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START AUDIO

Steve Els: I'm Steve Els. I'm the Sales Sports Manager of the \_\_\_[0:00:06] Centre. I started working on this project in the mid 1980s when Thames Water announced that the east and west reservoirs were going to become redundant and were looking at plans at filling them in and building on the site. I've been working, ever since then, on bringing sailing and water sports to the community.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about that time? Specifically the role, your role or interaction with the sector reservoirs.

Steve Els: Back in the mid 1980s I was still working for the [Inner London 0:00:50] Education Authority and we were running a water sports facility out in Chingford on the Lee Valley reservoirs in Chingford. By that stage, it was getting close to the end of Ilea, the Inner London Education Authority was going to be split up to the local boroughs.

A lot of our users are actually schools from this area, coming from Hackney. We could see that our future lied with the London Borough of Hackney, either bringing the schools to us out in Chingford, or when we saw that this site was possibly going to become available, it made more sense, especially with the national curriculum that was there at the time and starting to take hold. Time constraints within schools were becoming tighter.

The amount of time spent on a bus travelling to a site was time taken out of the curriculum. It made sense, rather than bring the children to the facility, to bring the facility to the children. So we started working on the idea of transferring our water sports facility into the borough.

The next step from that was, as I say, we were working for the Inner London Education Authority, so the next stage was to actually get involved with the various stakeholders that were around at the time, which was the London Borough of Hackney, Thames Water and the Save the Reservoirs Campaign, the local community. So we joined the Save the Reservoirs Campaign. We offered our services to Thames Water of advice on recreational facilities.

I, at the time, sat on the Royal Yachting Association's regional committee. The RYA offered its services to offer advice on using the reservoirs for recreational purposes. We got involved with the London Borough of Hackney and worked on their development plan for the area. We tried to sit on every side of the fence.

[Cross talking 0:03:10].

We worked on the theory that if we sat on every side of the fence, we should be on the winning side at some point. There were three of us, fortunately, so that gave them three sides of the fence. We took one side each and all worked in our little ways to try and persuade everybody that it was a good facility. If we were going to use it for a recreational facility, we could actually...

The original plan was simply to pick up what we had and transfer it here. We were based in a Portakabin, with a fleet of old boats. The idea was to find a spot of land somewhere on the side of one of the two reservoirs, drop the Portakabin and plant the boats. We'd find a way of getting boats in the water and out again and build a ramp. That wouldn't be...

It was fairly small scale at that stage, back in the 1980s because we hadn't got the National Lottery in existence at the time. The idea of huge amounts of funding wasn't really an option. As I say, it was literally a case of picking up the Portakabin and heading in this direction. A low cost option for, what by the end of the 1980s, became Hackney's Education Department, having been Inner London Education Authority disbanded.

We had, by that time, moved into Hackney, so we were part of the London Borough of Hackney. At least we were part of one of the stakeholders by that stage. Basically, the plan started off as quite low key. We had contacts with the Adult Education Institute, which was using the old Woodbury Down School site. One of the options was whether we could plonk our Portakabin in the middle of the old school playground, build a little bridge across the new river at that end, and launch using the playground as a boat path.

There were various options that we explored at that stage, trying to find ways to cheaply relocate. The important thing was bringing the water sports facility to the kids. Getting it closer to the kids so that there was more time spent on the water and less time spent travelling.

Interviewer: How integral was that community connection to protecting this water space?

Steve Els: I think, without the work of the Save the Reservoirs Campaign, it would probably have been a lost cause. Save the Reservoirs Campaign was a group of quite strong and verbal members of the local community who had the strength to stand there and make the council stand up to Thames Water and not let them just walk over them.

Thames tried various things over that period of time. They drained the reservoir down. Most people believed that was in the thought that it would then crack and dry out. The clay liner would crack and then when it filled up again they could sit there and say, "It leaks, what could we do? The best thing to do is to fill it in." That's the cynical amongst us that would suggest that that's what they were doing.

But there was no reason to drain it down. It was drained down, when it was filled up again, it didn't leak and it's still not leaking today, thankfully. So we've still got a body of water. Without the Save the Reservoirs Campaign, it would have been much, much harder to try and keep these patches.

Interviewer: What role do you think, in your considerable time here and connection to the site, what role do these bodies of water play in terms of the local community's sense of place?

Steve Els: I think it's hard because part of the... It has been hard in the past. One of the problems was always that, being a Thames Water site, being an operational reservoir, it was surrounded by high security fencing and almost impossible to see. You had to turn your head very sharply as you drove across the bridge in Lordship Road, to get a short glance of the water. That was the only visibly sign.

The buildings around it and the geographical layout means that it just wasn't visible from the road. Its existence was hidden. It stands out well on a map. You can see that sunglasses effect on the map. Those two reservoirs that look like a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses sitting there. You can spot where they are really easily.

But if you're driving along Seven Sisters Road, if you're driving up Green Lanes, it's impossible to spot the water. It's impossible to know that it's here. It's always been a hidden thing. You notice this by when people walk along and the first time they actually see the patch of water, everybody has the same effect, their jaws drop, because it is so hidden.

