

# Portable Antiquities from the Thames Foreshore

Nikola Burdon  
Adrian Green  
Cheryl Smith

THE MUSEUM of London has a huge archive of records of finds from the Thames foreshore. Objects found by amateur searchers and mudlarks have been recorded since the 1970s creating an archive of over 14,000 records. Many of these finds have been acquired by the Museum of London. In 1998 a unique collection of over 700 pewter toys (collected from the Thames foreshore) dating from 13th century to 19th century (see Fig. 1) was purchased by the Museum with the aid of grants from the National Heritage Lottery Fund and the National Arts Collection Fund<sup>1</sup>. This paper aims to summarise the history of ‘mudlarking’ on the foreshore; the current systems which are in place at the Museum to record finds; and the potential uses for this material.

## Historical context

For thousands of years the accidental loss or intentional deposition of objects in the River has mirrored the preoccupations of the people who have lived in the Thames area. Even before the foundation of London, some 1950 years ago, the River was a focus for the votive deposition of metalwork. Since Roman times the growth of London as a port and World City resulted in hundreds of objects lost or thrown in the River every year by people who visited, worked or lived in the area. Together these items reflect almost every aspect of life from prehistory to the present day, be it religious beliefs, trade relations or domestic and industrial activities. Even today the Thames is still a focus for deposition, for example small earthenware lamps are found on the foreshore which are associated with modern Hindu ceremonies taking place by the River.

The River Thames and its foreshore have revealed a number of its treasures throughout the centuries. The wet conditions have produced a wide range of objects in a state of preservation rarely encountered. Redevelopment of the riverside area has

provided opportunities to retrieve objects. This was particularly true in the 19th century when new wharves and docks were being constructed, and the river dredged. Finds from all periods were discovered, famous examples being the Battersea shield and the bronze head of Hadrian, both dredged from the Thames and now housed at the British Museum. Enthusiastic collectors of the period amassed huge and unique collections by purchasing material from the workmen and mudlarks (people searching the foreshore). Two prominent collectors at this time were Thomas Layton and Charles Roach Smith who gathered a wealth of antiquities in this way. It is thought that Layton probably spent much of his childhood mudlarking, instigating his passion for collecting<sup>2</sup>. Today most

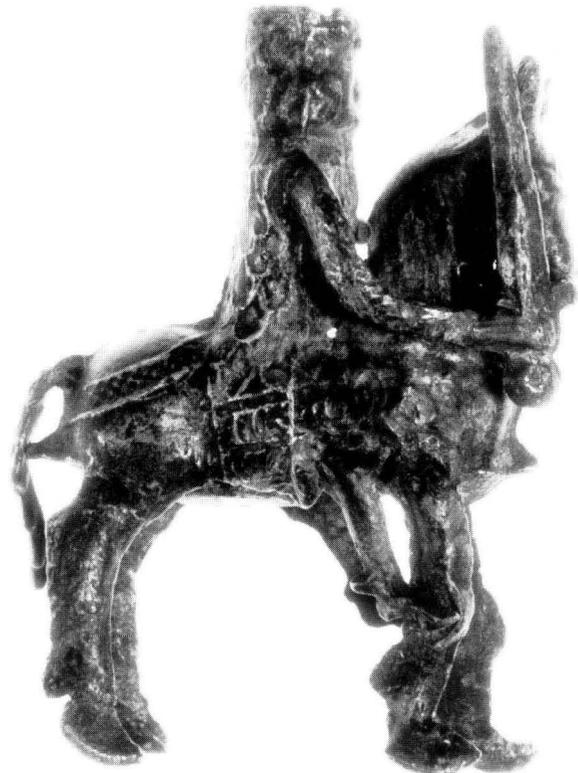


Fig. 1: toy knight on horseback c. 1300 (photo: Museum of London).

1. Museum of London accession number 98.2

2. L. Blackmore and D Whipp ‘Thomas Layton FSA (1819-1911) A misguided antiquary’ *London Archaeol* 3 no 4 (1977) 90-6.

of Layton's collection of antiquities resides at the Museum of London, and many of Roach Smith's objects are on display at the British Museum.

