

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: Cllr. Thelma Odoi**

**Interviewer: Eleanor Wright**

**Interview Date: 01/06/2023**

**ERW:** So, it is the 1st of June, 2023, and this is an oral history about East London, the Docks, female empowerment. And the interviewer is Eleanor Wright. Could you introduce yourself?

**TO:** Hello, my name is Thelma Odoi, Councillor Thelma Odoi.

**ERW:** Brilliant. And can you tell us about your connection to the Royal Docks?

So, I've lived in Custom House pretty much all my life. And I remember when I was in primary school and they started to sort of build up the Excel area and make the docks look really nice. One of my friends said, like, let's go and have a look. So we went over there, we walked over the bridge, and that was the first time that I really started to realise that, wow, I actually live near something really attractive, like something really nice. So, but yeah, the docks have been around me all my life, I'd say.

**ERW:** Amazing. And what drew you to getting involved in the Flotilla project?

**TO:** So the project, I just found out about it really randomly on social media. And I actually found out about it on the day that the briefing was happening. So I just thought, I already had some plans for the day, but I just thought, you know, I'll just go along and see what it's about. And when I walked in, it was really lovely. Like, you could just see, like, so many different women all sitting down, all really interested and involved in this project and because I already had an itinerary for the day I couldn't stay, but I really felt, you know, this is something that this is me, this is my sort of thing, this is right up my street, so I put my name down and I wanted to stay in touch and I wanted to be involved in any way possible, so that's how I got involved. It was very random, but I'm very happy that it happened.

**ERW:** Exactly, no we felt that too when we were sat around the table speaking and it was just really a very amazing supportive day. And I remember I left a tiny bit early too. But, you know, I walked out on my own, I was on the tube on my own and I was just beaming. I was like, wow, what a great class. Really, like, really, really great to meet people. And meet people that I wouldn't have met anyway, you know, our paths wouldn't have crossed ever, so it's really great to get such an eclectic mix of people.

**(the Microsoft Teams meeting later cuts out so this Question and Answer is repeated later on)**

**ERW:** So how did you find the project, you know, how did you find the filming and meeting in the aftermath and the viewing? Have you seen it?

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**TO:** Yeah, so for me, like, from start to finish, it's just been amazing. It's like a once in a lifetime opportunity. Because the whole entire day, it's like I've never done anything like that before. I've never been on the front of a boat and, you know, with all these different people. And there was such a range of people, some people that are really experienced with rowing and things like that, and then someone like me who's never done anything. But it just felt that we were all assets, like we all had something to add, we all had a contribution to make, we were all made to feel very special right from the beginning. We were given very clear instructions on what was going to happen throughout the day, but even then I still didn't really know what to expect, but it turned out to be so lovely. I was told to be put on a boat called Equity, so I was on the front of the boat, and we were told to wear clothes that would represent our professions. So I'm currently a maths teacher and also a local councillor, so I wore something very formal and it was just very nice to see other people wearing what they're there to work. So there was a colourist, there was a lawyer, so many different people that I got to meet all dressed up in their professions and then you had the rowers and everybody just put in their 110% I think and it was amazing. We had to do a couple of rehearsals, we had to do it a couple of times, we had the drones going above us and it was just, you know, you felt a bit like a celebrity, you know. I thought that they made us over here in our local area feel really, really special and it made us sort of realise how far we've come like in history when it comes to female empowerment, when it comes to women, it made us realise you know us women we have a contribution to make too, we are powerful, we have skills to add and it was just an incredible day.

**ERW:** That sounds great and also the like a twilight viewing as well, the filming and...

**TO:** I went to see the film and it was amazing so it wasn't just the film, there were other projects as well that made up Sea Change, but seeing the film was incredible for me. It was in a zero-waste cinema, so I've never been in one of those before, so that was incredible. And seeing the film, how it was made, seeing all the women all coming together, all involved, it was fantastic and it was very well produced, like, to the best professional quality ever. It was really great. And I'm sure it'll inspire a lot of local people here.

**ERW:** Yeah, I think it will, and I hope it does. So the next question, maybe we've covered this, and that's fine, but what did you see as your role and or purpose within, you know, the art project?

