

# Treasure in the Thames

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WHEN *The Future of London's Past*<sup>1</sup> was published, it highlighted the need for an organised, professional approach to the city's archaeology, and among many other points stressed the rich possibilities of the river waterfront area. The first years of the Department of Urban Archaeology have accordingly seen a series of excavations along the former banks of the Thames. But the D.U.A.'s activities are not the only current attempts to probe the past of London's river.

If you go down the ladders or steps to the present foreshore when the tide is low, you may well, even as winter draws on, encounter the parallel activity which is the subject of this article. Particularly on the Cannon Street railway bridge — Queenhithe Dock reach, and to the west of London Bridge, you will see perhaps a single searcher walking, perhaps half a dozen diggers picking and forking into the foreshore, while their companions sieve through the mounds thrown up around the holes. They are, of course, hunting for antiquities.

Londoners have been aware of the store of relics in the foreshore certainly since Victorian times, when (besides the mudlarks and tosh-fakers recorded by Mayhew) the foremost private collectors and antiquaries of the time, including Leyton and Roach-Smith, gave rewards to workmen who handed over all manner of objects they encountered. The Guildhall Museum's one time archaeological field officer, Mr. Ivor Noël Hume, was a keen mudlark (his term) and wrote a book about his own and others' finds, which bears the same title as the present article<sup>2</sup>. In the 20 years after the war, a handful of searchers frequented the foreshore; however, over the past few years the number of searchers has greatly increased. In walking along the foreshore in the city this summer, one could often come across areas of intense activity, which, when abandoned by the diggers, resembled the conditions of the Somme on a small scale. Queenhithe Dock was probably the most worked part of the city, and even weekdays saw holes four feet deep and still growing, spilling reject material into old unfilled holes nearby, which had, with the ebb and flow of a few tides, become treacherous mud-traps. Beside Queenhithe

Dock on one occasion, a joint-enterprise hole was being dug, not directly beneath, but right next to an access ladder. The occupants assured me that they always filled in their holes afterwards. (Their "filling in" in fact proved totally inadequate: the area around the ladder a week later was unsafe for passage, especially for those unaware of the possible danger, and even three months later the shore there is still treacherous). Just west of the Walbrook outlet one could see a series of abandoned and active holes, the waterfilled former being convenient to sieve the extracted material of the latter in. In Queenhithe Dock itself, part of a wooden structure (groyne?) has been exposed and come loose with the tides, as happened at the scene of excavations by the Princess Elizabeth public house at Swan Wharf. Digging on this scale, both in terms of numbers of diggers and the depths to which they delve, (6 feet is the deepest I have actually seen) is something new to the foreshore, as is the resulting turmoil of spoil heaps, pits and damage to the fabric of the bank. Noël Hume warns against excavation because "the Port of London Authority and wharfingers take great care to insure the surface (of the foreshore) is not disturbed, for if the skin is damaged the less stable mud below can be quickly eroded by the tides." A new protective layer of chalk was put down by the P.L.A. last year, immediately to the east of the Walbrook outlet, to prevent further erosion, but just over a hundred yards to the west, a similar surface has been pierced at several points by recent pits.

There is now a considerable range of searchers to be met with on the foreshore, from office-workers having a lunchtime look, through whole families (including one on a day trip from Birmingham for that very purpose), surface collectors of long standing, some of whom have reported or donated finds to London museums over the years, adolescents armed with metal detectors after coins, to the recurrent determined "professionals" intent on getting through as much volume of the foreshore as time and tide will permit. This last group is not homogeneous; it too includes some who take their finds to museums, some who keep "only quality material" and others whose finds are simply sold. One or

