Q: This is an oral history interview with Robert Bob Crouch by Walter Rothon on 18th of May 2018. Also present are, Eva Tausig (Q1) from the Thames Festival Trust.

Q2: Ian Jones, I'm a volunteer with the Thames Festival Trust.

Q3: And Adrian Evans from the Thames Festival Trust.

Q: Could you please state your full name?

A: Robert George Crouch.

Q: Your date of birth?

A: 14th of May 1937.

Q: Where were you born?

A: I was born in London at hospital in Shooter’s Hill but at that time my family were living on the Isle of Dogs, but we were victims of the bombing in 1940, our house was destroyed, and my father who was also a waterman rowed us across the river to his mother in Greenwich and although I was only three, I do remember all the river being alight and all the boats and tugs on fire. And so, we stayed there—, I was sent away for—, to avoid the bombing as lots of children were in those days, evacuation, and in the meantime my father bought us another house in Greenwich and we came back, and I spent all my—, rest of my life as a resident of Greenwich.
Q: What were your---, what are, what were your parent's names?

A: My father's name was Robert, Robert Alfred Crouch, and my mother's name was Ellen, Ellen Agnes Seymour, her original maiden name.

Q: And you mentioned that your father was a waterman, your mother?

A: My mother came from a family of stevedores. Stevedores are the men that load ships, it's slightly more skilled than dockers who unload ships because obviously, when you're loading a ship you've got to think about it being in the sea and moving about, so she was a daughter of-- , she was one of 15 children, big family of stevedores, and my father was-- , he was a waterman, he was apprenticed to his father, so I'm only third generation which in watermen's terms is quite a newcomer.

Q: What got your father in---, sorry, your grandfather into being a waterman?

A: I'm not 100% sure, but he was apprenticed to somebody called Ridley, I've got his apprenticeship papers. He came from a family in Kent, Crouch family in Kent, but although we're doing some-- , we're trying to do some history for the family, all we've found out so far is that one of our relations or one of [yeah, our 0:03:29] relations, was the Beadle of Hornsey Church in Hornsey which is in-- , near Crouch End funnily enough in London. So, he was sort of a Policeman or Inspector of the Church.

Q: Can you tell me about your school, you know, about your education? What were you interested in at school?

A: Well, you can imagine during the war there wasn't a lot of it [laughs], so we-- , I don't think I went to school until I was well back from the evacuation and we were all running a bit wild, you can imagine the children in and out of the bombed houses. But I went to [inaudible 0:04:16] Road Infant School and curiously enough, I've had people contact me through reading the book who went to school with me. One chap the other day, he's from-- , he's now in New Zealand, but one man who now lives in-- , I think he's in Germany or Belgium who-- , and he remembered all the names of the teachers and the other pupils, he's got an incredible memory and he sent me loads of stuff from that, so that's very interesting. 11+ in those days meant that you were sorted into where you would go next and that could be a grammar school if you passed for grammar school, or secondary modern, or if-- , there was an inbetween thing called
a central school and in my year there were a lot of people that--, and I was one of them, just
scraped through for grammar but there were too many of us, so I went to Charlton Central,
which was a bit of a shock to the system because it was very strict, corporal punishment in
those years, of course. I got the cane six times in the first year and gradually one time less at
it went through to my final sixth year [laughs].

Q: What are your earliest memories of the river?

A: My earliest memories were with my father who used to take me with him. He was an
Attendance waterman as was my grandfather. An Attendance waterman’s job was to--, this is
before mobile phones and telephones in general, listen for a ship coming up the river blowing
for a waterman which is two long and two short blasts. He would then make his way, or they
would, both of them, would make their way to Greenwich where--, that was their patch and
they would row off to the ship and take the ship’s ropes while the ship was turning round onto
the buoys and buoy jump to connect the ship to the river buoys. And then, all the time that the
ship was there--, in those days unloading a ship into barges round the ship could take, you
know, a week, two weeks sometimes and he would attend on the ship backwards and
forwards taking the stevedores backwards and forwards to unload and the ship’s crew and
visitors to the ship. And he attended on the vessel and when it was finished, then his job was
to buoy jump to release the boat after getting his cheque signed and then wait for the next
vessel, so they were called Attendance watermen [pause while bell chimes in room].

Q: Done. What kind of boat was--, did your father--,

A: Did they use?

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah, they used--, they had to be licensed, they were licensed boats. They weren’t wherries
then they were skiffs, something like this behind me which has got a transom stern as
opposed to the wherries that had a canoe or pointed stern. And the idea of that was that you
could back the skiff onto the stairs at Greenwich and the passengers could walk from the boat
straight onto the stairs and away.

Q: So, that was all rowed?
A: All rowing, all rowing, yeah. My father changed during his lifetime to motorboats, but they were open motorboats, they were still, you know, subject to the weather and I followed him into that. I can remember going with him probably about nine, age of nine, and he would sometimes let me have an oar in the bow and help him a bit. But in those days of course, the stevedores were--, these were the men that handled the cargo and a lot of the trade then was sugar ships coming in. 300 weight sacks of sugar which was--, 300 weight’s quite a heavy sack and I remember these chaps with their metal hooks tucked into their belt, walking round the street, I mean, you’d be arrested today if you carried a weapon like that, but they--, of course, that was the normal thing then. In fact, all the watermen carried [sheath 0:09:04] knives, quite big knives, kept them tucked away round the back but, you know, you could carry them ‘cause that was the tool of your trade.

