Oral History interview with Arthur Collier
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Interviewer: Felicity Fitchard
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Q: This is it, yeah. Right, shall we begin? This is an oral history interview with Arthur Collier by Felicity Fitchard, in Isleworth on May 23rd 2017. Also present are Sonia Cooper and Bea Moyes. What is your full name?
A: Arthur Edwin Collier.

Q: Where were you born and brought up?
A: I was born in Isleworth, yes.

Q: And what did your parents do for a living?
A: Yeah, my father had been in two wars, the First World War and an officer in the Second World War, and now he always complained how roads are full of German And Japanese cars, so we won the war but we bought the peace, and it’s a fact, yeah, okay. Yeah, what did you ask me, sorry?
A: What did he do for a living? Did he work on the river?

Oh yeah, he worked for [Fivestone? – 1:16], there was a big factory on the [inaudible – 1:23] Road, and after the war, after the First World War, there was a shortage of work and he managed to get a job for [Fivestone? – 1:33], which was an American company building, making tyres. So he was in the, on the staff, yeah.

A: So he wasn’t a waterman?
No.

Q: No. Can you tell us about your early memories of the Thames?
A: I should say that my elder brother, Tony Collier who died about a year ago--,
Q: I’m sorry.

A: He was a Thames waterman and lighter man, and he was the person who apprenticed me. We do a seven year apprenticeship to do with navigation and radar and all kinds of things, lights obviously in night time because obviously works night and day, it doesn’t work just in the day time. And yeah, Tony apprenticed me, he was a fine man. And my other brother, I had another brother, Dom, who’s dead now, he was a lighter man. So there were two lighter men older than myself when I was apprenticed, yeah.

Q: And when did you start? When was that, when did you start as an apprentice?
A: Yeah, I was an apprentice in the 1950s, I can’t remember exactly when, in the early 1950s, and I did a seven year apprenticeship.
Q: And where did you do that?
A: On the Thames, yeah, all over. You’re expected to have knowledge of the Thames from Teddington, which is the end of the tide stems, as far down river as Sea Reach, [Ovens Buoy? – 3:17], Sea Reach. So you’ve got to—, the questions they ask you when you go for your examinations are anywhere. If you tend to live up river they will give you questions about down river, and for the down river [inaudible – 3:33] is mostly east enders. They would ask them questions about up river, Richmond, yeah, to catch them out, yeah.

Q: And which company were you apprenticed with?

A: Yeah, I was apprenticed with a company called Tough and Henderson, and they had their own barge yard, a barge yard at Teddington, which now has been sold and it’s now apartments, blocks of apartments, that was—, and they have been around for a couple of hundred years I think, Tough and Henderson, and the interesting thing about the company was that half their barges were wooden barges, yeah. After the war most firms got rid of all their wooden craft barges, lighters, and replaced them in steel. Tough and Henderson, having their own yard, bought half of them and they had some lovely wooden barges. Half their fleet was wooden and half their fleet was steel, and they had four steam tugs, yeah. So I got a good introduction to the lighter industry. Most of the firms were based in London, yeah.

Q: And during your apprenticeship, what skills were you trained in?

A: What skills was I? Yeah, well for the first two years of your apprenticeship you’re not allowed to do anything by yourself, you’re not a licensed lighterman, but you can go and assist. So I was sent to West India dock or Commercial dock to assist around a ship that was discharging cargo into lighters, and looked after by the guys. They put me on overtime to seven or eight at night, you know, so I remember one day the foreman said that I was earning as much money as some of the men in the job because of all the overtime they were booking [laughs]. ‘Cause every week a lighterman makes out a wage bill for five days or even seven days. Most work on a Sunday was on a rota system, you could go to work or you could refuse it. And on a Sunday it was one job, one job and done. So you could be sent to a ship, a charging cargo, you would get there, West India dock, Commercial dock, the Albert dock, you would go to see the clerk and tell him who you represented, which company, he would look at the manifest and he’d say, “Look lights, come and see me at 12 o’clock, we’ll look to see if we’re getting near to your cargo.” You’d go to him at 12 o’clock, he’d say, “You can slide, see you Monday.” You [weren’t paid? – 6:48] but they wouldn’t get to your cargo because they were breaking into cargo through the ship, yeah, [stoppers? – 6:55], yeah. Do you know? I’ve even experienced in my time, I mean all dock workers hated policemen. I’ve seen a policeman come on a ship in London dock and look down the hole, they’d spot him, they’d all walk off the ship, strike, ‘til he go, he was put ashore. ‘Cause he was there to watch what they were pilfering, if they were pilfering. They weren’t going to be watched by policemen, but they were a very militant lot, yeah, London dockers, I admired them greatly.

Q: And were you treated well as an apprentice?

