



THE WEEKEND MILLIONAIRES

AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE THAMES LIGHTERMEN



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The Weekend Millionaires is an oral history project focusing on the Thames Lightermen and Watermen, the people who have operated boats on the River Thames with a history going back hundreds of years. Working with arts and education charity *digital:works*, children from St George the Martyr and Westminster Cathedral primary schools have explored this history, writing about it and also filming interviews with older lightermen for a unique oral history documentary film.

The writing and film the children have been making are included in this booklet but you can read more and listen to all of the full, unedited interviews on the project website...

www.thameslightermen.org.uk







As part of the project the young people visited Watermens Hall, The Museum of London Docklands, the National Maritime Museum and went on a boat trip on the Thames with ex-lightermen; they acted out role plays to help understand the history; learnt oral history techniques and how to film interviews, and created the writing for this booklet and their online blog. The writing on the following pages is a mixture of creative pieces, imagined diaries, poems and accounts all inspired by the children's research and meetings with the lightermen.



The history of the lightermen and watermen goes back to Roman times and the trade was first licensed under King Henry the VIII over 500 years ago with the establishment of the Company of Lightermen and Watermen. The profession has employed generations of Londoners with the lightermen carrying cargo and the watermen carrying passengers up and down and across the increasingly busy river. Skills were passed down within families through a system of apprenticeships and the river became a huge employer and important part of the communities to the south and east of London.

The demand for watermen dwindled from the 18th century with the construction of more bridges and improvement of the road network within London but the lightermen survived and flourished as London's ports were built and received ships from around the world. Sail and oars gave way to steam and then diesel but the traditions, language and communities remained a constant and by the early 1950s there were an estimated 6,000 lightermen afloat, running tugs and towing barges up and down the bustling and polluted river from the estuary all the way up to Teddington Lock with the shoreline dominated by wharves and ports.

The trade began to decline with containerisation of cargo from the late 1960s and the gradual closure of all of London's ports except Tilbury. Today far fewer people are working on the Thames and with this decline families are finally losing their connections with the river but for those still afloat or who have retired over the past 30-40 years there remain vivid memories and important stories to tell. This project aims to record and share some of these.



DIARY OF A LIGHTERMAN

Dear Diary, Yesterday was an extremely busy and sad day. It was the second day of World War II and children began evacuating from London Bridge to Greenwich so as a waterman, I had to take them across the river to safety. When the children went onto the barge, I could hear loud bombs crashing down onto innocent buildings. My stomach turned inside out as I climbed onto the boat. My fears grew little by little as I became more and more worried about my family. Questions began to take over my mind. Were they okay? Where would they be? Are my children choosing to evacuate? Was our home destroyed by the loud bombings? All of a sudden, loud sirens beamed across the entire city. My heart pounded faster. As I began to drive the boat, I could hear the deafening sirens become quieter and quieter. During the middle of the journey, everyone became calm and relaxed and enjoyed the peace of the village we were passing. But it didn't stay like this. Approximately five minutes later, the children began to sob and cry of sadness because they were missing their parents. I couldn't tell them to stop as I would do the same in their position and I was also missing spending time with my family. Luckily after a couple of hours I had finished my 7 shifts to and from Greenwich. Walking home, I was anxious of our home. Was it still standing? As soon as I arrived on the street I did not need to worry anymore: it had crumbled into shards of tiny pieces...in the midst of it stood my family. They were all shivering with fear as they did not think their house would be ruined. However I had remembered to keep clothes, tinned foods and bottles of water in the cellar so for the rest

of the night we searched the heap of the wooden pieces until we found them. Today, despite our house getting bombed, I still had to go to work. It was tough as many more people wanted to travel to Greenwich which meant that the boat become crowded and stuffy. Although the sun was still shining, I could still feel a light wind blowing against my face as I was sitting next to a window. Whilst the passengers hopped off the boat a wave of tiredness struck my face. I had completed six whole shifts yet I still had a few hours left before I went home. Drowsy, I opened the tug's door to let the bunch of petrified people in. They were all in tears; families were lost, homes were lost and everybody's hearts were broken.



LIFE ON THE THAMES

Life on the Thames
Peaceful Clean Tranquil Neat
Heaving in circles
Breaking a sweat
But my work lies on the river Thames

Clean skies
Open wide
Hope that I will never die

Listen carefully
Seagulls screeching
The river Thames calling for me

Working all day
Rowing all night
Wishing, wanting for my payday
rights

Young we start old we end
Our lives are different

We're first young like the river
Then done like the river
Polluted Dirty Noisy Ugly

The river is a monster
Rubbish it is
No work is available
The Thames is gone I already died

Listen carefully
Seagulls screeching
The river still calling for me

Wishing, wanting for the river again
Working years, 10
It's hard for a lighterman



HENRIQUE LAGE

RIO DE JANEIRO

W. H. HARRINGTON & SONS
Barge Owners

STORNAWAY 57 CONNO. 282

HARD LIFE & HARD WORK ON THE THAMES

Dear Diary,

Pouring and wretched it was today. Never have I witnessed such an ominous catastrophe in my entire apprenticeship. Seeing death himself before my very own eyes has caused great devastation upon me. For this day will haunt me for the rest of my life...Yesterday... Sharpened rain clattered viciously onto the metal roof of the tug as the black blanket covers the night. River Thames eerily whispers in the distance underneath the white pearl in the sky. I pulled thick and rough ropes to tie on the barges consequently causing tough callouses on my palm. Weary and feeble, I stumbled to the last barge on the left corner. Shedding a few tears of agony and distraught. Screams and shouts. Distant memories of my family dying 5 days ago in the deadly bombing. Wishing I could be with them. With the raging war transpiring it shouldn't be a problem.