One advantage of the new development, on the other side there, is that we've now had a lot more buildings that are all looking in this direction. You can see how much of a selling point it is by the fact that all of the advertising for all of the things for sale, show both \_\_\_[0:09:28], show the patch of water. It's a selling point for the new development. All the buildings are pointing in this direction, funnily enough.

It makes sense. But it's only now that it's become visible from that part of the community. As I say, the old flats were end on to the reservoir, so that their windows looked sideways. Nobody was looking in this direction.

Interviewer: In that respect, they didn't really feature in their sense of identity theory because they weren't part of it.

Steve Els: They weren't aware of it. It really was a case of not aware of it. Remember, Thames Water surround all of their operational reservoirs with security fencing. It's 10ft high palisade fencing. You don't see it. You don't get onsite. You don't know it exists. Even if you can climb up on a fence and look over the top of it, there's no way of actually getting near to it and seeing it as being...

The only real users that we ever had or people that visited the site when they shouldn't were the neighbours over on the Allenton Road side, that would break bits of their concrete fencing and then clamber through the fence and come and have a picnic on the bank when no one is looking. I think, they're some of the voices that didn't want the thing here because it took away from their private picnic area.

They'd had this reservoir to themselves for the last 30 or 40 years, with just the occasional Thames Water operative walking around to check everything is alright. The rest of the time they could picnic on the bank and it was their own private little oasis.

Interviewer: Which is interesting, because those feelings are echoed, say for example, with a lot of the members of Fishery \_\_\_[0:11:39], who have had access to that site.

Steve Els: Who have sat there for years, yes.

Interviewer: It's their own little oasis. The idea that other that other people will be coming in.

Steve Els: And wander around and use it, is... Yes. There is always, understandably, the fear that people will spoil it. The thing of it with an oasis, is that it is beautiful to you in its current format. What you don't want is somebody coming along and doing something that will spoil it.

My answer to any of the neighbours, when we were doing all the development plans was, "Any spoiling that we do is going to be a lot less than if they build a 30 storey block of flats on the land. You might have to put up with a few people your extended back garden, but it would be better than a housing development once it's filled in. You should be supporting it, not fighting it."

Interviewer: Did they come round?

Steve Els: I think most of the neighbours saw the benefits in the long term. I don't think we had too many people that were anti it once the ideas were explained. It was pointed out that this would save that patch of water and would give... Controlled is one of the things that we always agreed, at the very early stage, that it would be managed use, so that it didn't just become a park.

We've got Finsbury Park. We've got Clissold Park. There are parks that are very close and fulfil that need. The security aspect for the houses that were backing along it, one of their main concerns was having people wandering around their back gardens, because they'd never had any need for security. If their only visitor along their back garden was this Thames Water operative that came around once a day to look at the reservoir, they didn't have to worry about people wandering past their back gardens.

They were all concerned that there would suddenly be a huge influx of people all noseying into their back gardens. We had a fair number of consultation meetings where we had to deal with those sorts of concerns.

Interviewer: When you spoke to them about the benefits that a site like this brings, or could bring, to the local area, what is the argument there? What does access to this site, as a water site, bring?

Steve Els: When we started the whole plan, as I say, it was originally, once we'd put a Portakabin somewhere along the side and dump our boats in, they'd get a bit of sailing. That was the limit of it. But the plan soon increased once the National Lottery came into existence. One of the things at the very first meetings we had with the National Lottery, we'd gone along thinking we'll ask for money for a new Portakabin. We didn't have any big plans. Instead of a tatty old Portakabin, we thought we'd go for a nice shiny one.

We were told, quite firmly, that the National Lottery would not pay for new Portakbins. It wouldn't pay to put a new roof on an old cricket club. What they wanted was big, bold, grand designs. They had loads of money at that stage that they needed to show what they were doing and make it look effective. So what they wanted were big, bold designs.

Hence, we got Mark Sparfield, the architects that did the Millennium Wheel and the London Eye. They were the architects we worked with to design this. We went for the top architects. We were told in no uncertain terms, "There's no point in asking for £30,000, you're better off asking for £3m." So we had to find out ways of spending it.

We upscaled our original ideas and said, "Okay, we're going to have to build a nice, shiny water sports centre." But we also wanted it to be... The team that were working on this were all education based, so it was going to be an educational facility as opposed to a leisure facility. We were still part of the education department at that stage, and we wanted to provide an educational facility.

We contacted various environmental bodies and ended up working with the London Wildlife Trust for it to be an outdoor education centre. To have environmental education and water sports going on at the same time. The idea was to, as I say, offer managed access to the site. We would do environmental education along the banks and water sports on the water, which we did, to a degree, for the first few years.

Interviewer: You said, that to a degree in the first few years, that was a challenge, was it?