A: Yeah, I had, the first two years, yeah, the guys looked after me, the lightermen. And then finally after two years you go for a verbal examination and they ask you questions, as I say, ask me questions about down river, so I know my down river as well as up river. And then about the lights, you’ve got to know which ship’s approaching you with the lights, the way they’re displayed. And then if you pass the examination you’ve got your two years, you’ve got your first two years license and then you could load up to a certain tonnage, maybe up to 50 or 100 tonnes. There’s a limit to what you could do because of your knowledge, and then, but you could tow craft around anywhere, either a loaded barge or a light barge. And so you got lots of experience, and the next, then you did another five years of experience and then you received your freedom, freedom of the waterman’s company, you were a free man from your master. ‘Cause my brother was my master.

Q: Oh right! And where did you work after that then, after you had your freedom?

A: I worked for a company called Vokins. I went into the army, they put the—, they put lightermen along with fishermen and any workers around the coast, they put them into a special army
unit, which is neither army or navy, it’s half and half. It’s called the inland water transport—,
IWT in army language, and I did two years in the IWT.

Q: Was that before Vokins?

A: I went to Vokins a little while before I went into the army, and I think I was the last of the
[inaudible – 9:57], you know, the national service, I was the last lot, you know, and there you
go, I did two years in the inland water transport.

Q: So how did you change from working as a lighterman to owning a boatyard?

A: Well in the ‘60s and ‘70s the government decided to close all the docks and put all the cargo
on the road, that’s why the roads were congested. So all the barge work went, and the people
who really caused this change were the Americans, once again. They invented the container
ship, and instead of a ship coming into the port of London and taking five or seven days to
unload with dockers, dock workers, now ships dock in Tilbury, I think even they plan even
further down river, and they’re unloaded in half a day because they’re loaded with containers.
And of course the container fits a lorry, it doesn’t fit a barge. So barges, lightermen,
lighterage went, gone with the wind, went.

Q: Did you have to retrain in boat repair then?

A: Yeah, well I went ashore for a while. Most of the guys were going to the airport up here, but
they, when I went there they interviewed me and they made me a customs officer [laughs],
you know, I’d probably had a better education than most lightermen, and I worked in the
airport for six months for, in those days as you probably know, it was BOAC and BEA, two
separate companies. I worked for BOAC, and there was a particular job in the office that was
a not very pleasant job, it was a little bit complicated, and we took turns, all the clerks and
officers, doing this job. Anyway, I was given the job to do and I told the overseer that I’d done
the job two days ago and he said, “Well you’ve got to do it again.” So I said, “I’ve got to do
nothing again, I’m not doing it,” seen as though I’d just come out the docks with you know,
quite a militant lot. So then I was told that I would have to wait to see the overseer, you know,
with lots of gold braid and yeah, and after about 20 minutes I was called from my office to go
and see him. I went into the office, he carried on working whilst I stood there, I got out my
newspaper, my Daily Telegraph and read that. So he then made himself known that he would
speak to me, and then I was called over the desk, sat down. He first of all made a mistake by
calling me Collier, I told him, “Mr Collier, not Collier, Mr Collier please.” And he told me that I
didn’t have the best interest of BOAC at heart and they were going to sack me, and they’d be
sending over a notice to my office. I told them not to do it, that I would
rather leave the company, I couldn’t stand working in an office under those conditions, so I
left.

Q: So you left, and that’s when you--,

A: That’s when I bought a boat.

Q: Oh, you bought a boat, ah.

A: I bought a work boat and I bought a work boat, I’ve got the things here, and I advertised the
boat as a safety boat. And the first job I got was to stand by for six months at Hammersmith
Bridge, repainting the bridge. And the idea is you lay either upstream or downstream, so if
they fall off the bridge you pick them up.

Q: Right, so a safety boat in the sense of, for the workers on the bridge.

A: So I did that, and while I was at Hammersmith Bridge I got a phone call from British Rail, in
those days it was British Rail before they’d gone over to, like they’ve changed haven’t they?
They’re all private companies now. But British Rail wanted a safety boat at Blackfriars Bridge
for one year. Well I got the contract and in the event I was there eight years with that boat
because it went on and on, the job, they did it themselves, the workers, yeah. And I was there
eight years at Blackfriars Bridge, and that gave, earned me enough money. They were
working 24 hours round the clock, not with me, I apprenticed my eldest son, who’s nearly 60
now, Danny, he’s 57, 58, I employed him, some other lightermen I employed, because they
were working right round the clock, 24 hours, repairing the bridge, yeah.

Q: Could we just go back to Vokins, sorry? I should have asked you which
boats you had worked
on and who--,

A: Well each day I was allotted another barge, but each day, you were shifting barges, so each--,
in the evening you phone up the office and they tell you what to do the next day, be eight ‘o
clock at the Albert dock or eight ‘o clock Commercial dock, or eight ‘o clock at [inaudible –
15:22] or eight ‘o clock at Brentford, and you work all over the river. That’s why they call you
a journeyman lighterman, yeah. Vokins had about 150 lightermen.

Q: Right, sorry. And then you bought your own boatyard?

