Q: This is an oral history interview with?

A: Michael Phelps.

Q: By Nicole Beauchamp, on the 31st of August, 2018. Also present are?

Q2: Eva Tausig from Thames Festival Trust.

Q: The interview is taking place in Twickenham as part of the Thames Festival Trust, ‘The World’s Oldest Boat Race’, Oral History Project. Please could you state your full name?

A: Michael Richard Phelps.

Q: And what's your date of birth?

A: The 19th of January 1932.

Q: Whereabouts were you born?

A: I was born in West Kensington, in Turneville Road. My grandmother’s house.

Q: Okay. And what are your parent’s names?

A: My father was called Richard William Phelps, and my mother was Daisy, I don’t know if she had a second name, Daisy O’Connell.
Q: Daisy O’Connell. And what were their professions?

A: My father was a boat builder and a waterman, and my mother was a dressmaker.

Q: Whereabouts did you go to school?

A: I first went to school, erm, it’s St. Marks in, I guess it was in Chelsea. I then came to Putney and I went to St. Marys, and I was at St. Marys when war broke out in 1939 when all schools closed down. I went to live with an aunt for a while in Sussex by the sea. She was a very wealthy aunt, which was lovely. And I went to a useless little school there, until I came back to London when I was about nine, or eight or nine, I can’t remember. And I went to All Saints School in Putney. And then not long after that I, I had really such a poor education. I mean the one thing I did have I could, my mother had taught me to read when I was very young, so I read a lot. And in those days you didn’t have television, so you spent a lot of time in Putney Library, and I used to love going through encyclopaedias and things. So I wasFunnyly quite knowledgeable although I was badly educated. And in some superb way I managed to get into Latymer School in Hammersmith, which was an excellent school, and I stayed there till I was 18, and then I went into the army in 1950, ‘51. And then that was my last school because I stayed in-- do you want me to talk about the army? I was in the army, it was National Service, you had to do it, and I had a very good National Service, I served, I actually had active service in the war in Malaya, which I got a campaign medal for. And also because I worked with the African troops. So never having been outside of England I travelled to West Africa and East Africa, and I then got travelled off to Malaya, and really, you know it was amazing. So that’s my education. I had a place at Cambridge with Fitzwilliam House College, and I decided not to take it because I was earning in the army £520 a year as an officer. My father was earning about £320 a year and I thought, why I want to go to bloody university, it’s ridiculous, I don’t really want to go. I always wanted to be a teacher and a rowing coach, but. So I didn’t go to Cambridge, and after lots of interviews through the Public Schools Appointments Board I got a job with British Petroleum, and I stayed with them for my career.

Q: Going back to Latymer, what sort of things were you interested in? What subjects?

A: Well rowing of course. And in fact I was captain of boats in 1950, and our crew came second in the schools head of the river, which was good. We never actually rowed at Henley that was always something which was not allowed because the school, it was a big thing to do. And don’t forget war was just only over. And I suppose the things I was most interested in was,
well apart from rowing and apart from being friends, was really English and history, which I enjoyed enormously, and to some extent geography, although not so much. And just being part of the--, it always had a great, something called The Guild, which was a sort of theatre background, you know you went and played things, and I loved doing that. And I think I was very lucky to be at that school 'cause it was a very good school. And I just enjoyed every minute of it. But again, it was interesting because it was a wide-ranging school of quite well off middle class boys, right down to people like me. And of course in those days’ scholarships if you won, I didn’t win a scholarship, but a lot were scholarship boys who were just ordinary working class boys. But the Headmaster was brilliant, and everybody was equal, it didn’t matter where you came from. And also, I think the other thing he taught us was forgiveness because when the war ended he said we’re going to adopt a German school, we must not hate the Germans, we’ve got to learn to love them. And that was really something, which was very stuck in my mind for the rest of my days really. However much you’re offended by something you should face up to it that you’ve got to get through this. So I think I was very lucky to go to Latymer, and I think I had a very, an excellent education. The only difficulty sometimes, not difficulty, but just a slight embarrassment when some of the middle class boys would say come and have tea with me, or that sort of thing. And they were jolly nice houses and things, like my mother’s family would have had. And you say, come and have tea with me, and I know some of the boys were really quite shocked by our house ‘cause it still had one tap and that was it, you know. It was really--, but now in Ashlone Road, those houses they put roofs on and they’re selling for just under a million. Isn’t it--,

Q: What a difference.

A: I'm sorry, it's nothing to do, it's just absolutely barmy.

Q: [Laughs].

A: Yeah, so that was Latymer. Then did I regret not going to university? Looking back I suppose I do a bit, I should have probably have done it, but it just seemed to me that I was going to have to stand on my own two feet so I’d better start doing it now.

Q: Mm. It’s a question priorities at the time isn’t it?

