

Thames archaeology with older Londoners

The Thames Discovery Programme's 'Older Londoners' Project' was a multi-year project, aiming to engage Londoners aged over 75 in the archaeology of the Thames foreshore. Helen Johnston and Will Rathouse from the TDP describe the project.



RIGHT: Many older Londoners valued TDP's age-positive approach and volunteered as FROG Members

Introduction

The Thames Discovery Programme (TDP) Older Londoners' Project aimed to engage Londoners aged over 75 in the archaeology of the Thames foreshore, through events and activities including talks, walks and workshops. The project supported older people as volunteers with TDP to monitor and record the vulnerable archaeology on the Thames, and, through an oral history project, to explore how people have used the foreshore over time. The Older Londoners' Project was launched in February 2016 and ran until September 2019.

The TDP is a community archaeology project that has been running since 2008, training and supporting volunteers to record and monitor foreshore archaeology. The project is hosted by MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology). Since its inception, the project has trained over 750 volunteers (known as FROGs – the Foreshore Recording and Observation Group) to record foreshore archaeology. Over 1,000 archaeological features have been recorded in the dynamic and rapidly changing intertidal zone.

Aims

The Older Londoners' Project was supported by City Bridge Trust (the City of London Corporation's charity) which provided funding for the three-year project. Previous evaluation of TDP's activities had established that participation in community archaeology on the foreshore brought well-being benefits to participants, through outdoor activities, group involvement and a sense of purpose.¹ Following on, the Older Londoners'

Project had several aims for its participants:

- To learn new skills and be intellectually stimulated while also preserving their memories for future generations.
- Regular foreshore activities to offer significant physical health benefits by utilising one of London's least used open spaces.
- To be less isolated through engaging with other people.
- To contribute to the collection and dissemination of archaeological discoveries on the foreshore to a wider audience, and to contribute to our environmental understanding of the river through measuring erosion and monitoring the exposure of the river walls.

Outreach activities

Delivery of the project involved several strands: a core part of the project was working in partnership with older people's organisations across London to provide outreach activities, including talks, workshops and guided walks. Organisations that we worked with included University of the Third Age, Age UK, South London Cares, Parkinson's UK and the Alzheimer's Society, as well as residential care homes, and informal older people's social groups.

For many groups, we were able to offer our regular public engagement activities of talks, guided foreshore walks and learning workshops, with the increased marketing and awareness that we were actively seeking to work with older audiences. In addition, the funding enabled us to adapt existing TDP public engagement activities to the needs of older audiences, as well as trying new and different ways to deliver activities. This was particularly important when working with people with disabilities and long-term health conditions, including people with sight loss, hearing loss and neuro-degenerative conditions such as dementia and Parkinson's disease. Staff working on the project received Dementia Friends Training, organised through the Alzheimer's Society.

A participant with dystonia who took part in a foreshore walk told us: 'It was an inspiring morning. I was so pleased with myself for being able to walk on the gravels, I decided to walk home afterwards.'

BELOW: Our talks to older groups across London are always very popular



Several initiatives were particularly successful. The Pop-Up Thames Museum, which we ran in residential homes and with dementia and Parkinson's groups, was very well received. This was a flexible activity which could be tailored to the physical location and abilities of participants. Its core was a short talk, accompanied by historical images of the Thames, as well as photos of archaeological features on the foreshore, and a handling session with foreshore artefacts. We found handing round printed images was more engaging than a presentation. The tactile and interactive nature of the session meant it was accessible to people with different abilities and encouraged everyone to take part. These sessions encouraged conversations and discussions, and often led to impromptu reminiscence sessions, with participants sharing their own memories of the river and other aspects of their lives.

We adapted our guided walk programme to include Riverside Strolls – these are gentle, step-free walks along the Thames Path at low tide, at locations where there are good views of the foreshore archaeology. The strolls last around 20–30 minutes and finish in a café, with a drink and a handling session with foreshore artefacts. These were aimed at people who find it difficult to access the foreshore, with the intention to increase understanding of the local archaeology, and knowledge of the foreshore.

The project allowed us to offer learning opportunities to older Londoners who weren't able to join us on the foreshore. We ran a series of learning workshops aimed at older Londoners. These included artefact identification workshops led by MOLA specialists, and digital research skills sessions (on editing Wikipedia and contributing to the historical mapping resource Layers of London).