A: Well I didn’t buy the boatyard straight away, no. I got a, the safety boat, then I bought a
passenger boat, and I had two others. I’ve got three sons and I apprenticed the other two
sons as watermen, lightermen, and then gradually we built the fleet up until we own a boat
called the Connaught, which was chosen to lead the procession, the Queen’s procession.
Out of all the boats on the river can you believe it? They chose the Connaught, an Irish
county isn’t it, Connaught? They chose the Connaught to lead, and it was hired by the Royal
family, and they had 50 marines aboard in front of the Queen’s barge, and at every bridge
they came out the--, [sings] blew their trumpets, yeah, at each bridge. Beautiful, it was a
lovely day. Weather wise it was a bad day but it was a lovely day other than the weather
[laughs].

Q: So you maintain the Connaught at your dry dock in Isleworth?

A: Yeah we do. I own four boats now, I own the Connaught, the Queen Elizabeth, which is one
of the boat’s that the Queen and her sister, Margaret, used to hire when they were young
women. Yeah, I own the Queen Elizabeth, the Connaught, the Clifton Castle and the
Princess [Freda? – 18:16]. Now, the Princess [Freda? – 18:16] is one of your genuine
Dunkirk boats, she went to Dunkirk. Many of them were commissioned, like the [Connaught?
– 18:26] but she never went, they were steam, couldn’t handle sea water, the water intake.
But the Princess [Freda? – 18:35] was a diesel, she was diesel and she went, and we’ve
taken her back to France three times, yeah, across the Channel with the rest of the guys, you
know, yeah, we’ve taken her back to France, yeah.

Q: Can we just talk about the dry dock a bit and--,

A: About the dry dock, yeah. Well at some stage it was necessary to repair boats, so the first dry
dock I bought wasn’t this one that exists now. It was a small barge and it could handle the
size of the boats that I was running. I was running two wooden boats, the [Fleet Admiral? –
19:27] and the [Bay Queen? – 19:28], and they fitted into the dry dock. When I finally bought
this modern, well, it’s not modern, but this new dry dock, the one that exists now, the big
green monster they called it, the press, because she’s painted green, that was when [Heron’s
Place? – 19:53] tried to get rid of me. They got in touch with Hounslow authorities, the
Hounslow authority and they got lawyers at work to get rid of me down river. And the nearest
place I could have gone would have been well down river, you know, to find a place for a
barge as big. But in the event I employed two planning lawyers at the time, it cost me
£15,000 I had to put up to employ two lawyers, and we won the case, the judge ruled in my
favour, and Hounslow had to pay me my £15,000 back [laughs], that was good. And now
we’ve put a roof on the barge, the barge is large, 50 foot wide and 150 foot long. Any boat on
the river will go in there, and we applied a couple of years ago to put a roof on and Hounslow
didn’t object at all, they even made suggestions [laughs], they wouldn’t take me on again, and
we’ve now got a roof on it so it’s closed in. Yeah, we’ve created a very modern dry dock.

Q: So it’s quite a big enterprise, how many people work there? Is it just your sons or?

A: Well we run our--, I’ve got three sons. We run our boats and I have to employ a few mates,
and I have to employ quite a few bar staff because each boat’s got a bar. I have four pub
licenses now. Years ago when I first worked on the boats, once a passenger boat left the
quay, let go its ropes, he had a 24 hour license, you could sell drinks for 24 hours. When you came alongside you had to shut the bar, made [inaudible – 21:53], that's how the law worked. Now we have to apply for-- this government, they're making more and more rules aren't they? It's almost becoming like a fascist country, this country. Now I have to apply for four pub licenses and you have to apply it to the local authority. Well I applied to Richmond because that's my nearest authority, and yeah, we employ bar staff on the boats, yeah.

Q: So they're passenger boats, and in your working lifetime how have you seen changes in the river for the kinds of boats you might see on the water?

A: Yeah, well I've seen the introduction of pub licenses for boats, I've seen that. Now, from my times afloat in the '50s, the river is empty, it's empty, there's nothing on the river anymore. And yet the authority, the PLA are the worst ones, are making more and more and more rules for an empty river. But this is always the way with people who sit in offices on their backsides. They want to make rules for people who go to do the real work, yeah.

Q: And what are your earliest memories of Isleworth Ait?

A: My early memories of Isleworth, yeah, was that I was in the Sea Scouts third Osterley, which is still there, it's called the third Osterley because the group started out on Osterley and they moved to the river, and they were given that headquarters by Nazareth House at that time, yeah, for £1, they were given that ground. And the Scouts are still thriving, and of course that was all my early days in boats, and we used to sleep down there weekends. Do you know? I remember sleeping down there weekends in the headquarters and running across the snow to dive into the river, that's what we used to do, that's how tough it were in those days, yeah. I don't think they'd do that anymore, but yeah, and we used to-- do you know? One day we must have seen a film because in those days there was no television, we must have seen a film about rafts, we all decided to build rafts. About eight of us decided to get on this raft we built with tin cans and timber, we decided to paddle to the island, [inaudible – 24:43], there's an island there, yeah. Anyway, the raft turned over, we swam ashore to get to island. We took our clothes off and hung them on the trees. We were spotted by the nuns who were shocked, we were only ten year olds or 12 year olds, and she phoned the Scout master and we were all thrown out the Scout's for a month, a month's suspension, just before Easter it was. But some of our mates, you know, what we did, the eight of us, we were villainous in a way I suppose, we decided to cycle down to Box Hill where they were camping and camp in the next field, and we even had our equipment smuggled aboard the lorry by our mates so that we didn't have do ride down with it on our back, you know, we had the rucksacks. So yeah, they were good days in the third Osterley's. And three of the guys there became lightermen, I was apprenticed, and Jackie Smith and Dan Archer, yeah, three of us became lightermen, yeah.

