

Experience with Flotilla Project, What Community means, Reflections on East London, Female Role Models, Histories of Liberation, Relationship with the Water

## Flotilla Oral Histories

**Participant: Jackie Spiby**

**Interviewer: Dr. Anna Maguire**

**Interview Date: 05/06/2023**

**AM:** Sorry, Jackie, did you want to say something? I'm just checking. It's just recording.

**JS:** It's not video, is it?

**AM:** Not video at all. No, no, no. I'm definitely not dressed to be video recorded. All right, so I'm just going to get started on this recording, too, and we'll get going. So my name is Dr Anna Maguire, I'm a lecturer in public history here at UCL and the date is the 5th of June 2023 and it's just after four o'clock. And I am currently interviewing Jackie Spiby, is it? Is that how you pronounce it? Perfect. And we're doing the interview online. So Jackie, part of our conversation today is because of your involvement with the Flotilla film that was made recently at the Royal Docks. Can I start by asking you how you came to be involved in that film?

**JS:** I am a member of a dragon boat team called Wave Walkers. And we are those people who've been affected by cancer. So people who've had cancer, but also friends, family and other people. We're affiliated to another Dragon Boat team, Windy Pandas, and they were invited to be part of this. And because we're affiliated to them and we've got quite a few females on our team, because a lot of us have had breast cancer, we were invited to join them. That's how we got involved. And we're a team who say yes. So we turned up.

**AM:** That's wonderful. How long have you been involved with the Wave Walkers?

**JS:** Um, 2018. I was diagnosed in 2017, and so this was post-diagnosis. Obviously, we didn't paddle during Covid, but we did sort of virtual paddles.

**AM:** And how is your health today?

**JS:** My health is good. My arm movement is excellent because I paddle on wave walkers.

**AM:** That's brilliant. So you've been with the wave walkers for a number of years now, notwithstanding the COVID pandemic. Can you tell us a little bit about your experience as being part of this group?

**JS:** Ok, I started because I quite like to keep fit, I do a lot of Pilates and after my breast surgery I couldn't do the things I used to do and that annoyed me. And my physio at King's Hospital said...

**AM:** Sorry Jackie, I just had a problem with my machine but we're going to keep recording on the Zoom. I'm sorry to have interrupted you. I've got to the bit about your physio.

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**JS:** The physio said why don't you try wake walkers? This seemed like an interesting idea. I quite like doing different things. And so I went along, joined them and found it really good exercise but also quite a nice group of people I would never have met before and a fabulous experience being on the water. And we've done competitions, and we go to Venice to do the Vogalonga, which is stunning. And there's something quite, I don't know, something that makes me keep on wanting to keep on doing it. I'm not a big teamy person, but we all get together. We don't see each other much the rest of the time, but we support each other, and we understand where we've all been.

**AM:** It's really lovely. It feels like there's a really strong sense of kind of belonging and community that's developed through the activity, through being on the water together.

**JS:** Yeah. And obviously, we've met the other teams. So we go out on a Sunday morning, and there's another team go out the same time. Windy Pandas, who we're affiliated to, they go out on a Saturday. We get involved in events with them. And at the same time, we see the rowers who get there much earlier than us. They're just coming, getting off, and they're long legs and with their big bones, and we're just sort of huddling along. Yeah, and we're part of something that you wouldn't expect to. It's quite fascinating. We're opposite City Airport, and you go past, and you think, ooh, what's going on now? And then there's two bridges either end, and you see the red buses going past, and it looks really iconic. And there's some, you know, you work really hard, and you're exercising, but you're in a really nice place as well.

**AM:** Yeah, it feels like you get a really different perspective of the Docks of London when you see it from being on the water rather than kind of being on the side of the water. Have you noticed lots of changes in that area in the time that you've been part of the group?

**JS:** Well, at the moment, the way I go there has to change because there's works at Silthorn, And I understand they might have found a few bombs just the last day or two. Yeah, there's always new development, there's always new things being built. I live in suburbia, so it's quite an unusual place to drive through. And when I started, I had to have a sat-nav on all the time. But it's like a little, as you say, community that goes down to the docks, that uses the gym, that goes to the cafe, that says hello to the man in the front who gives us the tokens for where we put our gear, within a very vaguely sterile place. And obviously we go past Newham Council offices, and we also go past the University as we're huddling up.

**AM:** And had you been familiar with the Royal Docks at all before you started with the group? Because, you know, living in South East London and travelling up there to it, was it an area that you knew very well previously?

