



Figure 1. Painting showing mudlarkers on the foreshore. *The Adelphi Wharf*, watercolor, anonymous.
Photograph © London Museum

SECRETS OF THE THAMES: MUDLARKING LONDON'S LOST TREASURES AT LONDON MUSEUM DOCKLANDS

Reviewed by Nathalie Cohen, Archaeologist, National Trust London and Southeast Region, and former director of the Thames Discovery Programme

This exhibition at the London Museum Docklands will be open to the public until March 2026. The museum itself, which opened in 2003, is housed in an early nineteenth-century sugar warehouse—a building directly connected with London's long and complex maritime history—and the galleries showcase a permanent collection of river-related items. These include the archives of the Port of London Authority, the body which licenses and regulates the Thames mudlarks.

Mudlarking is the practice of discovery and recovery of archaeological artifacts from the Thames foreshore—the area exposed at low tide. Mudlarking has its origins in the late eighteenth century as a means of subsistence for some of London's poorest inhabitants, who scoured the Thames foreshore at low tides to scavenge for saleable materials, such as coal. During the course of this activity, they often recovered archaeological artifacts, which were then acquired by antiquarians, alongside items these collectors purchased from other river workers such as dredgers and “toshers” (those working in London's sewers). Many of these items became part of the collections of museums such as the London Museum and the British Museum. Discoveries made during this “golden age” include treasures like the Iron Age Battersea shield and the Waterloo helmet, both on loan from the British Museum for this exhibition. This early history of mudlarking forms the introduction to *Secrets of the Thames*.

Such was the interest in foreshore finds that by the mid-nineteenth century there was a flourishing trade in counterfeit items, such as the so-called “Shadwell Shams.” It has been estimated that William Smith (Billy) and Charles Eaton (Charley) made anywhere between five and ten thousand forged lead artifacts, fooling many eminent antiquarians of the day and leading to a high-profile court case in 1858 that attempted to disprove the supposed authenticity of the pieces. “Billys and Charleys” are to be found in collections across London, including at the Society of Antiquaries and the Victoria and Albert Museum, and as far afield as the Chau Chak Wing Museum in Sydney, Australia.

The intertidal foreshore in Greater London (from Teddington to the Thames Barrier) is mostly owned by the Port of London Authority and the Crown Estate, who jointly issue the licenses required by anyone wishing to search the foreshore. Until relatively recently, mudlarking as a hobby was an activity practiced by a small community, largely those who were members of the Society of Thames Mudlarks, who held “permits to dig” on the foreshore. A change in the license system in 2016 meant that anyone wishing to retrieve artifacts from the foreshore was required to have a license from the PLA. While previously it was only necessary to hold a license if one wanted to dig or scrape the surface, the new permit system includes “search-



Figure 2. A Billy and Charley figure goes on display. Photograph © London Museum



Figure 3. Part of the reconstructed foreshore that forms the centerpiece of the first room of the exhibition. Photograph by the author

ing” without intervention (eyes only) under the regulations.

The 2010s also saw a considerable increase in media attention for mudlarking, with Sky History Channel airing three seasons of the television series *Mud Men*, the publication of *London in Fragments: A Mudlark's Treasures* by Ted Sandling in 2016, and, perhaps most significantly, the global impact of the book *Mudlarking: Lost and Found on the River Thames* by Lara Maiklem, published in 2018. The higher profile of mudlarking as an activity and the growth in social media platforms enabling the sharing of discoveries and conversations online fueled an explosion of interest in exploring the Thames foreshore, with four thousand people now holding permits to search it. It should be noted that the waiting list to apply for a permit, which only lasts for a year as opposed to the previous three-year term, now stands at ten thousand individuals and is currently closed. These standard permits allow for limited excavation (to depths of 7.5 cm

or 3 inches only) in specific areas. In some places access is completely prohibited—for example, in front of the Houses of Parliament and at the Tower of London beach—and there are three Scheduled Monuments (at Queenhithe, Greenwich, and Millwall) where no searching or disturbance of any kind is permitted.

