

LOST | FOUND

Mudlarking along the banks of the Thames unveils both hidden treasures and unexpected moments of solitude, mirroring the journey of navigating loneliness amid London's bustling cityscape.

Words: Amy Souza

I stepped off the red double decker into a downpour. It had taken forever to arrive at St Paul's Cathedral, so now I had just five minutes to find my tour group beneath the Millenium Bridge. I dashed across the roadway towards the Thames, trying to avoid the deepest puddles.

London rains in winter and I'd prepared with head-to-toe waterproofing, but this felt like someone pouring buckets over the city and I wondered how long the protection would hold. The ends of my hair, which I'd let grow long during early pandemic years, were already soaked through and no amount of tucking them into a rain hood would help. My Gore-Tex sneakers might as well have been canvas.

Someone else might have questioned if this tour was worth the effort, but I'd traveled nearly 5,000 miles. Nothing would stop me from scouring the Thames foreshore. Spotting my destination, I hurried down the steps towards ten other souls braving the rain, most British, all there with friends or family.

For thousands of years, people have thrown unwanted everything into the Thames and for almost as long, others have combed its shore for treasures. In the 18th and 19th centuries, scavengers of low-tide river banks seeking items to sell earned the name "mudlark." Today, some use mudlarking as a fancy word for beachcombing on any tidal riverfront, but the term commonly describes those who search along the Thames for bits of London's history. Unlike in past decades, people need a Port of London Authority permit to search the foreshore, may look only in designated areas, and cannot sell their finds for personal gain.



Instead, modern mudlarks make up an extensive crew of citizen archaeologists, helping to unearth pottery, coins, jewelry, and more that give historians insight into London's past and life along this river. The only way to legally participate without a permit is on a tour like this one through Thames Explorer Trust or vicariously through others who post photos online or share their experiences in articles and books.



I had traveled to London for change and distraction. I could remain at the surface and tell you I needed a break. I could say I've experienced loss and wanted to counter it with joy. But scratch

a layer to find the words overwhelmed and untethered. Through a series of unfortunate circumstances, I've found myself doing life alone, having lost not only my closest people but also those in outer, less bonded communities that dispersed during lockdown and never regrouped. A solitary Christmas in Oregon felt like it might pull me under.

Meanwhile, London's all-out holiday displays popped into my social media feed alongside images of treasures unearthed by mudlarks I follow, enticing me with every scroll. For months I'd considered flying over to see Rick Astley perform live because his music offered bright spots in otherwise dark days. When he announced a show, I jumped and bought a ticket and then filled in my itinerary, with mucking about on the Thames top of list.

On paper, solo travel to a city where I knew almost no one doesn't sound like the best way to feel less isolated, but London represented a sort of homecoming. It was my first urban living experience as a young adult—I studied there on a college exchange, returned after graduation to work for a few months, and neither time wanted to leave. Flying to one of my favorite places seemed like a great journey out of my head and into adventure.

Our tour guide, an American who'd lived in the UK for two decades, passed around items she'd found

on the shore and described their likely provenance. A laminated photo sheet showing pottery fragments on one side and what they'd look like whole on the other offered a visual ceramic timeline. Different materials, glazing processes and decorations help determine a piece's era—Roman, medieval, Tudor and Stuart, Georgian and Victorian—and anaerobic mud can preserve items for centuries.

We should expect to see red roof tiles from the Great Fire of London, our guide said, as well as jug and tankard handles, bits of Delftware and tissue-painted tile, and loads of natural flint (though less commonly a flint tool). A lucky person might find a coin, jewel, or glass bottle, though that seemed unlikely.

"You'll definitely find pipe stems," she said. "They're everywhere."

Off-white clay pipes, typically single-use and pre-filled with tobacco, were a staple on the London waterfront for nearly 300 years, from the 16th to 19th centuries. When a person finished puffing, they'd throw their pipe into the water, the way modern smokers toss a cigarette butt or, unfortunately, plastic vape pen. Some pipes were simple, undecorated clay, but others were more artistic, depicting animals, crests, or faces. Many bowls also carried a maker's mark with initials or a full company name. Over the years, mudlarks have uncovered intact pipes with intricate designs or stems as long as eighteen inches, but the shore mostly yields broken pieces.

Permitted mudlarks can dig or use metal detectors, but tour participants cannot. Our guide also warned of dangers: narrow, slippery steps that she suggested we take sideways and not too close together to avoid a domino effect if someone fell; a second stairway to the shore with no handrail; a tide that often caught people unaware. She offered disposable gloves as slight protection from rat urine, which can spread a severe form of leptospirosis. More than once she reminded us not to touch our faces until we had scrubbed our hands well.



Pulling latex gloves onto cold, wet fingers took longer than you'd expect and the staircase with no handrail stopped me short—open risers let me see

how far the shore loomed below. But I made it down unscathed and took in my surroundings: bridge after bridge after bridge, the Shard across to my left, old and new together in every direction. A sleek Uber Boat cruised the water against London's busy skyline.

On a normal weather day, I'd have chatted with like-minded tour-goers, but rain and cold kept me turned in. I headed towards the pilings, which catch items as the tide moves in and out. Our guide was spot-on. A few steps in, I saw my first pipe stem and another and another and then a mostly intact bowl smashed right at the maker's mark. Once my eyes adjusted to the rocks and sand, I also noticed bits of pottery everywhere—blue and white, green and brown—all made by human hands ages before in a world I could only imagine.

To be honest, history isn't really my thing. Too many dates and men waging war. I could tell you the Romans came before the Tudors, but not how many years passed between them. (Do men really ponder the Roman empire every day?) But my house is filled with the past, not just twenty-million-year-old fossils but twenty-year-old paintings of my dogs, family photos from 1940, an aunt's diary circa the 1980s, my father's old guitar picks. I exist in a present where yesterday feels just as alive. Often, I think of my mother's final months, surrounded by photographs and mementos but trapped in a facility, her home and lifetime of

belongings gone. I dream of her house and wonder if strangers living there feel my presence.

I brought our tour guide a pointed, half-iridescent rock for identification.

"Looks like a tooth," she said, turning it over in her hand.

She hadn't mentioned slaughterhouses, but later I read that the Thames offered easy dumping ground for animal carcasses (and maybe humans, too). The mineralized molar likely belonged to a cow, not a woolly mammoth or wild boar as others have found, but it still seemed extraordinary. Holding it and pottery shards in my outstretched palm, I wished for some sort of second sight to learn the stories associated with them, even the pain.

Two days after Christmas, I flew back to an empty house. London was everything and also not enough. I didn't want to leave. The Thames tour could have lasted ten hours instead of two; I would have listened to Rick Astley for days and spent more time with people I met. As with previous departures from the city, my heart felt full and broken.

Mudlarking keeps showing up in news and social media. A tiny memento mori, young woman's face on one side and skull on the other, was shared by

the British Museum as an important archeological find. A prominent mudlark uncovered the base of a Roman pot, a post-medieval posy ring, and a garnet Georgian cufflink, all in the span of two weeks. Another shared pictures of a hundred rings he'd found, now slotted into a jeweler's box—modern, antique, unset, or jewels intact. A third looked like wedding bands. Who knows if they were lost, stolen, or tossed by the brokenhearted?

All I know for sure is that fragments of the past exist everywhere; you just have to look. Lives get shattered and sometimes put back together. I'm still collecting what fate has sent my way. Rivers will keep flowing, tides rise and fall.



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