Filmed interview with Ken Dwan
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Interviewer: Chris Conway
Filmed by Digital:Works

Q: I'm going to sort of-- well, you're a bit different to everybody else [inaudible 00:00:03] [laughter]. So I'm going to ask you a few questions just to set the scene for when the film goes out of just who you are, where you were born, things like that--,
A: Right you are.
Q: Then move on to a bit about your early life, obviously pick up your career in rowing and stuff and then move on to the boatyard itself--,
A: Okay.
Q: Okay. We'll-- I'll give you a nod-- 'cause there's so much to say, I'll give you a nod if we need to move on.
A: Okay.
Q: But don't think I'm being rude and asking you--,
A: No, that's fine, yeah.
Q: But say anything you want, okay, that'll be absolutely brilliant. Okey doke, are we ready?

Q: Okay, lovely. Can you give us your full name?
A: Kenneth Dwan.
Q: Thanks. And where were you born and brought up?
A: I was born-- born in Bermondsey and I was brought up in Bermondsey.
Q: Okay, thanks. Can you tell us something about what your parents did for a living?
A: My father was a dockworker and my mother worked in one of the wharfs around Rotherhithe.
Q: Okay, thanks. And what are your earliest memories then of the Thames, living and working--,
A: Earliest memory of the Thames was probably in my mother's womb [laughter]. Because, you know, my family's been on the river five hundred years, so it was something that, you know, we were brought up-- as soon as you were born it's river--. river--,
Q: And can you remember what's your very earliest memory of [inaudible 00:01:40]--,
A: Erm, I can remember probably about when I was about three, we were born right alongside the River Thames in a pub called the Torbay and so I can remember seeing the boats and the
There was a barge yard alongside of where we lived and, you know, seeing the barge repairs and things like that.

Q: Okay. And you--, the family's obviously got a long history on the river, can you just tell us something about that family history?

A: Yeah, well obviously the family go back for many, many years and would've worked in sailing barges, they worked in passenger boats, they worked in tugs, they worked on barges. They were watermen mooring ships up, I don't think there's a thing on the river that we haven't all done at one time.

Q: Right. And you've got a particular association--, well, many associations with the river, but particularly from your rowing--.

A: Well the rowing--, the rowing came really from my grandfather, because as a family--, so to be on that river all that time we had never ever had a Doggett's Coat and Badge winner, and from a very early age and going to work with my grandfather from about eight I was told that I was going to be the one that rowed for Doggett's Coat and Badge. And it then just became naturally that I joined the rowing club on the Isle of Dogs which was predominantly watermen and lightermen orientated with a membership and, you know, once they knew who I was, who my grandfather was, who the family was, then you were taken under their wing and taught to scull.

Q: Right. And from that it led to--,

A: From that I, erm, it was something that I could do, you know, I played in boats from a very early age and it was something that I could get in a sculling boat and make it go fast. If I'd have trained harder I might've won a bit more, but it was something that I could do. I then got selected to--. at 14--, from the age of 14 through to the Olympic final I never ever lost a race in a sculling boat. And then I went to the Olympic Games in Mexico City and made the final but wasn't clever enough to win it. And carried on from that to World Championships and European Championships and things like that, and then finishing off in Munich in '72. And it was that stage when--. because I'd come from a dockland area and a dockland environment, the world of rowing in them days, you were never accepted unless you was [at 00:04:33] Oxford/Cambridge University, and I swore that I would never ever let anyone beat me if I thought that I was not on the right side of it. So I did what I did, thoroughly enjoyed it, won the Doggett's Coat and Badge, went to the two Olympics, as I say, World Championships, European Championships and I decided then to pack up rowing and go into business.

Q: Thanks. The Doggett's Coat and Badge is clearly an important competition to your lightermen and watermen [obviously 00:05:10], could you say something about that for people who [don't know about it 00:05:14]--,

A: Well Doggett's Coat and Badge was--, is the longest and oldest sporting event in the world, and it dates back to 1715. Thomas Doggett was a famous Irish comedian and he was a manager of the Drury Lane Theatre, and he was trying to become a courtier to King George I, the House of Hanover. And he was a friend of Pepys and Turner and them sort of people and they used to be down on the river, using the watermen to get them to and from one side or the other into the city. And Thomas Doggett decided it would be a good idea that if he left in his Will a legacy for a race to be held between six young watermen just finishing their apprenticeship and that came around in the fact that one night when Thomas Doggett tried to get back from the [inaudible 00:06:11] of Southwark to go back into the City of London most of the watermen were drunk and the only person that would take him across was a young apprentice. And as the apprentice rowed him across he lost his coat and that gave Doggett the idea of presenting a coat and breeches, buckled shoes and a great big silver badge that goes on your arm with the rearing horse of Hanover and your name on it and 'liberty'. And so when you finish your apprenticeship you're eligible to row for Doggett's.