Q: Did you imagine you'd spend your whole life on the river at that time do you think?

A: Well yeah, 'cause every day I was working on the river wasn't it? And as the children grew up I took the boys to work with me as they grew, become old enough, eight and nine. Well, even my sons now take their sons to work, and one of them, one of my son's, John, I had some wonderful news yesterday. Alex is waiting to go to university, he's a bit of a historian, pretty good he is, but he's decided to be apprenticed as a waterman and lighterman, so we're going to keep it in the family. And then I've got another son who's got two little boys, they're only like ten and 12, they're not old enough yet, but at least Alex is going to follow, you know, in my footsteps and become waterman, lighterman.

Q: So is that four generations that will be then?

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah, yeah, Alex wants to go to university but he wants to be apprenticed because you see he goes to work now with his father as mate, so it all counts as time, yeah, it counts.

Q: What advice would you have for Alex, for his life on the river, you know, his future time?
A: Well he'll own the boats won't he? When I pop off and they pop off, he'll have the boats won't he? Four boats and a yard, hmm.

Q: Would you recommend it as a good life?

A: Yeah, I wouldn't change my life, no, if I had my life over again. At one time when I was very young my older brother, Roy, and Viv, never had any children, and they were thinking about adopting me, but my mother and father wouldn't have it. But had he adopted me I would have been an engineer because he was the one brother that didn't work on the river. But you know, towards the end of his life, Roy, he was a freemason, he said that he wished he'd made his career on the river, he regretted it, yeah.

Q: It's in the blood, really.

A: Well we live by the river, you know. I suppose if you live in Isleworth and you live near the river it's part, in your blood isn't it, yeah?

Q: What do you think the future is for the Thames, for the boatyards on the Thames?

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Q: What do you think the future is for the Thames, for the boatyards on the Thames?

A: Well I think that we've got lots of history, and my elder son, Danny, the BBC actually recorded his guide up the river. He give such a good guide. We get lots of, you can imagine, lots of North Americans on the boat, and of course you've heard that there's an expression in America, don't be a Benedict Arnold. Benedict Arnold in the War of Independence went over to the British, changed sides, and in America if you want to say to someone, don't be a traitor, don't be a Benedict Arnold. And he mentions that in his guide because he's buried in Battersea Church, St Mary's. I'm not sure of the church but it's a church there in Battersea. Benedict Arnold, you can go to the crypt and see where he's laid to rest. 'Cause he mentions all this, and then Captain Bligh lived at Lambeth, so as we shoot Lambeth Bridge he tells you about Bligh and what happened to him. I mean Bligh made the longest sea voyage in an open boat, which has never been equalled since at that time, in an open boat. He was cast adrift, so I think he went over 3,000 miles with about-- the boat was overloaded, obviously, 'cause they cast him adrift off the [inaudible – 30:28]. And he made the longest sea voyage on record, William Bligh, yeah. Yeah, there's lots of history on the river, and you know, and I was saying, the BBC were so impressed they actually recorded his guide, yeah, oh yeah.

Q: Can I just ask about other boatyards along your stretch?

A: Well they're all gone aren't they?

Q: Mostly.

A: They're all gone. The last one that existed was Toughs yard and that's gone, that's been sold to developers, so I'm the last--, well we've got [inaudible – 30:09] yard haven't we, we've got him? But he's not a waterman, but his father was at the yard and I remember his grandfather, yeah.

Q: Can you tell us about his grandfather? What do you remember about his grandfather?

A: I remember I used to put my boat in for repair, one of the first boats I owned, passenger boats, was a wooden boat called the [Fleet Admiral? – 31:34] and he used to repair it, yeah, his grandfather, yeah, yeah.

Q: So was there a community among the people, between the different boatyards?

A: Oh yeah, yeah, there was definitely a community, yeah, and there is now. There's definitely a community, there's bound to be isn't there? They all work on the river and know all the intimate and secret details of everything, so there's bound to be a society isn't there, yeah? As a matter of fact, when I first--, when you work at a particular pier, and the first pier I worked at was Richmond pier, which still exists, which I own, but the pier they sold, they sold all the piers, and all the ones that weren't profitable like Kew and Richmond, they sold. And they sold them to people who wanted them and we wanted them, so we built--, me and my elder
son and two other guys, east enders, bought the piers, Richmond and Kew, so we own Richmond and Kew. But yeah, it’s interesting that those piers now-- and of course we’re trying now to, thinking in terms of hopefully developing Richmond pier as a mooring for up market yachts, which we’ll see what happens, yeah. But they’re making so many more rules now, so many more rules and it’s ludicrous. I mean every now and again we were over on the island with the dry dock, we see the water company, Thames Water, pump sewage into the Thames, hundreds of tonnes of sewage, and then in the next few days you get dead fish all over the place, they’re allowed to do that. And yet now the authorities, the PLA and other authorities are making all resident moorings, you’re not allowed to discharge your waste over the side from the toilets, and yet that’s happening, we see this happening in the middle of the river, they’re pumping it into the river. So they’re making rules for fools, no rules for them, rules for them. They do as they like, we have to obey rules, so it’s become very difficult to create moorings now. You’ve got to in some way attach your toilets to the shore waste, yeah, which is not easy with boats that go up and down and rise 15 feet, [inaudible – 34:58], yeah.

