Q: I’ll start off with just an introduction. This is an oral history interview with Richard Turk by Jeremy Crump on 11th May 2017 at Town End Pier, 68 High Street, Kingston. Also present are Amanda Roberts and Bea Moyes from the Thames Festival Trust. Richard, if I could start off by asking you questions about your early life and family? Please could you state your full name?

A: Richard Daniel Turk.

Q: And where were you brought up?

A: I was brought up in Cobham in Surrey.

Q: So away from the river?

A: Away from the river but to be honest we were only a stone’s throw away from Kingston. It was a 15 minute run from Kingston which is where the boatyard was.

Q: And what were your parents’ names?

A: Michael John Turk and Diane Elizabeth Turk.

Q: And when you were growing up, how much were you aware of the family business and the family’s history in the river--on the river rather?
A: I think very aware. I was born into a well-known river family and when you’re born into a river family it’s sort of in the blood from an early age. If I wasn’t playing on boats I was working on the boats and my father was quite a strict sort of almost Victorian character in that he believed in--, we had to earn every single pocket money we ever had so we were working on the boats from about 13/14 years old, both me and my brother.

Q: What did that mean, working on the boats as a 13 year old?

A: Well in those days we had our passenger boat company, Turk Launches, which had been going about 30 years. He’d built most of the passenger boats himself bar one, and in those days we had six and we were running full-time and needed--, work included crewing them, working behind the bars, cleaning, general maintenance and every summer holiday, Easter holiday, Christmas holiday, I never quite forgave him.

Q: Were there jobs which you sort of aspired to do as you were a boy growing up? Presumably he started you off with some things and then you moved on to others?

A: Well you always start off as the tea boy and when you’re the ultimate tea boy then you get promoted to maybe do a few ropes and a bit of boat handling. But as I say, that led to us becoming very very familiar with the boats, the business, we knew the business inside out, so by the time I was--, I’d finished school, I then went to university. I came out of university and, you know, both my parents were, “Oh Richard, do you want to come into the family business?” and I was like, “No, I certainly don’t want to.” I’d worked for years and years and years, the last thing I wanted to do was come in the family business so I left and I went and did my own thing and in those days what do you do? All my friends were becoming lawyers or solicitors or doctors and I was like--, or stockbrokers, so I sort of fell into the first thing I could get my hands on which ended up recruitment consultant. So I worked for a recruitment consultant in the city which was pretty cut-throat in those days I think, it was still run sort of like it was in the ’80s, you know--,

Q: What years was it that you worked in the city?

A: That’s a good question--., so I left school in ’98 and I think I did a four year degree so it must have been 2002 I started off.... So I did a year there. Absolutely hated it but I learnt a lot and then I fell into management consultancy. I did that for about three years and then at that time my father was in his seventies and we had just got rid of a current managing director of the passenger boat company and both my parents were struggling financially as well as a few
years before that he’d built the Grand Turk, a big ship which was his boyhood dream. And the pressures that came with that, the age, my mother called a family meeting. I remember me and my brother sitting there and, you know, my brother was just gone to uni. I’d obviously had a few years out by then and we both sat down and she wanted us there ‘cause she was saying “You know obviously you need to be aware of the situation. We might lose everything including the businesses and the house and everything and you just need to be there.” Anyway, we sort of got to the end of that meeting and I said “Look, do you need a hand for a year?” And my father was like, “Well yeah Richard, that would be great.” I was like, “I have conditions” so in the end I came in. It was on condition it was only going to be a year, as soon as I’d helped out, got them on their feet I would leave again and I said “Make me a director. I’m not coming in at a lower level.” And blow me down because I knew the businesses inside out, I knew what was wrong with the businesses ‘cause I’d worked there as a kid, I knew--,
you know, we had out-of-date operational systems, ticket machines, processes--; it was a typical, typical river family boat business that had just gone stale and run and not modernised with the times and that’s very very common. And you get all river businesses, you know, have an upward curve and a downward curve and most of the time you adapt and diversify with the times and we hadn’t done that for a long time and that was the main reason. Anyway, to cut a long story short yeah, here I am, I don’t know 12/13 years on now, managing director and we managed to turn it round.

Q: So how did the conversation go when you got to the end of your year that you’d specified as the only time you were definitely going to--,

A: Well once you’re in you actually--; I loved it. You know, it’s in the blood and it was nice to work for yourself than anyone else, not being told what to do. But I mean it came with definitely some disadvantages like, you know, I’m a bit of a workaholic. I inherited my father’s ruthless work ethic so I don’t very often have days off, you know, I work late into the evening, weekends--; it’s our industry. You’ve got to do it. Most people frown at that now if you work over a 40 hour work, you know, I constantly work 80-100 hour week. So once I was in I was fully committed and that year came up and yeah, I just needed to carry on I couldn’t leave. I was, you know, we hadn’t--; it took me five years to actually get us back on track. We had six businesses in those days. We had the Grand Turk, we had RJ Turk & Sons which was a boat building business, we had Turk Launches the passenger boat business, we had--; we’d just taken the shipyard over at Chatham. We had a marine film business which was called Turk Film Services and we had Clarkes Property which was a bit of an obscure business. And I closed all of them down and kept two of them which was the passenger boat company and the shipyard. And the reason I did that was the others just weren’t making money. We had this--; my father had collected a 60, sorry, a 400-odd historical boats for over 60 years with the film industry. Anything from Viking longboats to African dugouts to Venetian gondolas, you know, he’d either built them, collected them, bought them, restored them. And the film
industry was going--; it had been a lot--; well it is a lot now CGI so it’s all computer generated, there’s not the budgets now to do real stunts with a real vessel and support boats and divers and everything that comes with it. And we were paying huge amounts of storage costs and insurance and the business wasn’t viable so we had a big online auction, boat builders from all round the world flew in and the whole collection went. We raised a lot of money.