**JS:** Well, when I was at university, I remember going down to Wapton Docks to go to the, to buy wine. Rock and wine, something or other. This is now the 70s, so this is a long time ago. I'm actually a public health doctor, so I know that there was work done in relation to the development of the docks and facilities for people's health. But no, I don't know. We've walked the Thames Path several times, so we walk along South Bank. I know those bits, but I don't really know it very well.

**AM:** It's interesting, yeah, that this activity then brought you into this new part of London, I guess, and offered a new...

Oh, yes, very different part. I would never have been there otherwise.

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**AM:** Wow, interesting. So, as you said earlier, you're a team who say yes. So you volunteered to get involved in the project. Did you know much about what you were going to be doing before you turned up on that very sunny but slightly chilly Saturday in March?

**JS:** No. I don't think we did. We were, oh, I hope this is going to be safe. What's going on? No, we just heard that we could paddle. It was going to be the time of the day when we never normally paddle. I'm not even sure we knew that we were going the other way, because normally we go on the docks and go east, I think. This time we went into a part of the docks we'd never been before, Kansas City Thorpe, so that was quite fun.

**AM:** And how was it kind of interacting with the other boats, I guess, with kind of keeping pace with the other dragon boat, but also with the rowers and then the big boats coming behind? What was that like being sort of paddling?

**JS:** Oh, the star of it all was the rower. She was magnificent. She was a little bit worried at first because she'd got and to go into rowing. And she was so fabulous and so able to pace and make it all happen. So we had two very good helms, two women we paddled with before, so they were in control. So I think mainly it was the two dragon boats and the rower that we had the contacts with. We knew there were boats around, but we were told not to look at them, so we didn't get that involved. But we looked at them, we saw the people on them and thought, ooh, who are they? What's going on here? That's interesting.

**AM:** And what about the kind of the other dragon boat? Because I guess you said you've been racing, you've done events, and have you ever kind of paddled in synchronization with another boat before?

**JS:** No. No, we were a mix of two or three teams. So some of our team were on our boat. It depended. We just got on the boats. That was quite nice. And the first time we went down, we thought we were doing what we were supposed to be doing. Then we were told we weren't close enough. So the next time, I think we understood what was required of us. That was quite fun. I mean, what was really fun was going down and seeing a bit of, for me, a bit of London I'd never seen. I'd never seen the new City Hall. I mean, I love the old City Hall because that's where you go when you're going to the South Bank. So that was really interesting, and to see who was around and what was happening down at that time of the day.

**AM:** Yeah, absolutely. And what about when it got dark? How was it having that experience of paddling at night, which I guess is not something that you would usually do?

**JS:** Never done that before. Never done it before. It was great. It was, we thought it might be quite dark, but actually it wasn't particularly dark at all, was it? So once you got familiar with it e knew we were safe, so it was a new experience. In a way, that's what we quite like doing. We've all had big impacts on our life, and so now life is about doing new things and having another go at something else.

**AM:** Yeah, absolutely. So just thinking a little bit more about the film itself, so I think you had the opportunity to come and watch it at the Banwell Village Hall. What were your impressions of the film when you saw it?

**JS:** I thought it was really interesting. I love the way the drone picks off the whole picture. I still would have liked a bit more commentary. I'm not visual enough and didn't quite understand what was being said. But I've got it on my list of places to go to see the actual exhibition or where it's being set up. So I think there's probably

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going to be something written about it. But it's fascinating. I've never seen us paddling from above. Completely new. I mean, we get a lot... we've just been... somebody's just been doing a promo film for us, so we get things from the side and the front, but never from above. That's quite unique, and especially being in a city airport where it's obviously not very easy to use a drone.

**AM:** Yeah, absolutely. Some of those drone shots coming in were incredible, and kind of looking up at the lights. And so at that event, I think Melanie talked a little bit about some of the motivations for the film that may be, as you said, that kind of commentary that would explain some of those choices. Did you know much about the history of the docks before sort of seeing this, of thinking about the history of women in water and the barriers to women being on the water or the histories of women as workers in that area, was it something you were familiar with?

**JS:** A little bit, but I didn't realise they were completely banned. I know there's always been lots of... I mean, women didn't go on sailing boats. It was thought to be bad luck. I didn't realise... In fact, I know somebody whose family are watermen, and they now run a company that I think was involved in this. She's definitely quite involved. But she's modern, so she's the new generation. But I know a lot, I mean, I generally know a lot about the East End and history, and women stayed at home, didn't they? And men went on the boats and docks. I mean, I don't know a lot about the docks, but obviously I know about them being very busy, and they're being part and parcel of London, and then I can remember when they were nothing. I can remember the South Bank before it was anything. I worked at Skye's(?), and you didn't go the other way. You only went into town, because there was nothing past Skye's on the bank. And so we've seen that grow years on years, and continues to. It was just fascinating. Even on City Island, we did a walk round there. I mean, that's completely... Wow, that's another new area. So, yeah, but I didn't realize women... Well, they weren't on the docks, but they were very much part and parcel of the families of the people who were on the docks. So I'm not sure you could say they weren't involved.

