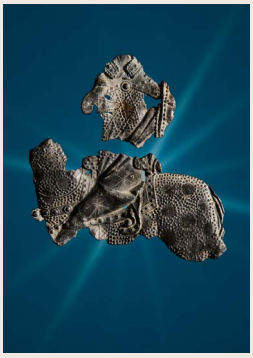






OUR GLOBAL LONDON







Written by Our Global London Heritage
trainees and edited by Amouraé Bhola-Chin,
Heritage Project Manager, Thames Festival Trust

2026



The *Our Global London* anthology reveals London's social, diasporic, and maritime histories through the lenses of 10 young people researching mudlarked objects shaped by trade, migration, and empire.

Thames Festival Trust

Made possible with Heritage Fund

Foreword

By Monika Buttling-Smith,
Mudlark Consultant

When Adrian Evans, Director of Thames Festival Trust, asked me to be the Mudlark Consultant for *Our Global London*, I was deeply honoured. As an experienced mudlark and co-founder of Hands on History, I am usually found up to my knees in mud on the foreshore, or cleaned-up and curating mudlarking exhibitions at iconic London landmarks, such as St. Paul's Cathedral, Guildhall, St. Martins-in-the-Fields, and London Museum Docklands. Our mudlarking finds are magical, historical, and always tell a story. That's why mudlarks enjoy researching artefacts and sharing this knowledge with the wider world. Adrian wanted me to introduce mudlarking practicalities to the Heritage trainees and become a bridge between the mudlarking parts of their research. I taught the trainees about foreshore safety and how tides, daylight, and weather affect our working conditions. They learned that anyone searching the Thames foreshore must hold a Port of London Authority Permit and record their finds with the Portable Antiquity Scheme. Then came the fun bit, when I guided the trainees on their very first visit to the foreshore. Here I demonstrated searching techniques and a range of typical foreshore finds, whilst my colleague Professor Claire Harris from Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) showed the trainees how a working port changed the natural physical environment of the Thames.

Finally, the trainees were ready to begin their own research journey. The day before, they had been given an annotated introduction to a range of pre-selected mudlarked finds and spent time with these artefacts, each choosing the ones that spoke to them personally, and which they felt would be most rewarding to research. When possible, the trainees also met the talented mudlark who found their chosen artefact. A very special day, indeed.

We are particularly grateful to the following mudlarks:



Previous page: Our Global London Heritage trainees with Heritage Project Manager (Amouraé Bhola-Chin), Mudlark Consultant (Monika Buttling-Smith), and Claire Harris on the Thames foreshore on the South Bank the day after their induction session, June 2026. Photograph courtesy of Adrian Evans.

Above: Hands on History mudlarks from left to right – Monika Buttling-Smith, Nicola White, Malcolm Russell, Caroline Nunneley, and Fran Sibthorpe on the foreshore on the South Bank, July 2026. Photograph courtesy of Hannah Smiles.

Monika Buttling-Smith: Hands on History Exhibition Organiser and Mudlark Consultant, Monika still likes to get muddy. Her favourite finds include a Roman oil lamp, a Saxon penny, a medieval Pilgrim's bell, to a Jacobean leather shoe and a pirate love token.

Dr. Alessio Checconi: A Palaeontologist mudlark with a keen eye for leather, bone, and ceramics, Alessio is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and a Creator for the National Gallery, linking mudlarked finds to their depictions in the gallery's paintings.

Tom Chivers: Author of *London Clay* (2021) and an ace mudlark, Tom is currently finishing his PhD in Mudlarking and was the Heritage Project Manager for the inaugural *Lost and Found* project (2025).

Caroline Nunneley: With an incredible eye for detail, Caroline has the best collection of medieval artefacts found on the River, including her mounted Thomas Becket pilgrim badge and her stunning Memento Mori bone rosary bead.

Malcolm Russell: Author of *Mudlark'd* (2022), Malcolm is a PhD researcher with a love for modern British history and a penchant for unusual finds, such as a 19th century Chinese opium pipe and 1920s Kiss-proof Midget lipstick.

Fran Sibthorpe: A social scientist and author of *Josh and Millee Go Mudlarking*, Fran is particularly expert at finding the little precious things, such as trade beads, fancy medieval veil-pins, lead tokens, and hammered coins.

Nicola White: "Queen of Pipes" and star of YouTube's popular 'Tideline Art' channel, Nicola has discovered phenomenal finds including the Kongolese Nkisi Kozo power figure and was the sole featured mudlark in last year's *Lost and Found* project.





Top: Heritage trainees with the Heritage Project Manager on the foreshore on the South Bank, July 2026. Photograph courtesy of Hannah Smiles.

Left: Heritage trainees Alisha-Iman Holness and Sam Loi Wong looking at Monika Buttling-Smith's personal collection, July 2026. Photograph courtesy of Shilonite Simon-Mathurin.

Introduction: River as Archive

By Amouraé Bhola-Chin
Heritage Project Manager,
Thames Festival Trust

Bodies of water don't constitute fixed, stable archives. Instead, their narratives ebb and flow, bending and twisting alongside, with, and against the conditions constantly reshaping them.[1] They collect in ways we can't; and they remember things some would hope to forget.[2] The Thames in particular, as an offshoot of the Atlantic, speaks to a long genealogy of weighted histories.

Whilst leading *Our Global London*, a traineeship-driven project guided by the entangled concepts of trade, migration, empire, and London's diasporic communities, I've been reintroduced to the river as a site of memory.[3] Through found objects collected along the foreshore by Hands on History mudlarks, the trainees and I continue to grapple with what archives are and who "heritage" is for. In other moments, we've tried to find a language good enough to unpick the complex legacies the Thames holds, with our site visits around the city reminding us that the contexts of the finds are constantly being *un*made and *re*made, depending on the beholder.

The artefacts themselves tell layered narratives shaped by trade and migration, whilst their journeys to London persist through the registers of empire, diaspora, and colonialism. They often forced us to speculate, as Georgia Sheridan in this anthology so beautifully depicts: especially relating to those whose lives, labour, routes, and roots have left temporal impressions on the London we know, though their voices continue to be overlooked. Where I can, I've encouraged each of the 10 trainees to avoid jargon and to be creative in what questions they've pursued, and how they've pursued them, bearing in mind our packed schedule and looming submission deadline.

The trainees' objective has not been to 'describe the world, or to represent it', but to respond to it from their own perspectives.[4] Thus, drawing on their varied backgrounds in art, archaeology, music, and photojournalism etc, the collection becomes a composite gathered through wayfinding, rather than a comprehensive whole.[5] In turn, their narratives span oceans, rivers, and continents, offering generationally important reflections, each inviting you to meander with them through the histories told by their selected mudlarked items.