Q: Can you remember when that was?

A: [pause] God, Adrian help me out, he might know. When was the--; oh, five years ago, six years ago?

Q: So quite recently?

A: Yeah. Probably longer, maybe it’s longer than that. God my memory’s terrible.

Q: Your father was still alive at that--,

A: Yes he was, yeah.

Q: Was it a great wrench giving that he [inaudible 0:10:02]--,

A: Oh he was dreadful. He was absolutely dreadful. So I had professional online auctioneers come down the yard and we were catalogue--; it took us six months to catalogue the boats and they kept putting numbers on all the boats and every time I turned round, my father was ripping the ones off saying “No, no, no I can’t let that go, we’ve got to keep it.” So--; oh he was a nightmare. So we probably added another two months on with the negotiations to say “Dad, they’ve got to go.” We did keep the Turk family boats though. We’ve got a--; we kept a for instance, a beautiful 1890s Turk double skiff that I’ve got that is--; built by my grandfather. We’ve got a beautiful sailing--; wooden sailing boat again built by I think it was my great-grandfather and a few other odds and canoes and that kind of thing, choice items. Proper RJ Turk & Sons built.

Q: When you were young can you remember the film business?
A: Yeah, yeah I remember it very well because my father had done Harry Potter films, he’d done Indiana Jones, all the Bond films. We had all--we had--we’ve still--I still own now the James Bond model submarine that he built for The World Is Not Enough, I think that’s the right one, I think it’s The World Is Not Enough with [clicks fingers] the Scottish actor, I’ll remember in a minute--; so we’ve still got that in the yard, that’s actually in Chatham dockyard at the moment, we gave it actually to--; or I lent it to the Chatham dockyard and they’ve got it on the quayside.

Q: Was there a kind of glamour associated with the film side of the business and did you get to see whoever was playing James Bond at the time come down to the yard and all that kind of stuff?

A: Well I didn’t although I went on a few of the films I got all the rubbish ones, all the good ones were done by then so I remember 16 years old Dad was like, “What are you doing for the summer?” I was like, “I don’t know Dad,” he was, “Well I do, you’re coming to Austria with me.” Right, okay. So we went on a film job and we did The 10th Kingdom which was a ten part American TV series, sort of throwing all the fairy tales into one so you had lots of mythical characters and elves and all kinds of things and we were on this big--; in a place called [Hauschter 0:12:38] and big big lake and we had probably a dozen boats and boat scenes and it was great fun. The only famous actor on that was--; that I recognised was Jimmy Nail and you could tell him a mile off ’cause you could hear his loud northern accent. But my father met them all and they all knew him. Actors then all the directors, the art directors, they all loved Mike because he was very--; shall I just say he was very himself around whoever he was and most of the time he didn’t know who they were. I mean, once on the--; he did The Talented Mr Ripley so he went out with the director for dinner, Jude Law and the female actress which I’ll remember... married to the Coldplay...

Q2: Gwyneth.

A: Gwyneth Paltrow. Gwyneth Paltrow. And he came back and he was telling us, “Oh I’ve just been for dinner with some woman named Gwyneth.” I was like... “Yes dreadful woman, ghastly.” I said, “Really? You’re joking Dad, she’s the main actress.” “Is she? Oh God I thought she was the secretary.” [laughs]. You know, so I had--; you know he was--; that’s the way he was. He was just very, you know, just himself. He was just a typical river man, didn’t care who he was with or who he was socialising with.

Q: What did you actually study at university?
A: Sociology.

Q: Right. And whereabouts was that?

A: University West of England, Bristol.

Q: Okay. And where had you been to school before?

A: City of London Freemen’s School.

Q: Right. So when you were brought in to look at the business, how far was your-- either your educational background or your work experience in the city, how far did that influence the way that you began to analyse it and the kind of decisions you recommended?

A: Well I--, from the boating experience I’d apprenticed at The Company of Watermen and Lightermen when I was younger. I never completed what is called a traditional apprenticeship with a waterman which is five years, in those days it was five years. Purely because these days the average waterman is--, you either leave school at 16 and you do this or you’re what’s called a journeyman waterman whereas I was very blessed to go to private school and I happened to be--, you know, did A-levels and went on to university so I never completed it but I’d done the majority of it anyway without doing it. So I came--, I have to say I came in pretty green. You know, I’d had a few years management consultancy, a year in recruitment. At 25 although I knew the business pretty well and had a lot of common sense, you know, I find it--, this kind of business you’ve got to learn on the job, you know.