Q: Thanks. Very prestigious--. very prestigious.

A: Erm, it's a very much family orientated with the River Thames because it's not like racing in any other racing where you're racing against opposition that you don't know, from the River
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Thames point of view everybody you’re racing are the sons of your dad’s friends so it is very family, erm… And it’s quite a difficult race to row because of the pressure of, you know, when I worked in the docks and things like that, everywhere you went people were asking you how your training was going, oh I’ve heard so and so’s going well and this one’s going well and that--,, and you lived it for, you know, quite a few years before you actually get in the boat to race it.

Q: Yeah. That's great, thanks. Can I move on a bit to the training and your career which eventually led you here. You started--,, am I right to say you started off as an apprentice waterman [stroke lighterman 00:07:49]?

A: I was an apprentice waterman and lighterman, I came afloat in 1963 and I worked for a company called Humphrey and Gray which was owned by the Hays Wharf Group and I was boy on a tug. And as boy on a tug all you did is you scrubbed the cabins out, you made a cup of tea for the captain and you made sure you was there when a barge was going to hit with a fender. And so, therefore, you started by doing that sort of work and then once you got your two years licence that made you eligible to go out onto the barges and you could actually tow a barge around or load a 50 ton punt, but you was constantly under the eye of the old Freeman who was giving you experience and... So I did a seven year apprenticeship and on the finishing of my apprenticeship I became a Freeman and was then eligible to take on my own apprentices. But it--,, you know, I learnt everything, I worked in sailing barges, I worked in hovercraft, I worked in hydrofoils, I worked on the tugs, I worked on the barges, worked in passenger boats, basically a bit of everything. And rowing boats, mooring ships up, loading ships, discharging ships, everything that appertained to work--,, and from one end of the river to the other.

Q: Right. So when you finished your apprenticeship were you self employed or were you employed by--,

A: No, well there was two ways of being employed, you was either known as an attached hand and in which you was attached to a company, or you was unattached and that meant you was like a freelance and you worked wherever you--,, wherever you could pick up the job, but there was so much work that you was always at work. And then Devlin--,, the docks had to be--,, well it was nationalised but the dock labour board was beginning, they were doing so many strikes and that sort of thing in the docks that they separated it and under Lord Devlin they brought out this thing where everybody had to be fully employed. And I was then sent to a company called F T Everard and Sons who were based at Greenhithe in Kent and I worked for them for, you know, quite a few years and they were very, very good to me when I was rowing because, you know, you only really were needed tide time, so that sort of five or six hours between tides I could go rowing all day long, which was--,, which was...

Q: Apprenticeships were very famous for having little ceremonies at the end of them, what--,, did you have a sort of passing out ceremony?

A: No, not really, you became a Freeman and when you came down the stairs there was a thing called the Bachelor’s Bowl that goes back hundreds and hundreds of years and the story was that old Mrs Bachelor decided to buy herself a cup and fill it full of ale and when you came down the stairs you gave her a shilling and you had a swig of her--,, of her ale. But no, there’s no initiation ceremonies and things like that.

Q: Okay, thanks. Coming sort of forward to more modern day, the boatyards, what are your first memories of Eel Pie Island, we’re sort of jumping ahead quite--,

A: I think I started coming to Eel Pie Island when I was about 13, so my grandfather used to work on the passenger boats for Thames Launches, so I used to come up here. In the winter what you did, they was all out of work in the winter and then early sort of autumn you would come up here to Eel Pie Island, well I was like with my grandfather, and he would put his name down for he was able to work for them for the next year and they would allocate him a boat that he would be working in. And so I remember coming into this boatyard many, many years ago. And then I--,, eventually when I came out of the Lighterage I took severance and it gave me enough money to purchase a small boat and then I used to fetch it here to have it repaired. And then gradually as our company got bigger we needed a place for them to be--,
the boats to be repaired and because I'd known the people here all the way through from a young boy when it came up for grabs I--, they said to me, you know, why don’t you take the yard over? And I didn’t have the money to take the yard over and the man who was here at the time, he said to me well pay me when you can pay me, so we came--, I came into the yard and we paid him off after a year. He wouldn’t take no interest and we inherited Eel Pie Island Slipways Limited.

