And when we used to go home, my mum would smell it instantly and they’d have a massive argument and she’d say, “Have you been swimming in the river?” I’d go, “No, Mum”, she’d go, “Liar.” And she’d go, “Brian, keep him out that filthy water.” And that’s also where I learnt to row. So, when I got a little bit older the Waterman’s skiff that used to row the men off, I’d sit in there and try to pretend and row it. And no life jackets, I’d just sit there, a little blonde-haired boy, six, seven years old and I’d try and pull this but I realized afterwards that my dad was actually pulling it on a piece of rope. But we’d spend hours doing that and I’d walk around the barges following him and, you know, it was just an incredible lifestyle. Everyone—, my dad would even put me on a different tug, if it was a short little trip I’d sit in the wheelhouse of a tug and they’d take me for a little trip, bring me back [sounds emotional]. So, and [inaudible 0:06:31] so it must have worked.

Q: Started early?

A: It was delightful.

Q: So do your family have connections to the river before your dad?

A: Yes. We’re a few generations in and also my mum’s side. So, obviously, what people have to realize is if you live East London you had connections with the dock and the river. There was no avoiding it, that’s what you did. So you either worked in the heavy industry in Stratford and the railways or you worked in the docks. That’s what manual labourers did. And, the same with South London, Bermondsey and even up river, West London, Brentford, you know, it was all associated with the river. It was the lifeline so, almost all trades stem from the river. I—, when I went to school I never knew anyone who went to University. I never knew. So when I left school I still never knew one person who ever went to University so they all went to various professions. Mine was an obvious choice of going to work with my dad on the river.
Q: So you talked about starting to row at a young age when did you, sort of, graduate onto rowing properly?

A: Right, rowing properly? Actually come quite late for me. I was very into—, I done twelve years of Judo and I played football at quite a good level which is, which is what I done. When I got apprenticed with an insistence of my dad I went to Poplar and Blackwall. I was not a gifted rower, I was definitely not a gifted rower. I had to work hard. I’m short. So, I’m only five foot seven and a bit. So, for a rower that’s small. And I was light. But I was very strong. And I was also very stubborn. So, I realized very quickly that the other sports had to put aside, rowing was a difficult sport for me, and I had to work harder than everyone else. And that was in 1976.

Q: And what made you want to put aside the other sports for rowing? Was it your father, was it your connection to the river?

A: It was both. Well, it was more. It was my father, it was his passion. My dad was never a rower. My father never won Doggett’s. He never ever got into a sculling boat. He was passionate about the river and the history. And it was because I found it so difficult. Rowing is a tough sport and it’s really difficult and also being a smaller person I had no power of leverage and I had to work so hard to make the boat move and I realised at a really early age I have to stop playing at other sports and work hard at one. And also, Poplar and Blackwall which is my mother club, I’ve been a member of a couple of clubs, but Poplar was a beautiful environment for me. Their friendliness, their banter, they’re life long friends and it was my second home. And I just had to work harder and harder and being a very obsessive character, and it’s an addictive sport, it just literally overwhelmed me.

Q: And can you talk a bit about that community at Poplar and Blackwall.

A: Poplar and Blackwall was the most amazing club. We can’t even pretend it’s a great standard club nowadays but, and we’re talking about 2018, but back in 1976, 1977 we’d had the great people. I can’t emphasise what a great club it was. There would be 40 scullers gone-, go out on the river and on shore, like if you’ve interviewed the Spencer brothers they’ll tell you. Every rack of Poplar and Blackwall used to be empty of a weekend and we’d all go along in a massive peloton, a pack, all the way up to London Bridge down to the Blue Bridge at West India dock or even down to the barrier and back again. We was doing seriously big mileage. We had fantastic mentors. Martin Spencer, one of the scullers said, er-, when did he win, I
think that was ’81, he won Sculler’s Head in ’81. That means he was one of the fastest in the country. He represented the country in the first ever Great Britain Quad, we’d just seen Kenny Dwan, just finish his rowing career who was probably the most incredible sculler this country’s seen. He dominated this country for a decade, for ten years, Kenny Dwan was unbeaten. He dominated the rowing world. A god in the rowing world. And then you’ve got Bobby Prentice and Martin winning Henley. That doesn’t happen, you know, it really doesn’t happen but these people, working class men, still holding down a job, still working on the tugs and barges went up to London and they beat the best in the world. They are just true heroes and that calibre, that pallyon, that pack was so inspirational. To actually sit in amongst this pack and get gradually faster and faster, gaining their respect. And actually you have to work hard at gaining their respect which they all eventually adopted me and took me under their wing and every single one of them I would die for. Poplar and Blackwall and was an amazing club and even walking down there at any time the friendliness just overwhelms you.

Q: Can you talk a bit more about the social lives that everyone at Poplar and Blackwall was Watermen and Lightermen?