Steve Els: There wasn't as much environmental education going on as we would have liked. I think there wasn't any proper funding on the environmental side. The advantage that we had on the water sports was, we had a water sports facility already. You had an existing provision, and all we did was we moved the existing provision into a nice shiny new facility. There wasn't an environmental provision, so getting somebody to come in and some environmental education work meant that somebody had to fund it. There wasn't, shall we say, a sustainable funding source at the time.

We struggled. The environmental team that were working here were doing it on a very ad hoc basis. One day a week during certain times of the year and so forth. It wasn't a full commitment to it. Obviously, with the London Wildlife Trust, they've gone on and on and now they've got a very big provision over there with very sustainable funding and bits and pieces. So they continue and offer a much better service than we were able to offer here at the time.

What we had was, at the beginning, in the next room down, the lecture room as it is at the moment, was our environmental classroom. We had that room set out and it was used by the London Wildlife Trust and they had access to the site and could run their provision from that room.

Interviewer: Did it come to a point where it came to an end?

Steve Els: It came to an end when, funnily enough, Thames Water took on... We had the pleasure of digging a tunnel from the field over there. The field had been turned into a wildlife classroom by the London Wildlife Trust. They did most of their work, actually, in the field. Thames wanted to suddenly start digging a very deep hole and tunnelling from it. So we had to shut down our car park and the London Wildlife Trust were actually relocated over on the other reservoir and given the little building at the other end of this one by Thames Water as compensation for digging a big hole in what was the outdoor classroom.

That's how East Reservoir came about. They were given access to East Reservoir, because until then, East Reservoir had remained operational and Thames had not allowed anybody onsite. It was only once the tunnelling work started and once they had to relocate the Wildlife Trust that they got access to the reservoir and they got the little classroom at the far end.

Interviewer: Are we talking early 90s?

Steve Els: No. We're talking, probably about 2005/2006, somewhere around that. Mid 2000s.

Interviewer: Okay.

Steve Els: The centre, as it stands at the moment, officially opened in 2002, I think it was, or 2003. We actually opened our doors in May 2001. That's when we opened as it is at the moment.

Interviewer: When you were filling in that grant application and you were explaining why this money needs to be spent on this facility, what are the reasons given? What is the demand? What makes the social offer here so important?

Steve Els: When we were working on the Lottery bid, there were a number of factors. There was the huge \_\_\_[0:22:07] population, obviously, with limited amounts of recreational facilities. We, carefully, found some community partners. For example, we took the North London Sailing Association, which existed and was based where we were, but we took them along as an instant community group to show that we had that community usage as opposed to the commercial side of just running courses and bits and pieces.

There was that club thing. We didn't have to create the club. For the kayaking, there wasn't an existing kayak club that we could relocate, so we created a kayak club ourselves. Within a year that had 100 members and was operating. At first, what we did was, we moved into this facility when it was the old pumping station still, and we had temporary accommodation.

We secured funding from Thames Water. When Hackney eventually bought the reservoir for £1.00, it received half a million of funding from Thames Water to develop the site. What we had to decide then was, do we spend the half a million to build a water sports centre or do we use it as funding to seed fund a Lottery bid and have a much better facility?

£1/2 million sounds like a lot of money, until you realise that we had no services onsite. There was no electricity, gas or water coming to this building. Water seemed the strangest thing, as a waterworks, that we didn't have any running water. We had some running down the walls and in various places that it shouldn't be, but none coming out of the taps.

It turned out that when Thames decommissioned the site, their idea of decommissioning, which they did in the late 80s, early 90s, was to basically chop through all the services down at Green Lanes. You're never going to get squatters in there if the electricity cable is about six foot to short. Yes, so basically, all the services were cut off.

We had to lay a new gas main, new electricity from Green Lanes. There were huge costs just to make the building operational. We used the Thames Water money to A, provide a temporary facility, and the temporary facility had a design life of 20 years. We knew that we had a backup plan if it all went wrong. If the Lottery bid fell through, we had a facility that would last for 20 years, albeit in a limited state and using the old kit that we brought with us and everything.

We had a temporary facility. We'd laid on all of the services. Then the rest of the money was used to sort out the architects, a project team, to work on the Lottery bid and so forth, and to pretty much guarantee that we got the £3m from the Lottery.

Interviewer: Was it set up as, did it need to a social enterprise? Did it need to be something of that nature?

Steve Els: At the time, there were various discussions as to how we move forwards with it. But it went through as, the London Borough of Hackney put the Lottery bid together and put it through, so it was the local authority. There was talk about whether we should become a Trust. The future of leisure provision within Hackney was all up in the air at that time. It was before it had all been put out to private management.

There were various conversations about what the way forward would be. At the time, we were part of the London Borough of Hackney and there were a few people within the senior management team in Hackney that supported the plan. To be fair, as I say, in the end it cost the London Borough of Hackney £1.00 to provide this facility. All of the money came from Thames Water or the Lottery, so they got a pretty good deal out of it in the end.

I think, sometimes, they forget that they got such a good deal. All they, basically, had to spend was three salaries for the three staff that worked on the project over the years to get it up to that stage. That's all it cost them.

