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An introduction to

MUDLARKING.

THE LIFE OF TRADE UNIONIST and Liberal MP John Burns had been intimately entwined with the River Thames. He had spent seven years as an engineer's apprentice working alongside it, led one hundred thousand of its striking dockers to victory in 1889 and married the daughter of a Battersea shipwright. When, in 1929, an American visitor compared the Thames unfavourably to the rivers of his home country, Burns retorted: 'The St Lawrence is mere water. The Missouri muddy water. The Thames is liquid history.'¹ He was right. The Thames has been witness to much momentous history in the making: Roman invasion, Viking incursion, the signing of the Magna Carta, Elizabeth I spurring on her sailors before they set sail to face the Spanish Armada, the building of an empire, the devastation of the Blitz and the docking of the *Empire Windrush*.

But beyond these transformational episodes, the Thames has also been witness to the day-to-day lives of millions of London's ordinary citizens: sailors, traders, craftsmen, dockers, criminals, gamblers, sex workers, drinkers, shipbuilders, entertainers and immigrants, who lived and worked alongside it or who traversed it every day. Throughout the city's past, objects that belonged to them have found their way into its waters. Rings slipped from fingers, buttons became snagged on ropes, pins fell from hair, coins were

tossed from bridges for luck, cargoes were spilt, broken pottery and other household rubbish was dumped over river walls – packed behind revetments or used to build barge beds – and incriminating evidence was disposed of hastily.

The Victorians were the first to recognize that the Thames provided a rich source of objects from London's past. Antiquarians enthusiastically acquired spectacular artefacts found by dredgers, bridge builders and dock diggers. Newsworthy finds included Bronze Age shields, an Iron Age horned helmet, numerous spearheads and a colossal bronze head of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, which all now enhance London's museums. Enthusiasm for Thames-found artefacts was such that two illiterate rogues, Billy Smith and Charley Eaton, even began forging medieval trinkets and passing them off as the real thing, claiming they had found them during the digging of an East End dock. At the same time, impoverished children known as 'mudlarks' were also searching the Thames. Their haunt was the river's foreshore – the area of mud, sand, shingle and rocks exposed for a few hours twice per day when the river is at low tide. Their goal was to gather anything they could sell for a few pennies, including bits of rope, bones and copper nails, and, if they were lucky, a hammer accidentally dropped from a

PREVIOUS PAGES.