Q: And when was that, Ken?
A: That had to be about 30 year ago.
Q: Right, some time ago.
A: Mmm.
Q: So for you that was presumably a big step from bringing your boats to be maintained here from taking on the responsibility?
A: Well, we had quite a few old boats and we knew that we needed to maintain them, and possibly had we not had this place we couldn’t have afforded to have maintained the boats in other boatyards. But because we had this place it gave us the ability to keep them boats running, and ‘cause a couple of them are old Dunkirk veterans, I think the oldest boat was about 1914.
Q: And did you yourself have to learn new skills to…?
A: Well I came here I didn’t know anything, I didn’t know--. I was a waterman, I knew how to tie boats up, I knew how to untie them and tow them around, but as for the fact of actually running a boatyard, I just had to self taught. But I had some good people round me who put me in the right direction.
Q: What sort of--., can you tell us something about the people you--., obviously they were important in doing that.
A: Well they’d been here since they were younger and they were shipwrights, they were platers, welders, lofters, all the skills that you needed to have in a boatyard, and were sitting in a boat shed here and--., and if you look at most of the tools in here they go back to the days when they were here. But there’s a tool in this place to do any job in the building or the repairing of a boat, but I never know where to find it, so I have to end up going to buy a new bit. But no, I got taught by them in knowing what to do, they--., they were getting old but my attitude towards the boatyard, if a customer come through the door, if he wanted to land a boat on the moon then it was doable. And I couldn’t see any reason why there was nothing that we couldn’t do if you put your mind to it, and that’s how we work in this yard, you know, there is no job too big or too small and there is definitely a, you know, we cannot do that, we can actually do anything.
Q: And what’s the background of the people you have working for you now, [how many have you got 00:15:05]?
A: Er, well, most of the background are people that have come into the yard, the older people have now gone away and the younger ones have come in and they were taught by the older men. And likewise, the new youngsters that are coming in--., it’s very difficult to find youngsters to come into boatyards, you know, youngsters don’t really want to be laying under barges in the mud and welding overhead, they’d sooner far sit in Canary Wharf and drive a Porsche. But, you know, notoriously boatyards were badly paid and it’s--., every job you have is a hard job, there’s no easy--., easy jobs in a boatyard.
Q: And has the sort of type of boat--., excuse my ignorance, but the type of boat you do work on, has that changed from the time you originally took over the boatyard to today?
A: No, no, we’re still doing the same as we was doing when we first come here. We don’t build boats anymore, when I first come here we used to build landing craft and tugs and barges,
you'll see the pictures around the wall of what we built. But, you know, we became too expensive to be able to carry on doing that work and foreign yards can do it so much cheaper, and they've got the space to be able to do it, so we solely stick to boat repair and painting.

Q: Okay. If--, we'll just wait for the plane, sorry. [Noise from aeroplane flying over]. If [we're losing a channel 00:16:49], bit technical for me [laughs] [inaudible 00:16:54]. Do you want to say something, Ken, just we-- --, our sound engineer can...

A: One, two, three, four, five, six.

Q: Yeah, that's fine, that's better. Lovely. What I was going to say was, if--, I mean I have never been to a boatyard and [inaudible 00:17:13] it's absolutely fascinating, extraordinary to see everything here. If you were describing to--, I was on the phone to me for the first time, what sort of sights or smells I might expect the first time I come into the yard, how would you describe it?

A: Well, the first thing would be how much money have you got, 'cause we've got a hole here that you can throw it into in repairing boats. Erm, how would I describe a boatyard, a boatyard is-- -- it's a very tranquil environment, but a very dangerous environment to be in at the same time and therefore you have to be aware of everything around you because everything is a trip hazard. Wherever you look there is a trip hazard and a problem, so you have to teach people, you know, don't put your hands in your pockets, you know, the old boys used to give you a bit of wood to carry, rather than you put your hand in your pocket you had to carry a bit of wood. So the smells come from--, depending on what job you're doing, most of the barges that we do are old barges so you are burning off black tar, which is quite a messy sort of a job. The manhandling of stuff is heavy, but from--, if you're coming in as an owner then you're coming in to get jobs done and we would hope that we would be a one stop--, anything you want we can do.

Q: And is there--, probably it's a silly question, but is there any such thing as a typical day in the yard?

A: Never. No, never, you don't know never what you're going to find until you-- --, that's why it's very, very difficult when you're pricing jobs to be actually--, the owner knows what he wants to pay but until we start opening up a barge to find out what is there, you know, someone wants a bit of plate put on a barge, well that plate can only go on to something that's good and if when you take the old plate off the frames are gone then you've got to make the new frames. If the frames have gone, how far have they gone, so you never really know... And it's the same with time, we can never say to someone we're going to do your boat and it's going to take three weeks or two days or whatever, it takes as long as it takes it to happen.