Interviewer: The transfer over from the London Borough of Hackney to the Trust?

Steve Els: While we were at the stage of actually building the centre, Hackney was getting into a bit of a mess with its finances. Its solution for its leisure facilities was to put it out to tender for private management companies. When we actually opened in 2001, we were left with the staff team of three that had been running from one Portakabin, now running around this building having a wing each. You can have the east wing. I'll have the west wing and the other one gets the tail.

It was a very limited staffing. We had no cleaning staff. We had no reception staff. It literally was, three water sports instructors running around the building trying to do everything. Hackney's response to anything that said, "We need to increase staffing and all that," was, "Wait until the private management company comes in."

Unfortunately, the private management company, the first one that came in, took it on thinking it was getting an operational facility. And then discovered the three sailing instructors running around in there, couldn't actually manage a facility of this size on their own and did actually need a few more resources. There were some quite big battles, early on, to actually get the place resourced to a level where it could actually provide anything near the level of provision that it was intended to.

Obviously, it's a seven day a week facility, it needed to be staffed appropriately.

Interviewer: \_\_\_[0:28:48]?

Steve Els: That management company were eventually, I wouldn't say given the boot, but they left. The council took back all of its leisure facilities for a short period of time and then put in a second management company, who have now been here for eight or nine years now.

I would say that the only real difference each time is a change of T shirt. I get a different logo. The problem with the private management companies, and it's probably a problem that we had with Hackney as well, is lack of understanding of what we're trying to do. We are run by a private management company that operates swimming pools and gyms. Everything we do has to, if you like, fit into their model.

You're lucky you didn't walk through a turnstile as you came in, because that's their model. They model their success on how many times the turnstile goes around. We actually work more on quality and provision than numbers. There are some quite major issues in, shall we say, understanding what we do.

The other big one that we have is always, usage. Last year was a bad year because we lost a couple of members of staff. But the year before, our customer usage was 20,000 visits. That's the water sports visits. That's not counting all of the dry side stuff and seminar rooms and bits and pieces. There were 20,000 water sports visits.

Which, if you speak to the governing bodies of the sailing and kayaking, they think we're wonderful to have that many people. It's ignoring the location, the fact that we're in the middle of London. But just to have that many people on the water over the course of the year. When you're working with the ratios that the governing bodies do, for an adult sailing course, I have to provide an instructor for every three people that are learning to sail.

We push the limits in the kid's stuff. We have 2 instructors to a class of 30 children, which is greater than the Royal Yachting Association recommend. But we claim that we do it with experienced staff in a safe environment. The site itself leads to \_\_\_[0:31:28]. It's accepted that we can offer it on those ratios.

But even then, to get 20,000 visits, the number of instructor hours on the water is huge. However, we're measured against the local swimming pool. We are nowhere near that sort of usage. Even the local authority, even the council, suffers from not having anything to compare it against for understanding.

Somewhere out there at the moment we've got 30 kids.

Interviewer: Swimming about.

Steve Els: They're doing something, yes. I'm not worried because I know there are two instructors with those 30 kids. But you can be forgiven for thinking that we're deserted. I've got half my staff team working with that group at the moment.

What you see as happening, isn't necessarily a fair reflection on the amount of work in what goes on out there.

Interviewer: That divergence, in terms of how you measure success, is that down to, basically, numbers equals pounds and pennies or do they gauge your success from simple numbers?

Steve Els: I'd actually be happy if it was just pounds and pennies because I think they'd understand that a little more. We could then charge more because you're getting a one to one session or whatever. You charge more, so you can justify it because then your income will balance out. But they don't see it as pounds and pennies, they look at footfall. But they're not comparing it with a like for like basis.

You cannot compare something that requires huge amounts of staffing to cover the safety aspect to something where you can get 200 people in the swimming pool and employ a lifeguard to sit on a chair and watch it.

Interviewer: Yes. Someone with less skill.

Steve Els: Less skill and capable of doing the job safely because he can see. Everybody is just doing their own thing, he is just watching and he only has to look out for the one that either stops waving and is sitting on the bottom of the pool for a bit longer than they should. That's the one he's got to watch for. They're capable of doing that.

But it's not a fair measurement to say, "Well because you've only had 30 kids on the water all day, whereas we had 200 in the pool, the pool was more successful.

Interviewer: When it comes to you've all come from an educational background, I'm assuming that you feel a site like this brings considerable education value. What do you think a site like this, available in this particular part of London, brings into the value of the community?

Steve Els: I think, the educational side is where can actually get people... London is one of those places, as I said earlier, where people don't move outside of their little bit of the community. They don't venture. It's a frightening place, so people aren't as bold as they make out, and they don't go very far. They stay within their own little bit of the community. They only walk down the streets that they know.

They do not go through, even though there is a big sign at the gate that says, open, it doesn't mean that they are going to come down and find out what it is that is open. If it's something they don't understand they tend to steer clear of it.