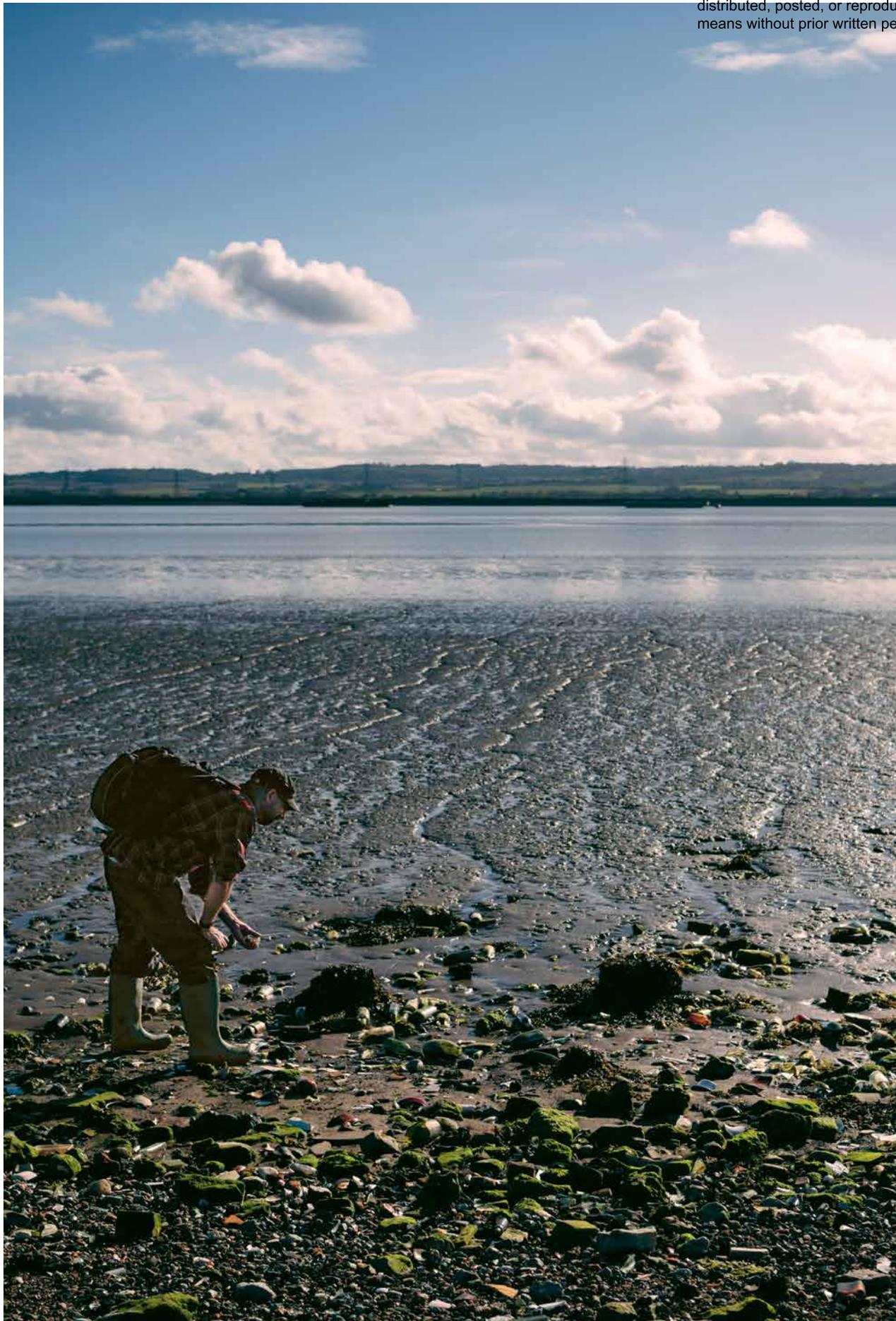
Two views of the River Thames foreshore at Southwark, one including the author mudlarking among the rubble there.

OPPOSITE.

The author searching the River Thames foreshore at Tilbury, Essex, where London's rubbish was dumped at riverside landfill sites in the early twentieth century.

OVER.

Two boys mudlark on the Thames foreshore by the York Water Gate, a landing stage for London river traffic, in this painting by Henry Pether, c. 1850.





I. A nineteenth-century shipbuilder's hammer, caulking irons and a barge lock, all discovered on the Thames foreshore by Jay Sisu.

II. A mudlark wears a basket on his head to use later for his finds in this drawing by Beard taken from Mayhew's London Labour and the London Poor, 1851.

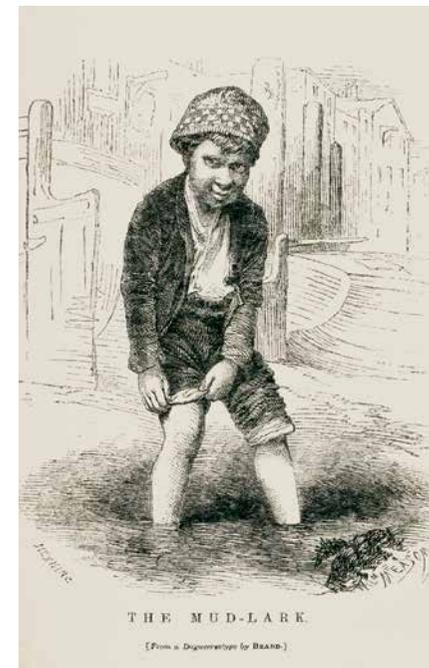
III. This 1805 engraving depicts mudlark Peggy Jones carrying her finds recovered on the foreshore near Blackfriars Bridge in her apron. She will be able to sell pieces of coal for eight pence a load.

shipbuilder's hand. One such mudlark, aged fourteen, told journalist Henry Mayhew his father had died falling drunk between two river barges, and his mother was too weak to work. Searching the muddy foreshore at Wapping for many hours every day, his bare feet were often painfully pierced by shards of broken glass and rusty nails. However, he had no choice but to keep returning to the river in search of a few lumps of coal, as the family often had nothing to eat until he provided the cash from its sale.

