

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: Maddie Phillips

Interviewer: Kate Liggins

Interview Date: 25/04/2023

KL: Okay, so it's the 25th of April 2023 and this is an oral history interview for the Armada of Women Royal Docks Project. The interviewer is Kate Liggins and would you like to introduce yourself?

MP: Yeah, my name's Maddie Phillips. Do you want me to say-...

KL: No, that's fine for now, yeah. So can you talk a bit about your connection to the Royal Docks, or the area in general?

MP: Yeah, so I grew up in Newham, not especially close to the Royal Docks, because they're a little bit further out, kind of to the northeast. But sailing and being on the water has always been quite a big part of my life and part of growing up you know so I used to go like dinghy sailing on a Victoria Dock when I was a kid yeah that was kind of one of the places where I kind of started learning how to sail with my dad, which it was really good fun but it's kind of a terrible place to go sailing because it's so surrounded on all sides by really tall buildings, so you just end up kind of like drifting around until you reach a point where the wind just funnels down between the buildings and then you end up on your ear and then you have to like right yourself and then you're kind of like back to drifting around. But it was really good fun still and I really loved it. And yeah, it's always been a really interesting place. In more recent years, I organised an event for Newham History Month, I think two years ago. Yeah, it was 2021. I organised an event where I took a Thames Sailing Barge from Malden to Victoria Docks, I moored up just outside the Excel for two days as part of the month because the theme was shops, docks and factories. And since there are still, you know, some Thames barges kicking around, some of the types of boat that would be used to sail in and out of the Royal Docks. I thought they should be represented alongside the shore-based heritage. It was incredibly stressful to organise. But it was a really good event, and we got about 200 visitors to it, even though it was mid-week, because we couldn't do it over a weekend for one reason or another in the end. But yeah, that was kind of my 'in' to the Armada of Women as well because it was because of that, that I had done that I got put forward to taking part in this project. So it all kind of snowballed.

KL: Cool. It's really interesting that you kind of grew up with the water in your life. I remember you talking about that first meeting about sailing and stuff with your family. If you wanted to, like, say anything about that, that would be really interesting, about how it was to grow up that way.

MP: Yeah, I'm...*cough.* Sorry, I took a test and it's not COVID.

KL: Oh don't worry.

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MP: Yeah, I must say, apart from the stuff on Victoria Docks, I haven't really done much sailing here since, its kind of mostly been around Essex and Suffolk. But yeah, it was something that my parents were both into, you know, and have been involved with since long before I was around, so when I was a kid I just didn't really get much choice. But it's something that I've kind of done all my life really and luckily for my parents, me and my sister quite enjoyed it. Because there are quite a few people we know whose children or whatever they grow up with it and don't really enjoy it and they don't really carry on with it, which is always a shame. Yeah, me and my sister just really loved it. So, yeah, just like most weekends and summer holidays, we'd spend in Essex out on the water and we would go across the channel for summer holidays and stuff, being very seasick. Yeah, it's somewhat surprising that we both stayed involved with it when all of your summer holidays are just bookended by two horrible trips where you're just going to be really ill for 12 hours. I think it's a really fun thing to do and I really enjoyed growing up in East London, and having London as my home, but spending so much time kind of out in the countryside as well, I kind of feel like I got the best of both worlds really. You know, kind of having a good balance of both in my life. But I love living in London, I don't think I could be tempted to live outside of it. I did that for a couple of years and I'm very happy to be back.

KL: That's good. And you work with boats and things, now I don't use to, that's super interesting, like you say, you've grown up with it and you've obviously stuck to it as a passion.

MP: Yeah, um. The other thing I was always really interested in from when I was a child was history and archaeology. And so, like, from that, I ended up going to study archeology when I went to university, and kind of found a way to tie both of those together in the work that I do now. So, I work as a shipkeeper on the Cutty Sark in Greenwich, which I've done for *cough* a bit over a year and a half, I think. And did other conservation work on other ships for a couple years before that as well. I really enjoy my job. I really like the variety of it. I like being so hands-on with such a historic object as well. You get to know it really well.

