

### Mudlarks: Victorian treasure hunters

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, mudlarking is a fascinating hobby. Today's mudlarks are amateur archaeologists who scour the foreshore, searching for items left over from London's long past. Some of these items are valuable but more often they are rich in social history, adding insight to our understanding of the London of past centuries.

It wasn't always like that. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mudlarking was a fight for survival.

### The Life of a Victorian Mudlark

'The mudlarks generally consist of boys and girls, varying in age from eight to fourteen or fifteen. For the most part they are ragged, and in a very filthy state... As soon as the tide is out they make their appearance, and remain until it comes in.

The following narrative was given to us by a mudlark we found on a float on the river Thames at Millwall, to the eastward end of the Ratcliffe Highway. He was an Irish lad of about thirteen years, dressed in a brown coat and vest, dirty greasy canvas trousers roughly-patched, striped shirt with the collar folded down, and a cap with a peak.'

*(Words of Henry Mayhew, social commentator, in London Labour and the London Poor, 1851)*



## ONE MUDLARK'S STORY

*About two year ago I left school, and commenced to work as a mudlark on the river, in the neighbourhood of Millwall, picking up pieces of coal and iron, and copper, and bits of canvas on the bed of the river, or of wood floating on the surface.*

*When the bargemen heave coals to be carried from their barge to the shore, pieces drop into the water among the mud, which we afterwards pick up. I have sometimes got so much at one time, that it filled my basket twice before the tide went back. I sell the coals to the poor people in the neighbourhood. I generally manage to get as many as sell for 8d.*

*We often find among the mud, pieces of iron such as rivets out of ships, and what is termed washers and other articles cast away or dropped in the iron-yards in building ships and barges. Pieces of rope are occasionally dropped or thrown overboard from the ships or barges and are found embedded in the mud. Rope is sold to marine store dealers at 1/2d a pound. We also pick up pieces of fat along the river-side. Sometimes we get four or five pounds and sell it at the marine stores; these are thrown overboard by the cooks in ships, and after floating on the river are arrived on shore.*

*There are generally thirteen or fourteen mudlarks about Limehouse in the summer, and about six boys steadily there in the winter, who are strong and hardy, and well able to endure the cold. Some of the mudlarks are orphan boys and have no home. In the summer time they often sleep in the barges or in the sheds or stables or cow houses, with their clothes on. Some of them have not a shirt, others have a tattered shirt which is never washed, as they have no father nor mother, nor friend to care for them. Some of these orphan lads have good warm clothing; others are ragged and dirty and covered with vermin.*

*The mudlarks generally have a pound of bread to breakfast, and a pint of beer when they can afford it. They often have no dinner, but when they are able they have a pound of bread and 1d worth of cheese. The boys who are out all night lie down to sleep when it is dark, and rise as early as daylight. When they have money they take a bed in a low lodging house for 2d or 3d a night.*

*The Thames police often come upon us and carry off our bags and baskets with the contents. The mudlarks are generally good swimmers They are often seized by the police in the middle of the river and thrown overboard, when they swim to shore. I have been chased twice by a police galley.'*

Henry Mayhew  
London Labour and the London Poor

## Questions:

- 1) According to Henry Mayhew, what was the age range of the London mudlarks? What is the minimum school leaving age now?
- 2) Name 5 items that the unnamed mudlark looks for on the foreshore.
- 3) How much does the mudlark expect to earn from selling coal to poor people?
- 4) What do ships' cooks throw overboard and who do the mudlarks sell it to? Can you guess what it was used for?
- 5) Where do the mudlarks with no home sleep in the summer?
- 6) Why would the number of mudlarks working at Limehouse drop in the winter months?
- 7) What do the mudlarks generally eat for breakfast?
- 8) Why do they drink beer instead of water?
- 9) When they can afford it, where do the mudlarks like to sleep? What do you think these places were like?
- 10) What do the police do with the mudlarks when they catch them?
- 11) What would the river have been like at this time?
- 12) Would you like to be a mudlark?

## Creative Writing

IMAGINE you are a Victorian mudlark. Write a diary of one day in your life, detailing how you live, what you find and what life is like on the foreshore. Do you find something amazing that you can sell to change your life? How do the people you meet treat you? How would you like your life to change?