Q: You worked for a company that was part of Tate & Lyle which is the sugar company. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

A: Yeah, my father insisted I stayed on at school for an extra year. He didn’t want me to come afloat as we say, he didn’t want me to come into--, follow him into the trade, but I was dead keen to do it and he eventually agreed that he would apprentice me as a second string to my bow as he used to say, and he got me a job with Silvertown Services which is the transport wing of Tate & Lyle. And there’s Tate’s and there’s Lyle’s refineries down river and I was mostly at Tate’s which is opposite Woolwich, so to get there I had to get a tram down to Woolwich, go through the foot tunnel and out the other side and walk up to the Tate’s Refinery.

Q: And where-- how did you get into-- you know, obviously you dipped an oar in with your dad, but how did you get into rowing a little bit further on, when it became a little bit more full-time?

A: I was not keen on rowing as a sport, my sport was swimming and I played water-polo for Greenwich. All my friends were in the Greenwich Swimming Club, but my-- he was quite clever my father, he didn’t push it too hard, but he kept gnawing away at it and when I was about 18 he persuaded me to go with him to the Globe Rowing Club at Greenwich and a couple of outings and I loved it, I, you know, really took to it. And then, of course, from there-- that was rowing and from there I went into the sculling side of it because, you know, having got the bug I wanted to row for the Coat and Badge.

Q: So, is that your-- so, let’s talk about the Coat and Badge. Is that your first memory or what is your first memory of the Coat and Badge?
A: Well, it's something that's your--, they talk about on the river from the word go, probably--., you know, it's even very young children hear about it when their parents are talking about it and my family was no exception. You know, my father was very pleased when I agreed to do it, but in--, I didn't start until I was 18, I didn't start rowing until I was 18 which is quite, you know, old because Doggett's when you're--., in those days, you had one chance when you were 21, the first year of your freedom of your--., from your apprentice, apprenticeship. So, he was very keen, and I had a very good coach he got for me who was [Roadsman 0:12:15] at Tate & Lyle, a winner of the race himself and I think he won the World Championship once as well, a chap called White. And I used to go down there--, he kept the boat off a float and kept it varnished and maintained and I used to go off and row. But he sent me on very long rows, I mean, from Woolwich I had to row down as far as the wires at Dagenham which cross the river, was quite a row down and back and then, on the following--., or another day I had to row up river, row over the course, the five-mile course, and all the way back for another outing. So, they were quite long, involved outings. And unfortunately, you know, young men do this sort of thing, I was working down at Purfleet for Silvertown Services and we were seeing who could lift this heavy metal ladder that somebody had left on the top of the jetty, and I managed to rupture or get a hernia, this was six months before the race. So, Jack West was--, who was the--., my coach said, “Well, we’ll have to get you strapped up, you know, you can’t go this far and not race, you’re going to race.” So, I went to Seaman’s Hospital to--., and the surgeon thought it was hilarious, you know, this idea of being strapped up and he said--., he was a rowing man and he said, “If you do exactly as I tell you, I’ll have you back in a boat in three months and you’ll have three months of training.” Which was, in a way, good because I was a bit of an outsider then, nobody knew, you know, much about my abilities. And come the day of the race, or three months before the race, I was back in training and then right through to the day of the race, my father hired a following pleasure boat and I went up with Jack and met him at Tower Pier and he said, “Right, get in the boat and go right over the other side, go away from everybody,” which I did. And there should have been five of us in the race that year, but the one from Gravesend was ill and couldn’t row, so there was only four of us in the race. The favourite was a chap called Darcy who still doesn’t speak to me [laughs] although he’s a very wealthy millionaire now, he’s got a big company, waste paper company. And so, there was Darcy, a chap called House, good family name, and a chap called Evans and we started off and I went into the lead and with rowing, any form of--., but particularly sculling, you know, to be a length up is a very good place to be because you can watch what’s going on and you can match their efforts, you know? But Darcy had other ideas, he went up in the--., he went through the wrong arch--., well, he went through a different arch of the bridge and rowed up inside the [roads 0:15:44] and I didn’t know he was doing this, I’m looking to see where he’d got to and I thought he’d hit the bridge. I thought, oh, great, you know? Anyway, he came out the [roads 0:15:53] three lengths in front of me. My--., Jack West was in the bow of the boat giving me this signal, long and strong, which was the signal for when you’re behind, you know, whatever you do, don’t look round and you just row them down. ‘Cause the theory is that
they've put in a tremendous effort to get where they are, and you don’t let them rest and so, that’s what I did. And at Pimlico I just saw the stern of his boat and then it disappeared, he had another go and I just kept going and then, he stayed there for a bit longer and eventually, I did something that Jack West told me he did during his race. You know, it’s a disheartening bit of gamesmanship and the trick is, you turn round and look at the thing and smile at them. Theory being that they’re exhausted from their efforts and you’ve got--., you look as if you’ve got loads left, you know, so that’s what I did [laughs].

Q: And what--., can you describe the day? You know, what was the tide like? What was the day like itself?

A: A bit unusual on my race. In those days we had stake boats. These were boats anchored in the river and a man would hold the stern of your boat and the idea was, it was done on the young flood so you’ve got the floodtide with you and he was holding the stern of the boat so that you got an accurate start. But the tide was very late, it was still ebbing and so, we had to row the--, pull the stake boats round into the correct, you know, position. And so, we started off with the tide against us, slightly against us and we then rowed through the--, you know, the non-tidal part of the low water.

Q: And it was Darcy who did the shortcut. Were there lots of dirty tricks or tricks that people used?