A: Yes, yes. And I couldn’t see why my father ‘cause certainly he wouldn’t have been able to afford to subsidise me at all, and I just thought, no I’ll--, and I don’t regret not doing it now. In
a little way I do because my son went to university and got a blue, and it was a different world for him. But I just feel that I didn't miss much because my career in BP was so interesting, and I was very lucky. When I was at BP they used to have a graduate intake, and they'd also say to certain people at the graduate age, would you want to take this exam? And if you do as well as the graduates you can come onto the, you know the induction scheme for graduates, which I managed to get onto. So in a backdoor way I was always treated as a graduate in BP. But I do recognise that it probably would have been better to have gone to university, but you know. And also rowing, that's another story that when I first went to BP and I got a job in whatever department it was, the number two in that department who was quite important, a man called John Hart, said to me something about are you anything to do with the rowing family? And I said, “Yes.” And he said, “Oh, who’s your father?” I said, he said, “Oh my goodness,” he said, “I was at Westminster School and I was mad about rowing.” And he'd been a prisoner of war for the Japanese for most of the war, and he'd been, just before he'd been at Westminster just before the war. So all those names of those boys, you know I sort of vaguely knew. And I'm sure it was John Hart who pushed my name forward for the graduate thing. And that happened so often, even when I was going after my, erm, when I was in training to be an officer. Your passing out thing you were interviewed by various people, and your last one was an old Brigadier, and this Brigadier said, “Anything to do with the rowing family?” And I said, “Yes, my father is Dick Phelps.” He said, “I know Dick so well. What a wonderful family it is, and great history. Oh well, I'm sure you’re going to do.” And I thought, you know, again, it's only afterwards you think these little bits are sort of amazing, we've got family connections. And it's not like it was an okay yah family in the church or something, it was a working class family called the Phelps. Who in their way were aristocrats of the--,
A: The watermen, if you see what I mean.

Q: Yes. Yeah. Let's focus for a moment on your family's connections to the river. Because you come from quite a famous family this interview is going to be listened to by all sorts of people who know rowing history and don't know rowing history, so could you talk about your family for a little bit?

A: Well they were essentially, and I think Maurice would tell you, you can virtually trace it back quite a long way, certainly 16th century, probably before then. I think he lost the trace, he couldn't get much further back than that. But they've always been watermen. And you could say how boring that was, but you've got to-- I think one has to remember that transport was on the water mainly. So that was quite big. Moving goods around was on the water. It wasn't just rowing, it was. So you can see how a son, you know you probably had a bit of a river, which you had got, you know your father or your grandfather, or your great, great grandfather would have used, and nobody else would pinch it for you for rowing people around and taking people up and down. And that would be passed on. Very un-ambition, nobody wanted to be a prime minister or, you know they just followed in their father's footsteps. And that really went on until my generation, I guess. Bozzy Phelps, who was my father's uncle, no he was my father's cousin, and he was my grandfather's nephew, he was Queen, Kings Barge Master. But the story is that my grandfather Charles, who was, obviously, a great character, and also a very good rowing coach, would always say, 'cause Bozzy was successful, and he really started a business. Say, "Yeah, lovely man, Bozzy, lovely boy, but he never won Doggett's. [Laughter]. That was a downer, you know you had to win. And my grandmother on my father's side she came from a rowing family, or watermen's family, which were called the Brookes. You don't hear much about them now. And she was a tough and lovely lady because my grandfather did nothing but row, it was just rowing all the time, and she had all those boys and two girls, and brought them all up. And in fact I said to my cousin Frances, who is now 97, I said, "It's odd," I said, "Grandma used to seem to have a baby every year and suddenly there's a two year gap, I wonder what happened?" She said, "Grandpa was coaching in Germany." [Laughter]. So I mean it was just, rowing was it, you know. And so when we moved to Putney, to Ashlone Road, I mean I would go down on my three-wheel bike and go and sort of be with my father, and pottering around the river and all that sort of thing. And he taught me to scull when I was quite young. But I suppose, my mother was determined that I wasn't going to go on the river, she wasn't going to just-- she was quite a proud person. My father was a boatman to Thames in 1932, the year I was born. And Thames was a lovely place, but you'd never go into the club without being asked. And when your mother and your father were just, not treated badly, they were treated well, but they were treated as servants. My father accepted that he knew his place in society that these were the gentlemen and he
was not. But my mother never accepted that. And I can't say, looking back on it, I blame her. And she hated going down to Thames. She hated going to Henley because what did you do? You weren't allowed into the enclosures 'cause you were the watermen, you just sat outside by the tents. It's so changed now, I can't believe it. But can I just push on a bit because I want to just say--,

Q: Yes, do.

A: Something that happened at Thames. When I was about 14 Thames had a very old Victorian secretary who said to me, “Michael, would you like to join Thames Rowing Club?” And I would never do anything without asking my father, I said, “Well, I have to ask my father.” I mean this was such a shock to the system, you know. And my father said, “No, I don’t think you should.” I said, “Fine. Okay, right.” And then about two years later Peter Kirkpatrick, who was captain, and again at Cambridge, and Blue, and everything, a lovely man, said to me, “Michael, we’d love you to join Thames. Would you like to join us?” ‘Cause I was rowing at Latymer then and everything, so, and I was sculling and things. And again I asked my father, and my father said, “If you want to you can, but it's your decision, you've got to do it.” So I said, “Yes, I do.”