Volunteering for older people

The core of TDP's work has always been to carry out ongoing monitoring and recording of the constantly changing archaeological environment of the Thames Foreshore. This work is carried out by the Foreshore Recording and Observation Group (FROGs) volunteers through a programme of year-round monitoring visits, and an annual fieldwork season running from March to August. We run training for new volunteers every spring. The Older Londoners' Project encouraged Londoners aged 75 and over to consider becoming FROGs, as well as providing support for existing volunteers in that age group.

We offered a flexible approach and were able to adapt many of our methods to suit different abilities. Many adaptations were simple, such as not requiring a minimum volunteering commitment, so that people

An Activities Development Officer with a housing association reported: 'We learnt more about the Thames and what things can be found there. It amazing being able to hold things from Roman, Tudor and other periods. The event inspired more conversation about the Thames and reminiscing about living near the docks.'



ABOVE: Northwood and District University of the Third Age on a foreshore walk at Putney

could take part as and when they were able. For instance, we had one older FROG who took part in every fieldwork session, but would only attend for a couple of days for an hour at a time.

We also encouraged alternative methods of working, including providing long-handled brushes to avoid bending, using different coloured backgrounds on drawing boards for people with visual impairments and dyslexia, as well as sitting down to work. Although only a small number of older people volunteered, the ones who did were encouraged by our age-positive approach and appreciated the opportunity to do something new and active in later life. One volunteer, Catriona Stewart, has shared her thoughts on taking part as a FROG member (see box page 19).

We also explored other ways for older people to volunteer with the project. In 2017, we worked with a group of 10 members of the University of the Third Age from across London on our 'Sail to Steam' Shared Learning Project. Running from June to October, the group were set the task of researching the collapse of wooden shipbuilding and rise in metal shipbuilding along the Thames in the 19th century.

BELOW: Examining foreshore features at Rotherhithe on a guided walk



RIGHT: London University of the Third Age members taking part in the 'Sail to Steam' Shared Learning Project

We supported the group by giving them an introductory session on the archaeology and history of shipbuilding on the Thames, and a day-long research skills training. The group then traced the history of shipbuilding companies, through internet and archival research, meeting regularly to share their results. They presented the results of their work at our annual Forum in October 2017, as a talk and poster session.

This was a very beneficial piece of work for us. It enabled us to explore an area of research and address several questions we had, but previously haven't had the capacity to explore. Feedback from the group was positive, two members went on to do FROG training, and several others continued their research and took part in other activities with us.

Oral history

The 'London's Lost Waterway' oral history project strand of the project explored how people have used the Thames foreshore over time, and the ways that can inform our understanding of the archaeological features found there. We sought interviewees who had been visiting the foreshore for 20 years or more, and could tell us about their experiences working, relaxing, travelling, and living on or near the river. Interviewers, transcribers and researchers were recruited from among our FROG volunteers and were trained in oral history interviewing techniques, as well as attending a Dementia Friends Awareness session.

In addition to conducting formal oral history interviews, we visited groups to record memories of the Thames, and organised a 'Remembering the Thames' tea party event for Silver Sunday 2017, an annual day of activities for older people. This was one of the first Silver Sunday events to be held in Hackney and was well attended by local residents who shared their memories of the river.

The oral history stories we received included tales of a mischievous wartime sea scout carving his initials into the mast of HMS *Discovery*; a swimmer narrowly avoiding being crushed between barges; boat building in West London and a body being recovered from the river. Our FROG volunteers will be doing more research on the topics that the interviews have highlighted, and we are preparing these interviews for archive deposition at the Bishopsgate Institute.

BELOW: Sharing memories at the 'Remembering the Thames' tea party



What we achieved

People were really responsive to the Older Londoners' Project, and it generated new interest in our work. Although TDP has a long track record of public outreach, the funding allowed us to reach groups that we had not been able to engage with before, including supported housing residents and people with dementia and other disabilities and long-term health conditions. It was rewarding to see the well-being benefits they gained from taking part in our activities. It encouraged us to explore other creative ways we can engage with people, expanding our outreach activities and working with more under-represented groups.

From February 2016 to September 2019, the project reached 1,270 Londoners aged 75 and over, and a great many others also benefitted from the activities and events. The project reached participants in nearly every London borough and all the riverine boroughs. We gathered 16 oral history interviews; we ran 40 social activities and guided walks, 73 lectures and workshops and 36 training events.

In our evaluation, the majority of participants strongly agreed that the event was interesting, that they learnt something new, gained new skills and it encouraged their interest. The majority of those who responded reported that they learned new things from engaging with the project, 43% reported learning new skills and 92% reported that taking part had encouraged their interest.