A: The social life, unfortunately, the social life was a little bit too good at Poplar. In the--, I mean we’ve got legends down there. A man called Billy [Plunden 0:12:56] was their coach but was like a natural comedian and he was a tough man but the camaraderie, the social side. The drinking, the fun, ah, it was just a delight. If, I mean, we used to finish training, we’d work so hard, literally to the point of sickness and exhaustion, we’d come back and I’ve sat in the bottom of the shower and tried to get my breath back then and many have. We’d sit outside and everyone was quiet for a while and then we’d go to Poplar Steam Baths, have a go in the Turkish bath at Poplar Baths and then go and have pie and mash after. And then after the pie and mash go and have a few Guinesses. It was a life. It was the best life ever. It was tough but it was amazing and I’d love to do it all again. I don’t think my liver would handle it but I’d love to do it all again and they was just so warm. The, every single person I’ve ever rowed with at Poplar is a true-life friend.

Q: So, can you talk about your apprenticeship. You did your apprenticeship because your father wanted you to do it or did you want to do it--,

A: No, my father, like I was with my own son, my father was very much against me getting an apprenticed. I was quite bright. And he wanted me to become an engineer. Which I don’t know why because I’m the least engineer person on the planet but he wanted me to become an engineer, go to college or uni. But it was never [there 0:14:30], it was never there. I stayed on a year at school and I done my mock A-levels, done okay, but it was never going to
happen. Any my father never spoke to me for a month. When I got apprenticed my Uncle phoned my dad up and said, “If you don’t apprentice him, I will.” So my dad did apprentice me but he didn’t want to. Although I love him dearly he just thought the river was dead and I should move on. And, but I didn’t feel like that. And I’m going to retire quite shortly so I have eaked a living out of it somehow. And, but the apprenticeship was my idea, it come from me. I was already, from an early age, I just couldn’t think of anything else.

Q: And can you talk about that time when maybe the older generation saw the river really changing and decided that the river was dead. What was the feeling about the river at that time?

A: Well, the feeling of the river was, what we must remember, my father--, I’ll explain about him first of all. My dad was bombed in World War II. The school where he was at East Ham got a direct hit. It blew it to bits. So my dad then went to work on sailing barges at twelve years old in World War II. And when you talk to him and listen to his stories and he was going--, it’s only now as he’s coming to the end of his life he now talks about, he goes about how eerie it was. He said because of the blackouts and he said we’re on sailing barges with no engines and he was twelve years old [emphasis] on a sailing barge with a man he didn’t know. That’s how tough it was. And you couldn’t get apprentice ‘til you was 15. So for three years he was just a boy on a sailing barge, then he picked up his apprenticeship and started his apprenticeship and my father worked ‘til he was 80 years’ old. So he’s 85 now. He’s had Parkinson’s for 20 years but he carried on working. He finished working on the river when he was 65. And, erm, when you listen to that and the heritage, his apprenticeship was so hard and he made my apprenticeship very hard. He was a tough man. So if ever there was a crappy job I had to do it. And wherever there was something horrible to do I went and done it because he always said that his boy would do every single facet of the trade. The biggest difference now is after five year apprenticeship when I was a kid and apprentice I moored ships. So I moored up every ship, shape and size down to submarines alongside HMS Belfast, the first submarine ever to go there we moored up, worked it out. We done every form of work, pleasure boats, river bus, high speed which is now called the Clippers which was Sean Collins. But I worked with Sean Collins at Riverbus. In actual fact I worked with Sean, he was a tug-mate when I was the Captain of [Cleanarray 0:17:51] so we all go back years and years but every facet of the trade, within that five years, was covered. The difference I find now is there’s too many shortcuts and that’s not the fault of [Waltman’s Haul 0:18:09] that’s the fault of the European License. So, and is this is my politics. The problem is now that people can actually just do in-house apprenticeships so someone working at Clippers, for example, will not be able to moor up a ship; they’ve never done it. It’s dangerous, it’s highly dangerous. They won’t be able to do it. But I can do every facet of the trade, hopefully. The same as my son, the same as all the people who’ve done their five year apprenticeship. In actual fact, credit to Watermen’s
Hall they’re now very, very qualified, their paperwork is impeccable, their navigation is impeccable. It’s superb, it was a fantastic system that should never have been touched.

Q: And what kind of jobs did you do as part of your apprenticeship? When you say your dad made you do the difficult jobs what were--,

A: Oh, if there was a tank barge that needed sweeping out of food oil you’d have to put wellies on, go down there and it was sludge, and it was fumy, it was horrible, it was crappy and because I worked a placed called Cherry Garden Pier which was, an apprentice, which it’s different now. It’s pleasure boats but it my day it was porterage so we’d mooring up all ships in the lower and upper port of London [Bellamy’s 0:19:35], Clarence, New Crane Wharf, the colliers going up to Battersea, the coal ships which were huge, I’d be putting the pilots on, picking the pilots off of them. The bow boats we’d be picking the pilots off of the bow boats, putting the--, the infamous bow boats. So we would be putting the pilots on and off. But my dad was never satisfied with that, so if I wanted to be a tug or a lighterman, I should say, I should say a lighterman then I had to do my lighterage. So if I was waiting on the pier I’d have to wait for my dad and they’d turn the tug round, at the Port of London, in the middle of the night or whatever time of day and I’d have to get on the tug then and do my lighterage ‘cause he insisted. And it took other people to turn around and say, “Oh, for God’s sake Brian, let him go and have some sleep”, and he literally would make me do all the work simply so he could turn round and say, “He can do it.”