Yeah, I kind of miss... in my last job I did manage to... I got to spend a lot more time on the water whereas obviously with the Cutty Sark, it's very different because she's a museum ship and in a dry dock, so she's static. And so yeah, it's just kind of interesting, like the different way of thinking and the way of approaching that you have to take it when you're conserving a historic boat that's still going to go out sailing as opposed to one that isn't really going anywhere. You have different pressures and different, you know, things to take into consideration. And so with the Cutty Sark, it's much more kind of handled with preserving the material specifically and doing what you can to conserve what's already there. As opposed to, you know, if you are on a conserving ship that is going back out to sea, you know, you're going to worry less about conserving like every single scrap of historical fabric, because you know, if that planks rotten, then that plane needs to come out and be replaced with one that will actually withstand the elements. Whereas on a static ship, you don't have to worry about that. And it's more important to hang on to the 150-year-old Burmese teak *cough* that you can't get anymore. Yeah, and it's the fabric that's way more important.

KL: Interesting, yeah. So you spoke a little bit about how you got involved with the Armada of Women, but, yeah, if you could talk a bit more about what drew you to getting involved. What did you think, what sparked your interest with the project.

MP: Um, I think I got an email from, uh, Rosie Murdoch, just like outlining the project very briefly. And for me it just ticked a great number of boxes of things that I'm very interested in. So obviously boats and being out on the water, as well as history and heritage. You know, and the history and heritage of my local area as well, which is something I'm also really interested in. And also women's history and women's experiences, because

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as a woman myself *cough,* particularly- as a woman who works in a fairly male-dominated industry. Sailing is a very male-dominated hobby, and maritime heritage is a very male-dominated sector. Not necessarily so much in the museum world, because most of our curators and researchers are women, but doing the practical conservation that I do, I'm the only woman who works on the team of three of us. And the people who I work with now are very... you know, it's fine, I don't really have any problems with them at all.

But, in my previous job and other jobs that I've had, and even just sailing, you know, in my spare time and stuff, that you do just meet people with attitudes as to your value on board, to put in politely. And just knowing that if you... they don't really look at you as your own kind of person. That wasn't really making sense, but you know, say if you screw something up or if there's something that you don't know, they'll kind of be like, you know, silly woman. And they will just decide that that's why you don't know how this thing works or whatever, or how to fix an engine or whatever. It's because you're a woman, and women just don't know those kinds of things. So it's like, no, it's not because I'm a woman, it's just because I haven't learned. You know, like, if I was a bloke, you'd just be like, oh, well, you need to learn that then. But because, you know, purely because of my gender, I'm a representative of all women, because we're a monolith. And there's no way that we have our own individual lives or interests or personalities. And obviously, that's a generalisation, and there are plenty of men that I've met who don't think like that and that are fine, but it is a more prevalent attitude than I think they would like to admit. Yeah, and it's something I find like really frustrating and really just grating and wearing because I just want to enjoy my work, and the things that I do with my spare time without the burden of sexism and, you know, assumptions being made about y-, made about me when I walk into a room, you know. Yeah, it's really annoying and I know that it's something that is changing, but it's changing slowly and it definitely won't be solved within my lifetime for sure. And, you know, so that aspect of it was really important to me and that was something that really spoke to me and grabbed my attention. And I think the way the email was phrased was something like, there's this project, let me know if you want to find out more, or before you sign up. And I was like, no, count me in! Yeah, I was like, absolutely, no hesitation, yeah, sign me up. So yeah, I was really interested right from the start.

KL: Yeah, that's amazing, yeah. So, thinking about the role of women's activism, kind of now but also in the past, was the activism surrounding the Docks area something that you've been aware of? Because obviously you're interested in history and heritage of the area. So, is that something that, thinking specifically of the women's liberation and labour rights movements in the Docks area, is that something you've been aware of?