One of the first things we need to do is educate people into what's available and how they can use these sorts of facilities. The way through that is always, as far as I'm concerned, schools. We have 70 or 80 primary schools within the London Borough of Hackney. If we could get every one of those primary schools up here for a couple of visits that means that all the children within the borough would know that these sorts of facilities exist.

I don't expect every child to enjoy it and want to come back. But there will be children within that group that will have never thought of coming here, suddenly think, "This is actually quite good." Why would a child who has been brought up in the middle of Hackney, who has never experienced water, think to go kayaking or sailing? Something has got to prompt them.

They're not even likely to wake up and see a picture of a sailing boat. What are the odds they're going to sit there and see something that's going to make them think, "I want to go sailing,"? If you can get them within the schools, introduce them to this sort of facility, then once they've experienced it...

As I said earlier, this place sells itself. On a beautiful day like today, if you were out there and saw sailing boats, you couldn't help but want to come back and give it a go. You sit there and it sells itself. You've just got to get people onsite, and that's the hard part.

Interviewer: Why is that important, that those kids that have never seen water, that have never seen a sailing boat, that wouldn't ever even consider getting involved in something like this, why is it important?

Steve Els: To me, it's important because it's my passion. I love to pass on that passion. I get the biggest buzz from seeing other people getting a buzz from it too, that I've passed that on. These are kids that are stuck in that council estate or those dirty streets with the car fumes and the noise and the crime. Hackney can be a frightening, horrible place at times.

These kids are unlikely to actually have the opportunity to go any further. To get on a bus and then head out of town. To have facilities within the community where they can come and experience fresh air, or as close as it comes to fresh air in the middle of London. It's a beautiful environment out there.

Again, it's what we're saying about the bringing sailing to the kids. It's bringing the outdoors to the kids. You can't guarantee that you can get the kids to the outdoors, but if you bring the outdoors to the kids, you overcome the problem. Then, like with most things, you hope that you develop that passion that they want to see more, they want to do more.

As a water sports venue, it's very limited. It's a foundation site. It's never going to take people up to Olympic level. But our aim is to get people interested and hopefully they'll move on. We might get the odd one that moves on enough to actually want to compete and do things. We've given them the tools. We've given them the basics. Be it water sports, be it just the open air and the environment.

Once we've given them the knowledge, then what they do with it is down to them. But at least you've given them those tools to start with.

Interviewer: Do you think it changes, in your experience of \_\_\_[0:39:29], people come and use the site and interact with it? Do you think it changes their relationship with water?

Steve Els: It's actually interesting because, as I said before, there are people that sit there and say that the place is inaccessible. That's because they haven't actually tried to get in and tried to use the facilities and make use of it. But, when you get people actually using it, they get a sense of ownership.

We've had that with the kids from the estate. Where, they'd throw stones at kayakers as they went past, from the car park, through the fence, until you actually get them onsite. Now, if they see anybody doing something that they shouldn't over on this side, they'll be shouting abuse and telling them to leave it alone and stop.

So there is a sense of ownership that is created by getting people onsite and using the facility. But that's how you treat the customer or how you treat that person in the first place. You've got to give them that sense of ownership and let them feel that it's their facility and it's there for their benefit.

Interviewer: Are there barriers, physical or otherwise to people feeling like this could be theirs?

Steve Els: I think there are perceived barriers and there are commercial barriers. Perceived barriers are this perceived barrier in their head that because it's different and they don't understand it, they can't be a part of it. Bearing in mind that I'm a Londoner and I was brought up, I first went sailing with the school. I don't come from a coastal background. I learnt to sail on a site similar to this. The barriers aren't there, but they're perceived to being there. So that's the first barrier.

Then there are the commercial barriers. Because, at the end of the day, it costs money and someone has to pay for it. One of our suggested solutions or ways of overcoming some of that financial barrier work, it's always been proposed that the council should fund free use for the local schools. The cost would be minimal. You could pay for a couple of instructors. What's that, £40,000 a year to provide free use of the facilities for the local schools.

That would get the schools that sit there now and claim that they can't afford to use the facility, have got no excuse. So you would get more than just the interested schools, you'll get the ones that will just take it up because it's free. It gets more people through the door. It gets more people visiting and seeing the facility. Then there is a better cross section of the community.

My answer has always been, when people ask about the demographic of usage, I can only deal with the people that come through the door. If you get a full cross section of the community coming through the door, then usage is going to be a full cross section. The best way to do that is, obviously, to get every school in the borough to go in.

Then, if 10% of the local schools are Kurdish refugees, then 10% of our users are going to be Kurdish refugees. You can guarantee that you've got that cross section.

Interviewer: But that, presumably, hasn't happened?

Steve Els: It's never happened yet. Every time we go to meetings to discuss better usage, I always throw that one up and, shall we say, that the council usually go quiet and go away again with their tail between their legs. It's not as if, I've been banging on about it for the last 15 years. There needs to be the funding.