Q: So do you remember getting your Freedom was that in a separate--,

A: Oh, oh, I remember it like yesterday. The Freedom wasn’t too bad the 2’s was more--,, because I’d not experienced--,. When we come up here I was lucky because a lot of my friends, I was apprenticed with 27, there was a big year, and we’ve come up here and the apprenticeship was very casual but I’ve been in this building many times before. Some of them have never stepped foot in this hall and if you’ve not stepped foot in it it’s quite stiff, and bear in mind you didn’t have friendly Colin Middlemas you had Barratt Wilson, who was a bit of a growly man and he was like out of a Charles Dickens. And everyone had to booted and suited, if you didn’t wear a collar and tie you were sent home. So if someone come in with no tie on they were sent home. So you’d come in with shiny shoes, your best suit and you stood there and we all got apprenticed which is easy, it’s just a formality. But when we come up for our two year exam that was terrifying. That was absolutely terrifying because, in my case my Master was my father, that doesn’t always follow. We had about a 50-50 mix at that time so there’d be uncles, there’d be mentors, there’d be people who just did it. It’s even less nowadays. But in my time, I tell you, it was 50-50. And my dad would stand behind me
blowing hot air down my neck while they were firing questions all round the room. Have you heard what they do? Have they told you about the apprenticeship thing, the horseshoe shape? So, we'd go up in the courtroom which is stunningly beautiful, it's a fine example of Georgian architecture, and the Master would sit in front of you on a throne, it is literally a throne, big golden chair with big arms. He would sit there with his robes on and hat on. And all the other court assistants would sit around the room dressed the same way with their cloaks on, as you can see over there with the fur around the rim and with their hats on, and then they would fire questions at you left, right and centre. But you had to face the Master. So it was very daunting, it was very daunting. And your, my inclination, was to look at the person who was speaking but you couldn't and then if you stumbled I'd have my dad standing right behind me blowing hot air and grunting. And, er, but I got through that and I, I've, I'll admit I had my shirt was soaking wet with sweat. It wasn't as bad for me with my Freedom, I'll be honest, because I'd already been here and I was so confident. I was three years further down the line and I knew I was ready. So everything I could have done, I done. And in actual fact I was more geared up for Doggett's at that time. So, I was fired up.

Q: So let's talk about Doggett's. What are your earliest memories of Doggett's?

A: I used to go with my dad to see this race. He would be passionate shouting for people he knew, I obviously at that time never knew anybody but I liked the occasion. It looked quite good. And you were going through the heart of London and I was always given a lemonade and sandwich so I was always quite happy with that. And, er, but it was always a very jolly occasion, they'd go back to whichever rowing club it was, who the victor was, or to central London. So, my dad, never a drinker, my dad didn't drink at all, so he'd have lemonades as well and then we'd go home. So, I've been watching Doggett's, I can't think when I haven't watched Doggett's — there's only a couple I've ever missed, so, er. It's, I just can't remember not seeing Doggett's. And, but the occasion, I will say in the 60s and 70s, there would be so many boats following it. And in my particular year the boats could still follow it. You didn't have to be a member of the Fishmonger's Company or the Waterman's Company. The family, my family, for my Doggett's were out on a boat following me. And the entire population of Poplar and Blackwall rowing club were also on that boat shouting for me. So we didn't have to moor up or wait or the river was not closed, it was still a working river. So, myself and Chrissie Livett and the other we had a working river and ours was the very last time that they had no river closure. So, in 1983 they closed the river; 1982 it was open. And that was very, for a specific reason. Myself and Chris Livett went through Westminster bridge with one of the bow boats and you're taking about a massive, huge ship so as he was coming through we went through the other way. So, and after that they said, no, let's shut the river down.
Q: We’ll talk about your race day in a second. So, Doggett’s was something that, in the community of watermen and lightermen that you grew up, was talked about a lot.

A: Oh, Doggett’s—, I’ll explain, you see, it’s very important. Doggett’s is the only race in the world which affects in three different ways. If you’re an Olympic rower, you go home and you rest and it doesn’t affect you in any other way. When you do Doggett’s, when you go to work, everyone goes, “How’s your training going? What you been doing? Have you done enough training? Have you been for your run today? Have your done your weights? Have your done your skipping circuit? Are you eating OK? How’s your weight?” That’s every day at work, my entire working life. Then when you go home my dad would go, and my mum, would go, “Have you done the training? How’s your weight? Have you done your skipping circuit? Have you done your run? Have your done your training? Have you been in the boat?” And then when you go down the rowing club, they go, “Have you done enough mileage? How’s your training? How’s your weight? Are you eating okay?” So, it’s the only that encompasses every single 24 hours piece of your life. And I’ll give you a classic example. I worked in Cherry Garden in Bermondsey, I used to go to a café for my breakfast and every time I went in that café at Bermondsey I would get a pint of milk and four slices of bread with my breakfast. I hate bread and I hate milk. But the lady doll behind there would go, “Oy, this boy’s training for Doggett’s”, and they’d all go, “Oh, you training for Doggett’s, boy?” And she would give me a pint of milk every breakfast which I felt obliged to drink and four slices of bread which I felt obliged to eat but I don’t particularly like bread and I hate milk. But she would do that every single day I went in. She would go, “There’s Gary, he’s training for Doggett’s”, she would tell everyone. And when you went into the café, they’d go, “Are you training for Doggett’s, boy?” “Yeah, yeah, I am”, “Oh well done, good luck.” Everyone would always be on your side. Incredible. The catering for the pleasure boat that we hired on the day was done by the people in the café. And they done sausage rolls, little sausages and that particular meal, a good friend of Kenny Dwan’s actually called Charlie Lunn, and they come out and their whole family come out as our guests. And for five years I’ve had loads of milk and loads of bread. And they come out and done the catering on the day.