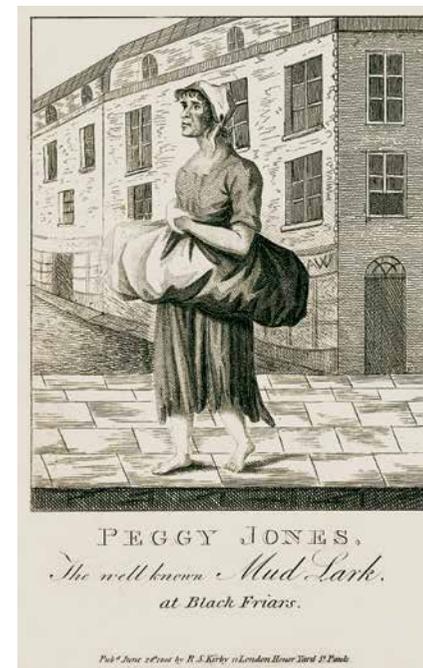
In the twentieth century, destitute searchers vanished from the foreshore and the grand finds unearthed by the Victorian construction boom became rarer. But the practice of mudlarking continued, evolving into an offbeat leisure activity for the historically curious. Archaeologist Ivor Noël Hume

was one such enthusiast, observing in 1956 that 'many minor treasures [are found] not by builders, dredgermen or even skilled archaeologists but by enthusiastic antiquaries who have discovered the strange hobby of mudlarking.'³ These hobbyists have since recovered many thousands of artefacts from the Thames foreshore, which have added greatly to our knowledge of London's past. Five years ago, I joined their number.

My first attempt to search the foreshore ended in failure. Not understanding it could only now be accessed at a few points, I ended up abandoning my quest while looking for riverside steps long since decayed. The next trip proved more successful, and I gradually learned how to scour the mud, rocks, bricks and shingle, without the aid of a metal detector, for bent pins, broken



II.

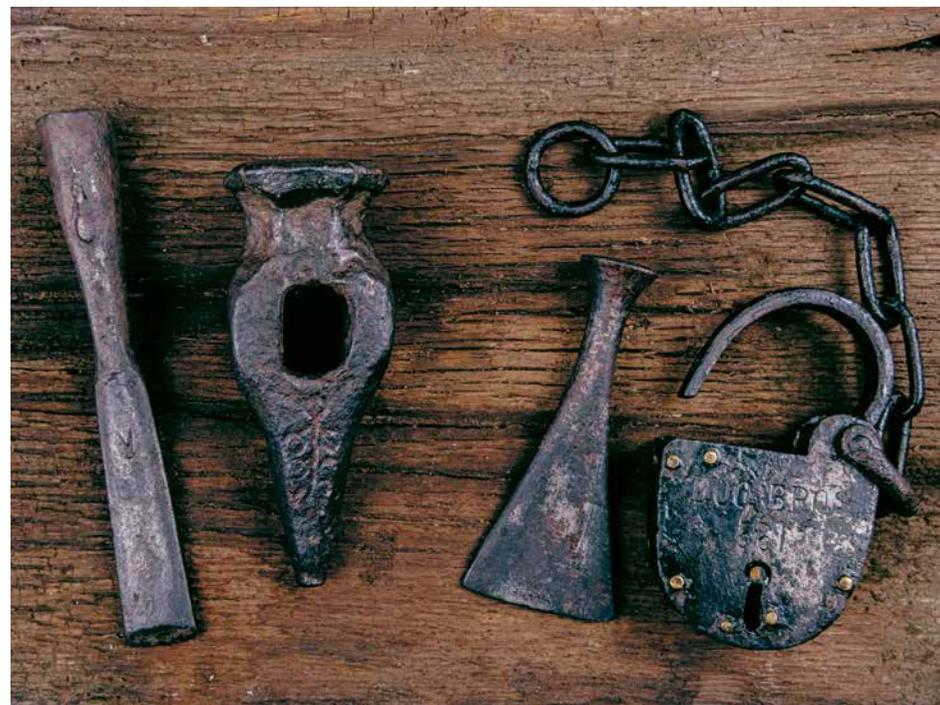


III.