A: Well, it’s not really a dirty trick, it’s just using the river which is what you’re supposed to be doing. We still have it even today with traditional rowing. There was a big argument at the last meeting that we had for the traditional rowing where one of the livery company’s crews thought the watermen cheated by going--, changing sides of the river. But what they were doing, they were gaining the tide, you know, they were using the--, getting a better tide flow. So, it still goes on. But there was in the early days a lot of--, because it was a wager, people were betting on the outcome and so, you know, people would try and damage your oars or steal your oars or damage the boat, let water in, you know, things like that were commonplace, I’m afraid.

Q: How close was the race in the end, you know, in terms of your win?

A: I think I won by 26 lengths, they said which was quite a lot. He’d--., I mean, he’d--., he was just--, that smile, I think, destroyed all his [laughs] efforts.
Q: And what did it feel like when you crossed the line?

A: It's strange, everyone says that, it doesn't really register for a few days. I mean, everything is going on and you think, you know, great and the Prime Warden of the Fishmongers comes over with a bottle of champagne in the boat and, you know, everybody wants to pat you on the back and my friends who--; from the swimming club who were there, they wanted to--; you know, “Come on, let's go off and have a drink,” and I actually sneaked away, I didn’t go on my father’s boat which, you know, upset him a bit. So, we all went off and enjoyed ourselves and they all--; they enjoyed themselves, but it doesn’t really register for--; you know, for a bit of time. And in my case, of course, one of the reasons I wanted to make the most of my time, was the fact that I had to do National Service. I’d been deferred until I’d finished my apprenticeship and so, after Doggett’s I was then called up. I did my National--., I was in the Navy--.

Q: How soon after?

A: Or a matter of a couple of months, I think, before I went in and did [laughs]--; they give you an interview at--; went to Blackheath where you do a medical, you go around and do a medical and then they do an interview to see which branch of the Services you’re going to go in and I’m 21 and all the others are about 18, so you can imagine I was, you know sort of Jack The Lad and nobody was going to--; I was going to go in the Navy--; if I had to do it--; I said to them, “If you want me to do it, I’ll do it in the Navy, other than that, you’ll wish I’d never been born,” you know, that sort of attitude. And anyway, the chief petty officer who interviewed me said, “Right, so in civvy street you’re a waterman/lighterman,” he said, “well, we don’t have a Plumber’s division, but we do have an electrical.” [Laughs] So, I finished up doing an EM’s course, electrical/mechanic’s course in the Navy for my National Service, ‘cause they thought that a lighterman was something to do with electrics. I’m sure that’s [laughs]…

Q: And any interesting stories from your Service period?

A: I did my basic training and then I did the EM’s course which was about five months at Collingwood. And then I was flown out to Cyprus to meet the--; join the ship, HMS Battleaxe, and in those days Cyprus was in the middle of this war between the Turks and the Greeks with Bishop Makarios and the EOKA they called themselves, these terrorists. And I landed at Nicosia in the plane and then these squaddies, these Army chaps, collected me and put me in the back of their lorry ‘cause you’re all in whites, you know, white uniforms, and halfway there--; ‘cause we had to go right up to the Turkish part to join the ship, halfway there they said--; we stopped to have a--; you know, something to drink, and they said, “Alright,” he said, “well, I
think you’d better come in the cab with us now in that white suit,” he said, “cause this is where they’ve got their snipers,” [laughs]. You could have told me before, you know. So anyway, I did that and then we’d go round and round Cyprus showing the flag and it was great because it was like the Grand Tour, I mean, going--, visiting all the Mediterranean countries. And then, after about a year the fishing war broke out in Iceland, so our ship was sent from the Mediterranean to Iceland and en route we had to stop at Gibraltar and join in with the Americans in a big naval game, I suppose you’d call it. And our ship was a radar picket ship which meant it had a great big radar thing on top which gave 200 miles extra vision from the fleet, so you had the fleet in the middle and a radar picket at the front, one at each side and one at the back, which gave you 400 miles warning of any attacks or anything like that. So, off we went and we hit this dreadful storm, it was awful, you know, wish you dead, that sort of storm, and we were the radar picket at the front, so went all through the storm, through the eye of the storm, through the other side and when the main fleet hit it, this American Sea Captain said, “No, this is too rough, turn round.” So, the whole thing turned--, and we were now the one at the back and we had to go back through the storm again, so it was quite an experience. In fact, the ship was damaged which meant that we--, instead of going straight to Iceland, we stopped in Chatham for some repairs and then went up to Iceland and then we were there for the [changing 0:25:05] of the Icelandic gunboats which--, I only saw them once and our Skipper had been telling us what was going on. There was this gunboat Thor that was chasing two of our fishing boats, threatening them, chasing them out of the--[, what they said was their waters and so, we all turned--, we all had to turn to on action stations and my action station was on the foredeck, so I had a wonderful view of what was happening and suddenly, out of the fogbank, came three trawlers. We thought there was only two trawlers being chased down, but one of them had a little gun on the front [laughs] and that was Thor and she came towards us and turned this gun on us and our Skipper turned all our guns on him and he went cock-a-doodle-doo and went back in the fogbank. So, it was in some ways light-hearted, but there were some dangerous--, they were--, you know, they were deliberately crashing into vessels and things, the Icelanders, so it was quite an experience up there.

Q: So, having survived Cyprus and an altercation with the Icelandics, you get back to the UK, what happened with your win of the Doggett’s? I mean, did that have an immediate impact once you got back or how did that impact your life?