Q: And what do you think had changed in those few years? Do you think society was beginning to--,

A: The war.

Q: Yes.

A: Yeah I think that sort of evened it out a bit. And I think, erm, the attitude of some of the--, I mean some of the Thames guys. A lot of them were not happy I was joining. I mean I heard a whisper in the bar saying, “God, I mean the bloody boatman’s son is allowed to join, is it worth joining this club?” You know. But the other thing that threw me, I was delighted, I was very pleased about it. And also I was going to a good school, I was going to what was virtually a public school, which shouldn't help, I know, but always does. But, erm, my family, I just know my Uncle Tom and others thought I was getting above myself.

Q: Mm.
A: It's extraordinary, I mean I think even Edwin, who had a good boat building business thought he's getting above himself. And I know that and I felt that very deeply, but I thought, what do you do, you know you've just got to live with it.

Q: Sometimes the strongest prejudice comes from our own families.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: [Laughs].

A: So it was--, that was almost a period of sea change, and I think that you know--,

Q: What kind of, how old were you at this time?

A: Well when I joined--,

Q: Mid-teens?

A: When I was asked I was 16.

Q: Okay.

A: Which was quite young really. But I was rowing at Latymer and I was sculling. I was sculling from Thames. And Jack Beresford, who is the subject of that painting up there, I was using one of the boa--, and Jack Beresford is one of the great scullers of all time, and a, you know gentleman, [laughs]. And he, I was allowed to use his boat, erm, one of his old sculling boats, which was lovely. And when I met him years, years later when he was quite old, in a party at Thames, I said, "I always must thank you for Latymer use your boat." He called it, erm, Bozz's Apple 'cause it was built by Bozzy Phelps. And he said, "Oh that was the best boat I ever had. Whatever happened to it?" I said, "I don't know, it's still here somewhere." He said, "Oh you've reminded me, I must get it back, I must get it back." But he was, although they were aristocrats, I remember winning a race at Putney, one of the regattas and he came down to the shore when we were coming in, I was in an eight, and he said, "You rowed really well."
And God, your father must be so proud of you.” Whether he meant it or not, but it's the fact that he said it, and you know you just felt, 'cause Jack Beresford was like you might have an Olympic star today, he won four Olympic medals, and until that time he'd won more than anybody. So it was changing a bit. And what never changed, my father and his brothers who were boatmen were never, were held in great esteem. It was just, there was this just, still this slight hangover of. And a lot of the guys in Thames, when you think about it, a lot of them were very sort of aristocratic, which was fine, but they were just really ordinary mortals who'd happened to be not working with their hands. So it had to change, and it did change. I think, and of course Henley had to change. And Henley did change as well. And the first, I suppose the first working class crew that rowed at Henley, I may be wrong about this, were the Australian police came over and they said you can't row 'cause you're not gentlemen. And that was a total disaster. I can't remember what year that was. But, [clears throat], it's one of the, you know the working class boatmen’s crews, watermen, what's that club called?

Q: Poplar and Blackwall.

A: Pop-- there was another club as well, and they rowed at Henley. And they were coached by Jack Beresford’s father. And they did well. That was all beginning to break up. And it was also beginning to break up, I do remember again, when I was about probably 16 or 17 again, Freddie Page who was, erm, a rowing master at St. Pauls, and who also was a member of Thames, and was the Secretary of Thames, and sort of not aristocrat, but upper classes, a man of few words. I was at Henley walking past the stewards and he said, “Oh Michael, have you got a badge for getting into the stewards?” I said, “No I haven't sir.” And he said, “Well look I've got a spare one here,” you know. And I thought, I can't get in there. I mean even at that age I thought it's not for me to go in there. And I look back and think, God I was quite well brought up to know my place.

My mother hated going to Henley, she would never go there, she stopped going there. And it's extraordinary, erm, I was in a pub. I don't know if you know that pub in Putney, no you probably don't. And I was with one of my friends who's sadly now died, a Thames man and we were having a drink. Another guy came in and he said to me, “Are you involved in the rowing world?” And Tim said something, which was really quite super, he said, “Yes, he is in the rowing world, his father won Doggett’s, and his son is a steward at Henley.” Now make that leap, you wouldn’t, that is a leap.

Q: In one family.
A: That is something, which you think--,

Q: One generation.

A: Wow, things have changed. Yeah. It was a very significant remark. I'd not thought of it in that before, but that's what it was, truly, yeah.

Q: It encapsulates everything.

A: I still think, I don't think there is any, you know the river now we're all free and we're all equal to each other, but I don't think in those days, I'm not sure my father ever resented it. But he was held in great esteem. But just, I'm sorry, I'm side tracking a bit, but to go onto this theme 'cause it has been a big theme in my life.

Q: Yeah.