Some found comfort in *ekphrasis*, while others leaned on critical fabulation and reflexivity.[5] Thus, we're able to delve into pilgrimages told through a meditation on psychogeography and family history; explore rivers as sacred sites and memorials; reimagine the transnational crossings of manufactured "goods", handcrafted jewellery, plants, ideologies, and the imperial exchanges enabling these; all whilst bearing witness to the sonic memory preserved by a Caribbean pub. As a result of this, the written pieces contained herein naturally give rise to important contemporary questions being asked of and by heritage practitioners (themselves emerging in the sector) regarding collecting practices, knowledge production, and the importance of whose voices we mean when we talk about heritage.

This journey would not have been possible without Adrian Evans, who has played such an important role in shaping *Our Global London* since its conception; nor without the mudlarks who have shared their objects and knowledge during the first phase of the project. If you know very little about mudlarking (like myself at the start of summer), each mudlark has offered a short insight into the day they came across their find(s), which acts as a precursor to each piece.

To the trainees: I'm so moved by you all, individually and as a cohort, and by the research you've produced in so little time. I have been

so inspired by the conversations we've had during the traineeship (between early June to mid July 2026) and I'm so grateful for the mentoring, public programme, and internships to come let alone our public launch. I'm thankful to: Sylvia Cordara for your creative approaches to archaeology; Alisha-Iman (Iman) Holness for your humour and dedication; Georgia Sheridan for your ability to thoughtfully archive community narratives; Sam Loi Wong for the confidence of your voice; Emmanuella Bamfo for your inventive responses to contested histories; Preesha Sanghrajka for searching out colonialism's many entanglements; Madeleine (Maddy) Beaumont-Grice for your many rabbit holes and presence; Simran Sehmbi for your continued contributions to the field of the western gaze; Nsiya Mangu for your unique drive; and Maya Wood for our conversations about grandparents – and food!

Let us all continue to ask the important questions of our watery archives.

Footnotes

1 'Water Remembers: Stepping Through the Undercurrent', *Dystopia Unmasked*, by Khadijah Carberry, Substack, 11 May 2025; Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 6-8.

2 Derek Walcott, 'The Sea Is History', *Poets.org*.

3 Toni Morrison, 'The Site of Memory', in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. by William Zinsser, 2nd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p. 99; Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, no. 26 (1989), 7-24.

4 Tim Ingold, 'Knowing from the Inside', in *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art, and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 7.

5 Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe*, 12.2 (2008), 1-14 (pp. 3-4, 11).







Far left: From left to right – Emmanuella Bamfo, Nsiya Mangu, Sam Loi Wong, and Amouraé Bhola-Chin doing a mapping activity at Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives, July 2026.

Left: Preesha Sanghrajka and Sylvia Cordara doing a reflective exhibition task during one of the cohort's site visits to The London Archives, June 2026.

Top: From left to right – Sam Loi Wong, Madeleine Beaumont-Grice, Alisha-Iman Holness, Sylvia Cordara, Amouraé Bhola-Chin, Nsiya Mangu, and Simran Sehmbi at the park during their site visit to Newham Heritage Service, July 2026.

All photographs on this page are courtesy of Shilonite Simon-Mathurin.



Courtesy of Hannah Smiles

Chinoiserie sherds

'I always turn over pottery I find in case there's an intriguing design on the other side. I'm so pleased I did with these pieces...'

Nicola White, Mudlark

Fragments of an Imagined China

By Alisha-Iman Holness

When I first picked these two pottery sherds from a selection of mudlarked objects, I was drawn to their decoration. Having studied Mandarin and Chinese history throughout secondary school, they immediately caught my eye. But even before I began researching them, it was clear that what they depicted was not China itself, but Britain's interpretation of it.

Although surviving only as fragments, they preserve glimpses of an imagined China: stylised figures, decorative landscapes, and motifs that once adorned everyday British ceramics. Both sherds were recovered from the Thames foreshore at Surrey Docks, an area shaped by centuries of maritime trade. One fragment is decorated in blue and white, while the other features a black transfer-printed design known as "Mongol huntsman": a popular chinoiserie pattern reproduced many times by British potteries.[1]

These small fragments tell a much larger story about Britain's relationship with China, London's global connections, and the movement of people, objects, and ideas across centuries.

The Thames: A River of Global Connections

For hundreds of years, the Thames was one of the world's busiest trading highways and the gateway through which goods from across the globe entered London. Chinese porcelain, silk, and tea travelled thousands of miles before arriving in the city's docks, transforming British consumer culture and shaping ideas of taste, sophistication, and luxury.[2]

The same river that carried these commodities also carried people, ideas, and cultural influences, with the Thames foreshore preserving fragments of everyday life from London's past. Pottery sherds like these were once ordinary household objects, used, broken, and discarded as rubbish. Others may have entered the Thames through nearby riverside potteries, where damaged or unfinished pieces were discarded during the manufacturing process. Over time, these fragments became part of the river's archaeology, preserving traces of the people who made, traded, and used them.[3]

Britain's Imagined China

By the eighteenth-century, China had become associated with luxury and refinement in Britain. Chinese porcelain was one of Europe's most

desirable imports, and owning it became a way for households to display wealth and taste.[4]

This fascination helped create chinoiserie: a style inspired by Chinese art and design that spread across ceramics, interiors, furniture, and architecture. As scholars have shown, Britain's growing trade with China fuelled a wider fascination with Chinese goods, imagery, and design. However, what Britain celebrated was often not China itself, but a conceived version moulded through European interpretation.[5]

British manufacturers would therefore make a point of adapting Chinese motifs. Landscapes, pagodas, and elegantly dressed Chinese figures would appear on household objects, allowing consumers to bring an exoticised vision of a distant civilisation into their homes.[2]

Britain's Pleasure Palace

Visiting the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, completed in 1823, brought these fragments to mind. Its elaborate interiors, filled with dragons, bamboo motifs, and imagined Chinese landscapes reveal how fashionable Chinese-inspired design had become in Britain. Its designers, Frederick Crace and Robert Jones, drew upon imported Chinese decorative goods already circulating throughout Britain, creating a fantasy of China shaped by European tastes and imagination rather than firsthand experience.



Although one imaginary belonged to a royal palace and the other to an everyday object, both reveal Britain's preoccupation with Chinese aesthetics and its desire to reframe them through its own tastes and political ambitions.

China comes to London

These pottery sherds would not exist if it wasn't for Britain's relationship with Chinese goods. Chinese porcelain, tea, and silk arrived in London through maritime trade routes via the Thames, embedding Chinese-influenced aesthetics within British life.[8]

As demand grew, British manufacturers began producing their own Chinese-inspired ceramics, including at Limehouse's porcelain factory, established between 1745 and 1748 and among Britain's earliest porcelain manufacturers.[9]

These fragments reflect London's position at the centre of global trade networks and Britain's imperialist fascination with representing distant cultures through domestic objects.

