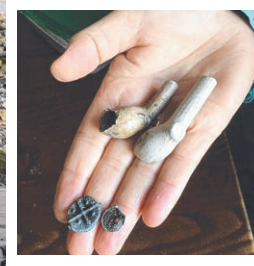




Muddy shores of the Thames; inset, mudlarking finds include medieval traders' tokens and clay pipes



PICTURES: ALAMY

Just larking about

ROSALYN PAGE



Imagine 1850s London. The River Thames is a hive of activity and the epicentre of a bustling port city, home to coffee houses, markets, docks and mercantile houses. Ships come and go, filled with cargo such as produce, spices, wool, furniture and pottery from almost all parts of the world.

Fast forward to today and the scene is of museums, galleries and offices and crowds of workers and travellers navigating the riverbanks. But alongside the busy river walkways there are also industrious mudlarks who foss-

ick the foreshores uncovering layers of the city's history. Dictionaries define a mudlark as "a person who scavenges in river mud for objects of value".

Today's London grew out of the Roman city Londinium, founded in the years around 50AD. Much of its long history of shipping and being a seat of government and home of sovereign power has been based on the Thames. So it's no surprise the river continues to offer up incredible objects that reveal a complex past.

The mudlarks' discoveries range from everyday objects to those of historical value. Old London traders' tokens, cufflinks and

clothing pins, seals, brass plates, pottery pieces and even precious stones are just some of the small treasures to be revealed.

Some of the oldest are flints and small fossils. Yet it's not all pretty things that surface on the water's edge; animal bones have come to light, plus the odd glass eye and even a complete skeleton.

A few social media-savvy mudlarks share their finds, and sometimes seek help from expert historians in identifying objects uncovered from the sandy depths of the Thames. Finds that may have some archeological interest are required to be shown to the Museum of London; they can be identified and recorded in its antiquities database, pro-

IN THE KNOW

A guided walk is an enjoyable way to spend a couple of hours learning more about the history of the river, and some include a spot of mudlarking. Thames Explorer Trust runs guided foreshore tours to several points along the river and the Thames Discovery Centre has regular guided foreshore walks. Thames and Field runs mudlarking tours and London Walks features guided themed tours. London Port Authority issues standard day permits for digging to a depth of 7.5cm; applications can be made online but allow four weeks for processing; £33 (\$59.80) a person. BYO bucket, sturdy shoes and gloves. An official mudlark permit allows digging to a depth of 1.2m but is restricted to Thames Mudlark Society members.

- thames-explorer.org.uk
- thamesdiscovery.org/events-home
- thamesandfield.com
- walks.com
- pla.co.uk

viding the museum a valuable source of authentic references.

Every era leaves its mark behind and sometimes it's the small objects that paint an intimate picture of life as it once was. A river like the Thames holds so much history in its watery depths, it's no wonder it often washes ashore, waiting to tell its stories.

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