Q: You said before that when you came in you found a lot of things which seemed very obviously out of date.

A: Yeah, we had a lot of processes and operational systems and equipment, you know, booking systems that were just terrible. Not fit for purpose really.

Q: Was there an awareness, not on your part but on the part of your father and the other people running the business, that this was a matter--,
A: No, they wouldn’t--, they didn’t have a clue. But luckily one of the conditions was I need carte blanche to make whatever changes I needed. And I came in and the first thing I did is sack about four people that I knew were no good and thieving and bad for our company and we had a big clear out and then set about changing bits and pieces within the business.

Q: And how many people were working for the company at the time when you took over?

A: We probably had about seven to eight full time staff and about 30-40 part time staff.

Q: And had it been that kind of size during your father’s time as well?

A: No it was a lot bigger back then ‘cause he had--, he also had a Barnard Piling & Dredging Company so he had about 20 men back in the day which basically did a lot of riverside repairs, banks, people’s gardens that were falling into the river, that kind of thing, piling and dredging.

Q: What do you remember about the Albany boathouse?

A: So the Albany boathouse was gone before I was born but I have lots of photos and I’ve had lots of dialogue. My brother obviously remembers it, he grew up there, that’s my older half-brother and obviously I hear stories from the family members.

Q: So is there a kind of family legend around it, almost?

A: Oh yeah well the Albany was famous--; famous, famous building and the old boatyard that we had that unfortunately burnt down. I seem to remember apparently my father ran in during that fire, he ran in and wouldn’t leave until he’d got as many boats out as possible and he saved most of the boats in the fire. But we lost lots of stuff that we’ll never be able to replace apparently and there was some amazing things in there, memorabilia and obviously the main boats we saved but everything else went up.

Q: And what impact did that loss have on the business as a whole and indeed on your father?
A: I think it had a big impact, yeah. We obviously had to rebuild, I think obviously the emotional side of it as well. My grandfather was still alive I think then as well and he although was very elderly and was extremely upset. But luckily we had the two boatyards in those days, we had the Albany and we had Thameside and so we just moved everything to Thameside.

Q: Whereabouts were these two in relation to Kingston?

A: Oh they’re not far. They’re a three minute walk from each other.

Q: And they’re both up the river near Kingston?

A: They’re both in Kingston, yeah.

Q: So the business which would have been done in the Albany was just transferred to the other one?

A: That’s right.

Q: So you didn’t lose any business in that sense?

A: No.

Q: I see. When did the yard at Chatham start?

A: So the reason we took that over was when--, we sold a yard--, we had Sunbury boatyard which was a big boat building yard that my father had for 30-40 years and we sold that. And then we needed somewhere to transfer all the film boats, these 400 odd film boats. And my father found this yard in Chatham that had been derelict for 50 years and the Royal Navy had obviously built the submarines in there. And it was huge, vast but it’s all derelict, totally. So it was an excellent--, we got a peppercorn rent and he agreed a long lease but he always took it on with one eye--, he was a great entrepreneur my father. He couldn’t run many businesses particularly well but he was brilliant at foresight. And he always said to me and I remember him saying to me, “One day we’ll get this opened as a dockyard and shipyard. It’ll earn a fortune, it’ll be a goldmine.” I was like, “Yeah, yeah, yeah,” you know, I’m too busy to even
think about it and yeah, blow me down when we did, we sold and we had this yard and I was like, “Right, well we need to make it work now.” So we borrowed a lot of money and ploughed it in and got all the gates working, I had to rewire the whole building, it took years. And we started getting one boat in, then two boats came in, then three boats, then we got the Thames Clipper contract which was 14 boats, dry docking them in the boatyard. But we still--, it was one boat in and we were relying on the tides. And ‘cause we’ve got a very unusual yard, the yard’s actually on a slope ‘cause they only ever built submarines in there and they greased a load of poles and pushed it with a JCB and launched them. So we’ve got a very unconventional slip yard to be on a slope so we were governed but we can only take one boat in and one boat out. So I knew we had to get a winch and my father, again him being him, suddenly announces, “Oh I own a winch!” “What do you mean you own a winch?” “It’s in Scotland.” “Well what’s it doing up there?” “Oh it’s with Atlas Winch.” I say, “How have they had it?” He said, “Ten years.” I said, “Why have they got a winch of yours?” “I bought it in Ireland. There was a deal going.” So he’d bought this winch and I’d suddenly found out about it and it was a 600 ton winch, it was ideal. So I then had a nasty shock on the price of getting it refurbed which was tens of thousands and I did, we raised the money, we got the winch. And then we set about digging it out, putting the winch in, 50 tons of concrete to lever the winch down so that when they’re pulling up boats the winch didn’t fly out and all of a sudden with this winch installed it transformed our yard. So we can pull boats up, left, right and currently I’ve got seven boats in my yard. So that transformed our earning potential, doubled, tripled it and we put rails down and we bought, again in Ireland I found out he’d bought a load of wheels, cast iron wheels, that run on train tracks. And that’s how we built these trolleys that run on train tracks and we designed it and we’ve altered it many times but I think we’ve got a really really good system now.