The activity of mudlarking is well established, it is mentioned in Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* as a trade of 'all ages, from mere childhood to positive decrepitude' collecting 'whatever they happen to find, such as coals, bits of old-iron, rope, bones and copper nails'<sup>3</sup>. Throughout the 20th century mudlarking remained popular, but it was no longer a means for the poor to eke out a living, it had become a pastime for those with a passion for unearthing antiquities. In the 1950s Ivor Noel Hume became prominent in the quest for further exciting finds and wrote about his experiences of searching the foreshore and his finds in the publication *Treasure in the Thames*<sup>4</sup> (see Fig. 2). By the early 1970s the method of metal detecting was introduced to the long-standing activity of mudlarking. As this so-called 'treasure-hunting' activity gathered more attention and followers, problems arose with regard to permission to search the foreshore and the loss of important finds without the chance of professional recording<sup>5</sup>. In 1980, the Port of London Authority (PLA), which owns most of the foreshore, introduced a licensing scheme to en-



Fig. 2: mudlarking on the Thames foreshore at Queenhithe in the 1940s.

able stricter control over searching and removing objects. Today a permit is required to search on the Thames foreshore, and searching is banned in some designated areas. An important condition of this licence specifies that all finds should be reported to the Museum of London, either directly or through another Museum, to ensure that information about London's past is not lost.

Relations between the more serious Thames foreshore searchers and the Museum of London have built up since the 1970s. Regular mudlarks have been bringing their finds to the Museum for over 25 years. In reaction to the licensing scheme these searchers formed a group called the Society of Thames Mudlarks. The society has limited membership, has negotiated special rights with the PLA, and polices its own members. Members of the society have worked together with archaeologists in various ways to retrieve assemblages from site spoil. Objects recovered from controlled searching of spoil both on and off site and direct searching of contexts during excavation have contributed greatly to the Museum of London's collections and publications<sup>6</sup>. Today the active society members regularly bring in their finds. These finds are identified and recorded and the information added to a unique archive. This process and the purpose of the archive are described in more detail below.

### Method of recording

Every object brought into the Museum is entered into a central register where its provenance, finder, description and date are recorded. Objects that are thought to yield more information go through a further recording stage where they are photographed and catalogued on individual record cards. These cards form the basis of the Thames foreshore archive. It now consists of over 14,000 records, covering objects dating from prehistory to the present day (see below). This is an archive of huge importance and potential for London's material history. In the past year the Museum has been working towards expanding and improving the current recording system. Henceforth all objects brought in will be catalogued on a computerised database and their provenance plotted on a digital map of London using Geographic Information System. Every find will have a more detailed description including marks, decoration, inscriptions and production methods.

3. H Mayhew *London Labour and the London Poor* Vol 2 (1851) 155.

4. I Noel Hume *Treasure in the Thames* (1956).

5. E.g. G Egan 'Treasure in the Thames' *London Archaeol* 3 no 1 (1976) 18-20.

6. E.g. G Egan 'Finds recovery on riverside sites in the City of London' *Popular Archaeol* 6 no 14 (1986) 42-50.

Not only is the Museum improving the way objects are recorded but it is also broadening the type of objects. At the moment most of the archive consists mainly of base metal objects that are obviously the main area of interest for many metal detector users (see Fig. 3). Only those with an interest in ceramics tend to bring in pottery. The Museum of London is actively encouraging mudlarks to bring in finds of other materials such as ceramics, bone and leather that tend to be chance discoveries while digging.

There are potentially hundreds of finds within the Greater London area that are currently unrecorded. The Museum wants to record these and add them to the archive. These include objects found not only by mudlarks but also by other metal detector users and the general public (i.e. non foreshore finds). These objects could be of any date including objects right up to the 1960s and might not always be from archaeological contexts but could also be found by chance or be a family heirloom.

The improvement and enlarging of the Museum's own recording scheme for London is in line with the Government's Portable Antiquities pilot scheme<sup>7</sup>. This scheme was set up to complement the 1996 Treasure Act and encourages the voluntary reporting of finds by both metal detector users and members of the public in England and Wales. Its aims are to initiate better, more uniform recording standards for the whole country and to promote stronger links between the public and archaeologists so that archaeological and historical information is not lost. To this end eleven finds Liaison Officers, funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the British Museum, have been appointed to record finds and set up links with local metal detecting groups. In the first year they recorded over 13,500 objects from 994 individuals. So far the scheme covers about half of England and all of Wales, however a lottery bid for a national network of Liaison Officers has recently been submitted.