We learnt some important lessons from the project: the programme needed more partnership development and planning than we allocated at the start of the project, and it was slower to get off the ground than anticipated. Building partnerships was vital for us to deliver this project. Working with older people was a new area of work for us, it helped us build our network, and reach more people. As well allowing us to reach new audiences, we were able to build links with organisations we had not worked with before. This has created new opportunities for us, including working with residential homes and care organisations.

Our oral history project was ambitious, and we found it hard to recruit people who were prepared to take part in a recorded interview. We found people

were much more responsive to reminiscence sessions, where they could share their memories informally, and we were able to gain some useful insights to the foreshore this way. However, despite this, we have collected a useful set of interviews which will enhance our understanding of the foreshore and Londoners' relationship with the Thames.

The contribution of volunteers to help us deliver this work was invaluable, particularly with delivering the oral history project. We were able to provide them with training to increase their skills and confidence, including oral history interviewing training and a Dementia Friends information session.

What next?

Such was the success of the project that we were invited by City Bridge Trust to apply for a further two-year extension. This is now ongoing, and we have broadened its remit from Londoners aged 75 and over to Londoners aged 65 and over at risk of isolation, Londoners of any age living with dementia, Parkinson's and/or mental health challenges, and service veterans.

We hope to build on the work of the first round of the project, as well as drawing on the experience of community archaeology projects such as Operation

Nightingale, which works with veterans, as well as The Past in Mind and Human Henge, which both worked with people with mental health challenges; all projects which have demonstrated life-enhancing outcomes for those participating in them. We are seeking further funding to conduct a clinical research project to contribute to the available data on the impact of community archaeology projects, and particularly foreshore archaeology, on the mental health of participants.

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The final thanks go to the partner organisations and participants who took part in activities, and the TDP volunteers who have contributed their time to support our work with older people, as well as to monitor and record the fast-eroding archaeology on the foreshore; the project would not exist without them.

I. N Bell Evaluation of the experience of the FROG volunteers in the Thames Discovery Programme Unpub report prepared for the Heritage Lottery Fund (2011).

Being a FROG: an older person's viewpoint

Catriona Stuart

One of my earliest memories is being woken to the sound of the hooters of all the ships, boats and tugs on the Thames celebrating the New Year. The Thames environs was a heavy-duty working area the whole length of the river which I wasn't allowed to visit. A lifetime later my chance had arrived!

When I heard about the Thames Discovery Programme, I signed up for the FROG Training Course. The group was a complete mix of people whom I found energising and inspiring. The theory training was quick but thorough, then the fieldwork practicals began. I carefully descended the muddy stairs determined that my arrival on the foreshore was not a spectacular slide. Some folk walked confidently over the slippery, rubble-covered foreshore, some didn't. As arms were offered and accepted – nobody fell.

Every time I leave the street level for the foreshore I am impressed and delighted by total change of the environment. How very different the foreshore feels from the street level. Even the wind is different, the Thames itself looks different, swirling and eddying – it suddenly feels as elemental as standing on a mountain. The foreshore excites me because it has so much to tell and the Thames itself is exciting because it is dangerous: a force to be reckoned with.

The Thames foreshore is constantly changing. I have watched a huge beam wash free of the foreshore to float down the Thames. Layer upon layer of history of London life is disappearing so there is recording to be done, and FROGs are doing it.

It's fun mastering new skills and practicing them when you have a purpose. The skills themselves aren't too taxing,

although the awkward positions you have to get into can be challenging. But, unless an ache is too much to tolerate, often we would much rather stay because the banter and the chat between the team is great! The information that you pick up from these open discussions is riveting.

The level of knowledge that other FROGs have about the history of life by the Thames is both wide-ranging and down-to-earth: time passes in a flash. The recording part of fieldwork certainly requires practice. I can't pretend that I have cracked it yet. The other FROGs look at the object, record the measurements, etc and there is a bit of discussion about the wood – oak or elm? It's all good stuff and an eye-opener for me. It's so valuable picking up the tricks of the trade by watching those more experienced than you. Getting the hang of 'the knowledge' feels so good. Job done! You can feel the buzz of satisfaction going through the group.

From my experience, all FROG members have a deep curiosity about the Thames and a desire to be a part of something worthwhile.

Older people like me share those qualities, and I can say it is excellent to discover an organisation who will put that curiosity to good effect. It's rewarding. Of course, older people enjoy it – who wouldn't?!



Catriona at work in Fulham