buckles, arcane tokens, lost coins and fragments of discarded pottery. I also discovered the foreshore's miraculous preservative qualities – the mud's low oxygen conditions and soft cushioning safeguarding Roman leather boot soles, delicate glass medicine vials and even pages of century-old newspapers. At first my motivation was purely curiosity and the dopamine hit released by making a find, but it soon became clear that mudlarking provided a unique lens through which to examine the past. While studying for a history degree I never once handled an object from the past. Having grown up trawling a Victorian rubbish dump for bottles in the industrial Midlands, this always struck me as a missed opportunity. Objects from the foreshore, such as Georgian counterfeit coins (some perhaps with bite marks where their authenticity had been tested by a shopkeeper's teeth) or a Roman gaming counter with a wager crudely scratched into its underside, bring a degree of viscerality and emotional charge to the past that is missing when studying documents alone.

But mudlarking doesn't just provide the opportunity to find artefacts. It

can also inspire the discovery of hidden histories – stories that disrupt what we typically know of the past. Like any histories, these start with raw materials drawn from an archive. But the foreshore is an archive like no other. The Thames' currents constantly erode the foreshore's surface, freeing objects and sorting them, not by period or purpose, but by weight and shape with no regard for rarity or value. Embracing this chaos as a starting point for investigating the past throws up unexpected connections, disrupting traditional hierarchies of information and overturning preconceptions. This is not least because the owners of many mudlarked objects were those marginalized or censured people who remain underrepresented in the history books. A Roman pin was perhaps last held by an enslaved hairdresser, a die last rolled by a Georgian gambler, a token last exchanged by an itinerant Victorian vegetable seller and a Jew's harp plucked by a forgotten street musician. Mudlarking can therefore become a redemptive act, aiding the creation of a people's history, the river's waters helping to fill the gaps in the stories we tell ourselves about the past.



I.

IN FOCUS— *Prehistoric Tools.*

Human activity in the Thames Valley began around 500,000 years before London's birth. Flint hand axes from the oldest phase of this occupation have been recovered from the river but mudlarks are more likely to encounter the area's prehistoric past as a tool lost or discarded by its Mesolithic ('Middle Stone Age') inhabitants.

Around ten thousand years ago, the ice sheets that had covered much of Britain retreated. With the new warmer, wetter climate, hunter-gatherers became a consistent presence along the Thames. Wild cattle, elk, deer and pigs were hunted, and fish were harpooned with spears incorporating tiny flint barbs, termed 'microliths' by archaeologists. These were designed to snag the flesh of an animal, making it harder for it to escape, and were produced from a piece of flint known as a blade. A second Mesolithic innovation was the tranche adze (also known as a

'Thames Pick'). This cutting tool, similar to an axe but with the cutting edge perpendicular to the handle, was likely used in woodworking. The remains of a Mesolithic wooden structure (London's oldest known construction) has been discovered on the foreshore at Vauxhall: six enigmatic wooden piles preserved by the low oxygen conditions of the Thames mud, and visible only during especially low tides.

From the fourth millennium BC, forests were gradually cleared to provide land for growing cereals and herding animals. This more settled lifestyle saw the emergence of new rituals. Polished stone and flint axes – some of which had been traded from across Britain and beyond – have been found by a lucky few. Archaeologists believe these were probably placed into the Thames deliberately as offerings, perhaps the beginning of the river's longstanding spiritual significance to those living alongside it.

This Neolithic ('New Stone Age') culture would not endure, however. Ancient DNA analysis shows that around 4,500 years ago, Neolithic people were almost completely replaced in the course of just a few hundred years, following a wave of migration to Britain. The arrival of these newcomers was accompanied by a number of tools and cultural practices that had captured the imagination of peoples across Europe. One example was the exquisitely knapped 'barbed and tanged' arrowhead, which was used against both animals and humans, and placed in archers' graves. Another tool from this period was the mattock, used for digging, with a head fashioned from deer or elk antler attached to a wooden haft.