**TO:** Hello?

**ERW:** Oh, did you hear me?

**TO:** Hello?

**ERW:** Oh, I can hear you. Can you hear me?

**TO:** Oh, I'm so sorry. I muted it because my email went off, but I think that was my phone. So that meant you couldn't hear what I said. Oh, no, sorry.

**ERW:** Oh, no. Can you repeat it?

**TO:** I'll repeat it. So what I'll do is I'll close all my emails so that they don't make any noise. Yeah. And then I'll do that again. Sorry.

**ERW:** No, don't worry if they're being a little loud. That doesn't matter at all.

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**TO:** Okay, so I'll just...

**ERW:** You can just do whatever you feel comfortable with.

**TO:** Oh, it doesn't matter if... Okay, I'll close the emails now, so hopefully that shouldn't make any noise. So maybe you can ask... [Microsoft Teams cuts out]

**TO:** Hello, I'm here. Sorry about that.

**ERW:** No, no, don't worry.

We might have to do that question again.

**ERW:** Sorry.

**TO:** Oh, yeah, don't worry. The transcript keeps starting, which is annoying because we don't need it. So I said, the last question, I think, was what did you see as your role and or purpose as part of the Flotilla project?

**ERW:** Oh, no, I think there was one before. I haven't had this question yet.

**TO:** You haven't had that? All right.

**ERW:** What drew you to getting involved in this project? And then I think maybe you might have been talking about the filming or screening.

**TO:** Yeah, the filming. Yeah, that's what I was talking about, yeah. So do you want me to talk about that first?

**ERW:** I think so, because I don't think it... I think it might be muted, so it would be great to hear.

**TO:** Okay sure, okay. So for me it was a really incredible day. So we started off all the women we all met all together and immediately walking into the room you just saw women from different cultures, different races, different ages, different levels of experience when it comes to sort of rowing and things. So for me I had none and it was just so exciting because, you know, you've got all these people that you can meet. And we had our briefing. We had to put on our life jackets. For me, even wearing a life jacket was like, oh my goodness, this is super exciting. And then we all got talking. We all got to know each other. And a lot of the women were encouraging me to sort of join their water sports groups, which was really great. And we've kept in touch.

And after that we were put onto our boats. So I was put on a boat called Equity and I was asked to stand at the front of the boat and it was just the best experience. It felt like Titanic almost. And it was just really lovely weather and you just had the best view of the docks. Like, you know, I'm able to be around the docks almost all the time. But just seeing it on a boat, I haven't had that view. So it was really lovely, really great. And I was also on the boat with someone else, and she runs a football club. And she told me about her story, how she got into playing football and like the amazing things that she does in her community. And that was a story for so many other women. I met another woman who said she was a colourist, and I didn't even know what that was. And she said, you know, that's a job that she made for herself. Like, she's created that job role. She's decided what

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it's going to be. And it just seemed like everyone's just living out their lives to the fullest. Everyone's just doing what they want to do. Yeah, it was fantastic. I met someone who was a lawyer. And we all had to dress up in our professions, like what we'd usually wear to work. So I'm a teacher and a local councillor, so I wore something quite formal. And to me, it just felt like we were celebrating who we are as women and the contributions that we make to our societies, which was really great. I felt that we felt very powerful. We felt like we have something to add. We felt that you could really see how far we have come as women. If you look historically, compared to now, it's like, you know, we can be whatever we want to be, and that's how we felt on those boats. It was an incredible once-in-a-lifetime experience, I'd say.

We had a couple of rehearsals for our film that we were doing, and in the end, we managed to get a lovely film. We had drones going above us, we had cameras on different angles, we had light, it was just really, really amazing. It took hours, so we started at around three and finished at about 10, I'd say. So a very long time to be on a boat, to be outside. It was quite cold, but I think with all the adrenaline, we were all so excited. So we just really, really enjoyed the day. And since then, we've been able to see the films. I've been able to reunite with some of these lovely ladies and just watching the film, just being like, wow, we've been able to create this. And even the lady who actually put the film together, the filmmaker, is another incredible woman that was just like, you know, wow, we have all collectively come together and produced this. And I'm sure it's going to be an inspiration to a lot of people in our local community. And I even recommended that, you know, they probably want to get local schools and local faith groups and voluntary sector groups, lots of different groups that just come and watch the video because I think it will be a real inspiration. And even the fact that the film has been shown in a zero waste cinema, that is also like really exciting and showing that you know we care about our environment, we care about nature, we care about you know where our world is going, the direction that we're going in and the sort of causes that we care about.