Q: So when did he buy it and when did this development of it in to a working yard take place?

A: So I think we’ve had it about ten years but really it took us five years of actually figuring out what on earth to do with it and the last five years we’ve gone from strength to strength and this year we’re going to do very well.

Q: And apart from the Thames Clippers contract what’s your market [for that 0:24:11]?

A: So we do a mixture of about 50/50 so we have the commercial vessels i.e. passenger boats, tugs, barges and then the other side is 50 percent houseboats and we do mainly the Thames and Medway. There’s probably about, I don’t know, two and a half thousand people living on the Thames so anything-- , and we take a lot of the big barges that none of the little boatyards on the Thames can take so we take, you know, the big 40/50 metres, we get all them. As well as the small stuff. We’re undercover so we’ve got an advantage of being able to paint and
work in all weather conditions whereas most of the other yards they’re on a slipway somewhere or on a beach. We get a lot of commercial work purely because when you’re spending tens of thousands on a boat in dry dock, the last thing you want is a load of sand to suddenly blow up from the beach and land on your wet paint. Tends to upset the owners a bit.

Q: And how many people are working down there in that yard now?

A: So I’ve got a team of Polish welders, we’ve got six Polish welders and I’ve got probably about 30 sub-contractors. And that ranges from painters, shipwrights, chippys, labourers, marine engineers, marine electricians.

Q: How’s the sub-contracting organised for all these people?

A: Well luckily the Medway where the yard is, is very very rich in --, there’s every single trade out there you can get. It’s brilliant. There’s nothing on the Thames anymore, there’s no skill on the Thames left anymore, it’s all out in the Medway now. You can get anything out there and there’s lots of guys who run lots of companies, we just sub-contract them in when we need them. I mean our bread and butter is obviously shot blasting which we do in-house and our welding work. We don’t tend to go in to painting, it’s very specialist now, it’s time consuming, it’s dirty so we sub-contracted it. We find it easier.

Q: And are these people who used to be part of the Thames --, the kind of London workforce or are they new things which have grown up in --, or were they there in Chatham already?

A: They were already in Chatham anyway but I think, you know, largely that the skill base that used to be in London is not now purely because they’ve been forced out the housing prices and all the rest of it and most of the yards are either out on the lower reaches of the Thames, Gravesend, Orpington that way, or round the corner in Kent.

Q: The six Polish welders, you employ those directly?

A: I do.

Q: And why do you have to employ welders directly when everybody else is sub-contracted?
A: Because we’ve got that much work. They’re very very skilled men, they’ve worked in shipyards all round the world. They can do anything. They are so talented these boys, fantastic.

Q: I’m tempted to ask why are they Polish? I mean obviously they are Polish but I mean did that just happen or did you go to Poland looking for workers or--,

A: No I actually-- they did a couple of jobs for me, they were working for another firm at the time and they were that good a team that they’d worked for me for about six months and I said, “You’ve got to come and work for me guys, you’re the best I’ve ever seen,” and they did. I’ve made it worth their while and they’re very very good, very very good. So we do--, you know, they can do anything from a new build houseboats which we do, repairs, you know. And they want to work. And when you run a modern day shipyard now and a boatyard, it’s very difficult to earn money. You’ve got to do what everyone else doesn’t want to do, you’ve got to work long hours 12 hour days, you’ve got to run a 24 hour yard basically. You know, we shot blast at night because otherwise no-one can work in the daytime so we shot blast at night so they do night shifts some of them, they work weekends. We’re round the clock. The minute a boat hits that dockyard the meter is running and it’s costing - 1) it’s costing us ‘cause we work on speed and efficiency, you get a boat in, finish, done, out, let’s get the next one in. You know, too many other old fashioned boatyards are you know, let’s get it in, sit there for four months twiddling their thumbs. The big yards now, the ones that survive are that you get them in, you get the work done and get them out as quick as possible. And plus the customers, you know, a lot--, especially the residential-- well both the residential doesn’t want to be in a hotel or sleeping on sofas while his boat and his family are-- you know they want the boat back as quick as possible and get back on board and the commercial boys, again they’re a bit-- you take a boat out of commercial action every day they’re losing revenue.

Q: If you had to get another welder to replace one of those six, how would you set about doing that, do you think?

A: It’s a great question. I’ve no idea. It would be word of mouth I think. I’d find someone-- I don’t know whether they’d be-- he’d be a foreign one, probably be an Englishman I would have thought. It is quite hard to get now.

Q: Do you have any apprenticeship or training within your business?
A: We have training, we don’t have any apprenticeships at the moment. From a purely selfish point of view, we’re too busy. I don’t have time or the resources to come back in and train the boys up, unfortunately.

Q: So when you say you have training, what does that consist of?

A: Well we have in-house training on––, we have big overhead cranes, ten tons, forklifts, that kind of thing so we train––, those welders can do everything. They can work the cranes, they can drive the forklifts, they’re already very experienced with the actual on-hand welding but we train them up to do all kinds of things. One used to be a jewellery maker.

Q: Oh.