I said already, one of our problems here, this business about the measuring was that the staffing is quite intense. There is a cost implement to that. It's actually quite hard to find staff anyway. If I had a water sports centre on the south coast, I'd find sailing instructors no problem. I'm in Stone Ellington. Sailing instructors do not live in Stone Ellington.

Yes. It's actually quite hard to find the qualified staff. The majority of our water sports team, our sessional water sports team, are youngsters that we've trained up and brought through the system, which is wonderful in one way. It's taken a long time to get to that stage. Thankfully, we've been open for 15/16 years now, I'm seeing the benefits.

When we first opened here, I had no local sailing and kayaking instructors. All the youngsters that we took on were all eight or nine, and it took a long time for them to get old enough to be able to teach. I've started to get a bit too old to be a role model anymore. It was alright when I was younger, I could teach the youth club. But now, you need the younger instructors to be the role models and for them to see the progression.

But we're getting there. That side of it is always a battle, but we do it. There is the cost implication and someone has got to pay for it. I'd love to give a percentage away for free. My passion is to get everybody out there on the water. But I know, for a fact, that I've got to sit there and charge somebody. If somebody wants to fund things, that's great. If they don't, then the customers have to pay.

They see it as a profit making thing, and it doesn't make a profit. Most of the activities we do are break even. But that's still quite costly, and that can be a barrier.

Interviewer: Yes. Would you say, are there cultural barriers to being engaged with water?

Steve Els: There are cultural barriers that exist within Hackney that the water doesn't create, but that they're already there. One of our biggest successes was that when we first moved onsite, we would have members of the Orthodox Jewish community, which are predominantly that side of the reservoir, coming and peering through the gate and through the window and looking. But wouldn't get involved because they didn't trust the non Orthodox Jewish community to provide things for them. Everything they do is done within the community.

We had huge problems trying to get them involved, until we discovered that they used the local swimming pools and they had their own swimming instructors. We encouraged a couple of their swimming instructors to come along and become kayak instructors. Once we'd trained them to be kayak instructors, they then brought along the kids. Now, Friday afternoons, I have 80 Orthodox Jewish boys, every Friday afternoon throughout the summer. From April to October.

We've overcome... If you can't beat them, join them, type of thing. But we got there. We knew that we couldn't... At first, girls were always a problem. It was, "They can't be taught by men." Unfortunately, still to this day, female instructors, I'm short of. It's one of those things that we just do not get the same number of female instructors as we do male instructors.

At first we really suffered with the girls. But we, eventually, managed to... We had numerous visits by the Rabbi and eventually we got to the stage where they trusted us. Now, we do the girls, usually they're one off's. Next week I've got three. There are a couple of Orthodox Jewish girl's schools amongst the estate over there. We've got three groups coming in next week, just for one off's, for taster sessions.

They book it as boating. It's a little more than a boating lake, but not much more. It's actually quite interesting that, when we first used to do it, it was so alien to them, because they just never got to do anything like that. They just couldn't understand it. Now, they all turn up with a bag with a change of clothes, "Where's the boat? We're ready to go." It's become the norm and that's really nice to see.

Now we're turning them away. "No, we're fully booked next week. We can't do that. Sorry." Whereas, before, it was so much effort just to try and get them to come in and try the facility. Now we've got to the stage where we're getting too many bookings, which is a nice place to be.

Interviewer: Which is a brilliant place to be, isn't it?

Steve Els: It is. That's the sort of success that you can really feel that you've achieved something. To see, as I say, within a community that didn't move outside of its own community, and weren't willing to try new things, to actually see that taking place is great.

Interviewer: \_\_\_[0:49.50] a difference at all in overcoming a series of barriers.

Steve Els: Yes. Yet, where we are, they take up, half of that area over there is the Orthodox Jewish community. You can't walk down the street without tripping over them, yet you had a site that they wouldn't come onto. There was no ways that we were going to let that defeat us. We were determined to get it. It was a roundabout way and it was, probably, pure luck that we came up with this, "Hang on a minute. If they go swimming down there, let's go and meet the guys."

We found a couple that were keen and interested. There's a picture down in the other wing of the Orthodox Jewish kayak instructor's course. It was a two year programme to get them... We're zero to hero with these things. It's not as if you're taking a competent kayaker and saying, "Let's train you up to me an instructor." We're taking people that spend all their time in the water. We've got to get them in a boat, first of all, and persuade them to stay in the boat and not get back in the water.

It was a zero to hero course. It was two years. We only got, from the ten, we got three that qualified, which is probably about the normal ratio when you do that zero to hero stuff. We got funding from the redevelopment budget and so forth. We had SRB funding which, technically, what we did was we got the group together, organised them and then got them to apply for the funding. Which they did and then they spent the funding with us, which was really useful.

Basically, it seed funded that part of the community coming into the site. Once we'd got a couple of instructors, then we could start and get people using the site.

Interviewer: Then build up a relationship.

Steve Els: Yes.