Q: And what is the, how are the residents at Heron’s Place? What’s the relationship like now between the people in Heron’s Place and your dry dock?

A: Well the relationship is not good. About five years ago, two of my sons, Danny and Arthur, the youngest, walked along, came ashore from the dry dock, walked along, saw a fire at Heron’s Place, jumped over the railings, all the curtains were alight and everything, rescued the lady concerned, put out the fire before the fire brigade got there, and in spite of that those buggers over there are still having a go at us, they won’t allow us to use the ladders, outside their Heron’s Place on the river front there’s ladders and they won’t allow us to use their ladders to get down on to the boats ‘cause the river rises 15 feet every time, they won’t allow us, in spite of the fact-- and one of my-- I haven’t got the letter, one of my youngest son’s wrote them a letter and said to them, you know, could they at their committee meeting mention the fact that we, two of my, my brother and I rescued someone with a fire in your Heron’s Place? And in spite of that you’re still acting against us, why, what’s the reason? Never got a reply, never got a reply from them, they’re still having a go at them. But anyway, there you go, this is people isn’t it, yeah? As my daddy always said, the higher you climb, you’ll always get people behind you pulling you back, that’s the way of life, yeah, yeah. I’d better go soon, I’ve got to go to work, I’ve got to mend the window in my other house. Yeah, go on.

Q: Was there anything else that we haven’t covered that you want to tell us about?