A: Although. When, erm, [clears throat], Richard was rowing for Leander, my son was rowing for Leander, and it virtually would have been the Great Britain boat, my father had been invited to-, 'cause he went to the Olympics in '32, '36, and '48, erm, with the crews, you know he was part of the Olympic team and he was also very much part of the team. You know looking after the crews and looking after the boats, and giving them advice and things. And he was up there for, I suppose he was probably in his 80s, and they were having a reunion dinner at Leander for the 48, I can't remember. Anyway, and he was going up, and he was going on there. And he was by that time in a wheelchair, and you know he was still mentally absolutely fine. [Telephone ringing]. Let that just go. Er, mentally fine, but he was getting a bit old, he was probably in his 90s or something. And he said, "Oh, I don't think I'll be able to get up the stairs." And my son said, "Oh, don't worry, I'll get some of the boys, we can carry you up." All Leander. And my father said, "I never thought I'd be carried upstairs by Leander gentlemen into this club, which I wasn't allowed to come into in my youth." And I thought that was, you know in a way another judgement of how things were changing. Well had changed dramatically, you know. Sorry, where have we got to?
Q: Oh that's all right, those are very interesting stories. Could you talk for a little bit about how many members of your family won Doggett's, and their kind of relationship with the Olympics, which you've just touched on a little bit.

A: Yeah. [Clears throat]. Well the first victory, I think was 1860. Erm, I don't know how--, I think it's seven have won. 1860 was the first one. And then there was another one not long after that. And then my grandfather won.

Q: That was Charlie?

A: That was Charlie. And then, erm, of his sons, his eldest son didn't win, which was sad, and that was Harry, Morris' father won. Morris' father Tom. And then, who resented me joining Thames. And then, erm, my father, Dick. Then Jack. Er, and then my cousin. The other boys didn't win. I think all together about seven or eight. I could easily look up the records and add them up, but it's that. I mean it's not, it was more than anybody, but and now I think the Dwan's, I don't know how many they got. In this century. I think the Dwan's are the Phelps' of the last two centuries, if you see what I mean. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. But they all worked on the river, except for one, Charlie, who left and he was an engineer at, erm, working with Gillette razor blades. And as my mother said, "The only one who's got a car and a lovely house is--, all the other useless ones stayed on this bloody river." My mother was very anti the river, and she was determined I wasn't going to be apprenticed. Which was, I can understand it, you know.

Q: What were your first experiences on the river?

A: My first experiences on the river were, erm, well helping my father. Well when I was very young, I suppose when, again probably six or seven my uncle Ted used to drive the coaches, one of the coaches, just as a, you know he just did it. And I remember this distinctly, one day I was, you know was standing around and the boats going out and, erm, my uncle said, "Do you want to come on board?" And I said, for a ride, and I said, "Yeah." He said, "Hold on, I'll have to ask, you know the coach whoever it was, the gentleman." And he said, "Yes come on." So he got me on the launch. And it was exciting, I do remember that. But I remember as we got off, well my uncle said, "Now don’t forget to thank the gentleman for allowing you to be on this boat." And I said, "Thank you," whatever his name was, I can't remember, and we got off the boat. He said, "Just come up to the boathouse, just stay, you can't come upstairs, but," and he bought me down a bar of chocolate. So there was a sort of goodness in him. But I look back at that and think, yes, you know I'd never have thought of going upstairs into the club.
And I wouldn’t have addressed a word to him. But I thought it was my uncle saying, “Thank the gentleman.”

Q: Mm.

A: You just knew your place. Do you know I don’t think it ever worried me at all. It never sort of made me feel resentful, it was just that's what it was. And I think Latymer was such a lovely, easy going school when I got to it, you know it didn’t matter who you were, you were all equal. And that was the headmaster’s, you know whether you came from a working class background or, you know upper class background it didn’t matter.

Q: Mm. Could you talk about the distinction between kind of gentlemen amateurs and working class professionals? ’Cause you were just on the cusp of that change weren’t you?

A: Yes. Yes I think I was, I was on the cusp of that change. I suppose had I not rowed at Latymer I might never have been asked by Thames to row. But Latymer was a very well respected school and we rowed to quite a good standard. I think that it was breaking down when I was getting older, but it broke down, I think when working class boys were rowing at Henley. That was really when it all happened. I think the war broke it down because the war broke down, you know temples of poor and rich, and everything, we were all in it together. And of course, you've just got to remember, and you wouldn't remember, but the enormous breakthrough of a Labour government post war, which did an awful lot of good. It was a fantastic change, it just made people realise the world was changing. And I think the war as well, because I think ordinary soldiers and officers, the First World War was very much, you know the soldiers and the officers were slightly different, you know. I think there was much more of a togetherness in the Second World War, in a much more--,

Q: It eroded the social divisions.

A: Yeah. You know we were all in it together, and you know we stood all together. But I think a lot of the Phelps family, and maybe a lot of the watermen, there didn’t seem to be any resentment that they had to be, call their groups of crews sir and everything like that. I don’t feel there was any resentment. And I think, but I did feel very much so that when I joined Thames just like my Uncle Tom, for instance, I know, and others really thought I was getting way beyond my social ambitions.
Q: Too big for your boots.