London's Chinese Communities

While imagined Chinese figures decorated British dining tables, real Chinese communities were beginning to establish themselves alongside London's docklands. Chinese sailors and workers connected to Britain's maritime networks were arriving in London from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with many settling around the docks. By the late nineteenth-century, a formalised Chinese community had developed around Limehouse, and by the early twentieth-century it was recognised as London's first Chinatown.[10]

The same maritime networks that brought porcelain, tea, and silk to Britain also brought people. However, the experiences of London's Chinese communities often contrasted sharply with the romanticised depictions of China found on British ceramics. Many migrants faced economic hardship and discrimination, while newspapers and popular culture frequently portrayed Limehouse through exaggerated



stories of crime and opium dens. Representations created a gap between Britain's conception of China and the lived realities of Chinese people in London's East End.[11]

Visiting the exhibition at St. Anne's Limehouse made me realise how often these communities are absent from wider narratives of London's history. We are familiar with Chinese porcelain, decorative arts, and imagined landscapes, but less familiar with the Chinese people who helped shape London's docklands and multicultural identities.

A Fragment of Global History

For me, these fragments demonstrate what makes mudlarking so meaningful: a broken piece of pottery can become a starting point for exploring global trade, migration, and cultural exchange. These objects allow us to uncover histories that are often overlooked, from Chinese sailors settling in Limehouse to the craftspeople, merchants, and consumers connected through Britain's relationship with China. They remind us that heritage is not confined to museum display cases or royal collections but exists all around us in the fragments left behind by ordinary people.

Though incomplete, these pottery sherds continue to speak of a city connected to a wider world through centuries of commerce, mobility, and shared histories. Their journey from a fantasised China to the Thames foreshore reminds us that the past is rarely preserved as a single or complete (hi)story. Instead, we piece it together from fragments: objects, memories, and traces left behind by those who came before us.

Footnotes

1. Pete Christmas, '1820s Pearlware Filled-in Transfers; Patterns and Attributions', Transferware Collectors Club Research Report (2010), 1-19 (pp. 2-3, 13).
2. David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 133-153, 17-20.
3. Stacey Pierson, *Collectors, Collections, and Museums: The Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain, 1560-1960* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 17-20.
4. John Schofield and Stephen Freeth, *London's Waterfront and its World, 1666-1800* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2023), pp. 100-1.
5. Clare Le Corbeiller and Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen, 'Chinese Export Porcelain', *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 60.3 (2003), 1-60 (p. 11).
6. Stacey Sloboda, *Chinoiserie: Commerce and Critical Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), pp. 226-9.
7. Oliver Impey, *Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 9-15.
8. 'Collection story–Brighton Pavilion: The Making of a Pleasure Palace', *Royal Collection Trust*.
9. David Porter, 'Monstrous Beauty: Eighteenth-Century Fashion and the Aesthetics of the Chinese Taste', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35.3 (2002), 395-411 (p. 404).
10. John Seed, 'Limehouse Blues: Looking for Chinatown in the London Docks, 1900–40', *History Workshop Journal*, 62.1 (2006), 58-85.
11. Annie Lai et al, 'Chinatown Annie: The East End Opium Trade 1920-35: The Story of a Woman Opium Dealer', *Oral History*, 14.1 (1986), 18-30; Sascha Auerbach, 'Margaret Tart, Lao She, and the Opium-Master's Wife: Race and Class among Chinese Commercial Immigrants in London and Australia, 1866-1929', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 55.1 (2013), 35-64 (pp. 59-64).

Left: Robert Jones, *Four Painted Wall Panels*, c.1810. From the Royal Pavilion, Brighton. © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 (Royal Collection Trust).

Top: Limehouse Chinatown, c.1920s. © The London Archives via Wikimedia Commons. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0).



Courtesy of Hannah Smiles

Hindu deities

'The trail of mud-filled *diya* lamps led me to Rama and Sita, reclining waist-deep in a rock-pool, adorned with garlands of jade beads and algae.'

Monika Buttling-Smith, Mudlark

The Thames as Memorial: Witnessing, Cleansing, Remembering

By Maya Wood

The Thames releases a multitude of objects to those who know to look. Mudlarks flock to the river as the tides pull back, bringing hidden histories into view. These items may be the first of their kind to be seen in centuries, or an addition to a vibrant existing collection. But what each has in common is that however old, new, rare, or routine, there is a story to be told: how it was used, who it belonged to, and how it came to lie in the river among the rest of them.

Sometimes these stories have spiritual significance, their connection to the river no accident: like these statues of Ganesh, and Rama and Sita. The imagery of these deities was immediately familiar to me. As I sit in my room, a statue of Ganapati (Ganesh) watches me from my chest of drawers. He is not alone. His companion statues keep watch in other rooms, keeping their posts around our home.

They come from my grandmother's house, brought with her from India. I was not raised a Hindu, nor do my statues hold religious connotations as they once did, but they are transformed into a personal memorial. Nonetheless, the statues discovered in the Thames cannot be separated from religion; nor are their journeys the same as mine: instead, they've taken a path away from people's homes, towards the river.

Hinduism is a global religion, with the majority of Hindus living in India. The many traditions, beliefs, and deities can also be shared with other religions. These statues are therefore connected to a diverse, global following, and their presence is a reminder of the diasporic communities that exist within London, a physical trace of the colonialism that shaped so much of the world today.

The impact of British colonial rule in India continued after its official end – including in the movement of people globally. My grandparents were no exception, moving to London in the 1950s-60s, a choice that allowed me to live in this very same city today.

However, Hinduism has a legacy far longer than the British Empire. It is considered to be one of the oldest religions in the world.[1] The imagery of these statues demonstrates a continuation of traditions going back in text as far as the fourteenth-century BCE, and perhaps earlier.[1] The similarity of the imagery throughout highlights the connection between ancient and modern, and the power of belief.

Smaller statues like these would likely be found at shrines within people's homes. Their very creation is the first act of worship, as images



of deities are often created using traditional craftsmanship and materials, where dedication to craft is an act of devotion itself.[2] Worship (*puja*) performed at a shrine may also involve the use of water in a variety of ways, through purifying oneself, cleansing the statues, or leaving sacred water as an offering.[3]

Even in name, Hinduism cannot be separated from the river. It developed from the Sanskrit word *sindhu*, meaning 'river', in connection to the Indus.[4] There are a number of sacred rivers in India, and for many Hindus in London, the Thames is sacred too, having been blessed in 1970 by a Hindu spiritual leader, Yogiji Maharaj.[5]

Different deities represent different aspects of belief. Ganesh, a god who removes obstacles, represents wisdom and intelligence, as well as new beginnings.[6] Images of him may be given as a gift at a new chapter in life, such as a wedding or new home. I don't know the occasions that brought each Ganapati to my grandparents' home, but I hope his presence once eased each milestone.