Q: Yeah. Do you-- --, I mean this is a stupid question, but you're on an island here, can you say something about how the tides affect your work and probably as a supplementary to that, actually being on an island, is that different than being--, having a boatyard on the mainland-- --.

A: Yeah.

Q: Can you say something about the tides and how it affects your work on the island?

A: Yeah. Well the problem with having a boatyard on an island is all the materials either have to come over that bridge that you walked over a bit earlier or come across in a boat or on a barge. So therefore we cannot have any mechanical lifting gear because there's nowhere to put it, so therefore everything-- --, if we get a lorry load of steel coming in we manhandle that off by hand, so it becomes labour intensified. So for us to unload a lorry, you know, if you're thinking of eight by four sheets of ten mill plate, you know, that's six men really to lift one of them off at a time, well you have to be very careful how many you order otherwise the men just couldn't-- --, couldn't do it. And the other difference is the fact that in-- --, and why I say we're not competitive enough with our prices is the fact that if you look at a modern boatyard on [the site 00:21:00] where the lorry can drive in, he can have plate delivered ten metres long, unload it with a crane, held into position and then you've got your welders who have only got to do that one bit of welding, whereas we're doing eight by four sheets because it's the only way we can manage it. So it's quite difficult working, as you say, with the tides-- --, the tides...
help us in as much as we can get the boats alongside the wall the other side and we can get them back up the slipway, but even our overhead gantry is a hand one, there’s no--, no mechanical lifts, you’re doing everything by hand, which is labour intensified.

Q: So what keeps you competitive compared to---, because it would seem there’s obviously lots of challenges compared to [your competitors 00:21:54]--,

A: Well I think---, I think [laughs], what keeps them competitive, pricing keeps us competitive, but that is to the detriment of the fact of profit. So you could argue on a lot of our work do we actually make any money out of doing it and on an environment like we’ve got it’s a big---, it’s a big question really.

Q: Are there any other---, I mean it seems a daft question, any other commercial activities you can do in addition to repair of boats here, I mean I don’t [inaudible 00:22:29]--,

A: We do scattering of ashes, we do a lot of Asian funerals on one of our boats where we take the families out onto where the stream is running at its fastest and they scatter the ashes. But predominantly we are a boatyard and we… And I think we’ve got a good enough name that people probably don’t mind paying a little bit more because they’ve got guaranteed and the work is done properly.

Q: Is there---, is there---, I mean you mentioned---, just going back a step, the whole health and safety thing which we know can be a challenge and I can imagine looking around and you mentioned yourself in a place like this, do you get scuppered by new regulations or new authorities [can that affect 00:23:13] [noise from aeroplane]… Yeah, I was asking you about the working environment and whether you get hamstrung by regulation or you’re left to your own devices because--,

A: No, you’re never left to your own devices and nor should you be, and health and safety are obviously around at all times and inspecting the yard and making sure we do---, but they do appreciate the fact that it is a working boatyard and therefore the people that have been here have been here for many years and are aware of the problems. But, in saying that, everyone---, it’s everyone’s responsibility in the yard to make sure that they never walk past a problem and leave it for the next man, because that problem may eventually hurt someone. So everyone’s mind set is that, you know, we go near water we put our lifejackets on, we’re climbing around on things you, you know, you make sure you’re not climbing, there’s handrails, there’s things like that. Which goes into the owners of the boats when they say well how much are we paying for that and you say well you are paying towards health and safety, and it’s not, or, you know, our men can’t work that high in the air, they have to have a safety harness, they have to have hard hats if they go that high. Erm, so it is a constant that we have to do on every job that we do, we have to do a risk assessment and that risk assessment is passed down through the paperwork to the boys.

Q: Are unions involved in boatyards at all?

A: Unions?

Q: Yeah.

A: Erm, I don’t think this yard ever was involved with unions. Erm, it may well have been ‘cause at one time there would’ve been over 150 people working here, so the fact there was 150 people working in this boatyard there probably was a union. But as time has gone on unions have gradually gone and therefore for a yard like us to survive everybody has to muck in to be everything, so you’re a painter, you’re a welder, you’re a shipwright, you’re a, you know, we all help one another on everyone’s job.

Q: Sorry, I didn’t ask you this at the beginning, how many people have you got working here altogether?

A: At the moment we’ve got I think about eight.
Q: Right. And presumably 'cause that's--; is it a fairly closely bonded group, do you--, they socialise together or…?