As the Bronze Age unfolded, metal tools gradually came to supplant those made of flint. Many bronze spearheads have been recovered from the Thames, some ritually damaged before being placed in the river.



I.



II.

Mesolithic microlith.

Mesolithic tranche adze.

Early Bronze Age barbed and tanged arrowhead.

Middle Bronze Age spearhead.

OPPOSITE.

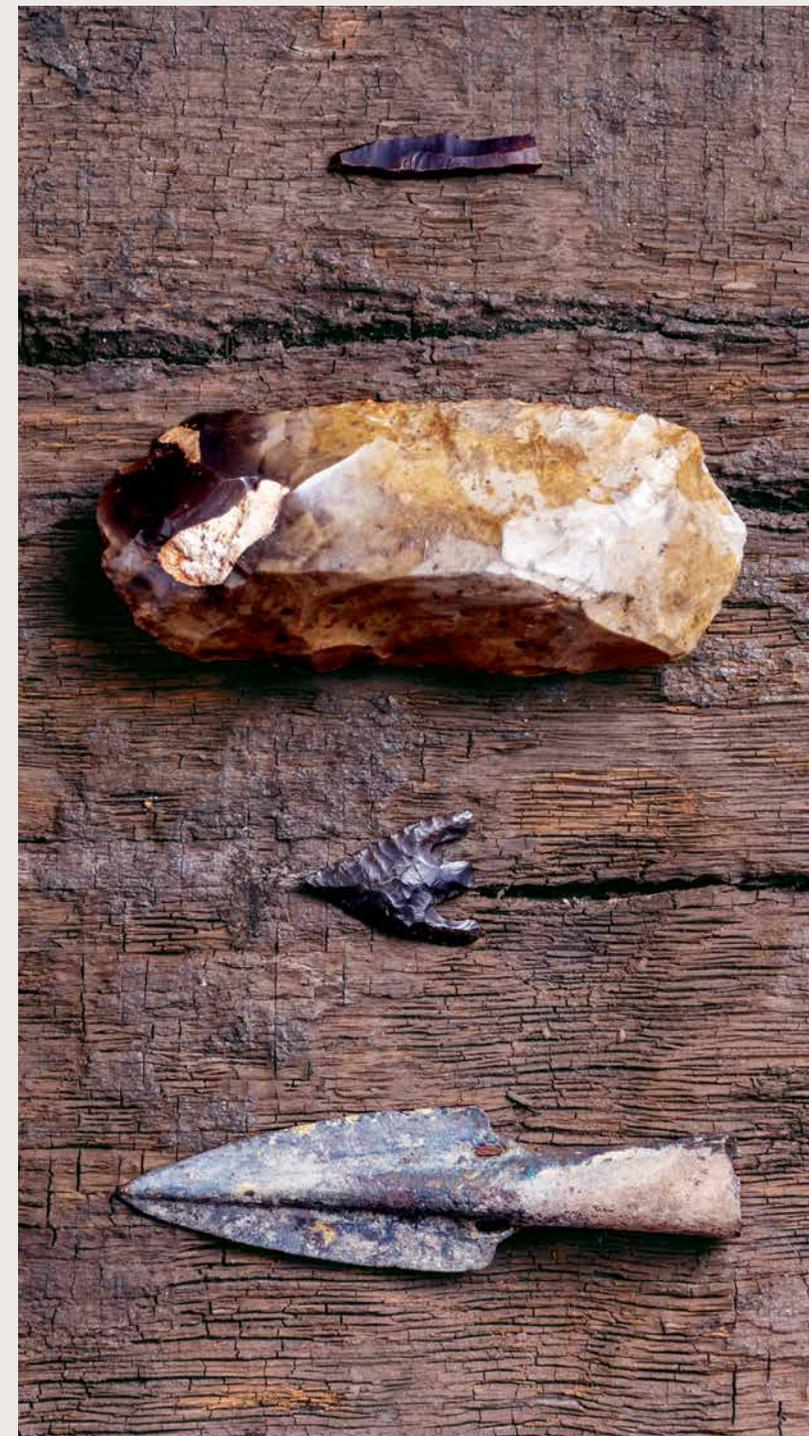
I. Mesolithic or Neolithic bone point; shaped by a flint tool and probably used for piercing animal hides.