A: Well, of course, while I’d been away there had been two more modern winners, so what tends to happen, the newer winners tend to be invited to all sorts of things, garden parties, anybody in the rowing world, you know, if you’re well enough connected, used to and probably still do, like to have some Doggett’s winners in their bright uniforms as part of the thing and guards of honour and all that sort of thing still takes place, so I joined in that a bit. But I was also keen on my rowing career which was now rowing rather than sculling and I rowed at Henley in the
Wyfold’s fours in 19--, the end--, ’61. And then the two following years I rowed in the Thames Cup, so I did three years racing at Henley for an invited club called [Argosy 0:27:41] which was The National Dock Labour Board sports division. And we didn’t win, but the best we did, we lost the final which is the worst thing you can do at Henley because if you’re going to lose, you might as well lose on day one and get-- , you know, enjoy it [laughs]. If you get through to the final, you’ve got to stay training all the way through.

Q: And going back to your win, when did you first wear the Coat and Badge? When was that given to you?

A: Yeah, that happens a few months after--, well, Doggett's is in--, end of July/beginning of August and the dinner where you’re presented to the Prime Warden of the Fishmongers’ Company is in November, November/December, something like that and of course, by then I’m in the Navy, so Fishmongers wrote to my commanding officer and he called me in and said, “What’s all this about, this saddle and spurs you’ve won?” Or something, you know, he called it. So, I told him a little bit about it and he said, “Well, I've been invited, I suppose I can manage some tepid fish,” I remember him saying this tepid fish. So, they gave me time off to come back to go to be presented with the Coat and Badge.

Q: And how did that feel wearing it for the first time?

A: Great, yeah, it’s really-- , you know, ’cause you’re with people you know, we all know each other and it’s-- , I don’t know if you’ve been to Fishmongers Hall, it’s a very impressive hall and the ceremony is very impressive because you-- , you’re led in by the clerk and a couple of Mace Bearers and then you and then there’s a couple of other people from the Fishmongers, then there’s as many of the past winners that they can get on the evening. And so, you all go in and they file round the walls and you’re presented to the prime warden and he’s got this-- , the cup that you also win, a silver cup, which is about, you know, that sort of size, full of port, very nice port, and so, the ceremony is that, you know, he gives you a taste and you toast him and then he has a taste and gives it back to you and you’ve got to get out with this thing [laughs] where it’s devoured by all the other winners. But-- , and in the background to all this you’ve got the Household-- , one of the-- , I think it’s the Household Cavalry or one of the bands playing See the Conquering Hero Come, Handel. So, it’s quite a-- , you know, it’s a thing that you’re not really used to doing that sort of thing and it really is a bit knee-trembling.

Q: Have you been back to subsequent handing over of the Coat and Badge?
A: Yeah, oh yeah, I'm invited every year to it. I don't--, I went--, the last one I went to was the year before last because for some reason my uniform has shrunk over the years and so, I had it altered, she let it out four inches each side and it still nearly pops the buttons, so anyway, it was the 300th anniversary and I thought I ought to make an effort. So, I had it altered and went to that and it's still the same, the same ceremony and the same thing, all the lads enjoy it and then they--, after the ceremony we all go down and have a dinner in the, like a mess room that they have down there.

Q: Do you still go down and watch the races?

A: Yeah, I go every year, I think I've been certainly most years, might have missed one or two in the process. No, it's good.

Q: And of the rowing and the sculling that you've been involved in, does that stand out as the event in your life? Is that the one you remember the most that win?

A: Oh yes. Yes, I think it is because it's so--, all the history attached to it, all the involvement with the trade, you know, everybody's talking to you about it. I remember my mother saying, you know, "I'm fed up Doggett, I have it for breakfast, dinner and tea," she said [laughs]. And so, you know, you have all these connections which makes it very special. Compared to swimming and water-polo, it was a much more--+, even compared to rowing, you know, the Doggett's is so much different to the Henley. Henley's great, but in a different way.

Q: How so? How's it different?

A: Well, it's very historic of course, Henley, it always impresses me that--+, one of the things I wanted to do and I hadn't done, one of the sort of ambitions was to drive the Umpire's launch. They've got--+, I think they have three and they follow the race and then they change passengers and then they follow the next race, and so, Chas Newens who organises it, I said to him one year, you know, "Can I do a day for you, no charge? You know, do it free of charge? I just want to do it," and God was it hard work because you don't stop. Even lunchtime you're running and picking up people from the way stations along and taking them back. And so, that was great 'cause you then find out that before motorboats, when Henley first started, watermen rowed the Umpire behind the racers. So, you know, it gives you an idea of--+, and that's why you've got this sort of gentlemen's rowing and professional rowing.
Q: And do you—, what—, how aware are you of the differences between those? Between the amateurs and the professionals? What's your experience of that?

A: Well, nowadays of course, it's not very strict. When I rowed they were very strict, we weren't even allowed to--we had to pay for our own tracksuits and our own expenses, you couldn't claim anything like that otherwise you would be--you would infringe the amateur ruling. There used to be--as part of winning Doggett's there was a purse and that was changed to the silver cup which made it fit in with the amateurism, but they were very strict and of course, over the years it's--it wasn't very fair because the Americans got round it by having university crews and the Russians got round it by having Naval crews and people like us, you know, the idiots as we always are, had to put up with it. Kenny Dwan, double Olympic oarsman, he tells the story of when he went out to--I forget which one it was, the Olympics, he couldn't afford a hotel, so he camped on a field behind the thing and there was an American chap who was rowing, and they got talking one day and this chap said, “Which hotel are you staying at?” And he said, “Oh, I'm not, I'm over there in that field,” and he couldn't believe it. But that's what it was like, it was very very strict.