Bill and captain are in the tug boat having tea whilst discussing funny moments in their lives. My funny moments were with my family, ha especially John. After 7:00 I read a book for 15 minutes before returning to the tug boat; to finish of my duties. Suddenly however, as I neared to the edge of the tug a bomb exploded nearby forcing the boat to tilt over. Drowning I swam up to the surface in search for air. Realising, yet again, I am isolated and by myself... Bill and captain didn't make it...



Long difficult hard working hours.

It's a hard slog on the Thames.

Giving up isn't allowed.

Happy we're making our ancestors proud.

Together as a union we strike for more money.

Evening, morning and afternoon we work hard.

Running up and down the river.

Men don't have time to shiver.

Even the cold knows that.

Never underestimate the power of lightermen.



‘IT RUNS THROUGH OUR BLOOD’

A new day dawns, another cold February morning commencing.

The penetrating bitter wind chills me to the bones as the river punches fiercely at my boat.

Beads of sweat trickle down my forehead whilst I heave yet another hulk of cargo, the pride of my master only urges me to work harder.

The drone of men rushing about along the docks buzzes in my ears.

For generations my ancestors have looked upon my dear family as they work on the Thames.

For generations our hands have been battered by the cruel weather.

The Thames runs through our city, it courses through our blood.

We powered the city and kept it flowing, our jobs all but gone.

Our story still lives on...



ALAN LEE WILLIAMS

Alan talked about what it was like to stand in front of the master at Waterman's Hall. He said it was very scary because the Master asked lots of hard questions about being a lighterman. Often your master would be your father and if you got questions wrong you would fail the test and disappoint your family.

Alan was a member of parliament and he was part of the R.A.F but he said his favourite job was being a lighterman. He said he really enjoyed his time afloat on the Thames. It was an exciting time of his life. He described working during the summer as a glorious time.

He had plenty of money as he was paid very well. At the weekends, lightermen would spend their money on flash cars and fancy clothes. Alan told us how he bought a 1930 Austin 7.

Alan told us he was extremely fit when he was a lighterman as the work was very hard and tough. It involved lots of lifting cargo, tying ropes and steering the boats.

When Alan left his job as a lighterman, he worked hard to educate himself and he even managed to get a scholarship from the R.A.F to attend Oxford University. His nickname when he worked on the river was 'Shakespeare' as he loved to read all of Shakespeare's plays. At Ruskin College he studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics and he later became a Member of Parliament.

Alan was a Member of Parliament from 1966-1979 and during this time he fought hard and campaigned for lightermen's rights as it was a cause very close to his heart.



1514—1859

to all to whom these Presents shall come.

Know ye, That at a Court for the admission of Freemen of
THE COMPANY OF WATERMEN AND LIGHTERMEN OF THE RIVER THAMES
holden at the Hall of the Company, St. Mary-at-Hill, in the City of London,

Alan Lee Williams

of the Parish of *Blackheath* in the County
of *London* was duly admitted, allowed and registered

FREEMAN OF THE SAID COMPANY,

Harry Rogers.

Charles Hamilton.

Dated this *eleventh* day of *March* 19*62*.

Members of
the Court.

Barnett G. H. G.

Clerk.

DIARY OF A LIGHTERMAN

Dear Diary,

Today, Tuesday 8th April, has been another horrible day “on the pool” trying to find a new job. We were the rich people and we had lots of money to spend on the weekends, on different things such as beer, fancy cars, suits etc... But since the containers and large docks arrived, us lightermen have lost our jobs. It is terribly difficult to find a good job, but when someone finds one, all hope gets lost; as we think “there are fewer and fewer jobs for us.”

Canary Wharf has started to be built. But I know that that place is going to be for Banking Business, and I don't know anything about banking; I'm a manual worker.

I would like to get rid of containers if we could, because people think it's easier, to just put the cargo in a container, and then in a lorry and it's gone. Docks are worse. The big boats arrive there and then the only thing you have to do is just transfer the merchandise to the factory that is just next door. If we could get rid of them, we would get our jobs back.



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This booklet was researched and written by Year 6 Children from St George the Martyr and Westminster Cathedral Primary Schools.

The film consists of interviews developed, conducted and shot by Year 6 Children from **St George the Martyr Primary School**: Victoria Addis, Carlos Auty, Ephraim Bediako, Jude Campbell, Evie Commons, Jonathan Demissie, Harika Dixon, Rebecca Dobson, Amr Elwany, Khayear Hussain, Shahreen Hussain, Nasir Islam, Nadirah Jahan-Ahmed, Jada Joseph, Imad Karim, Leo Lacourt, Mahir Roshid, Benjamin Morgan, Abdul Nasir, Adnan Patwary, Zidan Rahid, Amrick Thronka and Harry Yates and **Westminster Cathedral Primary School**: Gideon Ajah, Louis Andrade-Burger, Inigio Arreytunandia, Fabian Brazona, Elissa Capel, Joshua Colburn, Callum Davis, Jean Anselm Dela Cuesta, Sarah Duarte, Malakai Harbor, Danny Kidane, Maria Jose Marino Aguilera, Ryan Mayele, Fionnuala McMenamin, Elena Meaney, Daniella Ortis-Salazar, Alfie Pinner, Dylan Prado Caicedo, Lily Mae Prosser, Alex Stepinski, Nazar Tadros, Ania Wielogorska and Sarah Williams.

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