A: Yeah, I’m trying to think. Yeah, there is one other thing. Actually at the moment I’m writing a book about my life, yeah, at one time in my life-- and I’m trying to write, get dates for it. Yes, I’m writing a book here in long hand, you know, but anyway, yeah, I would like to say that on 5th March 1969 at approximately 11.30 midday I left my company’s main office, which is situated in Poplar dock, East London, where I had received orders to proceed to [New Roads? – 38:20], Greenwich and tow a barge up river to [Taylor’s Walk? – 38:25], [inaudible – 38:25], we used to work at [inaudible – 38:28]. As I reached the dock gate, which is about 50 yards from the office, and in full view, I was stopped by a police constable who asked me if I had business in the dock? I replied, “Yes, that is my office over there,” pointing to my office. He then said, “Why were you loitering?” To which I replied, “Oh leave off, that’s my office over there.” At this stage my attention was attracted by four men who were quick alighting from a car, which had drawn up behind me. One of the men told me to get into the car. I was quite frightened by his attitude as he had grabbed my arm and forced it up behind my back. I said to him, “My office is over there,” and I pointed towards it with my free arm. I noticed a middle aged woman entering the dock. I asked her to fetch Mr [Cribb? – 39:31] from the office, he was the manager of Vokins lighterage. At this stage the man said, “Get into the fucking car,” and he pushed me into the back seat. The four men entered the car, one on each side of me in the back seat, the other two in the front seats. The car left the dock and proceeded towards East Indian Dock Road. The man who had forced me into the car and had looked the eldest and appeared to be the leader of the group, proceeded to question me and in this vein, “Why were you loitering outside the Post Office?” At this stage I realised that I was being questioned as to my movements prior to going to my office in the dock. I had spent about five minutes window shopping at a parade of shops close to my office as I was a little early and did not wish to report until 11.30am. I replied that to my knowledge I’d not been loitering, I’d gone to.
the Post Office to get some stamps. He then said, “Where are the stamps?” I replied that I had not bought my stamps as I remembered that I had a book of stamps at home that my wife had purchased in Richmond. I said that I had been attracted by some funny postcards in the window of the Post Office and that I had looked at them. I asked the men if they were police officers. The leader showed me a folding card but removed it too quickly for me to ascertain its content. I told him that I had not seen the card clearly. As I was very worried about the authenticity of these men who I thought were behaving like gangsters not police officers, I told the lead that I would like a solicitor. The car drew up in the back entrance of Poplar police station. I was pushed from the car and the leader of the group roughly grasped a handful of my coat. I told him that there was no need to-- one second, there was no need to act roughly and I was not resisting him, I was quite prepared to come along with them. At the same time one of the men said to his associates, “Search the car, he may have planted something.” The leader said, “Get through that fucking door,” and roughly pushed me through the door that I gave on to the large square room in the back of the station. I was pushed in front of the desk, behind which was sitting a uniformed policeman. The [inaudible – 42:38] then proceeded to pull my personal belongings from my pockets. The leader took my clasp knife from my pocket, opened the blade and said, “Look, an offensive weapon.” I told him that I was a lighterman and that it was my work knife. I protested to the men that I was quite prepared to empty my own pockets. The leader struck me in the face and said, “Shut your mouth!” I was quite shocked and told him that I would bring charges against him for striking me, and I asked him for his name and number. He replied, “Fred Smith.” At this stage I was quite startled to receive another blow to the other side of my face from one of the four men wearing a beard. He said, “Bring charges against me too.” I attempted [inaudible – 43:40], which one of the men said, “Grab him, he is resisting arrest.” Actually I hit the bloke, he put his face forward and I gave him one, I lost my temper-- “He’s resisting arrest,” whereupon the four men attacked me, punching and kicking me to the floor. I was carried by my arms and legs to the cell, thrown on the floor and kicked in the stomach and back for several minutes. This treatment ceased when one man said, “That’s enough, he’s had enough.” I was told to get up, sit on the cell bench and remove my shoes and coats. I did this. The men with the beard wrenched my tie from my neck, tearing my collar. I requested a solicitor and a doctor as I was suffering pain in my back and stomach. The men left the cell. Sometime after this the bearded man appeared at a small observation port in the cell door. He had in his possessions some private notes, which had been in my coat pocket. These were notes appertaining to my business as shop steward in my company. About an hour after that I had first been put in the cell, an elderly man was brought into the cell. I was told that he was the doctor. This man told me to stand up. I attempted to stand up but I could not because of the pain in my back and stomach. I managed after an effort to get to my feet but I could not stand upright. The man pulled my shirt from my trousers and touched my back. He told me to bend forward. I tried to do this but could not because of the pain. I told the doctor that I suffered from colitis, the doctor said, “He’s all right,” to the policeman who had accompanied him into the cell. I once again said that I would like a solicitor. All the men left the cell. I was left alone for some time before approximately 1:45. I was taken from the cell and told that I was to be charged. I was taken back into the large room and shown a list of charges that were to be brought against me. I was asked if I understood them. One of the charges concerned my [clasp? – 45:59] knife. I explained that I was a lighterman and that a knife was part of my tool of trade. The policeman said, “Tell that to the court.” I was further asked if I had anything to say. I said that I would like a solicitor. I was also asked to sign for the possessions that had been taken from my pockets. It was indicated where I should sign. I asked to look at the list and on examination I found that where my money possessions had been listed a mistake had been made. I pointed this out to the sergeant. I was told that it was a typing mistake. The mistake was rectified with a borrowed pen and I signed the form. The police asked to take my fingerprints. I said that I would prefer to speak to my solicitor first, and he advised on the matter and I was allowed to ring my solicitor. And I explained that I would have to get in touch with my wife first to find out his address and arrange for his services. The time was approximately by this time 1:45pm. I was taken back to the cell. After a short time I was visited by two men in civilian clothes. One of the men asked me why I would not have my fingerprints taken. I said that I had no objection but would prefer to speak to a solicitor first. I was told that if I did refuse I would be taken to Pentonville and have them taken forcibly, also that I would be kept overnight. I noticed that the cell door had been left open and that a policeman was holding an Alsatian dog on a lead outside. The two men left the cell. At approximately 3:30pm I was taken from the cell and told that my solicitor was on the phone. I spoke with him and he advised me to allow the police to take my fingerprints as refusal might
mean that they would keep me overnight. I took my solicitor’s advice and allowed the police to take my fingerprints. Also they asked for my personal background, which I gave them. I was taken back to the cell. At 4:30 I was taken from the cell and given my clothes, which were on the floor outside. I was taken through the station to the front where my wife met me. A sergeant fixed bail for me with my wife. He asked me if I had any complaints to make as to my stay in the police station. I told him that I had. I said that I had been severely kicked and beaten and that I would be bringing charges against the police. He said that he knew nothing of this and had only been on duty since 2pm. I also explained that I had received no refreshment at all since I had been in the station. He said that he had just been about to arrange a meal for me. My wife and I left the police station. Okay, so my wife and I went to my office, which was an office by Bow Creek, Canning Town Bridge. We spoke to the manager, Mr [Crimm? – 49:30] and I think when I think about it at the time he knew that I was travelling by car up river back to where we lived in Isleworth. He asked me to take the tug’s money to Putney Pier on the way, and I think it was a gesture on his part to show that he had full confidence in me as far as you, know, being trustworthy. So we collected the money, my wife and I, and we drove back up river and stopped at Putney, the tug was there, the [Vista or the Vannet? – 50:12], one of the tugs, boating tugs, and we gave them their money, a few hundred quid, their wages. And then I went home, phoned my two brothers, put them in the picture. They told me they would come round, I was to go to hospital, let them examine me but don’t tell them it was the police who did it, tell them it was thugs. We did that, they took me by car to Westminster Middlesex Hospital, they examined me, all the bruising on my body, and then--, and I said it had been done by thugs, and then we went back home. I remember then we decided we were going to have a beer, and we walked from my house in St Margaret’s, 217 St Margaret’s Road, up the road to the [Alser? – 51:14] Tavern, and on the way I fell down, that’s how bad I was. And anyway I got up again, they picked me up and we went to the pub and had a couple of beers. And then the next day I was examined by my local doctor, who eventually came to court, yeah. But in the meantime the police had brought charges against me to go to Magistrates’ Court on three charges. I got in touch with my trade union and asked for legal advice. Anyway they said that there was an executive meeting that night and they would discuss it. Well I, being not satisfied, went down to East London that evening, Poplar it was, we called it the pie shop, it had been a pie shop at some time, Watermans and Lightermans and Tugman’s union. I went to the union and I asked to speak and I told them what had happened. In the event they decided to give me legal aid, and they gave me legal aid, and eventually the barrister, they got a barrister to represent me, Sir Charles [Inskit? – 52:45], he wears an eye patch on one eye. He represented me in Magistrates’ Court without his wig and gown, and I think he told my wife at the time that if the charges went against me I’d go to prison. They didn’t tell me at the time but they told me afterwards. Well it was thrown out of court, the three charges were thrown out of court and I said to the, Sir Charles [Inskit? – 53:18], I said I wanted to bring charges. He said, “Look, go home, son, and see me in two days time, come down to my office in London.” Anyway in two days time I went down there, said I wanted to make charges, he told me it would have to be a private prosecution, I would have to raise money, I would have to remortgage the house and this is what I did. I raised £15,000, which was a lot of money then in those days, and three years later we went to court. It was a four day trial and I won the case against the police. It was in all the newspapers obviously, four policemen found guilty, and I won the case. There’s a television programme been made of it, Cause for Concern, which one of my son’s is going to get a copy of, where I was interviewed on television with my wife about this kind of thing, which I told them it was happening every Saturday night all over Britain, they were beating people up in my opinion, the police, ‘cause this is what they do, and that’s what I said. Anyway that was that and so I won the case, and I received a load of letters from all over England where people were in trouble and asking for my advice about what to do, which I replied to, to fight, to fight it. ‘Cause the police tell lies, there you go. But that happened to me and it’s not, this isn’t about my life on the river but of course that figures in it. And at the time when this happened I was printed in the newspaper on the river trying to stop the closure of the docks, and it was the Labour government who closed the docks, Barbara Castle was the Minister of Transport, yeah, one of Wilson’s mob, yeah. And I was printing the newspaper, not just me, with other lightermen, there were quite literally. We printed a newspaper, which you have to register when you do it, you have to do it with, yeah, the authorities.