Q: So was that part of the reason why you put the sports to rest?

A: Absolutely, absolutely. As I did explain, I wasn’t a gifted rower. You know, I didn’t have the elegance of Roger Spencer and Martin Spencer. They were beautiful scullers. I didn’t have that elegance. I had to work so hard and I was strong, I was blessed with good DNA so I was quite strong, but I had to work so hard on the technique and the miles you have to put in. It’s not hundreds, it’s thousands of miles a year and that’s morning, noon, night, snow, ice. When we was rowing over the dock we’ve actually broke ice to get in the dock and row up and down in the Albert and Victoria dock doing winter training with another Doggett’s man called Freddy Burwood. I was helped incredibly and there also comes a point where I was the only one that year from Poplar. I didn’t clash with anyone so they encompassed me, I was their boy. I was
82 year and I’m proud to be a Poplar boy. And, they looked after me. I couldn’t let them down.

Q: When did you know that you wanted to compete in Doggett’s? And that you wanted to win Doggett’s?

A: When did I know I wanted to compete? I tell you, it was a funny story. Another Doggett’s man who I grew to love but I didn’t like him at first, a man called Frankie Walker. And Frank’s a lovely man, I idolise him, but when I first him he turned around and said, “You ain’t going to be no good at rowing son, you’re too small.” And I thought, I’m not allowed to swear on that, am I? And I thought you, blah blah, you’re going to be the first person I beat. And I made a point, Frank was the first person I beat. And I then I wanted to crush him. And I thought, hello, he doesn’t know who I am. And, erm, and he was the very first person I beat and I made sure. And then we got, we become great pals, we become great pals, he’s an older man and a very interesting, lovely man. But that’s when I knew they’re not going to stop me. There’s no one that’s going to stop me. The only person who’s going to beat me is me.

Q: What role did your father play in your training?

A: My dad was not a rower. But he had some fantastic ideas and he was a physically very strong and tough man. He was quite a, quite an awesome person, you know. Very well respected, very physically tough man. He was known to be quite a fighter. And, but he supported me more in Doggett’s than any time of my life. He, whatever I needed I could have. Whatever, whatever he could do to help me he took myself and other apprentices all round the country racing. All at his own cost. And, so much so, the Master of [Liss 0:31:57] Company at that time was a man called Alec Clark Kennedy who was something very high up in Cambridge and my father started the Cambridge Weekends, training weekends. Although he couldn’t skull he knew what we had to do. So he actually invented, with this Alec Clark Kennedy, the Cambridge Weekends which were a huge success. So the apprentices could have a taster and go to Cambridge, stay there. It was a different way of life. No one had ever seen Cambridge before and he actually started the Cambridge Weekends. So he was quite a formidable man.

Q: And the rest of your family, did they play a part in your training--,
A: Absolutely. My sister Maria, she fed me until I was sick. And my mum just doted over me anyway so I could never do no wrong with my mum. But, yeah, absolutely. I have nothing but love for them.

Q: And can you tell us about the build up to race day?

A: Well, I was lucky because I was one of the very last years that had heats. So we actually had more than the allocated number of six. So we had to have heats which was one of the biggest gifts on a plat for me in my life because the heats are done at Putney to Hammersmith. It’s all drawn out of a hat so I happened to have the four fastest people were in my heat. So, I knew I was the quickest, I knew that anyway, as long as I didn’t make mistakes. You can always make mistakes. So, Chrissie Livett and Craig Moore, who’s sadly no longer with us, Craig was an incredible character. Very tall, very charismatic, a beautiful person. A lovely man. Chris is highly successful. But we was all rivals at that time and Chris Wing and Gary Wing, Gary Bliss. But I had the four fastest in my heat and my coach was Bill Barry, who was probably the most famous coach in the world, and he give me very clear instructions that I’m very fast off the start. I’m a sprinter by nature. So, I could leave most people. And my instructions were simple. Was to lead, openly gap and by the time we get to Hammersmith there was a boat, a staked boat in the middle of the river, he wanted me to anchor on, turn round and skull back at full pressure, racing past to demoralise everyone. And get to as far down as I can and he actually told me, he said, “You’ll be 15 lengths up.” And he said, “Come back, race back”, he said, “Stop in Clapham.” And said, “Well done, well rowed.” And, which is exactly what I done so in actual fact it was a very sizeable lead and I spun round and I done exactly what I was told, raced back full belt, stopped, applauded the, my comrades as they went past, went, “Well rowed, well rowed, well rowed.” And each one of them dropped their head and then I skulled back. And then, because I cut the corner at Fulham, which is Fulham football pitch, so I cut the corner a little bit too much, he made me do the course again. Which my dad was heartbroken about. He said, “No”, he said, “it would have been good but you cut the corner, go and do it again.”

Q: Can you tell us about Bill Barry?