1. M. Biddle, D. Hudson and C. Heighway, *The Future of London's Past* (1973).

2. I. Noël Hume, *Treasure in the Thames* (1956).

two are said to make a living from these activities. Many searchers seem fairly knowledgeable: they may "belong to societies." I do not suggest that they are all only sufficiently interested to know a reasonable price when it is quoted, but if one takes a look at Seaby's Coin and Medal Bulletin<sup>3</sup> over the past year or so, it will tell its own tale. To quote from the August 1975 sales list: "H5099 — Henry I cut halfpenny of London, found on the Thames foreshore on the site of Old London Bridge, 1st Sept. 1974, extremely rare, nearly VF, £125." and "H5137 James I . . . halfpenny, found on the Thames foreshore near Tower Bridge 1975, good VF, £35." From the October 1975 issue: "H5239, Burgred 852-874 (hammered coin) found on the Thames foreshore near the Tate Gallery 8/7/75 . . . £100." In the March issue this year is an ancient British tin coin from the river near Sion, and the May issue has three silver hammered coins, all "from the Thames near Tower Bridge." There are several other items through the year from the Thames, but the above illustrate the prizes available. Rumours were current in June of several Celtic coins being found on the foreshore near London Bridge, but enquiries have not revealed anything definite. It is hardly likely that all that is sold from the Thames passes the hands of so responsible a firm as Seaby's, who have acted quite legally throughout, (few dealers would list the provenance or dates of finding so accurately, if at all). It is by no means only coins that are sold: pilgrim badges and jewellery are occasionally said to have fetched a good price, though I have no direct evidence of this. One of the coin-cum-antique dealers under the arches at Charing Cross recently had some small 17th century delftware drug jars on sale, described as "from the Thames." During the course of the summer, a pistol and several daggers of 16th century date, all from the river, and in a quite remarkable state of preservation, were handed in at the Tower of London for identification and recording; any item like this, if sold at auction, would bring a very attractive reward for an exciting few weeks digging. What appears in the sales catalogues must only be a fraction of what is sold, what appears at museums is a fraction of what is found, which is again a fraction of what is to be found. The Port of London Authority, which maintains and is responsible for the fabric (including the antiquities that make it up) of the foreshore has not in the past made any automatic claim on what is discovered

in the river. Even if it is entirely above board to sell one's finds like this, it is a very cavalier way to treat the city's antiquities.

This summer, the mudlarks were an all-too-obvious advertisement to curious visitors and resting workers, of the prizes sought, and so the number of searchers was constantly increasing. They could also be encouraged by recent coverage of this activity in the media, but maybe a large proportion come after reading *A Treasure Hunters' Guide*.<sup>4</sup>

Besides sheer numbers of people searching, I mentioned the depth of the diggings. Whilst most of the surface material on the foreshore is post-medieval, and largely unstratified due to tidal action and digging, the pilgrim-badges and medieval coins that are taken, and the scorned medieval and even Roman pottery sherds from deeper down that litter the fringes of holes in some areas suggest a broad stratification of some kind is being destroyed. The Department of Urban Archaeology's waterfront excavations provide further evidence of an archaeologically useful stratification in the foreshores, and some of the riverside searchers themselves speak of layers of a particular age. I do not envisage any archaeological excavations on the present foreshore, since the horizontal stratification of successive waterfronts means that it is unlikely any sufficiently rewarding sites are to be found there now that pure artefact recovery is a thing of the past in the professional world. But Queenhithe Dock reaches a good way inland; medieval and Roman boats could lie inside the present river limits, as could a range of specialized structures like kiddles or mooring complexes, and there is a former London Bridge, that was presumably supported by piles or piers, which has yet to be located. Before the relics of the river are dismissed as unimportant, remember the Battersea shield, consider the pistol found at Queenhithe this summer, which is as old as any the Tower owns, or look at the London Museum's Medieval Catalogue<sup>5</sup>—particularly the section on pilgrim-badges—and see the proportion of that collection which came "from the Thames." In many cases, especially metal artefacts, the river can provide objects better preserved than a dry-land site, because of the air-tight mud. For example, badly rusted patten supports in several pieces from the D.U.A.'s 1974 Aldgate (Minorities) site were identified by comparison with more sound ones from the Thames. The D.U.A. has in fact employed some of its workers for eight weeks to excavate part of the

3. *Seaby's Coin and Medal Bulletin*, published monthly by B. A. Seaby Ltd.

4. E. Fletcher, *A Treasure Hunters' Guide* (1975). This book, covering much of Great Britain, significantly starts with an account of the foreshore sites of the Thames in London — "some of Britain's most pro-

ductive amateur treasure hunting sites" — and includes the words "The secret of success at Queenhithe is to dig as deeply as possible into the foreshore, and wash the black silt from the bottom of the hole through a sieve . . ."

