



DISHING THE DIRT

London's history is unearthed on the banks of the River Thames

DENISE CULLEN

A terracotta fragment peeks out from beneath a layer of pebbles beside London's River Thames at Wapping. With gloved hands, I pick it up, scrape off the gritty sand, and register that it's an old roof tile. A piece of building material, as a discovery, might sound unremarkable but the hole in the tile, about the size of a one-pound coin, sends a shiver down my spine. This small detail marks it as one dating back to before the Great Fire of London in 1666.

Touching a link to the distant past is unexpectedly electrifying. An hour earlier, I would not have even noticed this piece of rubble on the riverbed. But at the start of Thames Explorer Trust's In the footsteps of Mudlarks tour, guide Elaine had passed around something similar as an example of what we might find.

"If it's got a big round hole, it would have been put on with a wooden dowel," she says. "After the Fire of London (the holes are smaller, because they would have used nails.)"

Briefing complete, our group of 24 takes the least slippery set of steps down to the Thames foreshore, which is exposed twice a day by the tide. As we descend, the sounds of buses, cabs and street-level conversation recede into the background, amplifying the sense of travelling back through time. Armed with a laminated sheet depicting typical finds from Roman, Medieval, Tudor, Stuart, Georgian and Victorian periods, we are let loose to explore on our own.

Mudlarking first emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when the city's poorest residents scoured the river at low tide

Mudlarker on the river bank, above and below; objects at the exhibition, above right; bottle found at low tide, bottom



IN THE KNOW

Thames Explorer Trust offers two-hour In the footsteps of Mudlarks guided tours at different foreshore locations several times each week. Tickets £28 (\$57).

thames-explorer.org.uk

The Secrets of the Thames exhibition at London Museum Docklands is open daily until March 1, 2026. Entry to the museum is free but exhibition tickets are £16.

londonmuseum.org.uk



looking for coal, rope, nails, metal and anything else they could sell. Contemporary mudlarks, on the other hand, are seeking tangible pieces of London history.

It takes only 75 minutes of scrabbling in the sand and mud before I begin to appreciate the appeal. Our group unearths the decorated bowl of a pipe last smoked in the 1700s, a piece of a Bellarmine (or Bartmann) jug glazed about 500 years earlier, a chipped Victorian-era eggcup, and much more.

The activity is meditative and enthralling; a hands-on way to connect with London's many layers. We can't take anything home, however. "We need to leave it for the river," Elaine tells us. I duly photograph our finds and leave them arranged like a collage on the sand.

Prospective mudlarks who wish to keep their discoveries need a permit from the Port of London Authority. Obtaining one, however, is akin to discovering an intact Medieval pilgrim badge. Significant finds have to be reported to a program linked with London Museum. Londoners' fascination for mudlarking surged during the pandemic, with applications for foreshore permits rising from 200 in 2019 to more than 5000 in 2022. Only 4000 permits are issued each year, and there are more than 10,000 people on the waiting list.

Fortunately, there is another way to enjoy this pastime, and it doesn't require gloves or wellies. We head downriver to London Museum Docklands, where the Secrets of the Thames: Mudlarking London's Lost Treasures exhibition provides further context for the morning's adventure. As Britain's first major exhibition dedicated to mudlarking, it features more than 350 found objects, including Viking battle axes, Roman coins, Saxon jewellery and an Iron Age bronze helmet complete with horns.

Wandering through a recreated foreshore, I find the small, everyday items to be the most evocative. Among them are Victorian children's shoes, a small pocket sundial, wig curlers, bone hairpins, a hand-coloured prosthetic eye and a set of dentures containing real human teeth (probably gathered from the dead) set in ivory plates and held in place with gold pins.

Other fascinating finds include a memento mori bead with a woman's face on one side and a skull on the other, a set of ball and chains (leg irons), and dice that X-rays revealed were weighted with mercury to ensure a predictable outcome.

The exhibition also includes a section dedicated to the process of mudlarking, with illustrated journals, replicated workspaces and recorded discussions with mudlarks. One such interview features Lara Maiklem, who wrote *Mudlarking: Lost and Found on the River Thames*. Reading her book after returning home, I learn that roof tiles and clay pipes are among the most common objects found on the foreshore. This doesn't dim the thrill of my discoveries that day. Maiklem writes that even seemingly insignificant items matter: "Each small piece (is) a key to another world, and a direct link to long-forgotten lives."

Denise Cullen travelled at her own expense.