Q: Sorry, what was it called?
A: The *Vigilante* we called it, and we printed it, trying to stop... do you know? You see more barge and tug movements in New York than you see in London now. There’s more work on the river in New York than there is in London, and we taught them all they knew. They’ve closed our river completely, it’s all on the bloody road, ‘cause we’ve got such good roads haven’t we?

Q: Were you involved in the dock strikes in the ‘70s, did you strike?

A: Yes, yeah, well no, in the ‘70s I was working for myself wasn’t I? But I got some messages from the guys that were on strike and they said that, to my brother Tony who apprenticed me, they said, Arthur Collier, he’s one of the good guys, that’s what they thought about me. ‘Cause I’ve been ex trade unionist, I had a background of fighting for workers, you know, men’s rights. I don’t know what I’m in business for! [Both laugh] But anyway, that’s how it was then, but do you know? When... I was interviewed one day by Thames Water authority, ‘cause at one time Thames Water authority ran the pier, they were running the piers, you know, running Tower pier, Westminster pier and all the piers, they owned all the piers then. They were running the piers and they invited me to go up to Windsor somewhere up river to have an interview about, ‘cause I was running boats. And they asked me if the Mafia were working on the river, can you believe it? And I said, “Yeah, there is a kind of Mafia, they’re not run by Italy but there’s a Mafia all right.” But I was actually asked that, ‘cause I knew that I’d fought them, I had a fight. At one time some of these guys in London took my turn away in London. I had a turn if you go under with the boat, Clifton Castle at Westminster, and they took the turn away and I fought it and I went before, Ken Livingstone called a meeting. He asked one of the men who had taken the turn away to speak and they got up and spoke about it and I got up and spoke on my own behalf. And he decided that I, he told them that if they carried on persecuting me, he said to them, “The GLC will take your turns away,” Ken Livingstone, good guy. “They will take your turns away and Arthur Collier will run, so leave him alone.” Anyway they come up and shook hands with me afterwards. They said to me, “With another two like you we could take over the river!” [Both laugh] One of them said, yeah, the bloke who said it was Charlie [Wyatt? – 58:56], that’s what he said, “Another two like you and we’ll take over the whole river.”

Q: [Laughs] Can you describe what a turn is?