II. Bronze Age mattock fashioned from red deer antler; used for digging, butchery or carpentry.

ABOVE.

A selection of mudlarked prehistoric tools, spanning 9,000 years of human activity along the River Thames.

All finds made by Tony Thira with the exception of the spearhead, which was found by Lukasz Orliński.



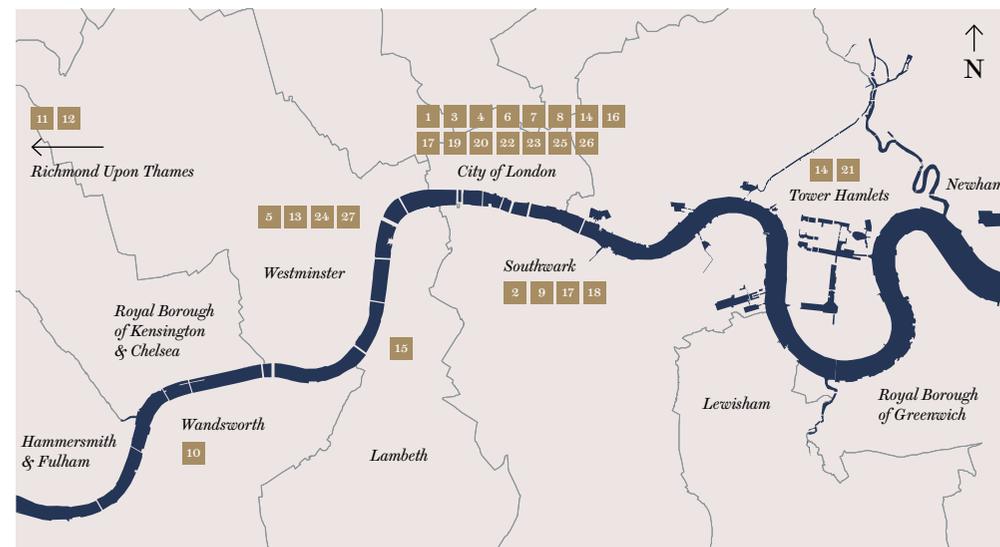
Finds from the River Thames, revealing stories from around the world.

Below are shown the twenty-seven artefacts that the stories in this book take as their starting point, presented in the order in which the stories appear in the book. They have been photographed on the foreshore in the locations in which they were originally discovered. The other two hundred and ninety finds featured in *Mudlark'd*, and relating to the stories, have been shot on surfaces recovered from the river, including part of an eighteenth-century ship's rudder, a Tudor floor tile, a Roman roof tile and rubble generated by the aerial Blitz of the Second World War. While all were found in the River Thames, they reveal stories not only of London's inhabitants,

but also of forgotten people from across Britain and the world beyond. London was the busiest port in England for centuries, and the busiest in the world in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And so, mudlarking in London means discovering Britain's global connections forged through millennia of trade, warfare and colonialism.

Interspersed throughout the book are 'In Focus' pages, exploring the evolution of five different types of finds over time – prehistoric tools, buttons, clay pipes, pottery and ammunition. Concluding the book is a 'Mudlarking Primer', which provides practical advice and guidelines to mudlarking on the River Thames.

BELOW.
Each of the twenty-seven finds shown here, which are key to the stories told in this book, is located on the map below in the London borough in which it was found.