Interviewer: What about the relationship now, \_\_\_[0:51:51], this is a 25/30 year project over there on Woodbury Down estate. They are quite a few years into that already, with quite a shift, as you say, with the new buildings and new communities coming in. The re-landscaping onto the edge of the reservoir, meaning that both sites are certainly very open.

Steve Els: Becoming more visible.

Interviewer: Yes. Do you think that is changing people's relationships?

Steve Els: I would love to say yes, but as a company, we're not good at marketing. That's because we run from impulse and you don't sell impulse. If you want to go swimming, you go to your local swimming pool, don't you? If that one smells a bit nasty or the change rooms are dirty, you go to the next one down the road or the one that's got the nicest slide.

You don't look at the marketing material. Nobody markets a swimming pool.

Interviewer: Everyone thinks that \_\_\_[0:52:59].

Steve Els: We're run by me, that doesn't understand marketing. We don't go out and sell the facility. I'm still dependent on people coming through the door, as they would in a swimming pool. You would think with the amount of new development over there, the amount of new homes, the amount of people that can see the water, see people on the water every day. See the adult club out there sailing on a Sunday morning. Monday to Friday, they might not see the schools because they're at work.

But at the weekend, when they see 50 to 100 kids out there on a Saturday, or 50 to 100 sailors and kayakers out there on a Sunday, adults, you would think they would be coming to the reception desk and saying, "What's all this about? How do I get involved? How can I do it?" I can think of two or three people in the last year that have come from over there.

You look through the application forms for the courses, and checking that, the number that list the new development as their address are very limited, which is surprising. Well, it's surprising to me.

Interviewer: It is interesting. What's your view on the opening up of East Reservoir and the relationship between the two reservoirs going forward, how that looks to you?

Steve Els: I love the idea that the Wildlife Trust has got East Reservoir and we've got West Reservoir. Not because I want them to be different, but because we have differing needs and different agendas. If this was to become generally open to the public, apart from the security issues for the young people that use the site, you have problems...

We run open water swimming on Thursday evenings, Saturday and Sunday mornings in the summer when it's warm. Because we allow people to swim in the water, we then get people who come along and think they can go swimming at any time, because it's water and because people are allowed in there. You have to explain that when we do run open swimming, we have people in canoes standing by as lifeguards. Because swimming in a large, expansive open water is extremely cold, it can quite dangerous if you're not used to it and you need a reasonable level of safety coverage. Especially on a large, expansive water as we've got at the moment.

Once it's open, once people can wander around... What they do now is, they climb over the fence. They don't just wait for the gate to be opened, they'll come through the fence. People think that they have a right to use it. Sometimes, that right can be dangerous. The other reservoir, if the Wildlife Trust is wandering around the other reservoir and everybody is using it on the land and not using the water, there's less desire for them to climb into the water and go swimming, for example.

You can keep, if you like, the dry side and the west side separate. It makes life a hell of a lot easier, for those of us that have to manage the wet side. A great example, that was one day during a quite blustery afternoon, I had a school group out there. I went rushing over to a boat at the far end that had capsized, and halfway across the reservoir I discovered this head bobbing across the water. I was motoring at full speed in a motorboat and there's this head in front of me in the water.

I knew it wasn't one of the kids that I was teaching because I knew where all those were. It was somebody who had climbed over the fence at the far end, and decided it was a good idea to take their clothes off and go for a swim. I could have killed him. I, literally, could have run him over and killed him. You can see the water now, when you look at it on a nice, bright sunny day, and you'd have trouble spotting a head amongst those little wavelets. Dark hair amongst those waves. It is very difficult to spot.

I was quite angry and explained the errors of his ways, as you would, clearly and told him exactly where to go. Back to get his clothes and not do it again. It is dangerous. On the reservoir where we worked before, over the course of the 20 years that I was there, we found three bodies. All of which were, obviously, people that weren't supposed to be there. They'd found their way in through the fencing or whatever else, and decided it was a good idea to go for a swim or whatever. And were found the next day floating face down in the water.

There is always that fear that there is misuse of the facility. Even, not long after we moved here, there was a toddler, a three year old, drowned in the new river over by East Reservoir. You see it in the \_\_\_[0:58:33]. We think the river was full of weed and it just left a green scum on the surface, it must look like grass. The toddler just ran and straight into what he thought was something solid, only to discover it wasn't. It happens.

You want, obviously, to avoid those sorts of accidents. So, if things are managed, separately it suits me down to the ground.

Interviewer: Yes. In terms of the work that was done here before, which is interesting to me, that the Wildlife Trust were here before. Will there be more interaction between the two of you now? Say, for example, if they've got volunteers that can do additional conservation work to make this site more conservation focused.

Steve Els: The local authority, Hackney, have been very keen to promote that. The only problem that we ever had, when the London Wildlife Trust were here, we had them doing some of the grounds maintenance work and some of the work on the back. Unfortunately, what tended to happen was, the reservoir has an annual inspection every year by the reservoir engineer who comes along and says, "That shouldn't be growing there because it will disrupt the bank."