A: A turn is what is granted by the authority that own the piers, and the piers that are owned by them are Westminster pier, [Payswell? – 59:18], and Tower pier. They’ve sold all the other piers, Battersea and Richmond and Kew, they’ve sold them to people like me. Yeah, a turn is when, the permission that you get granted to go alongside your boat at a certain time, ten ‘o clock, 11 ‘o clock, 12 ‘o clock, that’s your turn and you go every day. But you must run on that turn. I’ve had a situation I’ve been under, Christmas Eve at Westminster and got two people aboard the boat, and you’ve got to go, you have to go to Hampton Court if that’s the boarders ticket. Well I’ve got these Americans down in the bar and I bought them a drink, I said, “Look, if you want to go we will, but you could use this ticket for the next week if you’re in London. If you go ashore--,” bought ‘em a drink, “If you go ashore now you can use the ticket--,” anyway, they had a drink, they went ashore, we tied the boat up. Well it’s not worth going with two people. It’s three and a half hours to Hampton Court and three and a half hours back, without the time you stop there, so you’re talking about an eight hour turnaround. Yeah, so that’s happened to me. But yeah, that’s a turn, when you get a turn at a pier, that’s when you’re in heaven, you get to heaven when you get a turn.

Q: Can I ask you two more questions, have you time for two more?

A: Yeah, go on.

Q: Okay. How did you come to establish your yard at Isleworth Ait?

A: How did I come to do it? Well I’d been closely associated with the Sea Scouts so I knew the area. I knew there was a berth available there so I applied to the PLA that I had a barge, Thames lighter, an 85--; they’re usually 85 feet long and 20 foot wide, 85 feet by 20 feet, and they granted me the mooring there. And of course from that mooring I eventually bought this other green monster and replaced it.
Q: And prior to that, where did you maintain your boat?
A: Well I used to go to Wood’s yard, yeah, because that was my nearest yard. I knew his father, I think I mentioned him, I knew his father, well, his grandfather. And I knew his father, his father’s dad, his grandfather’s dad. But yeah, I knew his grandfather, that’s when I first went with the fleet admiral and I had another Bay Queen, and they fitted into the barge, you could sink the barge, float the boat in, do up the valves, the next tide it floats, you would repair the bottom of the boat. It’s below the water line where most of the repairs are needed, yeah.

Q: And where were you taught to do repairs, where did you learn those skills?
A: Not at school ‘cause I went to grammar school, no, not at school. I think I was self taught, I was self taught. I mean most--, remember Jesus Christ was a carpenter, I always remember that, he was a carpenter, people forget this. So every Christian is a carpenter, and I mean even now with our boats from steel, but there’s lots for wood inside, and my boys are quite good carpenters, like me, they’ve taken over and they’ve got the skills, yeah.

Q: What are you best at do you think within carpentry?
A: Drinking beer! [Both laugh] No, I’m only kidding, I don’t drink that much. What am I best at? Yeah, carpentry, I still do carpentry. That’s what I should be doing now, repairing a window! It’s a wooden window and a lady--, I rented my house out, 217, to a lady, an American lady can you believe it? And she’s wrecked the place. She was one of those people that hoards stuff and she had higher ceilings than here, two foot higher in two months--,

Q: Oh dear.
A: She had it full of junk. It took lorry loads to get rid of the junk.

Q: Arthur, before you go and mend your door, or is it the window, can I just ask one more question? How does being on an island in the tidal Thames affect the working at the boatyard, the fact that it’s tidal?
A: Well it’s not as--, yeah, it affects you a lot, even with, you know, when you’re afloat all the time it’s a little harder to work things because if we’ve got to get steel from the shore to the barge, you know, sheets, 84 sheets of steel plate, it’s obviously difficult isn’t it? You’ve got to have a crane barge to lift it [all the? -- 1:04:56] boat and then it’s got to go--, so it makes things more difficult, yeah. But of course you overcome it, you get used to your environment don’t you?

Q: And are there certain jobs that you can only do at certain times of day as well according to--,
A: I think Woods, he does sand blasting, we don’t do that, that’s where they sand blast and it causes lots of--, and they moan about it at Heron’s Place. They’ve tried to close him down a few times, but we don’t do, I don’t do that, I avoid that. We find that, we’ve got water pressure does a better job than sand blasting. You get a machine, it blasts very high powerful water on the steel and it will take the rust off, and if you dry it straight away and then prime it, get the priming on, it’s protected, then you give lots of coats of paint. No, we don’t do sand blast, and I think that sand blasting, it tends to get down your lungs. Even if you wear a mask it’s dodgy, very dodgy. He does that, we don’t do it. Very dodgy! Carpentry, keep to carpentry.

Q: [Laughs]
A: Carpentry, keep to carpentry. Oh okay, there we go. Well when I write my book I’ll send you a copy of it.

Q: Oh please do.
A: I haven’t written it lately but I’ll finish that book. I’ll put those notes in about the police because that was a good case and we won the case! We won it, yeah.

Q: Was it the BBC who made the documentary?
A: I'm not sure, but when I get the--, be in touch again. When Arthur comes here, Arthur, my son Arthur lives in South Africa, his wife's South African, white South African, but when he comes back I'm going to get a copy of the film. I might--, when I get it I'll--, leave your card for me please. Leave it here and I'll put it there and when I come to phone you to have a look at the film I'll know where to look.

Q: Arthur, thank you so much for the interview, we really appreciate it.

A: Okay.

[END OF RECORDING – 1:07:22]