1 **Hairpin.**
150–400
(Ornatrices)



2 **Signet Ring.**
1450–1550
(Hanse)



3 **Lead Cloth Seals.**
1500–1700
(Strangers)



4 **Glass Bead Production Tube.**
c. 1635
(Black Georgians)



5 **East India Co. 1/4 Paisa Coin.**
1791
(Lascars)



6 **Bartmann Jug Fragment.**
1550–1700
(Cunning-Folk)



7 **Counterfeit George III Shilling.**
1819
(Coiners)



8 **Candlestick.**
1550–1700
(Sex Workers)



9 **Cufflink.**
1662–1700
(Courting Couples)



10 **Pilgrim Ampulla.**
1220–1420
(Pilgrims)



11 **Doves Type.**
1899–1901
(Printers)



12 **British Fascists Badge.**
1924–c. 1933
(Fascists)



13 **Jew's Harp.**
1500–1800
(Street Musicians)



14 **Hudson's Bay Co. Trade Beads.**
c. 1680–1850
(Indigenous North Americans)



15 **Clay Tobacco Pipe Featuring Parachutist.**
c. 1890–1910
(Parachutists)



16 **Coin of Roman Emperor Caracalla.**
198–217
(Romans)



17 **Lead Tokens.**
1600–1800
(Mollies & Macaronis)



18 **Chauffeur's Uniform Button.**
c. 1900–1920
(Cross-Dressing Women)



19 **Clay Tobacco Pipes.**
1610–1680
(Smokers)



20 **Bone Die.**
1600–1800
(Gamesters)



21 **Case Gin Bottleneck.**
c. 1750–1850
(Gin Drinkers)



22 **Human Tooth.**
date unknown
(Montebanks & Dentists)



23 **Medicine Bottle.**
1700–1800
(Quacks)



24 **Spitalfields Market Token.**
c. 1880–1900
(Costermongers)



25 **Turk's Head Clay Tobacco Pipe.**
c. 1850
(Forgotten Heroes of the Crimea)