Rama and Sita represent a devoted marriage, and their story is explored in a Sanskrit epic, *the Ramayana*.[3] It is a tale I remember being told during my own childhood, loving Rama's adventure to rescue the kidnapped Sita, and his triumph over Ravana. A highlight of our Diwali, the festival of light, was lighting candles (*diyas*) to celebrate the homecoming of Rama and Sita.

How these statues end up in the river is often intentional. Old, or damaged statues are disposed of in seas or rivers.[3] After death, Hindus are usually cremated and their ashes may be scattered into a river, occasionally alongside statues from their home. The ideal river would be sacred, but local rivers often perform this role. Statues may also encounter the river during festivities. Rivers are prominent in Hindu festivals and pilgrimages as a holy place to carry out celebration.

Due to their sacred nature, the removal of religious objects from the Thames must be considered. Mudlarks too have concerns about the materials, especially resin, and the potential



strain on the river's ecology. As such, the mudlark of this object has consulted with temples, and ensures to treat each and every item with respect. (Materials and pollution are a continued discussion for Hindus too, and many believe Hindu reverence for nature is a reason to protect and clean rivers.)[7]

But all objects, whatever their material, hold meaning. They may belong to people now forgotten; they may be damaged or broken, but they are held indiscriminately by the river. It becomes a sacred space and provides comfort and peace in the face of both celebration and loss. It accepts what we let go of – intentionally, or accidentally. It bears witness to it all. My grandmother's statues never made their way to the river. But those that did continue to contribute to the collective memory space that is the Thames – a memorial to the individuals, to their beliefs, and to the global communities that have made London their home.

Left: Drawing of Rama, Lakshman, and Hanuman fighting Ravana, Late 19th Century.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Top: Earthen lamps, *diyas*, from Diwali celebrations. Part of London Museum Docklands' *Secrets of the Thames* exhibition (2025-26), featuring mudlarked objects.
© London Museum.

Footnotes

1. Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 3rd edn (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), p. 1.
2. The London Archives (TLA), ILEA/S/LR, The Living Arts of India: Details about the Work of Nine Indian Craftspeople, 1985.
3. Jeaneane Fowler, *Hinduism: Beliefs and Practices* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), (pp. 89, 93-4).
4. Asko Parpola, *The Roots of Hinduism: The Early Aryans and the Indus Civilisation* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 4.
5. 'Yogiji Maharaj in the UK: 50th Anniversary Celebrations, UK & Europe', *BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha*, 14 June 2020; Kate Sumnall, 'The Sacred River Thames', *London Museum*, 17 October 2025.
6. 'Lord Shree Ganesha', *Shree Ganesh*.
7. Vasudha Narayanan, 'Water, Wood, and Wisdom: Ecological Perspectives from the Hindu Traditions', *Daedalus*, 130.4 (2001), 179-206; Deborah De Koning, 'Green Ganesha Chaturthi: The Ritualising and Materialising of a Green Hindu Identity and the Emerging of an Alternative Representation of Ganesha', *Religions*, 14.1 (2022), 1-24.



Courtesy of Hannah Smiles

Pilgrim badge

'Found on a cold, drizzly foreshore in September 2019, this was my first find to move me to tears and remains the most precious in my collection.'

Caroline Nunneley, Mudlark

The Pilgrim's Journey/s: Water and Movement as a Vessel for Hope

By Sylvia Cordara

The pilgrim's badge, just folded, slipped from someone's fingers without reluctance. For a moment, it hung between two worlds, still belonging to air, not yet accepted by water, and then the river folded over it gently.

It rests in the riverbed, stirred by the tides for 700 years. Eventually, weakened by that last folding, it fragments and loses parts of itself, almost forever…

Water often reveals itself as a physical medium for crossing spiritual thresholds. The river Styx provided passage for souls to the underworld. The Ganges cleanses sins from the living and liberates souls of the dead. Baptism washes away sin and marks the passage to new spiritual life.

For this badge, dropped into the Thames as a gesture of finality, the river acted as a threshold space that allowed its bearer access to the divine in that moment.

A pilgrim's badge was traditionally purchased from the sacred site upon completion of the pilgrimage. It was official merchandise, cast in the church's workshops, and was touched by the saint's tomb or shrine, imbuing its lead and pewter body with grace, such that it became sacred matter itself.[1]

Many have speculated why medieval pilgrims folded and dropped badges into rivers on their return. Chloé M. Pelletier refers to the practice as the creation of a 'communal deposit of sacred matter'.[2] Water disseminated the badge's sacred content, dispersing it through fast-flowing currents, infusing the environment with grace.[1]

These objects were ordinary people's access to treatment when sick, a votive offering as a prayer, a remedy for failed crops; they were a way to effect change, to enact hopes, and banish fears.[2]

Sacred sites of pilgrimage were often centred on springs, rivers, or wells, where water became the medium of healing.[3]

However, water's significance reaches deeper than any single religious tradition. There seems to be an enduring impulse, or a profound human attraction to flowing water as a source of cleansing, renewal, and hope.

When the Protestant Reformation dissolved Catholic shrines and scattered the relics of the saints, the spring waters continued to flow. Across Protestant Europe, places of pilgrimage became spas.[4] Waters that had once drawn the faithful continued drawing the sick, and

pilgrims became patients. Bodies were lowered into the same waters where the holy dipping of heads had been carried out generations earlier.

The destination changed less than the language used to describe it. Sacred healing became therapeutic mineral content: and faith became medicine.

The ritual of seeking, healing, and blessing in flowing water is ancient, but still persists.

When I was little, my grandmother took me to a church in Greece. I could just see over the lip of the basin where a trickle of holy water ran. We drank from it together, and the water carried into us the saint's sacred blessing. This was her pilgrimage to Agios Nektarios, from Australia to Aegina, to give thanks to the saint to whom she had prayed to save my uncle's life when he was dying as a baby.

Her surname, Hadji Savva, carries the memory of pilgrimage. The honorific 'Hadji' would have been bestowed upon a distant ancestor of hers named Savva after completing a sacred religious journey.

These same journeys of faith recur across generations.

My grandmother, migrating from Greece to Australia alone in her 20s, had crossed a sea searching for a future. Water provided the passage for a pilgrimage of hope. Then, 50 years later, it was crossed again, carrying her gratitude back to the shrine of the saint, drinking the holy waters which had once been a vessel of hope for healing her child.

We are not sure what prayer went with this pilgrim's badge as it was dropped into the river. Perhaps it was a similar plea for a loved one's health.

As it lay in the mud beneath the river's tidal flows, London's many histories unfolded overhead: merchants, pilgrims, refugees.

Perhaps among them were pilgrims crossing the Thames for the southern ports, bound for the long and uncertain roads to Jerusalem, Rome, or Santiago de Compostela.

Medieval pilgrimage was rarely a gentle undertaking. When travelling far or crossing seas, disease, hunger, exposure, and violence were a given. Most pilgrims made their wills before departing, uncertain of their return.[5] These journeys required the same qualities demanded of migrants who cross borders today – resilience and endurance: the willingness to step into uncertainty in the belief that life might somehow become different.