A: Too big for my boots.

Q: [Laughs].

A: Yeah.

Q: And the distinction was if you worked with your hands then you weren’t allowed into certain places?

A: That was it, yes. I mean the distinction wasn’t, I mean my father would tell you, I mean he moved around Thames all his life, and his older [inaudible 0:31:42] I mean he was always at the dinners and things. As, you know, Dick Phelps. And also he, erm, you know when he was older he was revered, I mean there was no question about it. I mean much respected, but always had been. Jack Beresford and he would get on like a house on fire. My cousin Eric, who was a very good coach, one of Bozz’s sons, you know he would, they were all respected in that sense. I don’t, I mean and he was allowed in the club, but he would always ask permission if he could come up, and they’d say, “Yes, come up,” or they’d say, “Come up and have a drink,” or something like that. So I don’t think he felt it, I think it’s my mother who felt it much more because she tended to have a bit more pride, and she wasn’t going to, she said, “I don’t see why I should be treated as a bloody servant,” and I remember her saying that. So she was the one who-- and I think she was the one who probably would not have wanted me to row, erm, I think she’d have delighted if I didn’t row, but I did.

Q: It’s quite funny, when we interviewed Sean Collins, his parents said don’t work on the river, you’ll never make a living at it, and of course he now runs Thames Clippers.

A: Yeah. Yes.

Q: So he’s made a very nice living on it, but sometimes family’s expectations--,

A: Yes.
Q: And desires for their children are different.

A: Yeah.

Q: What are some of your favourite stories about your father because he was such a personality?

A: Erm, yeah, that's good, I'm, you know going to forget any of them. But he was always able to tell a really brilliant story. You want to ask Maurice about them because Maurice used to go to the pub with him and collect them all, and there'd be fantastic stories. Now I'm going to actually dry up now because I can't now remember.

Q: [Laughs].

A: But he'd go on and on, and you just kept quiet and listened. Oh well, I suppose going back to his youth, erm, he was one of the younger brothers and he fell down and broke his, oh I don't know what part of the body he'd broken, and he was not really all that well, and he had to be taken to hospital in Fulham. And his mother, I mean I think back on it, you know it was awful, used to have to carry him, you know it was a penny for a bus ride, a bit more than you had in your pocket. Anyway, he was always there for somehow the weakling, but give him his due he fought back and he, well some of his stories I can tell you, he used to work at a, you know go to people's houses on Upper Richmond Road, which was the rich people, just to earn a few pennies clearing up things. And it must have been a bit further away and he was kept late, some old admiral, I can't remember who it was, and he said, "Oh look, young Phelps, you ought to go home 'cause we've kept you later than we should. Look here's tuppence so you can get a bus." And my father was probably coming back from, I don't know somewhere on Putney Hill or something, and he said, "Oh, I'm not going to spend tuppence on a bus," so he walked home. And he gave it to his mother, he said, "Look, they gave me my sixpence I got from my work and he gave me an extra tuppence for the bus fare, you'd better have it." And she said, "Well you keep a penny. Keep a penny of it." But I mean you just can't, you know these days this is what makes me so mad when people say, "Oh you should give up all these drinks, kids are drinking too much in their lunch hour and having all these. Where's all the money coming from?" Well the next thing you're saying, we do have a lot of poor, and I think it's terrible we do have a lot of poor people here, but you can't be poor and be able to do that. My pocket money when I was allowed to have pocket money was something like sixpence a week, and you never spent it. And even when I went to Latymer when they used to have in
the break you could buy buns and things I never bought them because I never had enough money.

Q: And what would they have cost?

A: Oh, I suppose tuppence or something.

Q: Right.

A: You know tuppence or three pence, I don’t know I can’t remember. I’m going back now. A, I didn’t particularly want them because I was brought up very frugally with food, you know. And you’d gone through the war so you weren’t all that hungry.

Q: And the approach to food was very different then wasn’t it?

A: Yeah, but I mean, but I’d never had enough money in my pocket to buy one, so. I’m trying to think are there stories of my father. I mean fantastic stories, okay, yes another story, when he was in the ’32 Olympics they were all invited out by the Americans to listen to some show, and it was a whole load of, [laughs], a whole load of little girls and boys singing, which you know they all thought was awful. Jack Beresford as well. And my cousin Eric was also out there ’cause my cousin, or my second cousin Edwin was rowing for the world championship, and so he was coaching him. And Eric managed to get out and get somebody to go in and send a message to my father that he was wanted urgently outside. And he was sitting next to Jack Beresford who by this time was going mad with all this awful children singing. And my father left and when Jack Beresford said, “How did you get out?” He said, “Well Eric sent me a message that I was wanted urgently.” He said, “Why the bloody hell didn’t you send one to me? We had that awful hour of it. God just terrible.” But so he, also it definitely shows you that he was part of the Thames team, although he might have been the boatman he was part of the Thames team. And they not just respected him for what he was doing, but they enjoyed his company as well. And he was an incredibly good storyteller, as they all were. As Maurice would tell you, when the Phelps brothers got together it was story after story ’cause the other one would want to beat the other one, you know, and always fantastic stories. I can’t remember so many of them, you know. You’d just stand there as a little boy listening to them all.