A: So [Jamish 0:30:56] he’s my most skilled guy. He used to run a £5 million jewellery company over in Poland and he lost it all, I think his business partner was corrupt and ran off with all the money. But he’s unbelievable––, the detail and the skill, I mean he can make this table out of steel or aluminium or stainless, nothing he can’t do, very talented guy. So we tend to use him for all the delicate jobs, you know, handrails or fancy bits and pieces.

Q: Is there any tradition of trade unionism in this industry?

A: Yes, massive.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about that?

A: Well luckily I don’t have it in my company but trade unionism runs rife on the river, always has done. It stems from the Watermen and Lightermen and still is. Unions are called in, militant skippers, river workers, I believe Cory’s––, Cory’s Tugs have a big yard and a big workforce and they have to sit down with the unions regularly.

Q: But none of your employees––,

A: No luckily we are I think a sign of the times, ‘cause we have a lot of teams of sub-contractors they all run their own businesses, they want to do well, you know, it’s not within their interests
to upset the applecart and start saying, “Well actually I want weekends off and I don’t want to do that.” They’re trying to earn as much money as they can and be as efficient as they can so it doesn’t do them any favours to be that minded.

Q: Was it always like that in your father’s time as well? Do you have any memories of--,

A: The unions have mainly traditionally all been more from the lower reaches of the Thames. The upper Thames has traditionally been non-union. However, my father still has had union problems over the years but they haven’t been as severe as what some of the lower reaches of the Thames have had.

Q: Can you remember any specific cases that [inaudible 0:33:27]?

A: No I can’t, I can’t. But I know that most of his workers and his shipwrights were all members of the RMT Union, the Rail & Maritime, that was the big union in those days and still is I think. If you’re going to join a union, you join the RMT.

Q: Now you said that the people work very long hours and so on, but is there a kind of social life amongst the people who work in the company outside the workplace?

A: Yeah, yeah. There’s--., well most of the people that work on the river are related. You wouldn’t believe it but lots of watermen’s families, they’re all married to each other’s cousins and God knows what, yeah. So that’s why you can never upset one because I guarantee someone will know the other one and he’ll have a cousin or a second cousin--., it’s all very incestuous. But yeah, of course, we all drink together. I mean the river as a whole, especially--., I’m talking specifically more about the Thames now, the Thames have come a lot more closer together because we’ve all--., rather than the traditional rival Mafia families, “don’t come into my stretch”, we’ve all had to work together because commercially. All the piers, I mean, Transport for London have since bought all the piers so there’s no, “I own this pier - you’re not coming on this pier anymore”, it’s now--., you know, there’s a lot more cross-trade and we’ve all had to work together and to get along. It’s been healthy for the river and healthy for the people that use it.

Q: Can you remember from your--., when you were growing up any kind of difference in the way in which the different families related to each other?
A: Oh yeah, yeah. My father was--. I mean I’ve seen him--. boats that on the pier, “Who’s that boat?” And he’s got a knife out and he’s cut the lines and kicked the boat off. That’s how it’s done. No-one would mess.

Q: Were there particularly famous rivalries between--.

A: Yeah, massive famous rivalries - [noise in background] Is that a bird?

Q: Yeah.

A: Oh.

Q2: Do you want me to pause it?

Q: I think we’re all right.

Q2: Do you want me to pause it? [pause in recording]

Q: Sorry, I was just asking about family rivalries. Could you give us a little more detail about some of those?

A: Well I can’t be too incriminating but there were many many rivals between certain companies and certain families especially. Some families couldn’t absolutely stand each other and so, you know, it was the done thing that whoever owned the piers within that particular stretch, it was not all right to come into those waters unless you rang ahead and you said “I’ve got to come through.” Then it was allowed but yeah, it was pretty fierce back in my father’s day. Now it’s nothing like that, you know, there’s rules, there’s regulations, there’s less of this macho, you know--.

Q: But you came in from the City and that’s presumably very unusual for somebody in this environment?

A: Yes.
Q: And how did people react to that?

A: Well a lot of the older guys that I’d known--, some of the older skippers who’d been here worked for my father for 30 years, they were great they’d known me as a boy. But a lot of the other staff, obviously I was viewed as a non--., well just ‘boss’s son’, you know, and you had that stigma attached to you and that’s why I had to work twice as hard as everyone else just to prove myself. It took a bit of time but gradually over time it rubbed off and people accepted who I was and what I did.

Q: Could you say something about the relationship between the company and the river authorities, something like the Port of London for instance, how does that work?

A: We don’t have a relationship.

Q: Would you like to expand on that?

A: Yeah I mean we work with them, we have to work with the Marine Coastguard Agency which regulates all our boats. Obviously, the actual navigation authorities, whether it’s the Environment Agency, the Port of London Authority - obviously their organisation has changed greatly over many years and with that has come more regulation and more cost which a lot of us river--., working river watermen object to and resent. So we don’t have a terribly good relationship I’d say, I don’t think anyone does. A lot of people have to work with them, we accept that, but it’s through gritted teeth a lot of the time. And again this modern age, we do live in a world where more and more regulations coming in, we’re getting a lot of European regulation now that’s very--., well it’s a big hindrance on a lot of our businesses and our men, yeah. That’s all really to be said on it.