The badge depicts Thomas Becket at a key moment in his own journey: his return home in 1170 after six years of exile.[6] Appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, Becket had come into conflict with Henry II over the Crown's encroachment on the Church. Twenty-eight days after his return, he was murdered by four of the king's knights. Three years later, he was canonised by the Pope.[6] His shrine became one of medieval Europe's most important destinations for pilgrimage.

On the fragmented badge we see him in earthly splendour, sitting atop his dappled horse, riding to Canterbury (and to his death).



Before releasing it into the river, the returned pilgrim scratched her initial onto the reverse and etched two tiny stars onto Becket's leg. The badge – cast in the thousands from the same mould – becomes singular: its message to the divine signed, 'A'. [7]

Personalisation here is more than decoration. It is an act of resistance against anonymity, a way to assert that identity can survive movement, and that the self can remain legible even when separated from home. Long after the pilgrim's name has vanished from history, these two stars continue to insist that this object once belonged intimately to someone.

Migration, pilgrimage, exile: each demand that a life be compressed into what can be carried. A child's toy. A folded letter. The fewer the possessions, the more identity is invested in each one. Objects accumulate meanings beyond their material form, becoming vessels of memory, continuity, and selfhood.

After 700 years held in a tidal conversation between river and moon, in 2019, a fragment of the badge gently emerges at the surface and into the hands of Caroline, who in 2022 finds another part. She continues to search for the rest today.

Left: Complete Thomas Becket pilgrim badge, c. 13th Century. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International.

Footnotes

1 Diana Webb, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), p. 125.

2 Chloé M. Pelletier, 'The Pilgrim's Badge: Water, Air, and the Flow of Sacred Matter', *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, 8.2 (2017), 240-253 (pp. 249-250).

3 Kathryn R. Barush, *Imaging Pilgrimage: Art as Embodied Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 1-2, 5, 7; Pelletier, 'The Pilgrim's Badge', pp. 242-4; 'Britain's Holy Places', *British Pilgrimage Trust*, 2025.

4 Alexandra Walsham, 'Reforming the Waters: Holy Wells and Healing Springs in Protestant England', *Studies in Church History Subsidia*, 12 (1999), 227-255 (pp. 246-7).

5 'Medieval Pilgrimage', *In Our Time*, presented by Melvyn Bragg, BBC Radio 4, 18 February 2021, 18:20-18:42.

6 Lloyd de Beer and Naomi Speakman, 'Thomas Becket: The Murder that Shook the Middle Ages', *British Museum*, 28 December 2019.

7 Thomas A. Bredehoft, 'Literacy without Letters: Pilgrim Badges and Late Medieval Literate Ideology', *Viator*, 37.1 (2006), 433-445 (p. 435).



Courtesy of Hannah Smiles

Bartmann jug piece

'I gasped when those eyes stared back at me from the mud, as Bellarmine fragments are among my favourite finds because every hand-sculpted face reflects its maker's creativity.'

Alessio Checconi, Mudlark

Face of Clay and Belly of Wine: The Travels of a Bartmann Bottle

By Madeleine Beaumont-Grice

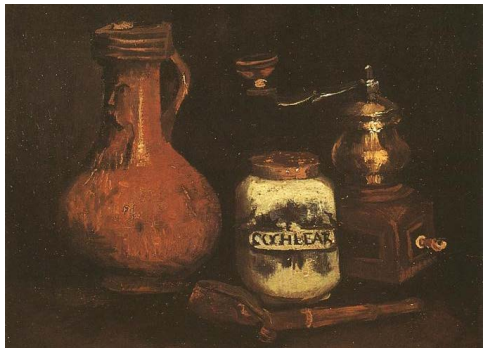
Beady eyes, somewhat offset; spindle nose affixed to an untrammelled beard cruelly curtailed by an unfortunate crack; and a mouth skewered in awkward grimace. When introduced to the Bartmann neck, once of a Bartmann bottle, or jug, I just liked his little old face. What has he seen?

Bartmann bottles (or jugs) were popular decorated stoneware vessels from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: salt-glazing assuring the impermeability that made them such a commodity. They had two primary functions in both domestic and commercial settings: small-mouthed bottles were used as drinking vessels, whilst larger jugs were used for the transportation of other wares or the decanting of wine. They were mass-produced, though their fabrication was by hand, with the mind attached to those hands probably having little time to wonder if the little faces in the kiln would one day rock up in the Thames.

These faces, or *sprigs*, were created by pushing clay onto carved moulds, then slipped onto the neck of the jug before it was fired.[1] The design of the face is generally regarded as the potter's artistic fancy, though sometimes additional meaning can be read into the placement of berries or corn into the mouth.[2] Our Bartmann, sadly, remains unfed, perhaps explaining his somewhat urgent demeanour. He seems happy enough, though.

Each face is the potter's figuration of the folkloric Wild Man character.[2] The anthropomorphised being of the Wild Man oscillates in his cultural guises between benevolent, mischievous, and as an omen of the irreligious unknown. The Wild Man was particularly recurrent in German cultural productions. Lauded throughout Europe during the Middle Ages, German stoneware was traded voraciously, with production centres dotted around the Rhineland; convenient, then, was the utility of the Bartmann jugs in transporting Rhenish wine. Cologne, through which the Rhine flows, became a noted site of Bartmann production, though I think our little fella from the foreshore hails from Frechen. A simple jaunt west of Cologne, Frechen had been producing Bartmann bottles from at least the mid sixteenth-century.[3] The mottled brown slip and dark grey fabric – seen in the wear of his face and jagged edges – are typical of Frechen stoneware.[3]

Upon absconding from Cologne, the Rhine winds would travel along and out of Germany into the Netherlands (the beneficiary of tributaries, of canals, and the benefactor of



distributaries: and again, of canals), seeping into wetlands and, at Dordrecht, entangling in a web of waterways that get spat out into the North Sea. Such a journey was a trade route of the Hanseatic League from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries and I think the Bartmann neck, at that point still attached to the rest, caught a ride.