MP: Yeah, not... yeah, to my shame, not yet. Not in any kind of great depth, but yeah, it's something that I kind of have been aware of, you know, like I remember learning about the suffrage movement when I was studying A-level history, and we kind of touched on, like, Sylvia Pankhurst's work and stuff, and you know, what she did, which I found really interesting. But yeah, beyond that, not so much really, which I think is also kind of interesting because women's issues, that's often the stories that don't get spoken about or given as much attention.

KL: Exactly, yeah. So hopefully through this project, you can raise some awareness around it, because it's fascinating, isn't it? The different kinds of activism that have been happening for a long time in the area. Yeah. So we've spoken about your work life. Do you have any kind of women in your life, either in your life or just that you aspire to, that have inspired you or motivated you to kind of, you know, be the person you are today?

MP: Yeah, that's a really interesting question. I do, and I think I would say it took me a long time to recognise that, if that makes sense. Um... Yeah, I think for a really long time... Yeah, I've met some really amazing women,

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I have some really incredible women in my life, and it took me a long time to kind of recognise uh... that... Yeah, I know someone with... who have a lot of strength, which they wear very lightly if that makes sense. It's cliché, but my mum. She's really interesting. If you meet her, she's very, she comes across as very friendly and outgoing, and she's always very vivacious at parties and stuff. But if she describes herself, she says she's a very shy person, and it's all kind of learned, yeah I don't know, I guess it's a kind of front that she's learned to be in front of other people, which is interesting. But she's always been, like, very caring and very understanding. And she's a real problem solver.

And I think it took me a while to... she doesn't really talk about it that much, but her parents separated when she was quite young, and divorced, and so she was raised mostly by her mum, but her dad worked very hard to make the most of the time when he could see them as well. But, I think it was hard on her, just, kind of, dealing with that. And it's something that she doesn't talk about very much, but when she does, there are little bits and pieces over time that I've pieced together. I don't know, I find it really fascinating, because I think it must have had... It has had quite a big effect on her. You know, like, in one way or another, but um, yeah, she doesn't really talk about it that much anymore, because I think it was a time in life when women didn't really divorce, and so like her mother, my grandmother, I think she had quite a tough time after that, which affected my mum. She started not doing very well in school, so they sent her away to a boarding school which really helped her in a way, to kind of, you know, in a weird kind of way but yeah I think just, just because she didn't, it was a completely different place in a different space and you know didn't it was a completely different place in a different space and you know and she wasn't, she didn't have to like live between two places or like with a mum who was still processing the breakdown of her marriage and her role as a woman who quite late in the 70s, as a divorced single mother in the 70s.

KL: Must have been really hard.

MP: Yeah, not an easy role. And, you know, she says quite openly that people in her school, teachers in her school, said to her that she would never amount to anything and she wouldn't get GCSEs, let alone anything else. And she got GCSEs and A-levels and went to university and she's just coming up for taking retirement after working for 20 years as a really committed primary school teacher. So, yeah, I think she's... Yeah.

KL: She's proved those people wrong, hasn't she?

MP: Absolutely, yeah. And she doesn't really make that much of a big deal of it, but I think she is a lot more interesting than she gives herself credit for. Yeah, but yeah, particularly through sailing as well, there are lots of women who... Mostly like older women. That doesn't sound great. There are loads of young women who are my friends and who are also young, but like old women who've, I guess, just like really had to like wade through a lot of prejudice to just like carry on, in a sport where people have so often been against them, or just so often dismissed their knowledge and their abilities and who've just been able to take it all in their stride and carry on and still have an enthusiasm and passion for what they want to do. Um, yeah, like, they're really interesting characters, and they... I don't really know how to describe it. Um, they don't really put up much of a front. They've learned to just be really unapologetically themselves, come what may. Which, yeah, I've learned a lot of people call them quite nasty things behind their backs, unsurprisingly *laughs*. But, yeah, I think it's really cool, I have a lot of respect for it. And I think that's definitely something that I aspire to be.

And if... are we allowed to swear?

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KL: Yeah.

MP: Okay, yeah, and if people call me a bitch because I speak my mind, you know, behind their-, you know, there's no call for being rude, but if someone's just assertive and tells you you're wrong about something when you're wrong, and you call her a bitch because she didn't coddle you whilst she said it, then oh well, I can think of worse. Yeah, worse things to be.