Q: But how typically do you engage with them? I mean do you have a caseworker who knows this bit of the river who you have to get to know?

A: Yeah, you always have certain contacts. I mean the Environment Agency certainly, you know, I have people I call who I know. The Port of London Authority will have an Upper Harbour Master, a Middle and a Lower so we tend to deal with the Upper Harbour Master if we need but I mean there’s not too much day to day contact. They police the river pretty well now.
Q: But they're not drawn from the same families as run the boats?

A: No. I mean, there is a couple of watermen who work for them but they're mainly nonners.

Q: Nonners?

A: A nonner is a non-watermen as we call it. They're still frowned upon.

Q: So when you say you disagree with what they do and their regulation has an impact on you, how do you as a community address those issues and are there [forums 0:40:28]?

A: Yeah, there are. There's forums, we have a passenger boat association so we get together and we lobby government and the PLA and the chief executive in all the ways any business would now, any modern day business.

Q: Can you try and talk us through an example of how that might work in a specific case?

A: For instance there's a new fuel directive came in from Europe and the MCA were consulted on it and we needed to--., well we basically lobbied them because none or a very very small percentage of the working boats on the Thames would have been able to handle this fuel, just purely because of the age of the engines. And we successfully got it turned.

Q: And how did you achieve that success?

A: Lots of letters, lots of meetings, all the boat--., I mean the river community came together, you know, especially all the managing directors because it could effectively put us all out of business so we really had to get a--., who shouts the loudest wins often and we successfully did that.

Q: So is that relationship between your association and central government or do you deal with local government as well?

A: No, we--., well both. But I mean we mainly--., we had to get someone pretty high up the tree.
Q: If somebody was thinking of getting into this business in the future, the next generation as it were, what advice would you give them?

A: Hmm. Well it’s very difficult for outside people to come in and work in this industry when you-- , for instance, a lot of the bigger commercial companies, I’m talking about passenger boat companies, if you don’t know anything about the river and you come in say as a HR manager or you look after their IT department which is not necessarily-- , you don’t have to have a background in the river to do those kind of roles. But we are a unique breed of businesses and I think you have to have a good understanding of the river and the way each company works in order to do those roles. So my advice would be, if you are coming in as that, you know, to get a good understanding of the river before you join them. The same I think-- , I hope that we still do apprenticeships on the river although I don’t apprentice down in my shipyard I apprentice in the passenger boat company and-- ,

[sound of phone vibrating]

A: And erm-- , [pause in recording]

Q1: Okay.

Q: Okay you were talking about apprenticeships in the passenger boat-- ,

A: Yes so we still do lots of apprenticeships for skippers to do their Boat Masters Licence. Becoming more and more difficult, 1) it’s very very expensive for the employee to do one as he’s got to pay for all his own courses and everything else, 2) a lot of the guys don’t want to come in to the river now. We’re finding it very very hard to attract a younger generation. Again I think it comes down to unsociable hours, not particularly well paid industry. So we are finding it harder and harder to recruit. But the ones that do, do come in and do go through their apprenticeships, they’re very very skilled men. A lot of them can, you know, they can work all round Europe with this particular licence and they can either go on the lighterage side and do tugs and barges or stay on the passenger side and do more commercial, obviously the commuter boats or the party boats or the sightseeing boats.

Q: And when you say they have to pay for all their own courses, whereabouts do they do those?
A: There’s various nautical colleges around. If not, Watermen’s Hall provides an in-house training.

Q: And has that always been the model for apprenticeship? Is it--,

A: The model always used to be, the Watermen’s Company used to do all the apprenticeships, every single one. However, things changed and it got taken away from us. Again, new regulations and got put out to the MCA which was government.

Q: Is that recent?

A: About 10-15 years ago, yeah.

Q: Okay. And are the people who are coming forward to do those apprenticeships, are they drawn from the families that were already [inaudible 0:46:10]?

A: Yeah, if any of the family members want to do it or--, I put four guys through who come work for me and, you know, after a few years they’re like, “Richard I really want a career on the river.” And if they’re any good and they’ve got a bit of grit and really want to do it then I apprenticeship them, I become their Master and they do a two year apprenticeship. It used to be five, it’s now obviously--; under the old regulations, the new regulations now it’s shortened and now it’s two.

Q: What would you say is your proudest achievement of your career in this business?

A: Hmm. Building this boat which is my Dutch barge--; my father had built everything. He’s built [sighs] where do I start? He’s built ships, he built--; well he built the only--; he took the last of the great British boat builders out to Turkey and built full-size man o’war that no-one had built in the world in 200 years and he built it traditionally. He built submarines, he built barges, passenger boats, tugs, houseboats, Viking longboats, gondolas, you name it he’s built everything and I hadn’t built a thing. And so I was very very proud to actually take--; get this opportunity to build my own Dutch barge which I designed it and built it. So I’ve done that. And then since then, that was the first one and then since then we’ve gone on to build lots and lots of houseboats, we specialise in houseboats now.
Q: Would you like to say a bit about what’s special—, apart from the fact that you built it, what’s special about this barge?