Over the last few years, through an ongoing popular program of temporary installations and pop-up displays at locations such as Watermen's Hall and St Paul's Cathedral, as part of events such as London Rivers Week and the Thames Festival, the mudlarking community had already established that there was an appetite for public engagement with their discoveries. Given the high public profile of mudlarking, *Secrets of the Thames* has attracted considerable attention and, with over 350 artifacts on display, there is plenty to explore.

Part of the contract for holding a foreshore license is the requirement to report artifacts to the Finds Liaison Officer (FLO) for the Portable Antiq-

unities Scheme, meaning that significant discoveries are recorded and the locations of the finds are logged. The anaerobic conditions of the intertidal foreshore mean that the range of artifacts which survive include not only bone, metal, and ceramic items but also those made of much more fragile organic materials, such as textiles and wooden pieces. One of the most extraordinary items of this nature on display is a decorated mid-sixteenth-century leather book cover, most likely from a primer (prayer book), a household item which might have been owned by a Tudor woman.

The displays are arranged by period and theme, and include cases devoted to religious

and ritual activities, trade and exploitation, riverside industries such as pottery manufacturing and printing, and—a highlight for me—fishing. The fifteenth-century eel spear previously on display in the medieval gallery at the Museum of London is here in all its glory. Interspersed throughout the archaeological displays are newly commissioned artworks (the porcelain pieces created by ceramicist Raewyn Harrison are a particular delight) and digital reconstructions, allowing the visitor to explore 3D models of the foreshore.

The devotion, persistence, and patience of the mudlarkers is possibly best demonstrated by the case of Roman intaglios, lost from finger rings



Figure 4. Mid-16th-century leather book cover. Photograph © London Museum



Figure 5. A late-medieval eel spear. Photograph © London Museum



Figure 6. Roman engraved gemstones. Photographs © London Museum

two thousand years ago—these tiny items are only recovered by the most dedicated of searchers.

These seekers and researchers of Thames history also feature as part of the exhibition. At the end of the second room is a reconstruction of the Finds Liaison Officer's desk, alongside portraits and interviews with some of the mudlarkers, exploring their motivations for mudlarking and displays of their collections in their homes.

As an archaeologist with nearly thirty years' experience of the intertidal archaeology of the Thames in London, to see this first major exhibi-

tion devoted to mudlarking is an exciting moment. *Secrets of the Thames* has been beautifully and thoughtfully assembled by lead curator Kate Sumnall, working closely with Stuart Wyatt, the Finds Liaison Officer for London, with the support and input of the mudlarkers themselves. The wonderful photography by John Chase is also a highlight. If I have one criticism of the exhibition, it is that perhaps there could have been more consideration of the different contexts of the finds. While it is certain that many have been simply dropped or discarded as rubbish, and equally certain that many



Figure 7. Mudlark Monika Buttlig-Smith searches the foreshore. Photograph © London Museum

items have been recovered as “surface” finds eroding out of the foreshore deposits (without excavation), there are still surviving archaeological sites and preserved structures within the intertidal zone. There will undoubtedly be more stories to tell in future from examination of foreshore finds in association with surviving waterfront structures, such as jetties, stairs, and revetments.

Beyond the exhibition itself, there is also a wide-ranging supporting program, including talks, book signings, well-being events, and foreshore tours. There is a wealth of further information provided by the London Museum in the form of blogs and articles on the museum’s website, allowing for a deeper investigation of some of the pieces on display, and a downloadable audio tour highlighting stories of research and conservation, produced by Bloomberg Connects. And mudlarking enthusiasts will enjoy the great range of books, prints, artwork, replicas, and souvenirs available from the museum shop.

References:

- Secrets of the Thames* exhibition: <https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/whats-on/secrets-thames/>
Secrets of the Thames audio guide: <https://guides.bloombergconnects.org/en-US/guide/museumOfLondonDocklands/exhibition/d28d845d-6ad2-4d33-bf5a-d5485853c6f9>
 Port of London Authority (with interactive map): <https://pla.co.uk/thames-foreshore-permits>
 Shadwell forgeries (from the Society of Antiquaries of London): <https://www.sal.org.uk/2022/05/fakes-and-forgeries-part-1/>