Q: Do you think you were treated differently? Apart from the obvious, you know, in terms of the strictness, were you treated differently by others in the rowing fraternity?

A: There is a difference yeah, I mean, the school rowing and the university rowing is different. But, I mean, I recently took my grandson to do the--to do a week at Eton rowing course and, you know, that's great it's all--you sort of mix with everybody, but certainly in the past it was very much a them and us sort of sport because of the fact that gentlemen took it on as a pastime, whereas the professional watermen it was their living.

Q: So, why did you write your book, The Coat?

A: Well, I wrote it because we--I sit on the Library Committee here, The watermen's Hall, and we had a lady come to categorise all our books and when she presented it to us there was no mention of a category for rowing or for Doggett's, the two biggest things, and said to her, you know, “Why?” And she said, “Well, you've only got a couple of books on it, I thought it wasn't necessary,” [laughs] so, while she was cate--putting those in a category I checked with the Fishmongers' Company and it turned out they had the same couple of books, you know, it was quite surprising. And one book was about--there was an argument about Doggett's portraits, you know, 'cause there was--still is, a bit of an argument about what he actually looked like, so this is just a thin book, it's not really much about Doggett himself, it's about his portraits. And the other one is a book by a winner or a rower who wrote resumés of the races in the
Victorian times and I thought well, you know, somebody ought to get this down and I’d never written anything in my life, so I thought it might be a way of doing it. And I started off thinking it would just be a factual book and then I realised that part of my job as the Queen’s barge master was having to be prepared to do talks, so I did a lot of research on the lifestyle of watermen throughout the ages and there was some fascinating stories and I thought, you know, if you could—, if I do it as a novel then I can put Doggett in it but tell of the lifestyle of the men of that time. So, that’s how I came to do it.

Q: Was it—, how was it viewed amongst the community of watermen and Lightermen?

A: Yeah, very good, I’ve sold about a thousand copies in the—, you know, amongst people in the know, you know, people that know about the River, but I’ve never really tried to sell it wider than that. I’m just not very—, it’s not my forte [laughs].

Q: And when did you decide to go into—, you set up a business, a pleasure boat business, what led you to that?

A: Well, when I came back from the Navy, from National Service, I joined my father in his business as an Attendance watermen, but I was always looking to expand and he didn’t really want to—, he wanted to—, he wasn’t against me expanding, but we decided then we would split and through a friend of his I got into pilotage, bridge piloting, so I did seven years as a Bridge Pilot taking little ships up—, little German, Dutch ships up through the bridges and down, you know, ducking under the arches. There was 25-foot rise and fall of tide, so you had to know how to read each bridge to know how much air draft there was underneath it. So, that was surprising and at the same time I was doing some civil engineering work. I had a little fleet of little boats that I would hire out or hire out with a man, building things like the terminals for the ferry, for instance, at Woolwich, I was involved in that and other things further down river. So, there was quite a business on that side. But a lot of the business was going form London, it was going down river, because—, mainly because of the way cargo was being handled with containerisation and railway ships and things like that and it mean that we would have to move down. By then, I’d married, I married my wife, a German lady, we met on a skiing holiday in [Kittsville 0:41:20] and we talked about it and I said, “The only thing that I can see that’s got a future is pleasure boats,” and a chap had just started a pleasure boat—, in fact, the boat hadn’t—, it was only half built, and he was looking for someone to come in with some investment, so I went in with him. It was the first catamaran on the River, it was called Catamaran Cruises. So, I joined him and we—, there were some other Directors involved, but I bought 25% into the company and then over the years I managed to get controlling interest and after 27 years I think it was, I finally sold out to a very big French catering company called
Sodexo and, you know, that was my career. In the middle of it, there was an opportunity for a BES company, Business Expansion Scheme company, which meant that people with more money than they needed could invest in these BES companies tax free, so there was, you know, there was this opportunity for cash and so, we put together a river bus operation called Thames Line and we ordered seven catamarans, so 64-seater catamarans and the idea was we had two people on the Board who were property specialists from Chelsea, they were all Chelsea lads, and their part in the scheme of things was to involve land--, the idea was to buy a piece of land next to the River and put a river bus stop in it, so it would enhance the value of that property and development. And it never really worked out, we just didn’t raise enough money. We raised enough money to buy the boats and do a few piers and under BES rules, after two years you have to go back to your investors and give them the opportunity to take their money out or whatever. And you have to have a plan what the options are. And they chose the option of selling the company to what was then the new going to be Canary Wharf, so the people at Canary Wharf took it over, changed the name of it, then that all went wrong because of the Canary Wharf went to the wall and then it came back again and eventually, some of the crews who worked for Thames Line took it over and by then the original boats had been sold, but they got some Australian vessels, clippers they call them, and now we have the river bus service that is now and it’s doing very well. So, we were a bit too early, very naive, I mean that’s all the business plan scheme was you’re dealing with multi-millionaires who are not really interested in what you’re doing, they just want to, you know, put their money safe.

Q: You’re involved in being a Royal waterman and Her Majesty’s barge master. What’s involved in that? What do you actually do?