A: Bill Barry? The most amazing, charismatic, oh, he’s an Olympic Silver medallist in Tokyo 1964, he’s Henley medals galore, represented the country, he’s one of the Scullers’ Head Wingfield Sculls. The man is a God. He actually coached the Olympic Bronze medallist Alan Campbell who won at Stratford, the Bronze medal, and that was all down to Bill Barry. The man’s a genius. He comes from the famous Barry family. He’s father was Lou Barry, a Doggett’s man, I think he won in 1921, Lou. They used to call him Lou la Jew. And, er, I never knew his uncle, Bert Barry, everyone said he was a beautiful man but he died before I knew him. But Lou Barry was superb and when I first to Tideway Scullers at Hammersmith it
was Lou, the father, who took me and then Bill come on the scene and we partnered up and we was together for about four years. One to one. So I would scull with Bill and he was my mentor. I would have fallen off Beachy Head for him.

Q: Let’s talk about race day.

A: Race day? It was okay. I was okay. Because I’d done the heats I was okay. If I hadn’t done the heats the nerves could take over. Everyone, everyone who gets in a boat is nervous. If it means anything to you, you should be nervous. You should be nervous. But, I was okay. I was--, I got afloat at Wapping, at the police pier, so I actually kept my boat at Wapping police station in the boatyard. And my father had polished it to within an inch of its life, it was the shiniest boat on the planet, and we walked down, got afloat at Wapping, Bill Barry put me in there. It was only me and Bill. My dad stayed out the way and Bill just told me absolutely everything to do which I had a very strange, erm, race plan. It was the reverse of what I normally do, I’m a very quick sprinter so, I go out, I lead and dominate. And, but Bill said for weeks, “How would you beat you?” “How would you beat you? You’re the fastest, how would you do it?” And I said, “I’d clash.” Because, remember, Doggett’s is a wager, there’s no rules. You can do what you want. Once, Bobby, who’s now the Barge Master, once he set you off, you can do what you want. You can go where you want. You can do what you want. And so the only way I believe I could have been beaten is if we clash or if I hit the buttress of a bridge or I fell in. So, he said, “I agree. So what you going to do?” I said, “Don’t clash.” He said, “Correct.” He said, “Let them all go. Let ’em lead. Let ’em go.” Which is against my nature. I like sprinting, I’m very quick off the start. And he said, “The only way they’re going to beat you is to clash, put you under the buttment, sit on your head, destroy you, get into your head.” So I had to stay behind. So, when the flag went down, five of them sprinted off, I stayed sitting. Then I just paddled off and then once we got through Southwark bridge, which is my instruction from Bill, and he said, “One three minute piece.” He said, “Then you’ll overtake them.” He said, “By Blackfriars you’ll be five lengths up.” Which I was. He said, “By Waterloo, you’ll be ten lengths up.” Which I was. He said, “By Westminster, you’ll be 15 lengths up.” Which I was. He said, “Then paddle.” He said, “Dominate ’em.” And that’s exactly what happened. The man was a genius. My inclination would have been to sprint off, get tangled up, fight your way through, possibly hit the bridge, possibly roll over. He was much calmer and he knew.

Q: And what did it feel like, winning?

A: Win. Surreal. Embarrassing. Very embarrassing. It changed my life. There was an episode that changed my life. I’m a very gracious sportsman. I don’t swear at people. I try not to get
angry but I’m also very competitive. And if I’d have lost Doggett’s I’d have just gone home and sulked and even contemplated giving up my job on the river; shut that chapter. It meant that much. It really meant that much to me and my sister had a pair of tracksuit trousers with money in the pocket, I would have just gone home. I would have shook their hands, wished them all the best and gone home and probably finished my career on the river. And it embarrassed me that every one of the competitors who raced that day were so gracious, so humble, so loving even the families of those people come up and said, “Well done, you really deserved it, you worked so hard.” And it changed my life. From that day on I become a better sportsman and a better human being. I was so embarrassed ‘cause I would not have done it. So, they were better than me. So, I won the race but they won me.

Q: So who was there to support you?

A: They was there, they was good sportsmen. They was good sportsmen and it humbled me. I’ve never, since 1982, I’ve never got over it.

Q: And are you still good friends with them now?

A: Absolutely, absolutely. I love ‘em to bits. Chris Livett’s a good friend of mine, the past Master. In actual fact Chris was the youngest ever Master of the Waterman’s Company. He now owns, fair to say, a multi-million pound company and he’s done well. And on Doggett’s day we normally have a couple of bottles of red wine and he takes the pee out of me, calling me names for William Doggett’s, and I just look and call him names for being a multi-millionaire. And I’m not [laughs]. So he’s the winner. But he was, he’s family. His father was a beautiful man, Ron, and his Mum, Rita, was a beautiful lady. And they was just so lovely to me. And in actual fact it was so embarrassing because when I very first rowed a barge it was with Chrissie Livett and Steve Livett by their invitation. We’re [owners 0:42:31] of a barge, come with us. But I had that aggression and then the lust for winning. But I learnt. But I learnt after that.

Q: What did you do directly after the race?