The Museum of London's own system has much in common with the pilot scheme. However, the Museum's system has a much wider catchment area because it includes not only archaeological finds but also historical objects right up until the 1960s. In contrast, the Portable Antiquities scheme is intending to record only objects before 1800.

7. Department of Culture, Media and Sport *Portable Antiquities Annual Report 1997-98* (1999); Department of Culture, Media and Sport *Portable Antiquities Annual Report 1998-99* (2000).

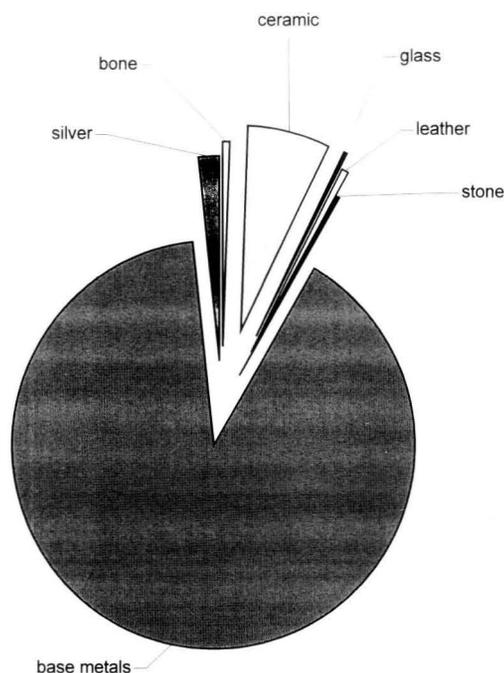


Fig. 3: the relative proportions of material types recorded by the Museum in 1979, 1989 and 1999.

Of the objects recorded a small percentage are acquired by the Museum, many of which are on display in the permanent galleries. Important discoveries now in the Museum's collections include a pair of Middle Bronze Age, copper alloy, side-looped spearheads found by a metal-detector user on the foreshore at Vauxhall in 1994<sup>8</sup>. They were found amongst a number of substantial wooden piles which have now been recognised as the remains of a Bronze Age jetty or bridge. In the last year nine artefacts have been acquired to augment the Museum's collections. They include some important and rare objects:

An early 16th-century iron rebated lance tip from the City foreshore at Bull Wharf (Upper Thames Street). While these are known from contemporary paintings, they are rare and only a couple are known of in other public collections. This is thought to be the first one to have been found and recorded in London. They were used when jousting and practising and have a rebated tip so that they would not give serious injury.

A pewter bird feeder of similar date also found at Bull Wharf. It is cast and decorated with two shields. It is interesting that such a functional object should be so highly decorated.

A rare late-17th-century silver cufflink from the Thames Exchange (Upper Thames Street) deco-

8. J Cotton and B Wood 'Recent Prehistoric finds from the Thames foreshore and beyond in Greater London' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 47 (1998) 14-16; Museum of London accession numbers 94.215/1-2.



Fig. 4: a rare late 17th-century cufflink from the foreshore at Thames Exchange (photo: Museum of London).

rated with a maidenhead, the arms of the Worshipful Company of Mercers. This would have been worn by a member of the Company, openly showing his allegiance (Fig. 4).

A late-17th-century pewter toy chair back from Blackfriars decorated with the royal arms of the Stuarts. It is astonishingly similar to a full size chair that the Museum has in its collection.

An 11th-century pewter finger ring from the south side of the Thames. It is cast with cable decoration and claw setting. The ring still has manufacture marks on it and may never have been finished.

A pair of late-17th-century iron curling tongs were found at Bankside, near the new Tate Modern. They are the only ones of their type now in the Museum<sup>9</sup>.

#### **The Thames Foreshore Archive**

The Museum is conscious of the need to improve access to its catalogue of foreshore finds dating back to the 1970s. A sample of records has been entered onto a database to assess the research potential of the archive and establish the value of computerising the entire catalogue. This pilot da-

tabase will eventually contain all the records from 1979, 1989 and 1999; therefore giving a cross section of all the mudlarks finds recorded over the past 25 years. It will also enable the Museum and other interested parties to identify any major trends. At present the Museum is only half way through this process. These are the interim findings that may change once the project has been completed:

The numbers of mudlarks and objects recorded by the Museum have declined over the past twenty years. This could imply that today there are fewer active mudlarks than in the 1970s and '80s.