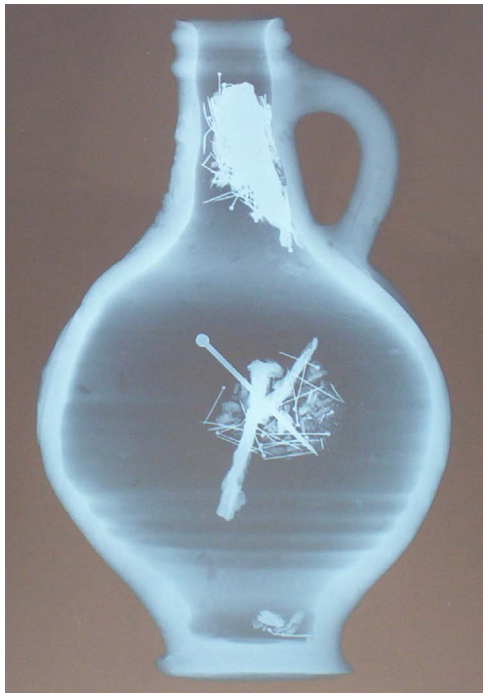
'The Steleyard (as they terme it) a place for marchants of Almaine.'[4] So goes Stow's 1603 account of the Hanseatic kontor in London, granted to them in 1259.[4] Operating relatively autonomously, Steelyard residents, largely German though with a small Dutch presence, 'dwelt in almost monastic seclusion.'[5] Along with this guildhall on the banks of the Thames, the Hanse were assured favourable trading and taxation conditions by English monarchs and utilised the protection offered by a confederated structure in establishing a noted trading eminence.

However, this apogee, like most, faded and by the seventeenth-century, the Steelyard – its political renown depleted – was cast in popular culture as somewhere to cop some cheap Rhenish wine at the on-site winehouse, served handily in Bartmann bottles.[6] 1666 saw the Great Fire, which in turn saw the Steelyard become ashen residue, with the League meandering towards similar disintegration.

Yet the cross-cultural and commercial connections epitomised by the Hanse at the Steelyard did not cease. Instead, they remained a prominent component in the heritage of London's docklands: with our Bartmann neck having woven himself into the strands of this transient history.

European "discovery" of the Americas and subsequent reconfigurations of trade networks were a further blow dealt to the waning League; and the Bartmann materialises here, too.[5] Uncovered around early English colonial sites of North America, especially Jamestown, Bartmanns are emblematic of the tendrils wrought across the Atlantic in this colonial enterprise – their mass propagation linked to a specific moment of imperial expansion. The recovery of ships which succumbed to the sea in early seventeenth-century colonial exploits will often reveal these knowing faces, attached to well-preserved jugs, nestled below for centuries amidst the wreckage.[7]

Notwithstanding seafaring, the Bartmann continued to be repurposed across Britain in ritualised protection against bewitchments. In such employment as witch bottles, Bartmanns were reconstituted vessels for: as in one 1682 Old Bailey case, one was filled with 'a quart of [the bewitched's] water, the pairing of her nails, some of her Hair, and such like.'[8] The globular shape of the Bartmann approximated a bladder (the ne'er-d-well witch striking with strangury), though in some cases the heart was the intended site of affliction.[9]



The secondary lives of these Bartmanns gesture to their apotropaic significance in the everyday lives of those who encountered them and shifted their function. Such a shifted function superseded the original intentions of their use, their keenly crafted form allowing for this transfiguration in an intersection of permanence and transformation.

The transformative property of our particular Bartmann is found in the fragmentary glimpses he offers into the past, encompassing myriad potentialities far surpassing his physical tangibility, as lovely as he may be. Did the Bartmann fail to make the journey in the first place, his face of clay and belly of wine jostled overboard from a ship Steelyard-bound? Did he become the favoured cup of a dockland inhabitant, or a one-and-done foible of a drunken reveller? Was he ever trusted in a cunning ritual, filled with urine and fingernails? And how long did he spend in the foam and the fray (a wraith sifting through grey waters and anaerobic mud) – the only place we can say with certainty he ever was? His function shifts again in this final wrenching from temporal finitude: those beady eyes not so enrapturing because of not just one actuality, but the many lives and journeys contained within that little old face.

Top left: Vincent Van Gogh, *Still Life with Coffee Mill, Pipe Case, and Jug*, 1884, oil on panel, Kröller-Müller Museum, Netherlands. Like the Wild Man on their necks, Bartmanns became embedded in contemporary media, notable through their appearance in still-life paintings. This later example testifies to their longevity.

Left: Alex Wright, *The Bellarmine and other German Stoneware Book III*, plate 21. Radiograph of a Bartmann jug which was used as a witch bottle.

Footnotes

1 Lisa Robson, 'Bellarmine or Bartmann Jugs from a Ceramic Maker's Point of View', *MAA Digital Lab*, 27 June 2023.

2 Charles E. Orser Jr, 'Rethinking "Bellarmine" Contexts in 17th Century England', *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 53.1 (2019), 88-101 (pp. 89, 93-4).

3 Christoph Keller, 'The Production of Bartmann Jugs in 16th Century Rhineland and Beyond', in *From the Wheel to the World*, ed. by Christoph Keller et al. Conference proceedings of workshop, 'Rhenish stoneware' (2022/2024), pp. 61-2.

4 John Stow, 'Dowesgate', in *A Survey of London: Reprinted from the Text of 1603*, ed. by Charles L. Kingsford, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), p. 232.

5 Philip Norman, 'Notes on the Later History of the Steelyard in London', *Archaeologica*, 61.2 (1909), 389-426 (p. 390).

6 Charles L. Kingsford, 'Notes', in *A Survey of London*, p. 320.

7 'Window on the World III', *Illustrated London News*, 14 March 1959, p. 429.

8 'Trial of Jane Kent (t16820601a-11)', June 1682, *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*.

9 Owen Davies and Timothy Easton, 'Cunning-Folk and the Production of Magical Artefacts', in *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery, and Witchcraft in Christian Britain*, ed. by Ronald Hutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015/16), p. 211.



Courtesy of Hannah Smiles

Glass beads

'As I walked along the Rivers' edge, I noticed a tiny blue object tumbling in the waves. Amazingly, it was a rare 17th century "Nueva Cadiz" trade bead!'

Fran Sibthorpe, Mudlark

The Names They Gave Me: A Bead's Testament

By Emmanuella Bamfo

Worn by both men and women across a multitude of ethnic groups from the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) through to Mali, Nigeria, and the Kingdom of Kongo – a list not exhaustive, neither mutually exclusive. Not only have I laid myself bare against the skin of chiefs and kings, but I've also left my owner's home to accompany the love he has for his bride-to-be. An emblem of spiritual protection while I remain white. In this form I ward off evil spirits as I am wrapped around and worn on the desired body part of one's neck, wrist, waist and: shall I go on…?

Many have whispered, speculated, pondered, and even written about my origins. *'No one knows exactly where this jewel of West Africa was made. It is dug up from the earth, somewhere in the interior.'*[1] They say I can be found only in the ground or in water, and that where my presence is, there you will also find gold.[2] This is the narrative my people from the Gold Coast bestow upon European travellers who stare upon me, fascination oozing through their eyes, mind, and body alike. They offer this explanation of my existence found in the ground they walk upon and the streams that flow from the riverbed, but I wonder if this is a story formed out of preservation? A clandestine pact to protect a small but mighty motif of their land and traditions. Handed down from generation to generation, worn in royal courts as adornments, and even on the battlefields as amulets. I am a protector of the land and its people, but I wonder if this story is my peoples' way of feeling indebted to protect me? Protect me from what, you may ask? Protection from the prying gaze of the white man who does not and may never wholly understand me further beyond anything more than what meets the eye. Or perhaps it is a righteous attempt – one others may refer to as selfish, to prevent me from becoming another instrument in the monopoly of foreign hands. For they did not merely enter our markets; they sought to reshape the meanings I carried, to influence what was deemed valuable, what could be exchanged, and whose terms of value would come to dominate.