**ERW:** Oh wow that was really beautifully put, that was great.

**TO:** Thank you.

**ERW:** So how do you understand community in your work life and you know your social life? It's a small pivot but just about, you know, still thinking about the community in East London.

**TO:** So for me community is all about being truly known so I think that I could go anywhere, I could go and visit a new city today and meet people and talk to people and have a really great time. I could even sort of like, you know, join some of their community events or things like that and have a great time. But to what extent are you sort of truly known? Whereas here in my community in Custom House, I feel that I'm really, truly known. Since I was a child I've lived here, so I've been to primary school here, secondary school here, even nursery here. A lot of my neighbours now who live around me, they babysat me when I was like two years old and now for them like seeing me as a local councillor you can see how happy they are, you know, the pride, the honour in their faces every time they see me doing my thing, sort of thing. So I think that it's just about for me living here in Custom House, I feel that people know me, like the shopkeepers know me, the fish and chip shop, they all know me, since I was a child and they know what I'm all about. And so it's like, even now that I'm a local councillor, they know that I'm still me, they know who I am. And no matter where you go in life, no matter what sort of titles you might have, I feel that this is the place where everybody knows who I am, what I stand for, the sort of things I like. Everybody knows me, everyone knows my interests here and because of that I can be me here, I can enjoy myself here, I can have my ups and downs here, you know, I'm allowed to have a good day or a bad day. I feel that in this place I can be myself and I can enjoy things with my community here.

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**ERW:** Yeah that's amazing because people knowing you, but also you knowing people as well, if you're growing up in a close-knit place and just seeing everyone progress and settle down and have... yeah, it's really amazing.

**TO:** Exactly, like even if I wake up in the morning and I walk down the road I know exactly who I'm gonna see at 7 a.m. I'm gonna see a neighbour who always goes and gets a newspaper, I know who I'm gonna see at the chip shop, I know who I'm gonna see when I'm getting my Oyster card. I know that I'm going to see a whole range of people. I know if it gets to about three o'clock, I'm going to see all the mums picking up their children from school and the dads. And I just know them and it's just nice. I know the sort of conversations they're going to have. And even now as a counsellor, it's even better because there's a certain level of confidence now that people have and people can share what they're going through. It's not just, you know, hi, how you're doing, I'm fine and that's it. But actually people tell you a little bit more and they have a certain level of trust that you might be able to help them with their issues. So it's even better now, like I'm even more just loving this community.

**ERW:** And as a teacher as well you really are immersed, you know, to see the youth growing up and what they'll do. So yeah-

**TO:** Yeah, absolutely-

**ERW:** -yeah. Oh, did you have anything to say? I cut you off a tiny bit.

**TO:** With being a teacher, I work in Hackney as a teacher, but just teaching the students, for me, it's like I can see me like 10, 15 years ago, I'm just looking at them and I'm just, you know, wondering where they're going to be 10, 15 years from now. And I just want to give them as much as possible to just equip them so that they can be whatever they want to be. Because I feel that I was given that in my local secondary school and primary school. So I went to Rosetta Primary School, which is just down the road from me, and I went to Royal Docks Community School, and I also went to St Angela's Ursheline School. And for me, all these schools, they believed in me so much, the teachers, they gave me everything I could possibly need to succeed and you know they entered me into exams early, they were putting me in touch with different people who could help me with applications for university, they did, they went above and beyond and I think that they've helped me to be able to contribute my best to society and that's what I hope to do as a teacher every single day.

**ERW:** Amazing, so how has the Royal Docks and the surrounding areas changed over time?

**TO:** So I feel that when I was a child, as I was saying earlier, I wouldn't really go over that way because everything was so different, like even the train station was different. So now we've got the custom house, we've got the Elizabeth line, and it's all been renovated and done up really nicely. But before we had a very old train station when I was in primary school and I don't think you could easily get across, I don't think there was that sort of access way, I'm not entirely sure. But I just know that we didn't really go over there, we didn't really see all of that, even Canary Wharf seemed so far away. But now that there are all these different ways to get there, it's just like, I feel that there's a bit more interaction between sort of Custom House and the Royal Docks and Royal Victoria. There's a bit more people coming this way, people going the other way. I feel that now it's a lot more of an attraction, people are coming to see what's over here, especially with the Excel Centre, you have people coming from all over the country, all over the world for different events that are happening all the time. So I feel like it's just lifted up the area. Also, from the Royal Docks you can almost see so much, you can see Canary Wharf and I feel like the whole place now is just so connected, it's really nice. Now we've got lots of

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lovely new apartments, so you've got a whole new demographic that's in the area. We have City Hall over there, so I feel that now there's so much to be proud of, you know, that our area looks really, really lovely and really nice.