A: Erm, I wouldn't have thought they socialise that much, they're stuck with one another every day of the week so I'm sure they wouldn't want to be out with one another of a night time but, you know, erm, they work together and they all get on very, very well. We found--; I've always found it very hard to get youngsters to come in to the yard, I remember going to the--, ringing round the labour exchange and everything asking for people in the area, if they wanted to come in to--; we had a job here where we would train people and we would send them to uni--; or college--; technical college to learn this, that and the other. I think the only person ever phoned up was someone who said we can do a bit of filing, and I said well filing's okay, that's metalwork, that'll be okay. And they went oh no, not filing, putting letters in draws and I said well I can do that job myself. And we've never ever got people--; and you'd think there must be hundreds of kids in this area who are not all going to be brain surgeons and everything else and are looking for a skill, and this place can teach them so much. And at the end of it, you know, because of the set up in our country at the moment it all revolves around a bit of paper you've got at the end of it. And I remember phoning up Kingston College once and said I've got a couple of lads here who want to do a welding course and they said, erm, if you can find another 12 lads we will start a course, and I said well by the time I've found the twelfth one I would've lost the first two. I had another young lad come up from Faversham in Kent, travelled here every day, half past seven in the morning he was first in this boatyard and he was away every night, and he wanted to be a marine engineer. And we brought him up here and we started teaching him, you know, we were taking engines in and out of boats, propellers, doing all this sort of work. And after about a week the tutor phoned up and said we've got a problem, we haven't got enough people on this course so we're going to have to close it. So I said well have you got any other courses that are similar, they said we've got a diesel fitters course, so I said well you teach him to do diesel fitting, we'll teach him the marine side. And that went on and then all of a sudden I got another phone call, we've got a problem, what's the problem now? Well the boy that you've got is really more qualified than the instructor that's teaching him, so really what you should be doing with him for the first year is letting him sweep the yard up and make the tea, and I said this is nonsense. And in the end the course closed down, the boy ended up working back in London, he wasn't going to travel all the way up here, he's a very, very good marine engineer with no certification whatsoever, and that's the sad part about it all. He could've got a Indian head massager certificate or a McDonald's burger turner over but he couldn't get anything to do with boatbuilding.

Q: But what do you think--; if you could wave a magic wand or [maybe there was a magic wand 00:29:32], can you see a solution to this, because this must be the same for all boatyards up and down the Thames, mustn't it?

A: I would've thought so, yeah. I don't know what the answer is to it--; I don't know.

Q: Do the boatyards ever get together at all to…?

A: I know all of the other owners of the other boatyards and I know that most of them would have Eastern European staff working for them. But, you know, they're the only areas that you tend to get labour coming from.

Q: Yeah, okay, thanks. Have you got something you could tell me about, I don't know, most memorable--; a memory of the time you've had the yard here, something that's happened that's stood out that would be nice to record for the person who's film--; as a memory?

A: I had a--; one of the best things was really, we had a barge up here that belonged to a man who they based the film Fishing in Yemen on. But he'd done all his fishing and set it all up in Russia and the Russian government gave him the top end of Russia for a dollar, and he was allowed--; they said you've got to form your own police force, your own army and he does these very exclusive fishing trips, they're five hundred mile from the nearest town so everything goes in on helicopters and things like that. And he had a barge that he wanted to a project on, and in the front of this barge was a great big fisheye window which he called his James Bond window. And his bedroom had this big fisheye window in it, and he wanted to--; when he sat up in bed to be able to look out through the centre of this window. And the barge, when it grounded on its mooring, used to dip down five degrees, so I went to Shepperton...
Studio and they were doing a Bond film and I got one of their technical people to come over here to organise a bed for us, that as the barge hit the ground so the bed moved up so that whenever he looked out the window he was dead centre of this window. And that was Peter and he ended up, I think he had the barge down in London for a couple of weeks, he phoned me up and he said I’m losing too much vodka. Why’s that? He said well every time I put a bottle of vodka on the table it zooms off the end when I’m on the ground. So he brought the barge back up and we had to build a floating wedge to go underneath this barge, and he came up here and he had all sorts of drawings and everything else, and he ended up telling me that I was metric dyslexic ’cause I will only ever work in feet and inches. And he said you’re metric dyslexic, so he had to do two lots of drawings, one in feet and inches and one in metric. And we built this great big wedge and he went now how are you going to get that barge onto that wedge? So I said come with me, I got a stick and I went out, I stuck the stick in the water and I said when the water touches that mark on the top of that stick that barge will go into your wedge, and then we’ll connect it up. He went I can’t believe it, can’t believe it, he said show me the drawings. I said I haven’t got a drawing, I’ve got a stick with a bit of tape round it, when that works that’ll go in. And I must be there, and he came up and we—, it was perfect, it went in a treat. But they’re the sort of things that you put up with.

Q: Thanks, that’s a lovely story. Can you say something about the immediate community—, when the plane’s gone. [Pause, aeroplane flying overhead]. Right, I was actually involved in the Eel Pie Island project [inaudible 00:33:38]—,

A: Right, yes.