Most objects are collected from the Thames foreshore either in the City or Southwark. Some objects recorded in 1979 and 1989 were from riverside redevelopments such as Bull Wharf (Upper Thames Street), Vintry House (Upper Thames Street) and a site close to Bankside Power Station. Occasionally finds were recovered from sites where spoil from building sites was redeposited by contractors.

Recently there has been an increase in mudlarks working outside the City at places such as Greenwich and Kew. This could be because some areas of

9. Museum of London accession numbers 99.122, 99.121, 2000.26, 99.153, 99.124 and 99.131.

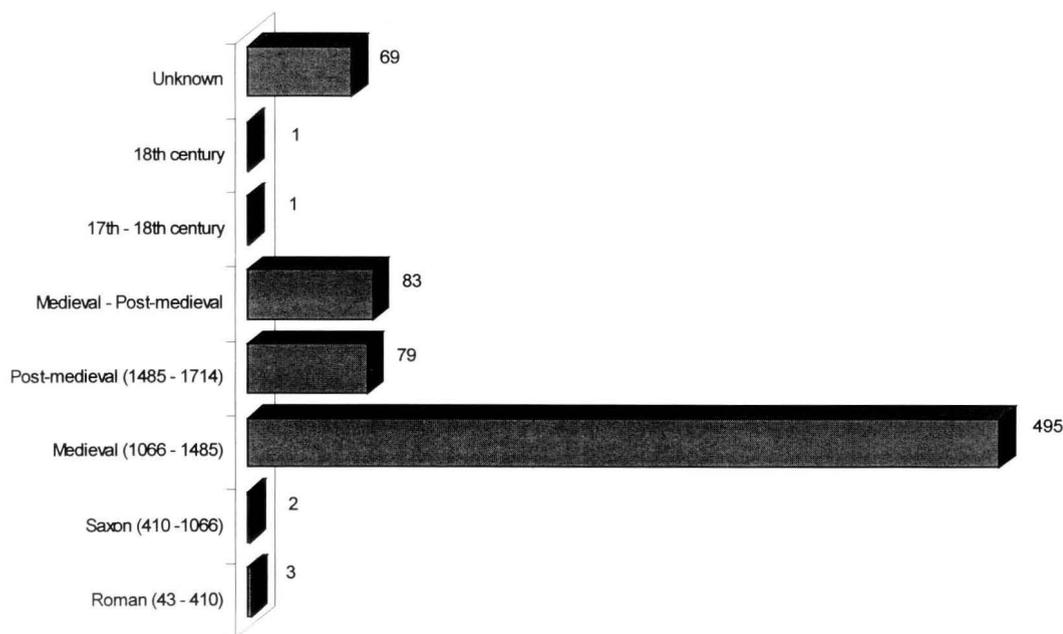


Fig. 5: the dating of objects recorded by the Museum in 1979, 1989 and 1999.

foreshore in the City no longer produce as many objects as they did in the past.

Most recorded objects are late medieval in date (see Fig. 5). This is to be expected given the recording system was set up by the department of Medieval Antiquities at the Museum. In addition many of the redeveloped riverside sites and spoil heaps which the mudlarks had access to were rich in medieval features and artefacts. For example at Vintry House archaeologists discovered a sequence of buildings dating to the 10th-early 11th centuries and at least six timber riverside revetments dating from the 12th-16th centuries<sup>10</sup>. The Society of Thames Mudlarks assisted archaeologists with the recovery of finds from the site and also searched the spoil dumped outside the City.

The main classes of object recorded are religious items or dress/personal accessories. These classes include pilgrim badges, secular badges, buckles, strap-ends and mounts. Once the pilot database has been completed other important classes will include household items such as tools and objects relating to food preparation. In the 1997-1998 Portable Antiquities Annual Report 44.3% of finds from the Portable Antiquities pilot scheme were coins<sup>11</sup>. The preliminary results suggest a smaller percentage have been recorded by the Museum.

10. J Schofield and C Maloney (eds) *Archaeology in the City of London 1907-1991: a guide to records of excavations by the Museum of London and its predecessors* The Archaeological Gazetteer Series Volume 1 (1998) 298.