**ERW:** Can you see yourself living in East London forever?

**TO:** I don't see why not. Like, it does everything that I would possibly want. Everything that I'd need is here for me. So I think that as a counsellor, being able to interact with so many different people, I can see a lot of issues. There are a lot of things that we do need to solve, a lot of problems that we're aware of. Some of these things are local issues, but some of these things are national issues, and there are things that we need to work on. However, as I said earlier, I've lived here over 30 years and from living here for this amount of time, I've built up community, people know me here, I know other people, I'm happy here. To build that somewhere else, it will take an incredible amount of time. So, you know, I don't know, who knows what the future holds. However, for me at the moment, I'm loving where I live.

**ERW:** Exactly. And could you reflect on some of the issues that people, you know, relay to you and what the steps forward are?

**TO:** So I'd say one of the main issues, which I'm sure people would agree with me all over the country, is housing. So even though I said that there are so many apartments sort of in the Royal Docks area, maybe people over this way in Custom House, that might be slightly unaffordable for someone like myself. And also, just a lot of people here, we have a lot of young families, so those apartments are probably not even suitable anyway. We have a lot of families who are needing three-, four-, five-bedroom accommodation, and that sort of accommodation is just not available, so we're really trying our best. We have a lot of regenerations underway, a lot of developments. We're trying to produce more housing, however, the rate at which we're trying to do it, it just doesn't match the scale of the need in the area. So people want new housing, they want quality housing, they want energy efficient housing, they don't want to be overcrowded, they don't want to have issues, they don't want to live in, you know, areas where they feel that it's not suitable for them. We want our children to live in homes where they can thrive, where they can have, you know, great well-being. So all of that, I thought so much can be solved by giving someone a suitable home. However, that is a big challenge here, I'd say, for two reasons. First of all, because maybe the council might have to stock to fill the needs of everyone. But secondly, it's also very hard for young people to get onto the property ladder.

**ERW:** Yeah, exactly. Yeah, I mean, that is, that's, yeah, it's difficult. And in a national issue, like you said, it's just, it's just frightening that young people-

**TO:** Yeah, and the population is just growing and growing and growing. And one of the great things about Newham and the docks and all of this area is that a lot of people actually want to live here because we're one of the most diverse boroughs in the country. So when people come here, they can feel a sense of home and community. You're going to find your religious group. You're going to find your cultural group. You're going to feel a sense of belonging here. So a lot of people like to come here, but we just don't have the capacity and the housing. So that is what I'll say is one of our main issues.

**ERW:** So have you noticed, is the desire to move to London recent or it's always been quite popular?  
(I meant to ask about East London here but misspoke, so it ended up being a slightly stupid question)

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**TO:** I think London is, you know, London is a main city, is a major city, a financial centre. So a lot of people want to come to London but I'm talking more Newham specifically. People like living in Newham because if you come here, you're definitely going to find a place where you will feel at home, you'll feel like you've got family around you, you will feel that. A lot of people like living here and people don't want to move out. So even if you were to offer someone accommodation which is outside of London, which would really suit their family situation, they probably want to stay here because people like to stay here, people stay here a long time, your neighbours become your family. So yeah, that's what I'd say. So I'm talking more specifically in Newham. But yeah, London as a whole, people have liked, people have wanted to come to London for a very long time, I'd say.

**ERW:** Yeah. Also... so, nearing the end of the interview... So, the Docks has a really rich history of women's liberation movements and labour movements. Is this something you were aware of?

