

## THE THAMES DISCOVERY PROGRAMME / COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY ON LONDON'S FORESHORE

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The Thames foreshore is reputedly England's largest archaeological site containing evidence of London's history since Neolithic times. It was only in the Victorian era that this history started to be revealed in a big way with the construction of new railways, sewage systems etc. causing a lot of ground disturbance. When the medieval 'Old' London Bridge was finally demolished in 1832 after 600 years of service many artefacts were found and collected. Waterfront development and dredging both uncovered objects from prehistoric to medieval times particularly in areas of past activity such as Battersea Shield, Brentford, the City and Putney. Fortunately waterlogged wood and leather are fairly well preserved. Another supply of artefacts came from the 'mudlarkers', individuals who roamed the foreshore when the tide was out. Many of these finds are now housed in the Museum of London along with efforts made to understand the river.

### THE OLD LONDON BRIDGE



It is now known that the meandering river used to be much wider, with marshes and muddy islands. New buildings encroaching onto the foreshore narrowed the river which now flows rather faster and has a different shape. The foreshore surface is continually changing both daily with the tides and in the longer term with storms and floods. Not much digging is required. The remains of old wooden buildings have sometimes been dated by tree ring sampling which allows correlations to be made with relevant documents as to the people and livelihoods at that time. In 1949 a map was made of the foreshore between Cannon Street Bridge and London Bridge marking the places where all the known finds had been made. This did not apply to removable artefacts so much as to parts of structures, ships, ship-building and ship remains.

In 1990 the principles of stratigraphy were demonstrated to apply to the foreshore. Not only did mud layers build up over time, as conditions changed some mud layers were being washed away. This could occur at different places at different times. At Bermondsey, grid irons were discovered which had been laid down as a base for ships to sit on at low tide. These grid irons were dated as post-medieval. Just yards away at the same level were some prehistoric remains.

Currently the new London Super Sewer is under construction. The Thames Tideway Tunnel mainly follows the route of the river with 24 access sites being excavated at depths of 60 metres. This is providing archaeologists with a wealth of detailed information across the whole site. It is reported at Vauxhall that there was a Bronze Age structure of wood possibly on an island with many artefacts.

We now come to the Thames Discovery Programme which initially ran for 3 years (1995 – 1998) and aimed to map the whole river using all the information on structures already recorded. They started with 3 staff and some volunteers. With so many changes in the river there are now 700 volunteers, known as FROGs, involved in the Foreshore Recording and Observation Programme. After 2 days training FROGs can take part in the 16 week projects that run in the summer months. They can also re-visit recorded structures and observe any changes. As you can imagine, a great range of artefacts can be found but Natalie, our speaker, was especially interested in recording finds of shopping trolleys!