A: Well, I’d like to say that I got really drunk but I didn’t. It was a very funny thing that happened, something very surreal and I think I’d be a unique person to say this. We was on a boat called the Royal Princess which my family were there and all of Poplar, my mum was there, and something very strange happened. My mum come up to me, she said, “I’ve met your girlfriend.” And I didn’t have a girlfriend at the time. So, I said, “Really? Who’s that?” She
went, “Sarah.” I went, “Ma, why d’you say that?” She went, “I know.” So I went and spoke with Sarah and her good friend Sue, my good friend Sue, and I said, “Er, my mum thinks we’re going out.” And Sue went, “Oh Gary, d’ah.” And I smiled at Sarah and said, “My mum thinks we’re going out.” And she went, “Well?” And I went out with my wife for the first time that day. So she come to watch me row Doggett’s, she come to the presentation and that’s the first time I went out with my wife.

Q: Can you describe the experience of being fitted out in your coat and badge.

A: The pride has never gone away. There’s only been one time I’ve been more proud of being a Doggett’s winner and that’s watching my son win Doggett’s. My son, Christopher, rowed for England in 2010, he was incredible sculler. He rowed for Diamond Sculls at Henley. He made the qualifiers. He got beat by the Australian who was ranked seven in the world and he was good. And watching my son win Doggett’s just was the most surreal, incredible feeling on the planet. I cycled along and when I coach Christopher, I coach Christopher, and when you coach Christopher I would never speak to him, I never called out, I never said a word. If I shouted out there’s something wrong but silence is good. And he was such a gentleman, he’s just got this integrity that I don’t possess, that comes from his mother, and Merlin Dwan, who was his main competitor, was going to heat Millbank Pier and all I heard at Millbank, by the Tate Britain, was Christopher steering Merlin saying, “No, on your left, on your left, on your left, straighten up, straighten up, you’re straight, now go.” I’d never have done that. Never in a million years. I would have let him hit the pier. And I was just again, as I always have been in the awe, excuse the pun, of my son. So, when he won, convincingly, it was just the best day ever. So, that actually put my own experience of racing into a cocked hat.

Q: What was the banquet like? Do you remember the Fishmonger’s Hall?

A: Yes. Yes, I remember that. I remember thanks to Milkie, Paul Prentice, he threw a banana, it hit me in the eye. So, [laughs] it was a very drinky affair and bearing in mind that as an athlete, although we appear to be very gregarious, athletes don’t actually drink that much. We didn’t go out that much, I used to be quite, ten o’clock bed and up for training, if you’d had a couple of Guinesses that done you. It’s only as we get older, as the old winners, got more drinky. But, other than that, no. And I remember not being able at all to handle any drink. I literally couldn’t handle any drink. We was treated appallingly at Fishmongers in the early days. We had, you might have heard this, polystyrene cups of tomato soup and like freezer fish and chips, that was it. And a man called Ted Manning then become the clerk and over night there was the bad behaviour. It was, we’d throw food all around, we’d all be going across the road to the pub because it’s better atmosphere and then all of a sudden Ted
Manning come in and we got silver service. There was wine on the table and from that day on, literally from that day on, it was different. We were treated like royalty and behaved like gentlemen. Before that we behaved like silly boys.

Q: And has winning changed your relationship to the river?

A: Er--, yeah it probably has because I become a rowing coach. So I was always very interested in giving a lot back and twelve years of unpaid coaching, I wanted to always help. So, and also coaching other Doggett’s boys, you know, en route, I’d always be very interested to do that. I’ve always been a supporter of Doggett’s. So, in that respect, yes. Has it gained me jobs or fame or money? No, not really. I was going to show you an episode of a book called “The Men of the Tideway” which is, and it mentioned in the 60s how important the Doggett’s men were. They would say this is the year of Phelps, this is the year of Dwan, this is the year of Anness. And we was revered. But I think that’s gone, that’s gone really. We’re now known as athletes, more as Doggett’s men. Which is a change of culture because of the connections with the family, the river, the brethren, the Watermen's Hall. So it’s so segregated now, it’s just different. It’s diluted.

Q: What do you mean, diluted?

A: Well, when I was apprenticed, as I said to you about a café in Bermondsey, people all knew who you was. That’s the boy rowing Doggett’s. They’d pat you on the back. I’ve even had people, strangers, complete strangers buy me a breakfast. Why? Now if they turn round and said in the same caff in Bermondsey, “That man won Doggett’s”, they’d go, “What’s that? Who’s that? Why? What’s that to me?” And that’s the difference. It was a championship race running through the heart of London and the people, the [Victorian 0:49:37] boroughs of Newham, Bermondsey, Rotherhithe, Tower Hamlets all knew about it. Everyone knew about it. And they were passionate about it. It was sort of royalty.

Q: So, this is before your time, of course, but there was the split between the gentlemen amateurs and the working class professionals--,

A: That’s it.