5. London Museum Medieval Catalogue (1954).

Thames foreshore — it was a fourteenth century part, at Trig Lane: with badges, a seal matrix, coins and lead tokens, it was very rich in marketable finds. If a dry-land site in the City were despoiled in the same way as the present Thames foreshore is, professional and amateur archaeological organisations would be vociferous in its defence. The present high-tide mark should not be a valid deterministic consideration in this matter.

Within the past few months, 17th century delftware kiln material has been found on the north shore in the city, and stoneware kiln material has been found in Queenhithe Dock. Each group consists of saggars, kiln furniture and wasters and each was from a limited area of shore surface until scattered as a result of digging. Rhoda Edwards mentions two persons connected with the stoneware industry living at Queenhithe in 1614, but goes on to say there is no evidence of actual working in the area<sup>6</sup>. The above sherds may be connected with these potters, but they are more likely to be of a late 17th or 18th century date. Although both groups are obviously secondary dumped material, it is hard to envisage them travelling far before they were dumped, and they do raise interesting possibilities. Such things are worth recording and investigating, but it should be as natural tidal erosion uncovers them, rather than from the aftermath of someone's unrecorded pillage.

The P.L.A.'s past policy was to allow digging if it was on "not too large a scale" and provided holes were "adequately filled" (verbal communication). A duplicated letter of permission to search from the P.L.A. says "any digging should be confined to surface excavation only." Obviously those who dig down four feet or more have made their own interpretation; the P.L.A. were unaware of just how deeply people were delving. They are now formulating new bye-laws and a more stringent set of conditions to abide by. One piece of progress is that the filling of holes has been more conscientiously and effectively carried out, following a letter in *the Times* from Mr. Merrifield, which, besides making several archaeological points, emphasised the dangers of deep digging into the foreshore. The Council for British Archaeology's campaign against treasure hunting has received wide publicity, and their condemnation of this particular practice in London concerns "a young boy treasure hunting on the banks of the Thames, accompanied by 'expert' Tony Hammond, who later in the (Jim'll Fix It) programme displayed some of his loot," and can be found in the editorial of the newsletter at the end of the May 1976 Calendar. Unfortunately comprehensive patrolling of a stretch of archaeologically rich ground,

exposed for part, and eroded to expose new material for the rest of every day of the year is simply not a viable proposition. (One young mudlark I encountered showed me his prize finds, among which was a yellow metal representation of a bird, about an inch long, with red stones for eyes. In this case, I think the glitter really was gold. He claimed to have found this on the surface at dusk by torchlight.) It is unrealistic to expect to prevent all artefact recovery from the Thames by the public, indeed for the following reasons it is undesirable. If what is found is reported, the discoverers would be doing a real service, for it is often only the amateur who has the time and inclination to traipse a windswept foreshore in his spare time. At the moment museums do at least see some of the material, some searchers having for years reported their finds to London museums; if all searchers made their finds available for study, with a note of the precise findspot and date of discovery, and providing a record is kept of where the more important pieces at least have gone, this would prove very useful. If too strong measures were taken, this would hardly prevent all the antiques being removed by the irresponsible, but would make even a temporary appearance at a museum unlikely, for fear of repercussions against the finder. The destruction of the broad stratification that random unrecorded digging necessarily causes is what must be stopped. This would discourage those who only make financial profit, since it is medieval metal above all that seems to spell money to these: with the lower, earlier levels unavailable, few would consider the later and more scattered surface finds worth the bother of hours of searching.

A watching brief on the foreshore in the city has been set up by the D.U.A., but this will only operate sporadically due to more pressing work. In areas of particular interest, a survey, perhaps following the recording method used on the Wandsworth foreshore<sup>7</sup> could be undertaken — though it may be too late in the case of the two kiln-dumps mentioned above.

I hope the situation is not as bad as this article implies; at present, with the lack of any system ensuring that what is being found and by whom becomes known, it is very difficult to sift rumour and exaggeration from reality. Some sort of licensing has become necessary if half a dozen or more people are ready to delve into the foreshore each weekend at Queenhithe and elsewhere. Professional archaeological and museum workers must be sure of knowing what is being found; this cannot depend solely on the chance conscience or curiosity of the diggers.

6. Rhoda Edwards, "London Potters circa 1570-1710," *Journal of Ceramic History* 6 (1974).

7. "Wandsworth Mud Larking," *London Archaeol* 1 no. 11 (1971), 248.