A: Well this particular one, I took a traditional Dutch luxemotor design and modernised it. I wanted to keep the same traditional lines and sheer and curves that makes Dutch barges so appealing and pretty. But also they weren’t particularly practical in terms of—, traditionally the wheel box is situated right back towards the stern of the boat and they usually have a small aft cabin. What I did was extend the wheel box, move it forward and extend it so I wanted a big wheel box that doubles up as a dining-room for entertainment and then some back doors that open to a back deck and too many of these barges—, you know, there's no point living on the river if you don’t have any outside space. It wasn’t rocket science but—, so I took a modern view of it. And I got a really nice effect I think so yeah, I enjoy living on here.

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

A: The ones that will survive are the ones that invest in the infrastructure and they need to invest in the cranes, health and safety, the equipment. And a lot of the old ones are gone and why? Because they weren’t earning much money, they hadn’t put any investment into their yards and property developers have come along and offered them money and they’ve taken it and they’ve developed on the site and that’s why all our water frontage is disappeared with new flats and that’s why the yards have disappeared. I mean, a lot of them are moving afloat now on floating docks and maybe that might be future and that might be the way our industry’s going to go. But I do think those are the ones that will survive and obviously quality of work. You know, the days of the cowboy are over and there still is some out there.

Q: Investment means borrowing money—,

A: Yeah.

Q: Usually. What’s the environment like for that for this?

A: Terrible, very difficult. No-one wants to lend. Boatyards and people with boat businesses are viewed as very very risky, banks don’t like us, investors don’t like us, it’s very challenging.

Q: Whenever I think about this it always seems to me it must be very difficult to be able to use the land more profitably than you could get for selling it for housing. Is that the case?
A: Well I mean, I don't own my yard so I have a long lease. It's actually, you know, it's part of the historic dockyard where they've been building boats for centuries so the land is all protected. The actual building is under English Heritage, it's a listed building so although I'm allowed to operate in it, I can't ever sell it. So I don't really have that temptation, you know, and as I said it provides a very good living now. We've tripled turnover in the last three years. We do very well.

Q: Is there anything more which you think I should have asked but haven't or which you would like to take this opportunity to talk about in relation to the yard and--,

[noise of sound equipment being moved]

Q1: There you go.

A: The death of wooden boat building. I think the death of wooden boat building has definitely almost disappeared from the Thames. Only I would have thought small wooden boat building is still done in various pockets on the Thames but really it's only double skiffs, wherries, traditional rowing craft. All bigger stuff on wooden craft is not done anymore and that, you know, there's no more shipwrights anymore. The last of the shipwrights are dead. Well, there's a few but they're all in the seventies now, well in their seventies. It's not passed on anymore and that industry is dead and that's why most of the--, in fact every single yard, yeah every single yard bar one, refuses to take wooden boats. I refuse to take wooden boats, we don't take them, 1) they're a risk and 2) we don't have the men to repair them.

Q: But are you suggesting that's a loss we should be concerned about?

A: From a very selfish point of view, I'm not concerned about it but those people that have historical boats that need repairs, are struggling. I mean, they're taking them down Southampton now, Portsmouth, right the way down the coast 'cause there's nothing in the south now.

Q: Isn't that a business opportunity for somebody who can work out how to do it?
A: Possibly but I don’t think there’s enough now. You know, whereas everything used--,
everything’s gone steel now, there’s very very little wooden boats being built. Except for
pleasure and leisure and recreation, you know skiffs, but I’m talking about big stuff. I mean,
the only big stuff’s probably on the Medway now with the Thames traditional wooden barges,
the sailing barges, they’re still repaired on the Medway and they’re still a few shipwrights
doing them along there but they’re few and far between certainly.

Q: Okay. Anything else that you want to add?

A: I don’t think so.

Q: Amanda? Amanda’s been following us so she may have noticed some other questions which
we’ve missed.

Q1: Yeah I’ve just got-- I just wondered just going back right to the beginning, how did the
boatyard feel to you as a child in terms of the noises and the smells and the people?

A: Oh it was great fun, very very fun place. The old yard at Thameside where my father’s house-
-, so the yard the big sheds were bolted on to the side of the house and there were 14 stray
cats--, no, twenty I think and they were just sort of feral cats but they kept all the rats down
and I remember all the boat guys used to all feed them. Terrific characters, you don’t get
many shy or boring people in this industry. Yeah.

Q1: And has that changed now, does it feel different now?

A: Yes it does, it does. It’s a bit more structured and it’s-- well it’s just a much more professional
era I suppose. You don’t get the--, people take their jobs very very seriously now around
boatyards, you know, there’s a lot of danger. I think people are a lot more aware of the
danger now whether you’re welding, working with gas or heat or whether you’re skippering a
passenger boat with 200 people on board, you know. These days you get done for corporate
manslaughter and you can go to prison if you’re negligent so I think there’s a different era
now. I think it was-- it was almost, you know, you’ve lost that sort of amateurish fun,
everyone had a laugh, they loved working outdoors. In those days it was-- it was all fun.

Q1: And the tools and the methods used, have they changed much?
A: No, largely--; they've just improved but largely you're still using the same tools and methods that you were. Just better ones.

Q1: And just a quick question about the future, how will Brexit affect you?