Q: Is that something that was talked about when you were growing up?
A: Yeah, it was a little bit. My father-in-law, Gerry McCarthy who’s an Olympic rower at Munich Olympics 1972, I’m very proud of him, he was a member of London Rowing Club and he was the first, he was mentioned in the book, as being the first artisan to be allowed to row out of London Rowing Club because they were gentlemen and he was an artisan. He worked with his hands, he was a labourer. And I’ve even met the Phelps family and some of the Phelps family, the stories are incredible, and if you read the Phelps Dynasty, the book, one of the Phelps’ used to coach, coach men doing Diamond Sculls at Henley. And he would coach the men sculling alongside them, talking to them. Now the men he coached won Diamond Sculls but he was not allowed. And he yet he was coaching them by talking next to them and beating them. It must have been painful. But he got paid for coaching. So, Kenny Dwan’s probably the forefathers of the first of the amateurs. So that [seventies 0:51:23] was the difference between the public schools and the working class men. And in fairness, you know, you’ve got the river Lee, you got your [riff 0:51:32] rowing club Poplar & Blackwall, Gravesend, you’ve got a lot of working class, and bearing in mind not just on the Thames, on the Tyne as well. You got working class men who were then able to row at Henley. And they were tough. And the river Lee in particular has got an outstanding victory at Henley. There’s not many years go by where the Lee don’t nick a pot. And they’re beating the best, and they are the best. So, it has, it has mulched into one. So, the days of the old schoolboys is, was, well and truly over. And that would be in my father-in-law’s era. Definitely. And in actual fact when I was rowing there was a big clash between London Rowing Club, which was the Great Britain Lightweight Squad, and Nottingham who were the artisans. And Nottingham ended up beating the Great Britain Squad and become the Great Britain Squad. And then from then it went into different forms of selection so you couldn’t just wear the right tie, be in the right boat, you had to prove yourself.

Q: After Doggett’s did you race in other races, other rowing races?

A: Oh, absolutely, I spent er--, My Christopher, my very last race--, I had both of my children in a tent, a golden Labrador and Sarah. She liked camping. And we stayed at Nottingham and this was the very reason I stopped rowing. We were absolutely broke because I took so much time off for training and I was in my thirties, so I think I was about 34, and it was my very last race, I didn’t know it at the time, but I raced in a Lee Lightweight 8 and a Lightweight Double with Jeremy McCarthy who was ten years younger than me. And that particular night we had storms and the tent was leaking and it was dripping so I took Christopher, my son, in the sleeping bag with me, Sarah had Olivia my daughter in a sleeping bag with her, and it just went drip, drip, drip, drip all night. And then when I woke up the next day I think, that’s the last time I put my family through this. I’m never going to put them through it again. And I didn’t tell anyone but we weighed in for the lightweight divisions, we done really well, and then I walked out and our coach, John McCartney, said, “Great, we’re going to go this regatta, that regatta”, I said, “I’m done.” That’s the last time I raced. And he was angry, very angry, to split the 8 up.
I went, “I can’t do it anymore.” I now need to go and work and earn some money, that’s it, no more. And, which I expected. And that was my very last race at Nottingham, in a final. And I never knew until my wife sadly was dying, she said that was one of the saddest days of her life. ‘Cause she wanted me to carry on. She enjoyed it but I didn’t know that. I thought I was punishing them. So, I thought I need to go and work and get out of the poverty line and we was the only ones in a tent, everyone was in a hotel ‘cause we couldn’t afford it, but they was all ten, 15 years younger than me. So the could all afford a hotel, I had two children. And mortgaged up to the eyeballs. So, erm, so I had to go to work. And it was only literally when Sarah was passing she said that was one of her saddest days. And that was, that made me sad but I thought, I done the right thing. I was getting old.

Q: And you’ve worked on the river your whole life?

A: That’s it.

Q: What jobs, different jobs have you done on the river?

A: Well as I explained about the apprenticeship we, we pretty much cover everything. At the moment this is the longest job I’ve ever had. I worked for Coreys, I think you’ve interviewed John Dwan already, John’s my best friend. And he’s the captain, I’m one of the other captains. There’s seven captains there and I’ve been there for 20 years. And I’ll hopefully, hopefully see it out to retirement which isn’t too far away. But I’ve got a few more years. But I love it and I’ve got a very, very good crew and my family.

Q: And how do you see the future of Doggett’s?

A: Doggett’s is less and less the big nemesis. This is my fear. The trouble with Doggett’s is that the licence changed. This is my belief, I know people disagree with me. I was Barge Master of the Watermen’s Company for five years. I fought very hard, extremely hard against everybody. At times I felt like the world was against me and the working men on the river were let down. And the problem was we done a five year apprenticeship and at the end of the apprenticeship you’re over Doggett’s coat and badge. Well now they don’t do a five year apprenticeship; they do at Watermen’s Hall but for the BML, the Boat Master’s Licence, you can x amount of months and become qualified. So why would they do a five year apprenticeship when they can do it in two years? They won’t do it. Also, what was destroyed by the London Port Authority mainly, some quite horrible PLA captains thought that this was a closed shop, and they wanted to blast the doors open basically which was wrong. This is a
very open shop. At the moment you’ve got over a hundred apprentices here looking for work. I think the figure is over 130 but you can check that. They’re all shapes, colours, both genders. You’ve got girls. All nationalities. All different shapes, all sizes, all ages. All apprentices. And the biggest problem we have now is they will go to work and earn as much as they can as quickly as they can, I don’t blame them, rowing is extremely strenuous, unforgiving sport. You’re out in all weathers. It’s not like being in a gym or a keep fit class. You’re out in the snow, when it’s peeing down with rain, it doesn’t matter. You get out, you do the miles. Miles makes champions there is no substitute. Who really wants to do that? Not many. But the problem was these PLA captains wanted to break the system, they broke the system and it’s fragmented now. Unfortunately, the Watermen’s Company buckled, the MCA have taken over which they’re as green as grass they don’t know, but the apprenticeship system was laid up and at the end of your apprenticeship come Doggett’s. If you got no apprenticeship, no Doggett’s. That’s the answer. Who would? Who would do five years rather than two? For no reason at all. And that is the problem with the Watermen’s Company. They all should have said no. I’ve now got past Masters who sat round this very table we’re talking at who shouted me down all those years ago because they didn’t want their companies affected and now they say to me and I can quote them, they now say, “We should have said no.” Too late.