Aggrey, *Aggri*, *Akori*, *Accori*, and *Cori* are among the names of which I have been called by. Each bears the imprint of translation. As I passed through foreign hands, so too did my name, reshaped by European tongues into new spellings and pronunciations. Grouping our glass bead variations under a single name, they ultimately denied the histories, places, and meanings held within each bead, making us easier to trade, classify, and possess.



Left: Venetian bead book and catalogue of the collection of glass formed by Felix Slade, c. 1800-1860.
© The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

Right: Unknown maker, Beer jug: *COMMERCE REVIVED*, c. Late 18th Century.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Trade beads they called us. Gorgeous and rich in colours varying from blue, yellow, red, white, green, and black, often with intricate designs. They studied every inch of us from our design down to our cut, producing and selling imitations along the Gulf of Guinea.[3] They produced us in places like Italy, Bohemia, Britain, and the Netherlands, with the Venetian *trade bead* becoming popular for its high-quality bead production. To the *trade bead* collective, chevron and millefiori beads were added, distributed, and sold all around the world. We were crafted in the furnaces of Murano designed to satisfy African eyes. These beads marked more than an expansion of our family; it revealed a clear understanding that if foreign hands could not manufacture our meanings, they could manufacture our likeness.

To foreign eyes we became a symbol through which Africa itself could be imagined. Not only were we catalogued on sample cards for traders to identify and exchange, but we became visual allegories in their arts and enlisted into the visual language of empire. In a scene titled *Commerce Revived*, I appear in the hands of a kneeling Africa being offered in submission before Britannia (figure 2). The title speaks of commerce, yet the image portrays one of conquest. One where Britain's accumulation of wealth implies a benevolent exchange of trade.

Slave bead. A name I carried with such heavy weight. Not only did they trade us for gold, ivory, and palm oil; we were also bartered in exchange for human life. From the sixteenth-century through to the nineteenth-century, I passed through hands that measured my worth against the bodies of men, women, and children forced to journey across the Atlantic aboard slave ships. Torn from their families and homelands, branded with hot iron, and denied their names. I was the price in which they were forced to sacrifice their lives.

You may be happy to hear that the weight I carried around so heavily by my name *Slave bead* became lighter and lighter each time I was worn by those enslaved, 'twined round their Arms, Necks, and Legs'.[4] Or when I was brought out for special occasions where enslaved women in Jamaica were 'decked out with a profusion of beads and corals'.[4] I found pride upon hearing that they held onto me. Not just in life, but in death too. They held dear their ancestral practice of beads accompanying the departed in burial. It then became clear to me that glass beads could be produced in Murano, but its value could not be forged in its furnaces.

My immortality lies not in my glass, but in my continual rediscovery. I have been traded and catalogued, buried beneath the earth, transported from ocean to ocean, and now found upon the Thames foreshore. Each hand that has held me has assigned me another name, another value, another story. Currency. Commodity. *Slave bead*. Yet I have always been more than the meanings imposed upon me. If you remember anything of me, let it not be what others have called me, nor what they believed I was worth. Listen, instead, to the lives and memories I accompanied: the histories I have witnessed. Do not merely look at me as an object of beauty, but pause and listen. For centuries others have spoken for me; this is the first time I have been allowed to speak for myself.

Footnotes

1 Frederick Boyle, *Through Fanteeland to Coomassie: A Diary of the Ashantee Expedition* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1874), p. 386.

2 John D. Fage, 'More about Aggrey and Akori Beads', in *Le sol, la parole et l'écrit: 2000 ans d'histoire Africaine: Mélanges en hommage à Raymond Mauny*, Tome I (Paris: Société Française d'histoire d'outre-mer, 1981), pp. 205-211, 210.

3 'Venetian Imitation of a Bodom Bead', *The Corning Museum of Glass*.

4 'From Culture to Currency: Glass Beads and The Transatlantic Slave Trade', *V&A*, 1 May 2026.



Courtesy of Hannah Smiles

Paterson's Camp Coffee bottle

'Whilst mudlarking in West London, I spotted a glass neck protruding up through the sand. Tugging at it revealed a complete bottle.'

Malcolm Russell, Mudlark

Colonial Consumerism: The Use of Racialised Imagery to bring Empire into the Home

By Simran Sehmbi

This glass bottle is a Paterson's Camp Coffee and Chicory Essence bottle, dating from around 1906-1914. The bottle was produced in Glasgow for R. Paterson & Son(s), which grew to fame between 1874 and 1885 when it created the world's first instant coffee.[1] The reasons for the development of instant coffee were believed to have stemmed from a request by the Gordon Highlanders to Campbell Paterson to make coffee in a way that the army could easily use during field campaigns in India, as the traditional way of making coffee was considered far too complex within a military field kitchen.[1] Camp coffee thus provided a much easier method. However, this isn't what I'm interested in, but rather the label that was placed on the bottle.

The original label depicted a Sikh servant carrying a tray of coffee to a seated Gordon Highlander, which raises questions around how colonial ideas are represented through the packaging of what we'd view as everyday household items. I wanted to explore this concept further and look at how the ordinary person could engage in colonial practices without having to physically be on colonised land. Through my research, I hope to delve into the idea of the 'colonial consumer' and how racialised depictions of colonised people from Asia and Africa were placed on the advertisements and packaging of mundane objects.[2] It is through this that we can explore how empire crept into the home and how invisible power dynamics have been showcased through normalised habits.[2] In this case, this inquiry can lead us to understand the types of racial myths and stereotypes that were imposed upon Sikhs during the British rule of India, who were bound to different representations, one being the myth of the "martial races".