KL: Yeah, for sure. It's so interesting. There's sexism in most workplaces aren't there, but it's so interesting to hear about it in your specific, in like, conservation and stuff, and especially working with boats, which, like you say, has got that male-dominated aspect. Yeah, I mean, is there anything else you want to talk about? Or if there's anything... maybe talk about your experience with the filming, of the Flotilla film. How did that all feel?

MP: Yeah, it was a great day. I think we were fairly lucky with the weather when it wasn't raining. But yeah, it was kind of amazing. It was really, I don't know, I suppose in a lot of ways it felt quite surreal. And I'm really, really looking forward to seeing how the film turned out. Yeah, it was it was really interesting having such a mix of people doing it as well, and you're just- Yeah, it's kind of fascinating because I think I was on the boat with the solicitor for a while the woman, like she looked fantastic. And I think that's gonna be really cool. And then for the other part of it, I was on the front of one of the dragon boats. And I didn't realise, but they're like... they go and compete internationally. And yeah, they're going to, I think, Malaysia next year? And they compete internationally against, you know, like 50 other teams in these competitions. And last year they came second! They were like, yeah, we came second, it was great! Against dozens of other teams. So they were, like, really high up in the world in dragon boat racing of all things and they just casually knock around in the docks.

KL: Yeah, and they clearly love it as well.

MP: Yeah, and yeah, I thought that was really cool. I find things like that really interesting, this kind of whole world that you don't really know about particularly, hadn't really heard of or thought of before, and you just kind of, suddenly you're like, oh wow, yeah, there's this whole thing, and these people are really good at it. And yeah, I never knew about it before, but yeah, that's really cool. Yeah, more power to them. Yeah, they were really nice as well. Yeah, I said I'd fix the end of their painter, but I never really got time. The bit of rope that they used to tie up the boat to the jetty at the end was just so frayed. I had all my kit with me to fix it and I was like, I can't. That was really bothering me but I didn't have enough time to actually fix it. I had to go back at some point and just solve the end. Because I was like, that is shameful, you can't get around that, that's ridiculous. It was like a mop. Before I worked on the Cutty Sark, I worked for the company that maintains the rigging and the masts of the Cutty Sark and also other ships, and I did that for two and a bit years I think. It was involved in the job I was at before as well so I've done quite a lot of rope work and rope maintenance. It's something that I do and I quite enjoy so when I saw that I was itching to fix it. I was like, I can make this better! But yeah, I didn't really have time to do it, which was a shame. But yeah, it was a great day. I remember particularly before it started, when we were all in that room in the... I can't remember, was it the Aquatic Centre or whatever?

KL: The Good Hotel or something? Oh, you mean on the day?

MP: Yeah, on the day.

KL: The upstairs place, it was really warm.

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MP: Yes, it was really warm.

KL: Yeah.

MP: Yeah, I think I was chatting to Anna. And we were just kind of talking about things, like the project and so on. And as we were chatting, more people started coming, including the guys who were going to be helming the boats, and off the work boats and stuff and yeah I just remember her saying to me like, she was like, isn't it interesting how the atmosphere just kind of like shifts subtly when it goes from being a room full of like just women which it had been before that, you know, because I think it was you know it's you guys, it's Melanie, us and like the I think kind of like just the crew of the dragon boats who were mostly women. And yeah, and then the guys came in off the boats as well. And it's really interesting, there was just this very subtle... Not in a negative way, necessarily. It's not good or bad, but it is different and noticeable. Which I thought, given what we were doing, I thought that was really interesting. And very subtle, but a significant thing that we both noticed.

KL: That is interesting, I remember thinking at that first meeting at the Good Hotel, or at least it's the first meeting that I'd been to, it was just incredible to be in a room with about twenty women, and everyone so passionate about their own kind of individual thing they were bringing to the project. And then, like you say, you go to the filming day and these men walk in and it's just like, hold on, we're in charge here, and we're keeping our stakes here.