A: Well, I--, back in the 80’s I was--, what you have to do, you have to offer your services to the Monarch and the Queen or the Monarch has had as part of the Royal Household, watermen dating right back well, we know now back in the 13th, probably the 12th century, there were--., it was a good way to travel because it’s comfortable, it’s safer than horseback riding or--., carriages were terrible apparently, they were real teeth-breakers, they used to--., on the cobbled streets. So, it was a good way to travel and the--., all the wealthy people had their own barges and the King of course was no exception. The earliest one we can see was at the signing of Magna Carta, the King either went to or was attended by his Royal Barge, ‘cause he didn’t just go once to sign it, he was backwards and forwards for about a month or so. And all the [barons 0:46:31] that attended that went in their private barges, so this sort of idea of this sort of form of transport goes right back as far as that. And anyway, I offered my--., sent my letter into the Privy Purse and said, you know, I’d like to offer my services to the Queen. They check you out, they do a search on you and then, you go on a list and if you’re lucky enough--., it’s changed over recent years, you now only do between ten and 15 years at it. They brought--., they’ve introduced a retirement age but in those days it wasn’t. Anyway, I was accepted and did eight years as a Royal waterman under Ted Hunt who was the barge master.
at that time, and then I was interviewed and promoted or shortly promoted to barge master, and this Queen has had six barge masters, she’s outlived or out-reigned six barge masters which is incredible really. An incredible woman when you--., you know, when you get to know her a little bit.

Q: So, with regards the future, has your perception of Doggett’s changed over time? Has it changed for you?

A: Well, the problem is that whereas when Doggett started this, you’d get as many as 500 men qualifying to be--, to run in the race and only six could row, but there would be as many as 500 coming clear of their apprenticeship that year. So, the names used to be picked from a hat and then if you got one, you could sell it, you could sell your--., if you wanted to, you know, you could sell it to somebody else. The clever thing that Doggett did was that he didn’t allow--., one of the reasons for having this one chance in your lifetime of rowing for it was it kept out the Wager men. These were the men that made their living racing in wagers and so, they were out of the scheme of things, and so, you know, that was how it operated. Nowadays of course, over the years they’ve had to make some changes. Originally it was rowed in wherries, you know, the working boat of the watermen and gradually over time that has been changed into special racing boats and it’s--., that’s had to be changed. The race is still in the same direction, it’s still over the same course, it’s still only for watermen but they can now have three attempts at it from their first official attempt through to--., because we’re not apprenticing the numbers that we used to. I mean, we get through maybe 20 a year, 30 a year at the most, apprentices.

Q: And what’s your view of the future of Doggett’s and the apprenticeship, you know, the watermen?

A: Well, we’re--., you know, we’re determined to keep our apprenticeship going and even in the teeth of, you know, Europe because Europe tried to change the amount of time people are trained and, you know, ours is a five year apprenticeship and they said, “You don’t need five years, you can do it in two years,” you know, so there was all sorts of new things introduced and Boat Master’s Licences and other things, but we’ve tried to keep the apprenticeship as part of whatever’s going on and our argument is, you know, we’ve been doing it for 500 years, it’s worked very well so, you know, why do you want to change it? And we’re actually--., looks as if we might be winning the day a bit because, you know, these bodies who are going to be in charge of deciding if somebody is trained enough, are having to ask us how to do it because it’s--., you know, it’s not easy. Our system is very similar to the Royal Naval Midshipman’s thing where you go before a Board of Grey Beards who fire questions at you for about half an
Q: And why do you think—, or how important is it for you that Doggett’s continues?

A: It’s very important and I think that, you know, this trial that we’re going to do with Thames Festival is good. One of the problems with Doggett’s is it’s been almost a secret, I mean, not many people know about it. The oldest annually held sporting event in the world and nobody knows about it, even Londoners. It’s amazing how many people don’t know about it. I mean, that Commander or Admiral I think he was when I did my National Service, he thought it was saddle and stirrups or something I think he called it, he had no idea what it was about. But it’s got everything going for it, it’s got history, it’s got drama, a bit of danger, we’ve had some dangerous races, you know, we’ve had a—, our safety boat one year when a chap who’s name was Winn, was trying so hard he didn’t notice he was off course and rode into the swim of a moored barge and his boat broke up round him and we were there, we couldn’t get to him because he was under the thing and we’re going to him, “Dive,” you know, ‘cause you don’t want to get caught under the barge. And he did, he dove—, we ran around the other end and got him as he came out. So, there’s been some, you know—, it’s quite dangerous on the Thames with the tidal regime.

Q: As anyone ever lost their life?

A: Not during Doggett’s no, but we are one of the—, apart from the Marchioness which was the first loss of passengers for, I think it was 113 years, we do lose our men occasionally. I think we’re rated more dangerous than Steeplejacks, I believe, on the ratings scale, which is, you know, just one of those things, you know.

Q: And are any of your children involved with the River?
A: My daughter’s a member of the company because we changed our system to allow ladies in a few years ago and she was number two to come in. I don’t have a son, but I have a grandson who--, I mean, at the moment he’s only 15, he’s at school still, so I don’t know whether--. I, you know, I wouldn’t discourage or encourage. I think if he wants to do it I will help him.

Q: Okay, is there anything else you’d like to discuss or talk about Doggett’s or apprenticeship as a waterman?

A: Well, we’re very lucky, we’ve got--. the Master this year who’s--, not only this year but in past-- , in recent years has really pushed to get the men involved and one of the things I like about it he’s--, the trouble with Doggett’s, it’s a winner takes all race and we--. it used to be that only the winner got the silver cup, now that goes to all contestants who finish the course and he is now in the process of introducing a blazer, a Doggett’s blazer, for all contestants who finish the course. And I think that encourages people, you know, it’s--. the trouble is that there are so many other sports you can be involved in nowadays and to choose rowing and it’s quite a--. you’ve got to spend a lot of time rowing if you’re going to do it properly, if you’re going to have a chance, it’s off-putting when you’re in your year of the race and you’ve got a couple of other people who are rowing to an international standard and you’ve got to--. you’re up against them, it’s--. you know, it’s~, so he’s introducing things which I think are very good. And I think this idea of having it part of the Thames Festival is a good move as well, it publicises it, makes it something that the men who could enter can feel, you know, proud about.