Q: And it couldn’t be more different to this, it was about the rock side and the music—, music side [laughter]. But what was interesting was the relationship that the community had with bits of the community and—, where obviously the fire and all things like that—,

A: Yeah.

Q: What’s the relationship like in general with the community and the boatyard, I mean obviously you’ve been here a long time?

A: Well I’d like to think it’s very good, I’d like to think that we, you know, we’re here and we’ve always been here and we work well with the community. We never start work till half past seven and we’re finished by four o’clock on the basis that most of the people have gone out, off the island to go to school or to go to work and by the time they come back we’re gone—, we’re finished anyway. And they’re always calling in for us to get jobs done, you know, this done or that done, so from our point of view we’ve never had any problems with the community, but you’d need to ask them whether that’s the case [laughs].

Q: And I mean we’re probably—, we’re sitting here, but would you like to say something about the access through your boatyard because people won’t be aware that presumably there’s a right of way through your boatyard [inaudible 00:34:47]—,

A: Well that—, that was a big mistake from the people—, the workforce that was here were given the opportunity to purchase it—, when Impala Marine went bankrupt the two guys who ended up buying the yard and started Eel Pie Island Slipways were a bit short sighted and only wanted what was sitting in here and the boatshed, and they didn’t really care what happened to the rest of it. And therefore, all they worried about was the money to get the bit that they wanted and therefore the people that had the rest of the site sold it off in lots and Len and Ted who was here gave them permission. There isn’t actually a right of way through there but there is a permission to come through the yard and into the other parts of the yard, which was a big mistake—, big mistake. (A) they should’ve took over the whole site and then if they wanted to sell any of it, sold it, but they didn’t, they—, they were too short sighted really and—, and it hasn’t created us any problems up to now but there will be a day when it creates a problem.

Q: Yeah, thanks. Is your work seasonal, I forgot to ask you.

A: No, we’re all year round.
Q: You're all year round, okay. And your types of customer, have they changed over the years, or…?

A: No, in fact most of the customers we had when I first ever come here are still coming back now every year, the only time they don't come back is if they-, they sell the barge or the barge comes up and be sold, a new owner comes up and looks at it and then we end up with that owner as… So all of the people that come back, come back to me regularly every five years to have their work done, or if they sell the boat they recommend us. So no, we have the same people all the time.

Q: Could you say something about--?, I mean what little I know, that the numbers of boatyards are quite fragile on the Thames, there's always boats that need to be repaired and looked after. Could you say something about your view about the--., whole thing about the future of boatyards on the Thames and possibly the future of this yard as well?

A: Erm, well obviously the infrastructure of the Thames is dying, there's hardly any infrastructure on the Thames whatsoever, because of the way that the land has become so valuable and the fact that the powers to be have let the developer in to build on what were potentially boatyards. Now I think there's about five boatyards on the Thames that do what we do, I think we're the only boatyard on the Thames that actually own it, all the rest--., this is freehold here where we are and most of the other boatyards are rented at exorbitant rents because they're competing against developers. And therefore there is no protection for the boatyards and there has got to be more and more of them go. This place, by just looking round here, I could spend £2 million on this boatyard and you wouldn't even see where I've spent it. And when you talk--, the powers to be here--, they're talking about a new boatyard being built down in the Albert Dock, I don't know if you're aware of that one, but it's a complete farce, it really is. The developer wants to build his flats, to get on with the local people well we'll build you a boatyard as well. And I was involved with the Mayor of London on the first sitting when we sat down and talked about the building of this new boatyard and I explained to them what they--., what they would need, what they want, and I reckoned for them to get what they wanted, minimum of £25 million. And they said well you could lease it off us, I said well what sort of rent would you want off me for a boatyard that was--? And I said you need to be getting all the big passenger boats out, you need--., 'cause there's nowhere for them to go, the big passenger boats, the heavy tugs, the working barges that are building the Thames tunnel and the Crossrail, that's the sort of boatyard that needs to be built in the lower reaches. And I think after the first meeting they brought in another company that started talking about 36 foot plastic boats and that as far as it--., as far as it's gone. But, you know, there has got to be some infrastructure on the Thames otherwise people will be going--., got to go to France, I think the nearest boatyard will be in Calais, somewhere like that, to do heavy barge work.

Q: Do the boatyards sort of get together and lobby local authority or, I don't know who it would be, the planning authorities, Port of London Authority, I don't know who's responsible--,

A: Well the PLA did designate that boatyards had to stay boatyards, but like the little boatyard alongside of here, they developed the building, they put a shed under it that they call a slipway and the biggest thing you can get up it is a rowing boat. So, you know, it's all nonsense, it really is nonsense.