11. Department of Culture, Media and Sport *Portable Antiquities Annual Report 1997-98* (1999) 24.

Over recent years finds from the Thames foreshore have contributed to a major publication on *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges*, an exhibition catalogue of a pewter toy collection and a resumé of recent prehistoric finds from Greater London<sup>12</sup>. Currently the Museum is conducting a number of research projects on foreshore finds, including one on base metal toys from the late 13th-19th century which will culminate in a published academic catalogue.

### The Future

Despite the work that has already been conducted the research potential of the archive has yet to be fully realised. The archive is a summary of thousands of years of object deposition in the Thames and along the foreshore. This pilot assessment suggests that it is a unique resource, an important record of the material culture of the everyday lives of people who lived in the London area. Most finds are indicative of what was commonplace rather than unusual and high status. The archive has the potential to contribute to future archaeological research in London, particularly that relating to the creation of object typologies and spatial analysis.

The study of post-medieval domestic life is one particular area in which the archive would be of

12. B Spencer *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges* (1999); G Egan *Playthings from the Past* (1996); J Cotton and B Wood 'Recent Prehistoric finds from the Thames foreshore and beyond in Greater London' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 47 (1998) 1-33.

use. Post-medieval dress accessories is one of the major groups of finds recorded from the foreshore. For example use of the archive would enhance any artefactual study of buckles, dress hooks, mounts and strap-ends. The 1997-1998 Portable Antiquities Annual Report highlighted one such study of dress hooks conducted by a finds Liaison Officer in Lincolnshire<sup>13</sup>. Another area where the archive would be useful would be in the study of post-medieval tableware. The survival of pewter plates, tankards, bowls, spoons along the foreshore is exceptional. Research of the touchmarks from these items would greatly add to our knowledge of pewter manufacture in London.

Research of any theme would be supported by the mudlark finds the Museum has acquired. Over the past 25 years at least 2500 objects from the foreshore have been added to the collections, including at least 1700 medieval items. The Museum also has a whole range of comparable material in the archaeological archive from excavations on riverside sites such as Billingsgate lorrypark, Thames Exchange (Upper Thames Street) and Baynard House (Queen Victoria Street).

Much of the Thames foreshore has been disturbed by redevelopment, dredging and erosion from river traffic. However, there are pockets of undis-

turbed archaeology, including the remains of medieval and post-medieval structures and deposits. Perhaps objects discovered in these areas could provide valuable evidence for activities conducted on the adjacent riverside. One area of potential research could be to see if it is possible to identify groups of artefacts from undisturbed deposits and establish if they have any wider significance.

The Museum of London records objects found in the Greater London area in order that the information about the past is preserved and accessible to all. This archive, built up over the past 25 years, has the potential to help develop a greater understanding of aspects of London's past. However, this can only happen if it is actively used by students, archaeologists and *bona fide* researchers. The Museum is currently looking at ways to make the archive more accessible and will be encouraging greater use in future.

If you want to know more call Nikola Burdon, Adrian Green or Cheryl Smith in the Museum of London's Department of Early London History and Collections (020 7814 5730).

#### Acknowledgements

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13. Department of Culture, Media and Sport *Portable Antiquities Annual Report 1997-98* (1999) 22.

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## Excavations and post-excavation work

**City of London.** Museum of London Archaeology Service, Walker House, 87 Queen Victoria Street, London EC4V 4AB (020 7410 2200).

**Croydon & District,** processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Jim Davison, 28 Blenheim Park Road, South Croydon, CR2 6BB.

**Greater London** (except north-east and south-east London), by Museum of London Archaeology Service. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to MOLAS, Walker House, 87 Queen Victoria Street, London EC4V 4AB (020 7410 2200).

**Borough of Greenwich.** Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites in the borough. For further information contact Greenwich Borough Museum, 232 Plumstead High Street, SE18 1JT (020 8855 3240).

**Hammersmith & Fulham,** by Fulham Archaeological Rescue

Group. Processing of material from the Borough. Tuesdays, 8.00 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 8, Rannoch Road, W6 9SX (020 7385 3723).

**Kingston,** by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society (KUTAS). Processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Thursday (10 a.m.) at the North Kingston Centre, Richmond Road, Kingston upon Thames KT2 5PE. Enquiries 020 8546 5386.

**Surrey,** by Surrey County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Old Library Headquarters, 25 West Street, Dorking, RH4 1DE (01306 886 466).

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