**AM:** Absolutely. Did it change your perspective at all about what it means now as a woman on the water, in the docks, in a leisure capacity? Yes. But did it make you feel differently the next time you got back in your boat?

**JS:** We're nearly all women on our boat, so I'm not sure. It made me aware of what we've got now and what we didn't have before. But as I say, the young girl who was the rower of the new young generation, she was fantastic. So confident, but in control. So I think it's the next generation.

**AM:** That's lovely. We're kind of coming to the end of my questions.

**JS:** Okay.

**AM:** One question that I have been asking all of our interviewees, and I'm interested in, because the film, Melanie's goal in the film was thinking about kind of equality and sustainable futures and female empowerment and recognising the multiple roles that women play in the docks and throughout the rest of London. And I was wondering if you had any reflections on women in your life who have inspired or motivated you?

**JS:** I trained in medicine when there weren't so many women in medicine. But I happened to go to a train where it was 50-50 male and female, which was quite unusual. So when I started, there was a professor in surgery and a professor in medicine who were female. I didn't know them. But what I realise now is that that meant I

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didn't think that women couldn't do these things. And I come from a family of three daughters, so the most empowering person was my mother. Didn't have any boys, so she decided we'd better, you know, get there. So there's lots of women in the life that I've gone through that have enabled me to get to where I got to. And now I think it's important that women recognize where they got to and how their mothers helped them get there and try to make it work for both them and their partners and for men as well.

**AM:** That's really lovely. Where are your sisters now?

**JS:** Well my older sister died of ovarian cancer, which relates to my cancer because I've got BRCA. She was a physiotherapist and my other sister lives in East London and she was a social worker. My mother said we all had to get a job that meant that we financially were independent.

**AM:** It's a good recommendation to make.

**JS:** Well, it worked.

**AM:** Yeah. It's interesting that you all ended up in public service of one form or another.

**JS:** Well, yes. I think that's, you know, it's a proper job.

**AM:** Yeah. Absolutely. And with the Wave Walkers now, is that maybe a last thing? It seems, it seems like from what you've said so far that that kind of group has been a form of kinship or community. And you talked about that kind of younger generation coming through. Is there a range of generations on the boat? Is that something that you've seen?

**JS:** Yeah. We don't have many younger people because it's not so common in young people. Or if they tend to think they've done it, finished. Yes, we have people with children, people who are beginning early on in their careers to people like me at the end. Yes, I want to make a dig, a bid for support for Wave Walkers, if people are out there who have been affected by cancer, want to try something new, want to meet some nice, unusual people. I tell you, we are quite unusual. I want to do something. We encourage people to come and have a go. And we don't talk about cancer. It just happens that we've all got a story that we know about and understand if people have a bad day or things are not working out. But we... people move on, sometimes people move on as well. It's something that some people use and need after they've been treated as the next step. And then their lives move on, they move away, or they do other things. So... but we're down there every Sunday morning.

**AM:** And do you think it's a kind of, a sort of therapeutic experience? Is it the water? Is it being part of the group? You said you weren't really much of a team sports person.

**JS:** Oh, it's all of those. It's definitely the water. Something about getting on the water. Something about being safe on the water. And amazingly, you have to do everything in time. So we might all be individuals, but actually we are a team. So it's supportive. It is sort of therapeutic. We just say it's there for people to enjoy themselves. We promote it as wellness as well, you know, something to change your life a bit. But the water is very important, and the water and the team, and how you go on the water. I know the rowers think we're very slow. We know they think that. But for us, it's 20 people all working together at the same speed.

**AM:** Yeah, it's an incredible feat of kind of, yeah, synchronicity to get everyone.

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**JS:** I try, anyway.

**AM:** Thank you so much for your time, Jackie. Before I stop the recording, I wondered if there was anything else that you wanted to talk about that we haven't addressed in the interview. Oh, no, I've got my plug in for Wave Walkers. I could have another plug for dragon boating. Some people think it's not a sport. But it is.

**JS:** And it's, you know, you don't have to be very tall like the rowers, and you don't have to be very fit. And you have to be able to synchronise, and you have to do what you're told.

**AM:** Brilliant.

**JS:** I think that's a good tip for anyone who's looking to get out and try a new perspective on life.

**AM:** New, absolutely.

**JS:** Try the water.

**AM:** Thanks, Jackie. I'm just going to stop the recording.