Q: So going back to, erm, the youngsters you can't get--,

A: Yeah.

Q: Let's--., well, suddenly--., I don't know what's happened but you're flooded with youngsters and they--., which is great, they want to start up a boatyard or maybe even take over from yours. What advice would you give to a new--., the new generation who might want to take over a boatyard or take on a boatyard [inaudible 00:41:02]?

A: Well take--., taking over a boatyard isn't a job, it's a way of life. So you've got to be saying to them well if you want to be rich then don't buy a boatyard, if you want to have satisfaction in some of the jobs and the work that you do then I'm a hundred percent behind you, go and be--., have a boatyard. 'Cause there's so much satisfaction when a--., when an old boat comes up here that's a rust bucket and you send it away nice and shiny and painted, there's a lot of
satisfaction in that. And the beauty is that the minute it slips off our slipway they start knocking the paint off it again, so in five years you know you’re going to get them back, so..., but... But no, it’s a very..., it’s just the money that is entailed to want to take the boatyard over is..., is, you know, there’s a lot easier ways of earning money.

Q: Thanks. That’s about it, Ken, I’ve got..., I’m sure my colleagues might have a couple of questions, but is there anything else? I mean these are questions that we’ve come up with that sort of seem sensible, but there might’ve been a great chunk that you think, God, why on earth did he ask me about that, so is there anything else you’d like to speak to us or talk to us about?

A: No, I think you’ve..., you’ve covered most areas really.

Q: Okay.

A: You’ve covered most areas.

Q: I’d like another hour on the rowing but we won’t be allowed that, so [both laugh], but thanks very much.

FS1: [Do you want anything 00:42:28]?

Q: Ian, any questions?

MS2: Just, you know, not sure..., it was just about the origin of the name, obviously the name goes back for many generations, do you know what..., where Dwan came from?

A: Dwan is and old..., oh, sorry-

MS2: Can you answer Chris.

Q: Oh, right, sorry yeah. Yeah, look at me and answer him, yeah, sorry [laughs].

A: Yeah, Dwan is an Irish name, when the Irish community moved over to build docks, the navvies and things like that, they moved into the areas of Bermondsey and Rotherhithe and Wapping and places like that. And it then just followed on, Irish watermen and things like that and they..., it was an easier job working on the river than building lock gates and things like that. But it’s a very famous..., it’s a very famous name in Cork. In fact there was a company out there which are the equivalent to Schweppes which is owned by the Dwans which is known as waterman’s tonic.

FS1: Can I follow that up just by quickly asking you about other members of your family who are on the river now, have you got kids who do the Doggett’s--,

A: I’ve got..., yeah, I’ve got my two sons, they’re Doggett’s Coat and Badge winners, they work with us in the passenger boats. One of the lads come up here to work with me up here, ready to shove me out. But this wasn’t the sort of life that he wanted so he ended up..., or the pair of them ended up buying a fuel barge company and they own five ships on the Thames that do all the houseboats with their fuel oils and, er, and the tugs and barges, so like a bunkering service. My brother is a captain for Cory’s, they run the household refuge up and down the river. His son, Merlin, is working for Cory’s as well. And then on my mother’s side there’s other families..., other boys that are doing passenger boats and working on the Thames tunnel and the..., the jobs like that, so there’s a lot of us out there.

Q: Thanks.

FS1: Can I just follow that up by just [inaudible 00:44:44]..., just one question really about the time that Ted and Len were running the yard and what you know..., a little bit about the yard before you took it over, kind of what was..., what was the story there with Ted and Len?

A: Well Ted and..., Ted, you know, obviously if you go back many, many, many years it was the Electric Boat Company, I don’t know if you’re aware of that, but they built electric boats here.
And it’s funny how the wheels turn, isn’t it, you know, they’re advising us to do away with diesel and everything else and a couple of hundred years later we’re going back to where we started. So it started off as Electric Boat Company, then it was taken over by, er, Joe Mears. Joe Mears was a local Mayor, he had coaches and he thought it would be nice to sort of buy boats so that they could fetch people up from London to go to the cinema and then he would take them back by coach, so that’s how the Thames Launches bit came into it. Len and Ted were apprenticed here in the Thames Launches days and then a chap by the name of [Sammons and Pike 00:45:57] took the place over and called Impala Marine and they had ideas of grandeur in building all these miniature super yachts. And-- but obviously they-- they forgot their core business and went into--, put all their eggs in one basket and that faltered and that’s when Len and Ted took over the place and they bought it off the receiver. And they kept some of the labour force on and then they run the place, and then there was an accident in the yard where Len’s son got killed when a boat rolled on top of him and Ted was here as well. Len walked off the island that day and has never ever-- well, he’s passed away now but he just couldn’t come back into the place after having to get his son out from underneath one of the boats. And Ted was there as well when it all happened and he lost his confidence in the place and that’s when I-- Len phoned me up and said, you know, would you come in and work with Ted, you know, I was probably the only person in the world could ever work with him. And so I worked with Ted for a few years and learnt an awful lot off of Ted, he was a very knowledgeable person, he’d been here since he was 14 sort of thing, so he taught me an awful lot. But he never had-- he didn’t have the confidence in the end, whenever boats were slipping he would run off the island like Usain Bolt whenever there was a boat coming in and out. And then we had done a deal that we would buy Len and Ted out and then eventually-- or buy Len out and then when Ted was ready we would buy him out, which is when Ted then went. And then we had it.

