

Radical Mudlarking? Reimagining the History of London as a Global City on the Thames Foreshore

Topic and aims

Mudlarking on the Thames foreshore has become London's most popular form of archaeology, attracting everyone from professional archaeologists to dedicated enthusiasts and inquisitive amateurs. Indeed, the Port of London Authority reported a sharp increase in permit requests, during the COVID-19 pandemic, re-surfacing questions about the public benefit of archaeology (cf Van de Vries 2021). This PhD project aims to understand why mudlarking has become such a popular phenomenon, what it means to the people that do it, and how it shapes their understanding of London's past. Often heralded as a democratising historical practice – an accessible form of 'public history' (cf Samuel 1994) – it will also assess the extent to which mudlarking can be used as a vehicle for promoting more radical and progressive understandings of metropolitan history, informing MOLA's public engagement activities and particularly its work through the Thames Discovery Programme.

Context, significance and originality

Mudlarking is a well-established practice that stretches back centuries. For much of London's history, scavenging at low tide for items that might have practical or monetary value has been a survival strategy for some of the city's marginalised populations. Today, it is dominated by those eager to find material souvenirs of the city's history and the activity attracts everyone from serious and highly knowledgeable 'experts' to occasional enthusiasts (see, for example Maiklem 2019, Sandling 2018). Indeed, larking has become something of a metropolitan cultural phenomenon, with: several celebrity 'larkers' like Steve "Mud God" Brooker capturing the public's attention; a large number of 'how to' guides written by foreshore experts (e.g. Lara Maiklem's, *A Field Guide to Larking*, 2021, or Jason Sandy and Nick Stephens, *Thames Mudlarking*, 2021); multiple YouTube video channels offering glimpses into the 'thrill of the find' (see [Nicola White mudlark - Tideline Art - YouTube](#)); a Facebook group with over 180,000 worldwide followers; its own TV series, *Mudmen*; a clutch of recent exhibitions and creative interventions centred around retrieved foreshore artefacts (e.g. [Thames Tate Dig](#), [Foragers of the Foreshore](#), [Larking: The Thames and Beyond](#)) and a planned museum ([Thames Museum](#)). MOLA has developed strong relationships with the mudlarking community through its involvement in the Thames Discovery Programme which uses the foreshore as a 'classroom' for educational and wider public engagement.

Given the popularity of mudlarking as a form of amateur as well as professional archaeological practice, it is surprising that it has received little sustained scholarly investigation. Popular accounts of larking cited above are the latest in a long tradition of volumes, featuring titles such as Ivor Noel Hume's seminal *Treasure in the Thames* (1956) and the more recent *The River's Tale* (Cohen and Wragg 2017), that largely cater to a readership of amateur enthusiasts. And while there have been numerous reports and publications on professional surveys and excavations of Thames sites (e.g. Webber 1999) many of them led by MOLA, critical assessments of amateur engagement with the river's archaeologies are limited to some relatively brief surveys of community archaeology programmes, often with a focus on surviving structures and features rather than artefacts (e.g. Cohen 2011). This is in contrast to other forms of popular archaeological investigation such as metal detecting which has enjoyed considerable critical scrutiny, for example in relation to how it encourages practitioners to engage with ideas of landscape (e.g. Winkler 2016, Keighren and Norcup 2020).

The Thames foreshore has much to tell us about the history of London and the importance of its river to its populations. The distinctiveness of mudlarking as a form of popular archaeology derives from the uniqueness of the foreshore as an archaeological site. The action of the river and its tides means that the context within which artefacts might be found is far from stable and the stratigraphic deposits characteristic of many on-land excavations are rarely evident. The river washes up artefacts for discovery that follow no obvious chronology or historical pattern and that might be removed from the site of their deposition. Once described by Peter Linebaugh (1991) as the 'jugular vein of empire' the river and those objects that lie within its environs tell us much about London's influence on the world as well as about the world's influence on London. As an archive of metropolitan things, the Thames mixes objects from different times and different places and of varying social and economic significance. As such, it is as much a metaphor for metropolitan life as a decipherable record of the city's history. Yet, as an archive of Londoner's things, it also holds the potential to cast light on three key features of the metropolitan past: (i) it can demonstrate the city's global formation and how it has been shaped by its connections with other places, near and far through trade, colonial exploitation and postcolonial migration (Massey 2006); (ii) it can challenge conventional linear historical narratives of the city's development and draw attention to its 'echoic' temporalities (Ackroyd 2000); and (iii) it can point to the everyday experiences of Londoners, including of those marginalised groups who leave few traces in the documentary archives of the city (Owens and Jeffries 2016). Through its focus on mudlarks on the foreshore, the project will also interrogate issues of relevance to wider studies of heritage and museums, such as the heritage of waste (and recycling) and the therapeutic affordances of community participation via public archaeology and heritage organisation/museum outreach initiatives (see, for instance, the recent Baring Foundation ['Creatively Minded and Heritage'](#) report).

Research Questions

Focusing on different mudlarking communities, and wider public interest in the phenomenon, this project will address the following research questions:

1. Who mudlarks? Why do people go larking? What do they hope to discover?
2. What are the wider socio-cultural and historical contexts which help to explain the popularity of mudlarking? To what extent does mudlarking today correspond with longer-term scavenging and amateur archaeological activities along the Thames?
3. How do mudlarks make sense of the objects they find? In what ways do they attach value to the objects? What do they want to know about the objects they find?
4. How do they begin to develop historical narratives about the objects they discover and, in particular, how do they seek to connect them to the history of the city? How does mudlarking shape practitioners' understanding of the city and its history?
5. How might organisations like MOLA, through initiatives such as the Thames Discovery Programme, engage with the mudlarking communities and use their finds to stimulate new understandings of the city's history? What potential is there for using mudlarked artefacts to offer a new metropolitan 'history from below'? Can such objects be used to point to some of London's diverse and global heritages and to questions of historical injustice? In short, can mudlarking provide a platform for raising questions about social justice, inclusion and well-being that are relevant to the city's present as well as to its the past?