MP: Yeah, yeah, no definitely, I definitely felt the same thing. Yeah, like the initial meeting at the hotel. Yeah, that was a really amazing afternoon. I found it fascinating just how different everyone's experiences was. Again, I suppose it was that kind of thing. Like, all the women from the walking football team.

KL: Yeah, the football team's video, like, inspired me, yeah.

MP: Yeah, yeah, it's really cool. I just had no idea that existed. It's a really nice idea.

KL: Yeah.

MP: Yeah, especially I suppose like for people with injuries that need healing through exercise, but you know, I suppose it's more interesting than just like physiotherapy or whatever, but you know like they're not strong enough or able to do like normal football. It's like it's just, yeah, it seems like such a nice idea, yeah, yeah, no, yeah it was it was a really cool afternoon, yeah, and I remember being on the boat in the evening with, when I was with the solicitor, the guy who was helming it, who I hope doesn't listen to this because he seemed quite nice. He seemed like a perfectly nice bloke but just really, really didn't get what we were doing at all. And yeah, I don't think either of us could quite break ourselves to try to explain it to him. Because it... Because it... I think it would have been hard.

Um... Uh... But yeah, I think he asked us like, what... What led us to be activists, I think? And then we were trying to work out what the plan was, and he's like, I don't know, just stand at the front and look pretty. And... I get like, he's like, quite friendly, you know, I think. Yeah, nice enough, but just... he was also really incredulous that we weren't being paid. Because he was, you know, obviously, but that's his job, you know, like, he is, you know, on the clock, technically, and he's like, you're not being paid. I'm like, well, no, because this isn't our job. We didn't come here to be paid, we came here to be part of an art project and you know like we're actually quite

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honoured to be involved and you know like you know enough *cough* to like give our time freely to it because it's not it's not about money it's yeah.

KL: It's about art and activism like you say.

MP: Yeah, and being involved and giving our stories to be part of something that I hope will be bigger than us and bigger than ourselves. *cough.* But, yeah, I didn't really say any of that to him because it was, it was late at night and very dark and very cold. And I didn't think it would be met with anything other than polite confusion. Which is fine, yeah.

KL: That's interesting, yeah.

MP: Bless him. And again, I hope he doesn't listen to this because...

KL: I doubt he will.

MP: I think you're right.

KL: Yeah.

MP: But yeah, no offence to him. I wish him all the best, but yeah, I don't think it was his cup of tea.

KL: There's probably not much crossover in the Venn diagram of people who own and sail boats. I mean, I don't know, what would you call him?

MP: I can't remember what he said he did now. I guess technically just a waterman.

KL: Okay, yeah.

MP: Yeah.

KL: Like you say, he sounds like one of the stereotypical sexist... I mean, obviously that's awful for me to put those labels on him, but...

MP: I mean, yeah, I know other people who work on Boats on the Thames and who are part of that world, and I think most of them are a bit like that to one degree or another, particularly from what they say. I think the stuff that's incredibly tame, from what I've heard, the rest of them are... are a pretty unruly bunch. Pretty un-reconstructed, I guess, in that regard. But there are women that work in that industry, and there's a group, I can't remember what they're called, um, but there's an organisation, I think it was the Temp Skills Academy or something like that. But there is a group and essentially they were set up as a network for women who work on the Thames, so who work on the Thames clippers or the other working boats there, or I think sometimes in the shoreside jobs as well. Yeah, as a support network and you know just a network network to like talk about jobs and stuff and you know to support each other in, you know, in an industry that historically and still now like was never really set up, yeah, for women and like, you know, in a lot of ways can really still be quite hostile towards them. So yeah, I think change is happening slowly. And, you know, I doubt, I don't think it's going to be a 50-50 split any time soon, if ever, but if people just kind of get more comfortable with the idea that women can and

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will work jobs like that, then, you know, I'd be quite happy with that. But, I think it's a long road. Yeah, maybe we'll get there eventually.

KL: Yeah, I'm sure you will. Great, well that feels like a good place to end. Yeah.

MP: Yeah, no worries, yeah, it does.