**TO:** I wasn't so aware of it. Growing up, I have been hearing bits and pieces about it and I'm also on the Custom House Regeneration Steering Group. So what that is, is we're having a regeneration in our local area in Custom House and as part of that, we need to make sure that the community are happy with all the regeneration that's going on in the area. So through that, we have been receiving training, especially about the history of the area. And through that, I've been learning a lot more about the docks and how important it was for trade and how it contributed to our economy. So I have learned a lot about the history of the area, but not so much about the women's liberation. So that is something that I really learnt so much more from this project in particular. And that made me even more proud to live here and to see that we've made so much progress. So I'd say I've learnt more about that through this particular project.

**ERW:** Yeah, that's the same for me. I think this really opened my eyes, particularly to the women's roles on the water and the relationship with boats. Yeah, so it's been, you know, beyond the aesthetic and artistic value of the piece, sort of the education is so central as well-

**TO:** Yeah, and for me thinking that, wow, like, you know, I didn't know all of this and now I'm learning this. I want everyone to learn this now. So I have told them, like, it would be a good idea to get, you know, the local schools to come and watch these videos, come and see all the projects, and just to educate them and let them know how far we've come because if I didn't know then there's probably so many more people that don't know about our local history. So you know it would be really great to get a lot of people to come along, watch the video and learn about you know what it was like for women on the docks all those years ago compared to now and actually because we're so liberated and because we have all this power now we can do whatever we want actually we should take the opportunity, we should capitalise on the fact that we live so close to the docks and see how can we get involved, what can we do, how can we appreciate what we have around us so much more.

**ERW:** Oh exactly, and the final question is, you know, who are the women leaders that have inspired or motivated you?

**TO:** Oh, that is a really interesting question. Women leaders that have inspired me? There are so many. At the moment, I am doing a couple of projects on - because I'm a maths teacher - however as I said earlier I really want students to really get the most out of education, and to get the most out of education you need to actually see yourself as part of it. Some students, when they're studying maths with me, they might feel that, you know, this is something that's like, some mathematicians from many, many years ago made up these formulas and I just have to learn them and I'm not any part of this. But I want my students to feel that they are

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mathematicians and they are part of it. And one way that I'm trying to do that is to use the life stories of different women and teach these life stories. And whilst teaching these life stories, then bringing the maths as well and having students doing calculations around these life stories so that they're a lot more engaged and interested. And if they have any similarities with these women, then they'll feel a lot more involved. So, the women that I am looking at at the moment are Madam CJ Walker and, sorry, just a second, Madam CJ Walker and Mahalia Jackson. So these are not local women, these are women from America a very long time ago. So what I do want to do is actually research local women around here so that I can actually, I think that would even be even better if I could do these projects about women who students can see that they lived in this area, they worked in this area, they grew up here, that would even bring them even closer to home. But at the moment it's Madam CJ Walker and Mahalia Jackson. And the reason why I chose these women is because they had very difficult childhoods. They lost their parents early, they had to work from a young age, they didn't have much of an education, but they had to just use what they had. They had to appreciate the identity. They didn't lose it. They didn't lose who they were. They kept who they were, and they just had a lot of integrity, and they refused to sort of compromise who they were. They kept going with it, and they used their skill to make a name for themselves and to become the best in their field. So Mahalia Jackson, she's the one who really coined gospel music and really made it what it was. And Madam TJ Walker, she became the first black, I think, millionaire in America. So for me, these women are so inspiring because it doesn't matter what their background was, they were still able to make it. And also the fact that they didn't really lose who they were. So someone like Mahalia Jackson, she was a singer and people were trying to get her to sing different types of songs or songs that were not really her or to change her voice and she didn't even have vocal training. She was like, you know what, this is me, this is how I sing, these are the sorts of songs I want to sing and I'm not going to compromise. If it means I don't get to have, you know, this opportunity, I'm not going to go for it until I'm able to do something that I want to do. And I think that's a very important message for women today. There are so many opportunities out there, but if we're able to have integrity and know our identities, know our skills, know our gifts, and just really push through with that and not be swayed by other things, which might not really be what we want to do, I think that's a very good starting point. And I think that women will go a very long way if we're able to learn these lessons.

**ERW:** Oh, yeah, that's amazing. Is there anything that you'd like to speak about which I haven't asked a question that touched upon it?

**TO:** I think it touched on everything.

**ERW:** Oh, brilliant. Oh, Thelma, thank you so much.

**TO:** No worries.