Q: And finally, before, you know, these guys have got any more questions, if you could just summarise what Doggett’s means to you? If you just put it in one little parcel, you know, what has Doggett’s meant to you?

A: Well, it’s meant a great deal, it--. as I said, it takes over your life to some extent, but no it does mean a lot to me and I would like to feel that I’ve done something to tell the story and to spread the word, as it were. So, yeah, I think Doggett said his race would last forever and we’ve got Fishmongers’ on track for that to look after it and the watermen’s Company are still producing the contestants, so I think--. yeah, I think we’re still okay, still going.

Q3: Well, can I ask you a question? This is Adrian Evans for the tape. Bob, you mentioned that when you were doing National Service your Commanding Officer attended the Fishmongers’--. the dinner for the--. to present the winner. He obviously understood a great deal more about Doggett’s having attended that dinner. Did that change his attitude towards you as a--.
A: I never met him again, never met him at the dinner, but he was there apparently, and I was almost at the end of my course by then, my EM's course, and I was trying to get--, I wanted to travel. I thought if I'm in the Navy I want to see something of the world, so I was trying to get Far East, but National Service, they didn't want to waste their money, so I got the Med which I-, was pretty good. But no, I never saw him again, so I don't know whether he changed his view of the tepid fish [laughs].

Q3: Can I ask you something more about this gentleman versus amateur issue? Where you ever aware of, let's call it discrimination between amateurs and professionals? Were there rowing clubs that you wanted to attend but weren't able to because of your waterman status or were there regattas that you wanted to compete in, but weren't able to because of your waterman status?

A: Not really during my time, no, I've never felt that, in fact, you know, I've made some very good friends amongst the--, that side of rowing. And I've been very pleasantly surprised that, you know, this new form of rowing that we've instituted called--, we call it traditional rowing, has come about. I mean, that all started with the Duke of Edinburgh making a comment about whether you watermen, Royal watermen, can still row and he was talking to Kenny Dwan who was a double Olympic oarsman when he said this, so we thought, well we've got to, you know, prove that we can do it and we instituted a row, a Tudor row from Hampton Court to Greenwich originally and we called it the Tudor Pull. And the idea was to get the livery companies involved in it as well, and it sort of took off, everybody thought it was a great idea and out of that it must have been a bad time for news because we got the front page of The Times, a big picture of the boat being rowed down to Greenwich with the Master of this company on board. And we ran it to Greenwich for a few years and then--. I mean, we were just going to do it as a one-off, the Royal watermen, but there was a couple of media types in the company who said, “You can’t do it just for once, you know, you’ve got to--., this is too good to do just a one-off,” and so, it was turned into an annual event and it’s still going today. And from that, came the Great River Race and a lot of these other fixed seat races with just a new one last year started up at Greenwich called The Royal Greenwich Challenge, which is a great fun and it’s all in fixed-seat boats. The rule is you have to have a Coxswain because of the tide, we thought, you know--., the idea was to make it safe, so these boats you can step into and they won’t turn over, they’re very stable and steady, anybody can row in them, disabled people can row in them, from about sort of 15 right through to old age, you can still row in them. So, we thought, it must have a Steersman, must have a Coxswain, and let’s make it you have to carry a passenger just to remind us of the days gone past. And so, that’s all happened.
Q3: Can I just ask another question about women and their participation, so only two women have participated in Doggett’s in his history. Do you think that going forwards that women will be both attracted as-- into the Company of watermen and Lightermen and they will take apprenticeships, and do you think that Doggett’s can be raced equally by men and women?

A: I think that’s a--, I can’t quite see that it would be fair for--, if the race stayed the same as it is now and there were women competing, because, you know, they’re physically not as strong. Well, apart from the occasional exception, they’re--, you know, they are at a disadvantage in my view. Whether there could be some sort of alternative race or perhaps something to do with the timings to make it fair, I don’t know, I’ve not really thought deeply about it. It really hasn’t come up yet, we don’t have them beating at the door saying, “We want to row,” but, you know, judging by the way all other things have gone in this world, you know, women are playing rugby, they’re boxing, they’re doing all sorts of sports. When I rowed, it was thought that rowing was not good for women, it wasn’t good for their physique, but now, I think we’ve got more lady rowers than we have men.

Q1: This is Aver from Thames Festival. I just wanted to ask about your time as the Master of the Company of watermen. What did that mean to you? What does being a waterman mean to you? And what did it mean to you to become the Master of the Company?