The reservoir engineer would give us a list of things that should be chopped down and taken away and the Wildlife Trust would come and cultivate it. So we had differing needs in that sense. There are issues. Our grounds maintenance tends to be more like, we get a guy with a tractor to run around an cut the grass because the reservoir engineer insists that it should be no more than 3cm high, so that he can check to see if there is any erosion, and wear and bits and pieces. So there are issues.

I know the local authority are keen that LWT, because they are a big stakeholder on the other site, that they get involved. Because they don't, at present, have much of a say in what goes on over here, I know the council would like to see more input from them on this site.

Interviewer: Do you think the interaction that you offer people here, in terms of the environment and water environment, say for example, enables people to generate a little bit more of a sustainable relationship with water? That they understand water.

Steve Els: I would hope so. One of the useful things, and again this is where we are different being in London, is if we were on a natural lake or a piece of natural water out of town where it's fairly normal, you would look more about the environment. Whereas, on a reservoir, I used to spend a lot of my time with the primary schools discussing the water supply. Talking about how water comes out of their taps.

Explaining how filtration used work when we had the filter beds out the front of the building, etc. There is this, turn the tap on and the water comes out, and people don't see the hidden side of it. There is a lack of understanding. So we worked with the schools. In the days when Thames Water had a budget for education, we used to work with them and had a load of leaflets about the water supply system.

We used to do work with all the local schools on the basic, how water came out of their taps and how we fitted in, as a reservoir, within that. And why we had now made passes of water, etc. So they could come along and find out how it worked, what it did and discover the advantages it had for the wildlife and everything else by having that patch of open space within the city.

Interviewer: Does that still happen or not so much now \_\_\_[1:03:19]?

Steve Els: I'd say it's now more the fact that we are now managed by a leisure and recreation company rather than part of Hackney's education department. I spent years trying to avoid becoming part of the leisure. What Hackney did was, they transferred schools from education, so they had schools and everything else.

So we went from being part of education to being part of everything else. When that got broken up, they took libraries and all the other bits, and so it did make sense then, as we weren't schools, we had to go into leisure. We were put into leisure by the back door. It's a big difference. Leisure and recreation is a big market, but the education side of it doesn't make sense to our leisure and recreation managers.

They couldn't understand me bringing a class in and spending an afternoon in the classroom talking to them about the water supply system and then taking them for a walk around the edge. They see me as being in charge of the sailing, so I should be taking them out in a sailing boat.

Interviewer: That's quite \_\_\_[1:04:44].

Steve Els: I would say so. Again, it's all about that commercial... Hackney couldn't afford to run its leisure facilities so it had to send them out to private management. At the end of the day, you don't get anything for nothing. Someone, somewhere is paying for something.

Interviewer: This is my final question. Do you think they are wellbeing benefits on this site, despite the fact that \_\_\_ in connection now.

Steve Els: I think there are huge wellbeing benefits. When you see some of those youngsters that are members of our youth club, that turn up here as fat lumps. Have been sitting on the sofa, playing with their Xbox, come whatever games machine, and never do anything. Then two years later you see them going off to compete at the London Youth Games or something. Spending every minute of their free time outdoors and making use of these facilities.

Then you know that there are huge benefits, health wise. Mental and physical health.

Interviewer: Do you think there is something unique about water in that respect?

Steve Els: As a personal answer, yes. You're talking to the wrong person, I'm hooked. What can I say? There's no way you're going to get a different answer. I can't go on holiday without... If I go somewhere where it's not near water, I start getting withdrawal symptoms after about three days and have to go looking for water. I don't know what it is, but it has that...

Interviewer: Why is it then? Why is it special for you?

Steve Els: I don't know. I'm a Londoner. It's not as if I was brought up at the coast or anything. I just have that urge to be near water. I bought a house on an island at one stage and had water all around me. It was great. There's something about water that, I don't know if it's romantic or what it is, but it's got that... You can look out at that water today, I can't sit in here talking to you without my head keep turning out there and looking at the reservoir.

It's there. We always said when we did the design for this, the seminar rooms here, the one drawback was these big windows. \_\_\_[1:07:28] at the front to keep people's attention. You can see all their minds wandering. If I had a fleet of 10 sailing boats sailing up and down there now, it wouldn't matter what you were saying at the front of the room, because everybody would be looking out there to see what was going on.

If one capsizes, that would be it. You just lost it. You might as well give up. It draws your attention. It can't fail to do that. There is definitely something about water that has that effect. It has a calming effect on most people as well. You get a few nutcases that the sea, and somebody decides to strip off their clothes and go diving towards it. Most people, it has a calming effect. It just makes them relaxed and calmer.

They just want to sit back and enjoy the scenery. You can go for a mad sail for a couple of hours. You still, at the end of it, sit back and just look at the water and say, "Yes. I've calmed down now." But, like I say, you're talking to the wrong person. I've been passionate about it for years.

Interviewer: Alright.

Steve Els: As I say, I can't explain it. I can't deny it. There's definitely something there.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for your time.

Steve Els: I hope that was useful.

END AUDIO

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