Q: Be in awe with them all.
A: Yeah.

Q: [Laughs].

A: Yeah.

Q: Can you talk about the role of, so, obviously, they competed in Doggett’s and races like that and there was a family wager? There was a race?

A: Yes, there's a picture there.

Q: Mm.

A: I think my grandfather said, “Okay, if you all won Doggett’s we'll have an annual race.” You know and the older you are, you know you got to--.

Q: Got a handicap.

A: Allowed a bit of a handicap. That's the word I'm looking for, a handicap. And I didn't really hear about that until, oh, some years ago, but then I found that picture and I thought, gosh that's fantastic. 'Cause my grandfather was just another fanatic about rowing and the river, I think all his life. And I think my grandmother didn’t mind it. I mean they lived in, they had a very small little cottage, which was then pulled down and they built very nice flats, which were council flats. So she’s moved into that and it was very smart, right opposite St. Marys School where I used to go. And when I used to come out on Friday afternoons she’d always call me over and drop me down, you know a little bit of paper, a thruppy--, well you don’t have them now, a little threepenny piece, which was silver. I think now if I'd have saved all those threepenny pieces they’re probably quite valuable 'cause they don’t have little threepenny pieces. She was all right, I mean she was quite a tough old cookie, but she was quite, yeah, she was okay. Unfortunately the flats were bombed and she had to be evacuated out, and she came and stayed with us for a bit. And on that night they were all bombed, and I look back on this and think it's extraordinary. And another lady came with two little girls about my age I suppose. I was going to Latymer, so I was probably about 12 ish, 11, 12 ish. And they had to stay the night and my mother put me in the double bed, which the only double bed in
the house was where they slept normally, with these two little girls, which I thought was absolutely awful, [laughs]. And then my mother said, “Look, their sister has been killed in the bombing, don’t tell them that, but I think I ought to tell you.” And I thought, you know just another—, I didn’t really think too much of it, but I think about it now and it’s awful. And when I think about it, the next day all the bombing that was going on in Putney, I just got on my cycle and cycled to school. You know you didn’t say, well you can’t go to school today because. I look back on it and think that’s why I think one’s just so terribly stoic about things, it just was that.

Q: You weren’t evacuated then?

A: Yeah. Sorry?

Q: Were you evacuated during the war?

A: No I wasn’t.

Q: No you weren’t.

A: I never was evacuated. My sister was evacuated. My sister was evacuated and then at the age, erm, just at the beginning of the war when she came out of school she worked for a bit and then she went into the Wrens, which was the Women’s Royal Naval Service, and spent the rest of the war in the Wrens.

Q: Just thinking about your father, how would you like him to be remembered?

A: How would I like him to be remembered? I think I could say as he is remembered now. As a really outstanding professional in what he did, lovely personality, did know his place, but that was fine, and got on with everybody really well.

Q: What legacy do you think your family has left?
A: Well I think--. I don't think it--. I think it's left a legacy, but no more than any other waterman. The one thing I would say that they all reckoned they were equal as watermen. And there was rivalry, of course there was rivalry 'cause Doggett's was the whole rivalry thing. But everybody would--. if a boat had to be, you know you were a boatman at the top of the London Rowing Club or something and you were trying to turn an eight over the riverside whistle, which I shall not be able to do now, you do, and they'd all go and help each other. Same as at Henley, they'd all be, you know they weren't allowed in the steward's enclosure, but they'd all rally around each other to get crews out and get the blades done. And I do remember one lovely story that my uncle Bill, who was the younger one, who didn't win Doggett's. He was then at Bryanston School, and he was so irresponsible, he would always go off to the pub at the wrong time, and then having had one he'd have two, and before. And Bryanston were due to go in the water for the Princess Elizabeth Cup and they said, "Where's Bill? He's bloody well gone." And so all the brothers said, "Right," and the four brothers there said, "Look, sorry," you know to the rowing master, "Sorry sir, I'm afraid Bill's not all that well, but don't worry we'll get the crew out." And so they got the crew out no problem. Then Bill reeled back and said, "Am I too late?" And they said, "Yes, you bloody lazy little sod," you know. [Laughter]. But they worked together as a team, and I would say they got on. That doesn't answer your question, you did ask me that.

Q: No, it does, it does answer it.

A: And it would go all those watermen would have helped each other. That thing I showed you with all the watermen, I mean if somebody needed help or somebody was ill or something they'd all rally around. It was great, great spirit. There wasn't rivalry in that sense. If they were rowing on the water they would have great rivalry, yeah.

Q: Mm. My last question is just about your father's funeral, which was a real brining together of the entire community.