Q: Can you just explain what the NCA is?

A: MCA, Marine Coastguard Association and they’re the overall governing body. So my licence now is, I’m a Freeman of this Company, I’ve done a five year apprenticeship. It was originally a PLA licence, Port of London Authority licence, which allows me to be, to take passengers or cargo or both. I have both licences so I can flit between both trades. So I can be a waterman, I was a pleasure boat captain and now I’m a tug captain, cargo. The MCA quite simply, the PLA no longer rule us, the MCA do. So we didn’t really change anything in my eyes, we just changed our driving licence. That’s all we done. So instead of a PLA crest we got a MCA crest. Makes no difference to my life whatsoever and the biggest problem is that people are doing the short cut versions of the BML. That is the biggest problem is that they now don’t need to come through Watermen’s Hall which was the fault of Watermen’s Hall. They should have stood firm. We had a massive protest, we took ten thousand signatures to 10 Downing Street, ten thousand signatures, and Watermen’s Company didn’t support it and that fragmented it from that day on. Because the men working on the river noticed that the Watermen’s Company were not at that protest and in actual fact were encouraged, their boat owners, not [emphasis] to be at that protest, to keep their head down. You can’t hide. The men never forgive them for it.

Q: How important is it to you that Doggett’s keeps on being raced?
A: We have a legacy, we have a legacy. We have the greatest race on the planet that goes through the greatest city in the world. We have the best race on the planet. And we don't need to buy watches, bribes, nothing that scarlet uniform is incredible and I think it's insanity that people don't want to compete. And all we need to do is get all the apprentices together, 130 of them, this year we got a two horse race. I've never known that in my lifetime. And, but I will say it's not, it's not, I think Kenny Everest who was the former barge master in the fifties raced two, two. It was just him and another. So it's not, not the first time but I had heats my year, we was all busting, every single boy I got apprenticed with wanted to win Doggett's. Every single one of us wanted, and deserved, to win it. They deserved to win it. And the education now with the apprentices unfortunately, 'cause I'm old I can say it, is it's too easy to play games on your phone, it's too easy for internet. Get off your backsides, get in a rowing club, start working hard. There doesn't, no enticements, we just need to educate the apprentices all over again and make them passionate. It's all there for them. Simon McCarthy who is the past Master, is a Great Britain coach, is a Doggett's winner in himself and he's put himself on the line and I respect him immensely for it. I know it's part of his idea about being a part of the Thames Festival which, if I'm being honest, I don't agree with because I think Doggett's is a national treasure. It should be raced on August the first which is when it was set up. It should be raced at midday, ebb or flood, which is how it was set up. Each time you come away from the original thing of Thomas Doggett you have diluted it. And that's one of the big problems. Too many distractions, get back to what it was, work hard. Toughest man wins or girl. Trust me, I know Katie Saunders very, very well, she's beautiful, lives in India now, she's incredible character. She would have been the first woman Doggett's winner but she come up against some amazing people. I mean, I think Christian Bullice raced her and he was the world junior champion. Not many people could beat him. He was the gold medallist. So, poor Katie come up against but she would have beat many people. She was incredibly good sculler. There will be a woman. There will. I'll relish it.

Q: Maybe, maybe Kenny Dwan's grandchildren?

A: Yeah, yeah. If my daughter had rowed she would have won it. She was a good sculler but she went to Cambridge.

Q: Is there anything else you want to talk about that we haven't gone over?

A: No, I think, I'd like to finish on a positive. I know we've only got two this year but every great race has its ebbs and floods and long may it prosper. I think this trying to open it to all will finish Doggett's. You know, I love the Fishmonger's Company, they're very generous and I've
always felt very at home there, but this theory that you have to have seats have created pressures that have worked against it. And it’s like if you tell someone to do something they do the opposite. So, really we should stand by the race and the legacy that Thomas Doggett left. The idea, and I’ve always agreed, it should be August the first. Don’t mess around with it. And if it’s at midday, midday it is. So if it’s low water, tough luck, get on with it. If it’s against the tide, tough luck, so what. We’ve had Doggett’s winner’s race over the tide. I think the year of Daniel Arnold, which I think that was the year before my son, it was 2010 was the roughest I’d ever seen, ever seen. It was just white water from start to finish. I mean like mini tsunamis he raced. It was incredible, 35 minutes right. On a 20 ten minutes slower just surviving in a boat. Incredible. We just got on with it. We just--. It’s never been called off. Just get on with it, stop messing around with this amazing race. This should carry on forever.

Q: Thanks Gary.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT – 01:06:05]