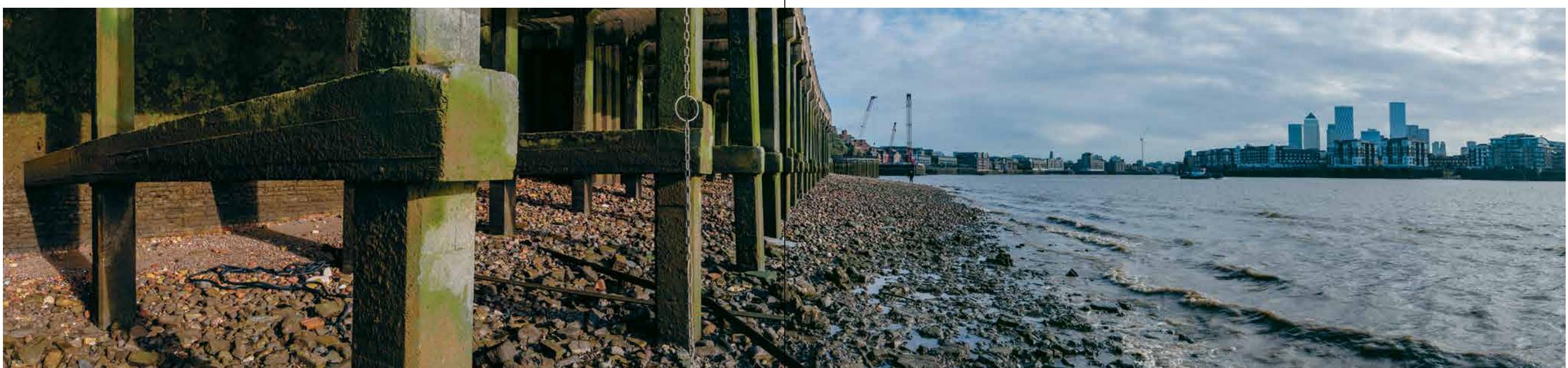
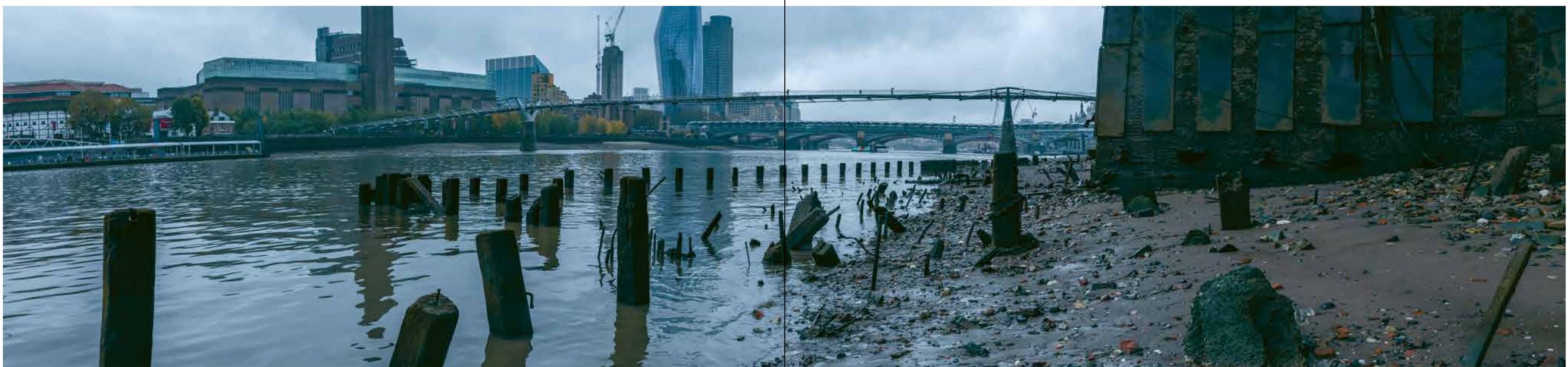
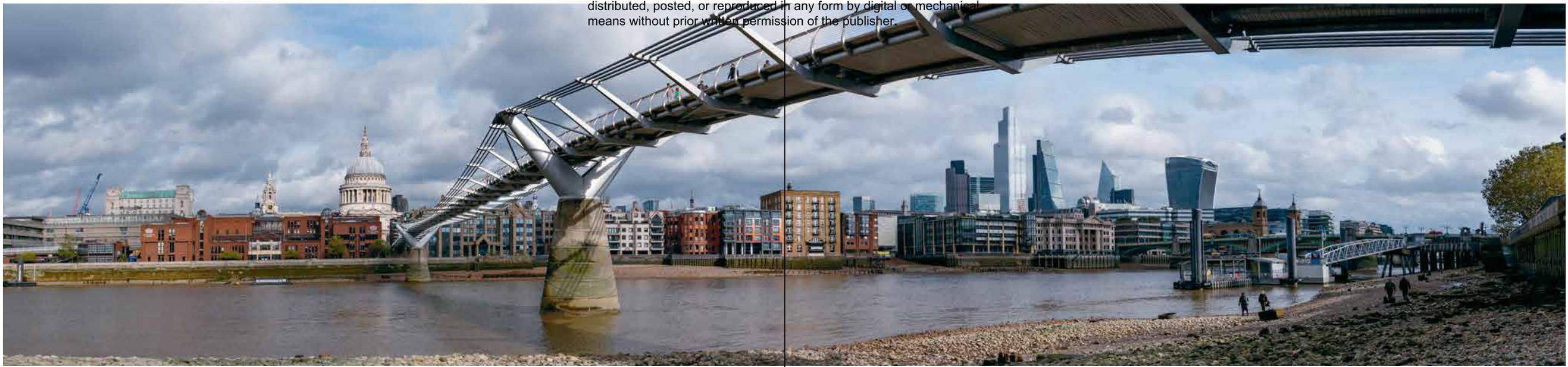


26 **Auxiliary Fire Service Uniform Button.**
1938–1941
(Auxiliary Firefighters)



27 **7.62x54mm Rifle Cartridge Case.**
1944–1945
(The Red Army)

OVER.
The Thames foreshore exposed at low tide. Top: Bankside, Southwark, once famed for its theatres, brothels and bear-baiting pit. Centre: Queenhithe Dock, City of London, a stretch of the river that has seen continuous activity for almost 2,000 years. Bottom: Wapping, Tower Hamlets, once inhabited by sailors, mast makers, shipbuilders and victuallers.



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a=above, b=below, c=centre, l=left, r=right

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