A: Yes, it was. It was probably the last of the line in a way. And erm, well Chris Dodd sort of was great. And Thames Rowing Club are absolutely great. And it was Peter Kirkpatrick 'cause I'd said, I assumed it would be a, you know we wouldn't do all that we did do. And the waterman's company also. And all the up river boys, you know I think they did like my father because I think he, when they were coming on and being amateurs he treated them like gentlemen, but made sure they were looked after. And it was an amazing, er--. And of course my son, erm, I think my son then had just, had he won a blue? I can't remember. Was he a blue? So he was very involved. And Peter Kirkpatrick. And the President of Thames was, erm, Alan Burrough, who'd got a blue in 1938. He'd lost a leg in the war. Was a great
Thames man, and a charming man, but a multimillionaire and they owned Beefeater Gin and everything. And his brother had been killed in the war. And Alan Burrough also was very keen that it should be a big occasion. And in fact, you know we arranged all the catering and when I came to pay the bill, erm, they said, “Oh you don’t have to pay it.” And I said, “Well, I think I should.” They said, “Don’t worry, Alan Burrough has just said everything’s on his account.” So why fight with a millionaire? [Laughter]. So we accepted. But that's how much he was revered. And they had, erm, I think they had a little plaque put up for him, which I don’t know if it’s still up in Thames, I haven't really noticed. But Alan Burrough was an absolute charming man, and I remember once, he would come along to watch the crews out training when my son was in the Cambridge boat. And he said to him, “Hello Richard,” And I said, “No.” He said, “Oh, I'm so sorry.” “It's Michael,” I said, “Don’t worry. If I’m always remembered it’s son of Dick, father of Richard, everybody will remember who I am.” I’ve never actually existed in my own little world of Michael. I was going to show you that-- well I must show you before you go of Richard’s, the boat race picture, which is nice. So that I mean he, my father adored Richard and they got on very well, and he taught him to scull, and of course he followed his rowing career with absolute, you know just all eating it sort of thing. And in fact he would be enormously happy now, I know if he knew about my grandchildren rowing. I mean Thomas and James, and Cissy was rowing, but she's given it up. But my daughter, youngest daughter, Annabel’s daughters are twins and they're now coming up for 16, and their father isn't a rower, he's a football. And they were playing football and they said to him, “Daddy, we don’t want to play football anymore.” And he said, “Okay, fine, but you’ve got to do a sport.” “Yes, we want to do rowing.” And he said, “Oh, bloody hell.” [Laughs]. And they're rowing and they're enjoying it enormously. They're rowing for the Fulham Reach. So somewhere in the genes it seems to come up. And my eldest granddaughter who is 27, lives in New Zealand, she rowed for school in New Zealand and was very good. But decided she was going to give up. So it's even gone to that.

Q: Well the legacy lives on.

A: The legacy lives on. Yes. But I, you know I guess it lives on for-- I don’t know what's going to happen after that generation, I won’t be around, thank God.

Q: Mm.

A: Have you got anything worthwhile?
Q: [laughs]. I have. I have. I was just going to Eva, do you have any questions you'd like to add in?

Q2: Maybe just, you mentioned before there was this waterman's charity that you had quite a lot of relationship with?

A: Well the Thomas Martyn Foundation, I think it was a charity, which was founded for watermen of Putney. And why it was founded I can't remember. And it's been going on since, what did we say? 17 something? And it was just clothes then. And it must have been a bonus for all those watermen 'cause none of them would have-- and it still goes on. I haven't got my glasses on, but you can read that that probably explains what it's all about.

Q: 1684, this cup says 1684 to 1984. Thomas Martyn endowed the school for the sons of watermen in Putney, 1718 to 1911. The charity is now an education trust assisting both the sons and daughters of licenced Thames watermen. And that's the Thomas Martyn Foundation.

A: Had I not been, had the government-- when I went to Latymer, I mean I got in, luckily, but I would have had to have paid fees, which my father could never have paid. But I suspect that Thomas Martyn, before I went, I mean I'd been told I was going to Latymer, you just do these things, [inaudible 0:59:15] don't know what you're doing and why you're doing it, you do what your parents tell you. And I guess that the Watermen School said if he gets a place at Latymer we will pay the fees. As it happened the 1944 Education Act, I went to Latymer in 1943, erm, and I can't remember the politician who brought it in, it was a conservative in the war time parliament, er, government. Anybody who earned less than whatever it was didn't have to pay school fees. And my father earned much less than that so I never had to pay a school fee at Latymer, it was paid for by the government. But I imagine that that might have covered it. But it still goes on. And of course there are not many watermen left in Putney now so they're extending it out to other watermen down the river. But you got, erm, well I think I said, you got clothes, you got, you know a new pair of shoes, I think it's once a year, and you know a coat or school uniform, or something, or shirts and socks. And the girls got similar. And you had to go to the same shops and things. I mean, you know you just took it all for granted, but it must have saved my parents an awful lot of money.

Q: That would have made a huge difference.
A: Yeah. Each year to have a set of decent clothing given to you. So that's all these little things. But I'm glad I've brought it, if you didn't know about it, I think it, you know another fantastic bit of the riverside. And now it's extending all the way down. I don't know what they're doing now, they do have an annual meeting, an annual service in the, not St. Marys, in All Saints. Not All Saints. St. Marys, Putney. Yeah. Which is where my father was christened and where he was buried from. Yes, have I bored you enough?