A: It was an incredible year, you know, it was one of those things you never forget. I-- you normally do about four years as a warden and you sort of learn the ropes, but during my time as warden-- I was made a junior warden and within the first six months, we had a death of one of them in front of me, two of them had to step back because one his wife was having a baby and he wanted to, you know-- he said, “I’ll step back.” Another one had business problems, so he stepped back and all I had was Sir Geoffrey Peacock who was the Remembrancer of London who was the Master in front of me and he was due to be Master of another Company the following year, the Pewterers, I think it was. Anyway, he phoned me one evening and said, “We’ve got a terrible problem,” he said, “our Master has died, the Pewterers, and they’ve asked me to go in immediately.” And he said, “Are you ready to take over?” [Laughs] I’ve only done six months, I’ve got no, you know-- anyway, he phoned me again the following night and said, “No, don’t worry,” he said, “I’m--,” he was actually Master of both Companies for about three or four months, so he overcame that. But I had a very short period of learning, a very steep learning curve, and I came in, I’d never made a speech in my life before and they throw you in at the deep end at this annual dinner that we have at Fishmongers’ Hall and so, you, sort of-- you have to learn quite quickly. The thing I really enjoyed about it was I’ve always felt that watermen’s Company had a wonderful history, you know, nobody had a history like us, but as Master you visit these other liveries, these other guilds, and they’ve all got fantastic histories, they’ve all got, you know, stories to tell. You
know, it’s not as if it’s a secret, it’s just that they don’t publicise themselves and, you know, they are incredible things to find out about and travelling round you get told the story of the different companies that you visit. I didn’t visit them all ‘cause, I mean, there’s over a hundred of them, so--, but the ones I did, I’ve not found one yet that hasn’t got an interesting story to tell. Even some of the modern ones, you know, they’ve found historic links.

Q2: Can I ask just a couple of quick questions?

A: Sure.

Q2: Could you tell us a bit about your training [clock chimes]--, can you tell us a bit about your training for the Doggett’s? You talked about some long rowing that you did, but what else did you do to train for the race?

A: The trouble with sculling it’s you’re on your own, you’re completely on your own, so you haven’t got--, you don’t even have your coach nearby--, or now they do because they have a boat following them, but in those days, he would tell you what he wanted you to do and off you went and did it, out of sight, you know? So, you’re very much on your own and when you think about it now, it’s quite dangerous. You’re in this tiny little boat and you’re in and out of tugs and in those days, tugs and barges all over the place and ships rushing through and some tugs rushing up river with a great big bow wave trying to catch the ship they were supposed to be assisting. So, it was quite a--, you know, it was quite an upheaval, but that was the way it worked, you know, Jack West would say, “Right, okay, today you’re going down to the wires at Dagenham, I want you to do this, I want you to stop at so-and-so and do ten starts, practice your starts and then I want you to do this stretch in long and strong and this--,” and you had all this in your mind what you had to do. And of course, the men on the River are quite--, if they got the chance they’d--., a tug Captain would get you on his head of his tug and keep pushing you to make you go faster and faster. So, although you’re on your own, you had people looking out, watching you and seeing what you were doing.

Q2: And just a question also about being a member of--., can you tell us a bit about being a member of the rowing clubs? What was that like? Which clubs were you a member of and...?

A: Yeah, I joined Globe and I’m still a member of Globe and that was rowing and then they did a little bit of sculling, but sculling was, as I say, a very individual thing, so as I was training for Doggett’s I went up to London Rowing Club at Putney and trained up there from the sculling
point of view. And that’s where, you know, Adrian was saying earlier about meeting people, I met some very nice people from, you know, that rowing world. All the schools and things and it’s surprising how, you know, complimentary towards us as the sort of working side of the River and a lot of the Boatmen up there are watermen, so—, and they’ve got a lot of respect for their Boatmen so, you know, I got to know them quite well. So, Globe Rowing Club and then London and then I got into—, after Doggett’s I got into this [Argosy 1:09:53] crew and they trained out of London Rowing Club as well, so I got to know, you know, quite a few of them. I’m at that age now where I meet people and they say, “Oh, I remember you,” oh God, you know, [laughs]. Everybody’s got a better memory than I have [laughs].

Q2: That’s great, thank you.

Q: Can I ask one last one? Qualifying heats, how did that work for Doggett’s? What was your experience?

A: Well, we didn’t have it in my year because it was—, there was only—, it finished up with only four of us in the race and there had been races where they’d been only three and I think once there was only two. You know, a bit of a problem, but with Simon’s, the Master’s new push to get more entries, it’s looking as if we will have to have qualifying heats and what they will do for that, probably the month before or a few weeks before they will run heats to see who gets knocked out and who goes through to the—, to actually row in the race itself and they usually do that at Putney.

Q: And probably one last thing is apprenticeship. What was your apprenticeship? What was involved in that? How long was it? What did you have to do and what was it like being an apprentice?

A: Depending on the firm you were working, you were apprenticed. You were apprenticed to a Master and he has to find you a job with one of the lighterage companies or, you know, another waterman or something like that. My father got me this job with Silvertown Services and the job for the apprentices, one of the most horrible jobs was pulling these sticky sheets off the barge loads of Demerara sugar that came over in the ships and they’re thick with sticky—, and we had to get them ashore, take them round to the yard at the back and hose them off and clean them and if they needed repair they’d go into the repair thing. And then also when the barges were emptied, all done by crane and grab, the apprentice would go down and sweep all the sweepings together and get the grabber to take the last ones out. And then when—, the way the apprenticeship works, after two years you got what they called a two year’s licence as you’re young, fit, men they use those people in that sort of age group
and called them the Chain Gang because we'd go off to the roads and you'd have a list of which barges were needed next under the crane on the shore, and you'd have to work that barge out from maybe it's the [inaudible 1:12:54] next to the [Roadsman 1:12:54] and you'd have to put fresh barges there and you were forever moving these things around without tugs, you had to just use the tide. So, you know, that was quite a good learning curve and I used to enjoy that 'cause it was all thinking about what you've got to do and how you're going to get that one out from there and while you're doing that one, you'd get that one back in and--, it's quite interesting [pause].

Q: Any more for any more?

Q1: Very good.

A: Good [laughs]?

Q: Thank you.