Methods

The project will use participatory methodologies, working *with rather than on* different elements of the mudlarking community. Both MOLA and the Portable Antiquities Scheme are seen as trusted organisations among mudlarks, and using their many contacts among London's (amateur) archaeological community (e.g. the Society of Mudlarks), the aim would be to identify and recruit around 20 to 25 mudlarks from varying backgrounds to work with. Indeed, a key objective would be to reach beyond some of the more familiar figures who have become self-appointed gatekeepers and who often represent a narrow demographic (typically older, experienced, male larkers); this would include trying to work with some of those who are new to mudlarking, such as the 'pandemic larkers' mentioned above. Indeed, we are interested in the question of who mudlarks and how, in demographic terms, they might differ (or not) from those who engage with other metropolitan heritage organisations; we are keen that our sample of participants reflects the variety of the entire larker community. The project would follow individuals onto the foreshore at several Thames London locations and use 'go-along' methods (Carpiano 2009, Evans and Jones 2011) to capture their engagement with material finds. To build up trust and understanding, multiple visits would be made with individual or small groups of mudlarks. Observation and semi-structured interviews would be undertaken in situ to investigate how mudlarks value the objects they find, how they begin to identify and interpret them, and how they use them to start to tell stories and construct historical narratives. The research will thus be object and 'citizen-science' led.

The second phase of research will involve the PhD student working collaboratively with a smaller group of mudlarks (around 8) to research particular objects to better understand them and to consider how they might illuminate London's history as a city. The choice of objects will be determined by the student in dialogue with the participant. For this element of the project, the student would undertake their own archival and object research and where necessary consult and draw on the expertise of MOLA finds specialists and other metropolitan historians. With the mudlark participants they would then 'co-produce' historical interpretation of the objects in relation to London's (global) history.

Convened by the PhD student, the third and final phase will involve the selected group of larkers sharing their finds, and the research and narratives they have developed in relation to them, at a public engagement event as part of the Thames Discovery Programme. The event will explore the value of mudlarking to the wider public (rather than just to the collectors themselves): how do people interact with and develop historical understanding from mudlarking engagement events and exhibitions? Through observation and reflective evaluation, the aim here will be to understand the potential for mudlarking to generate meaningful and inclusive appreciations of London's past – its history from afar, its history from before, and its history from below.

Alongside the three-phase programme of work with mudlarks, the student will also undertake archival and desk-based online research as a basis to investigate the historical and socio-cultural contexts in which mudlarking has become popular and the extent to which it exists within longer-term trends of amateur archaeological/scavenging activities.

Timescales

Year One: Induction, reading and preparation of literature review, development of methodology and research design, acquire understanding of mudlark sites and practices. Develop relationships with MOLA colleagues, familiarize and engage with TDP. Progression. Agree on and undertake some key training activity.

Archival work on historical context to mudlarking. Begin first phase of fieldwork with mudlarks, starting in summer.

Year Two: Continue archival work on historical context to mudlarking. Complete phases one and two of research with mudlarks; write a draft chapter or section for thesis; present at conference. Shadow TDP public engagement work; continue with training; undertake one significant skills enhancement activity (e.g. short placement)

Year Three: Undertake phase three of research with mudlarks and TDP, complete any archival work; produce final thesis plan; writing of three chapters; present a conference (e.g. overseas) and draft paper for publication based on conference paper or chapter. Engage with further training activity; undertake a second significant skills enhancement activity (e.g. public engagement funding application for event/activity etc.)

Year Four: Write remaining chapters. Following feedback, revise all chapters and submit thesis. Work with MOLA to ensure that benefit and impact of work on organisation, including the TNP, is realised.

Outcomes

The project will reassert and showcase the public value of archaeology – specifically how ‘small finds’ can tell ‘big stories’ about this history of our city – at a time when the politics of historical understanding and heritage have never been more contested. It will renew interest in the public history of the metropolis, and of an accessible form of history [or archaeology] ‘from below’. It will help shape equitable engagement with the history of the Thames. The research will contribute to debates about the value and impact of community and amateur archaeology (Simpson and Williams 2008) and about the wider significance of the cultures of collecting, curiosity and enthusiasm (Geoghegan 2012). A key outcome for MOLA will be understanding of how and the extent to which mudlarking can be drawn into inclusive and revisionary understandings of London’s history that challenge historical bias, centre questions of social (in)justice, and highlight the city’s global connections at time when ideas of British exceptionalism threaten to obscure or deny such metropolitan historical narratives. These insights will give renewed purpose to MOLA’s educational and outreach programmes and demonstrate the wider radical potential of engaging with MOLA projects and collections. How can use foreshore finds to create engaging exhibitions and educational experiences that create the space for discussions about historical bias and social (in)justice? The insights that will arise from the questions will have applicability beyond London where tidal foreshore archaeology has become a phenomenon.

The project therefore connects strongly with MOLA strategic priorities on ‘citizen science’ and ‘archaeology and the contemporary’, and with other projects on the [public benefit of commercial archaeology](#). Finally, it will connect with sector/discipline wide debates about the future of archaeology as an inclusive practice and discipline (Society of Antiquaries of London, 2020; cf also Archaeology Audiences Network)