A: The passenger boat company, it's certainly affecting us. The business is split between sightseeing/daily tripping which I think will still be quite good this year. However on the private charter side, weddings, birthdays, corporate events, certainly we're very quiet and I think that's down to less disposable income, uncertainty in Brexit and obviously rising costs. So I think people are holding on to their money. As far as the shipyard goes, it's not affecting us at all. Boats have got to come out whether they're a commercial boat and they've got to come out every year for new regulations and the new tickets like an MOT on a car for instance, or whether you've got a houseboat and he hasn't docked it for five years, seven years and he's got a leak and he's desperate to get it out. They're going to come out anyway.

Q1: Might it affect you in relation to labour?

A: Yes, well hopefully my Polish team won't get deported back but I'm sure we're going to be very very sensible with it.

Q1: Okay.

Q: Good, okay well thank you very much.

A: Okay. Thank you.

Q: Interview with Richard Turk, track 2. Richard, could you take us through the history of the development of boat building at Turks?

A: Yeah of course. We started--; my grandfather, well actually my great-grandfather started off in the early 1700s and when there wasn't any TV and there wasn't any or many recreational activities, rowing was very very popular and a lot of people took the family out on a skiff or a punt. And so we traditionally started building skiffs and double skiffs and punts and canoes. And then as the years progressed motor boats started coming in to fashion and we built
gentlemen’s launches. And from my great-grandfather, my grandfather continued in this until the Second World War happened and the boat building trade died totally. However, we saw an opportunity to go from boat building in the traditional sense to hiring boats out and the Canadians were in Bushy Park and the Americans also had a local base over at Richmond so obviously with our boys abroad, they took all the local girls out and so we had quite a thriving hire business in those days. And after wartime the business started to pick up again and we went back to our traditional roots of actually boat building and repairing, you know, people who already had vessels. My father then came in to the business as a young 20 year old and he’d just been in the--, he’d just come out of the SAS or SBS the Special Boat Squadron, and he came in to the business as I think my grandfather was in his eighties then. So he took over the traditional boat building side and brought that on and we expanded our range hugely during the film boat years where he did build gondolas, fishing boats, Viking long boats, Celtic long boats, Cornish gigs, he built the lot. And he also built passenger boats and we went in to the passenger boat side of things and ran that throughout the ‘80s, ‘90s and still to present day. And when we got rid of all the film boats that he collected and built, I currently now build houseboats and that’s where the current business is today.

Q: What are the fashions in houseboat building at present?

A: The fashions, well, people still think it’s a fairly cheap way to live and we are building a variety of steel craft and concrete hulls and the fashion is concrete at the moment purely because it has a 100 year life maintenance free, concrete never rots, never deteriorates. It comes with its disadvantages but we’re building a lot with a Danish boat builder we’ve teamed up with, doing a lot of them. Particularly--., when you say the fashions do you mean the styles?

Q: Yes, what do people come and think they must have in their boat if they commission a new boat?

A: We’re building--., the fashions at the moment are to have very very low windows right by the waterline so we have to get this properly specially made re-enforced glass, toughened. And they can actually see right on the waterline, you almost see the ducks you’re at that level. It’s a lovely feature actually and we’re doing more and more of that kind of thing in the side of hulls. Yeah, it’s great. We do get the weird and wonderful and wacky. We had a particular gentleman wanted at the end of his bed the floor to lift up and a TV to come up on electrics which we did for him. We don’t get often asked for that too much.
Q: Could I just put in an extra question about the passenger boat business. I mean, how is that developing? Clearly there aren't American soldiers around anymore to show around but where's that business going and how is it--, do you see any signs of changes?

A: My particular business we're very lucky, we're in a very picturesque stretch of river. You've got Hampton Court Palace which is a big pull for people, we've got Kingston which is excellent for retail shopping and restaurants and you've got very picturesque Richmond and Ham which is sort of leafy Surrey. We're in stockbroker belt so lots to see and do round here so we attract a lot of tourists in our own right within the boroughs and we also have a huge local following which in the summer holidays what are you going to do with the kids? I mean, you take them out on the boats and exhaust them and--, so we do a lot of that and it's very very strong our tripping business, we carry about 300 000 people a year.

Q: Weddings?

A: We do--, there's also the private charter side that runs parallel with that business so we do weddings, birthdays, corporate events. We do a lot of wedding transfers now, that's become very popular, from--, we pick up--, if a church has a riverside mooring or close to the river we'll pick them up and transport them to another venue again, that's near the river or on the river. So we do what's called a river transfer.

Q1: I have a question. So the passenger boats, do you repair all of those up at Chatham?

A: No, we're too busy. I'm too busy on the Medway so my own boats go to a local yard.

Q1: Do they?

A: They do.

Q1: And what's that yard?

A: The Sunbury dry dock.

Q1: Just because it's local and it's--,
A: It's local, all my staff--, my skippers although they work in the summer they all--, in the winter time they all double up and do carpentry, electricians, paint, they do all the maintenance so if they'd be having to travel to Kent or staying in hotels it's just not financially viable.

Q: Okay well Richard, once again thank you very much for answering all our questions.

[END OF RECORDING – 1:06:02]