Q: Okay, thanks.

FS1: Can you tell me just what year that was and when that was?

Q: [Inaudible 00:48:07]--

A: What year it was, so it had to be about 30 year ago, exact dates I’m not very good at.

Q: Yeah.

FS1: Was that just before or after the fire that was here?

A: No, we’d taken it over and I think about two or three months later the fire occurred. And being that we knew Ronnie and Reggie Kray-- I’d come up work through being with him, they said it was us who did it, but… But no, the fire was next door. And the crazy thing about the fire was when it happened all of our insurances this side went down, because the fire risk had gone, so…

Q: Oh [laughs]. Can I just ask you about the fire actually, were you-- where were you when the fire--

A: I was at home, in Bexley, so I didn’t-- I, you know, I only see it on the news. I know Ted was in here but, erm, we came in on the Monday-- nothing we could do about it, it was full of firemen, no one was allowed anywhere near it. So we came back in on the Monday and see what had gone.

Q: And the yard was intact?

A: Well the prevailing wind here is west to east, so the fire here moved in that direction. We did lose the top of this building here and-- and you see all this has all been done where it was all fire clad, but the actual fire went down river.

Q: Right, okay.

A: That’s the prevailing wind here.
Q: Okay.

MS2: What would you say was the most important skill that Ted taught you?

A: The most important skill that Ted taught me? Get the money out of the people before the boat leaves [laughter]. Or he used to say no cash, no splash.

Q: [Laughs]. That seems reasonable.

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

FS1: One last question, which is you told me a while ago about people pepper potting, and I wondered if you could describe what that was?

A: Pepper potting?

FS1: Yeah.

A: Well when you're doing doublers--, right, on commercial boats you have to cut out and replate, on old--, on non commercial barges you can do what is known as, erm, doublers, so you're actually attaching a plate to the bottom of the boat. But you have to do ring welds to attach the plate also to the frames and if a barge is too bad, if the material--, if the original material is too bad you get what is known as pepper potting and that is when you strike your arc to weld it just blows all the rest of it away. So, you know, you're constantly having to find something good to go on and the pepper potting is a sign that it ain't good enough for you to go on. Otherwise you'll hit a bump somewhere and the whole lot will fall off the bottom. But--, and it's the same with the--, with the commercial, if the steel is too thin you can't weld anything near it or to it.

MS2: Can I just--, sorry, I've been listening for a while [laughter]. Can I just ask how you see the future, Ken, what do you imagine--?

A: Well if it was left to my sons Barratt Homes will move in here the day I drop down dead, but I just see it rolling along as it is really. I think, you know, it's… You can never have enough investment in the place to move it into the next--, next century, so I can't see anywhere it can go other than doing what it's doing. 'Cause it earns money in doing what it's doing, albeit it doesn't generate enough profit to upgrade the site, and I don't suppose a bank would lend you the money to upgrade it on the figures that they would be seeing from your accounts.

Q: There must be a stage--, presumably some upgrade that, you know, that sort of to take to its logic conclusion, there must be a time when, I don't know, technical advances or something require new treatment, so there has to be a stage presumably where investment has to go into boatyards?

A: Or you sell it to a developer.

Q: That's the stark option? Okay.

A: No other option. But, this has been like this ever since I remember, when I was 13, so it's run a long while doing what it's done and looking like it does. And--, but no, it's--, no, there is nobody going to have the money to come in to turn the place around, you'd just be throwing money down the drain really, alright you'd have a smarter--, a smarter facility but you couldn't charge any more money for the work you do.

Q: Okay.

MS2: Great, thanks.

Q: Brilliant, Ken, really good.
MS2: Brilliant, thank you.

FS1: Thank you so much, Ken.

Q: Thank you ever so much.

A: Thank you…

[END OF RECORDING – 00:53:36]