Q: [Laughs]. Do you have any other questions Eva?

Q2: No that's great. Thank you very much.

Q: And do you want to add anything? Is there anything that I haven't asked that you'd like to talk about?

A: No, I think it's terrific you're doing this because I do think that the River Thames is important. And I think the waterman, and not just the watermen, but all the people who worked on the Thames, [clears throat], made a major contribution. And it's just not just the Thames down here, it's the Thames everywhere really. But in London particularly I'd say. And it's amazing to me that there's still work to be done on the Thames. I suppose its different now, it's more in the entertainment business or the cruising business. And it has changed dramatically. I don't know, Doggett's you could say is beginning to be an [inaudible 0:01:01:56]. I hope it goes on. And I think it can be funded to go on. But there's going to come a time, and I think interesting enough it is worth saying, and it's worth thinking about that women were in Doggett's as you've represented in your part, your thing, which I thought was good, but it didn't really take on. Because not many girls do get apprenticed to the river. In the long run, one, I mean I, with luck will be dead, but in the next 50 years I guess Doggett's might be running out of steam.

Q: And it's trying to find ways of bringing more people into it isn't it? And having an interest.

A: And if you start saying, well it's not watermen it's sort of, I don't know, I don't know. Well maybe that maybe you could make it say, state it's another rowing event. Suddenly you have an event at Henley, which takes over Doggett's again, but it would be different I know. And it is only intended for watermen. In fact a story, which I must tell you, Bertie Green, who was my generation, and he followed in his father's generation. His father's nickname was Dripping Green, and I asked my father once, "Why was he always called Dripping?" He said, "Because
the family were so poor the only thing they could give the kids was a bit of bread of dripping.” Well you're not allowed to drink dripping now 'cause it kills you, but anyway, [laughs]. You know you can't believe the poorness there was in all of that. How my grandmother brought up all those kids and with a husband who was probably always on the river and not earning much money anyway 'cause as long as he was rowing he was happy. And probably down the pub when he was earning money. He met her in the Half Moon Hotel apparently when she was a barmaid, do that was nice. But dripping, [laughs], But Bertie Green, he followed in his father’s footsteps and he was boatman of one of the clubs along the river, and I can't exactly remember which one it was. He's a nice boy. We had grown apart because, you know education is terrible. He's a bit of a, “Hello, how are you doing?” And he would say, “I'm all right,” you know it wasn't much of a conversation ever with Bertie. He's a good sculler, and he won Doggett’s. So my generation he's the only one I know of us lot who have won Doggett’s. And Bertie’s son was a good sculler as well, and his son got beaten in Doggett’s by, erm, another famous rowing name, river name. But have gone upmarket because they, erm--, How can I forget it? Oh God, it's a double-barrelled name. The father was a, I think a Bradley. Well you don't really get many boatman's sons, and he wasn't, by this time they ran a--, Woodward-Fisher's, it's come back to me. Woodward-Fisher’s, whose early generations had a bit more oomph than the Phelps’ and started businesses, and quite big in, and rich. And Kenneth Woodward-Fisher I knew, he was a bit older than me. And yes, I suppose 'cause he's then said I could use his boat. And he was a lovely guy. And his son was at Radley. And his son rowed for Doggett’s and won, and beat Bertie’s son. And Bertie said, once you get Radley schoolboys rowing for Doggett’s that's the end, I don’t want anything more to Doggett’s, I'm never going to wear it again. And it was the end, but you see what's--,, and this is what my son wanted to do with, erm, my eldest grandson, who is a good sculler, he wanted him to row for Doggett's. I was all against it, and they said, “Oh well, you know he can just be attached to some of the watermen for a bit. And I thought, this is, I'm not going to say anything, I never interfere in my children what they want to do, I don't like this, I think it's wrong. And it was Thomas himself who said to me, “I don’t want to do it. I'm not going to be properly apprenticed in the watermen. It's the watermen’s race, I don’t think I should be in it.” And I said, “Thomas, your words are absolutely brilliant. Hang on to that don’t do it.” Because once you start--,, I mean you know the boy, Radley, of course was on the river in terms of the fact that he was father owned a bloody great bit of the Thames and everything. And they were a very old family. But he wasn’t really a waterman. He's probably a, you know a chartered account or even a barrister or something, or a gentleman of leisure. And I do think Bertie was right about that. But then that comes up in the other question, how long will Doggett’s go on for? But that is a big question, and I can't see it lasting more than another, I don't know, 50 years at the most. Without it having changed completely ’cause there's going to be fewer and fewer people on the river.

Q: To be determined.
A:   Yeah.

Q:   Well thank you very much for your time for the interview.

A:   Well I don't know if you've got anything.

Q:   [Laughs].

A:   I just wanted to show you some of these things....

[END OF RECORDING – 1:08:13]