As a term coined by the British, it reflects a military recruitment plan that supported the progression of imperialism.[3] "Martial races" would include Sikhs, as well as Pathans and Dogras.[3] Notions around the label also stemmed from forms of scientific racism. In her article exploring martial race theory, Aneesha Dutta explores how the West understood race through ideas of biological determinism, highlighting how the 'martial race marked certain ethnic communities as inherently disposed towards military occupations by virtue of their physique, blood, and other genetic attributes.'[3]

Sikhs were also often bound to another racialised image, that of the "noble savage". This was often defined as indigenous people

untouched by civilisation, who were in popular culture often romanticised as possessing traits of purity and innate goodness. These definitions of the "noble savage" were often used by European colonisers to ensure colonised groups understood themselves through the lenses of their oppressors. If European powers could somehow convince the oppressed that identities like the "martial race" and "noble savage" were true of their authentic selves, they could ensure that such groups would behave in the ways they wanted them to.[4]

In her article exploring the "noble savage" trope, Madeline Pare argues how 'for indigenous peoples past and present, performing "authenticity" means conforming to oppressive stereotypes like the "Noble Savage"'.[4] The British would use a similar method to convince Sikhs that acting loyally and submissive to their rule was simply them conforming to their "authentic" nature. Such racial ideals of Sikhs were ultimately used by the British as tools for their wider imperialistic motives.[3]

When we begin to think about how theories of the martial race and noble savage were visually manifesting themselves on the packaging of everyday items at the turn of the nineteenth-century, then we can understand how racial myths have been imposed onto colonised groups by imperial nations. And we can make links between military power and consumerism, which worked hand-in-hand for nineteenth and twentieth-century European empires, since colonial trade was significant for the economic boom of empire as colonial economies were driven by products like tea, coffee, sugar, cocoa, and cotton. By the late 1800s, these commodities had become normalised within European homes, and it was through imperial advertising that trade could be masked as elegance rather than exploitation and extraction.





It is also important to discuss the exoticism that has been prevalent within imperial advertising, promoted through the use of bright colours, picturesque and tropical landscapes, and racialised figures 'in poses of service or wonder'.[2] These depictions would connect to Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*, which analysed the distinction between the imaginary of the untouched "East" and the West. As Shepley notes, he highlighted how "the Orient" was often presented as 'timeless, and subordinate', and that through imperialism the West often displayed its need to "civilise", which overlooked the realities of oppression inflicted upon local groups.[2] It was through advertising campaigns that stereotypes were popularised via ideas of the "unknown East": 'the adventure of the tropics and the purity of untouched nature'.[2] Moreover, there had been a long growing belief that the West was the holder of moral supremacy, which promoted ideas of otherness and a constant need to exhibit Western superiority: as seen in the World's Fairs, which presented non-Western nations largely as curiosities to be gazed upon.[5]

Racialisation is important in grasping how Western powers perceived the "East" and the Global South more generally through the use of language and imagery. Understanding racialisation, as James Busumtwi-Sam and Rina Kashyap argue in their article examining critical race studies, is 'understanding the role of power by interrogating "who defines whom and for what purpose"'.[6] Colonial advertising had a significant impact on how the people of the West understood people from colonised lands. Such imaginaries regarding Black and Brown people have led to prevailing racial myths and stereotypes perpetuating the modern world today, and we need to be conscious of these narratives in order to address the damaging effects this has on marginalised groups. Once these are confronted and challenged, we can begin to showcase representation in ways that move away from focusing on racialised depictions. We can then provide opportunities for those subject to these tropes to lead conversations around the shaping of perpetual myths concerning colonised people.

Footnotes

1. 'About Us!', *CAMP*, n.d; 'Embossed Green Glass Bottle, Paterson's 'Ess Camp Coffee & Chicory'', *People's Collection Wales*.
2. Nick Shepley, 'The Colonial Consumer: Advertising and Empire in the Early 20th Century', *Explaining History Podcast*, 6 October 2025.
3. Aneesha Dutta, 'Martial Race Theory and Colonial Military Recruitment: Constructing Racial Hierarchies in British India', *Aksharasurya*, 6.3 (2025), 107-115 (pp. 108, 107, 110).
4. Madeline Pare, 'Reclaiming Imposed Identity: Resistance in the Tropes of the "Noble Savage" and the *"Authentic Indian"*', *The Material Merge*, 3.1 (2025), 94-103 (pp. 95-6, 101).
5. Cory Austin Knudson, 'Whose World's Fair? Advertisements in Print Collection 47', *Unique at Penn*, 19 February 2020.
6. James Busumtwi-Sam and Rina Kashyap, 'Racialised Representations and the Global South: Insights from Critical Race Studies', *India Quarterly*, 81.2 (2025), 158-180 (p. 161).

Far left: Original Paterson's Camp Coffee and Chicory Essence Bottle label.

Left: Jan Rinke, Dutch Colonial Coffee Advert, c.1900-1922.



Courtesy of Hannah Smiles

Porcelain doll

'I wonder if the dolly heard my wellies crunching along the foreshore gravel? Because the only bit of her poking out was one pink ear!'

Monika Buttling-Smith, Mudlark

On Domesticating and Defining the "China Doll": The Real and the Uncanny

By Sam Loi Wong

This object is technically a bisque doll head rather than a "china doll". Here, however, the term refers broadly to porcelain dolls, situating the object within porcelain's transformation from imported Chinese luxury to a European-manufactured domestic commodity, and within the changing meanings later gathered around the "china doll".

From Porcelain Trade to the Production of "White Gold"

Whilst large quantities of porcelain reached Europe in the sixteenth-century from China, first through Portuguese merchants and later through the Dutch East India Company and other traders, its composition remained subject to speculation.[1] Duarte Barbosa reported that it was made from 'shells of fish ground fine, from eggshells and the white of eggs and other materials.'[2] However factually inaccurate, the account reveals how the foreign material could be imagined as an alchemical or mineral substance rather than ordinary pottery.

Scarcity, reliance on East Asian trade, and the mystery surrounding porcelain's composition fuelled a collecting craze among the European nobility. Augustus II, Elector of Saxony, described his insatiable appetite for collecting porcelain as *la maladie de porcelaine*.[3] Johann Friedrich Böttger, an alchemist claiming he could transmute base metals into gold, attracted the Elector's attention and was confined to continue his experiments. Unable to produce gold, Böttger instead turned towards porcelain – Europe's *white* gold. With the scientist Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus, he uncovered the arcanum for hard-paste porcelain by 1708. In 1710, Augustus established the royal porcelain manufactory at Meissen, marking the beginning of commercial porcelain production in Europe.[4]

Porcelain Dolls in the Victorian Home

In the 1830s, doll-makers in Thuringia began shifting from the manufacture of wooden dolls to the production of china shoulder heads.[5] Although the region's porcelain and toy industries partly explain the adoption of the material, this choice may not have been neutral.[6] In *Smithsonian Magazine*, Maria Teresa Hart argues that porcelain was valued partly for its whiteness, echoing the Victorian beauty standard of a "porcelain complexion", in which pale skin was associated with leisure and freedom from outdoor labour. Porcelain therefore provided doll-makers with a material surface through which a classed and racialised ideal of white femininity could be reproduced.[7]



During the late nineteenth-century, a new type of porcelain became more widely used in the doll industry. Bisque was an unglazed porcelain that could be tinted to produce softer, more life-like complexions. Mass production widened the market for porcelain dolls, but it did not make them equally accessible. Elaborately dressed bisque dolls, supplied with wigs often made from human hair purchased from working-class girls, remained closely associated with affluent and middle-class European households.[7] For girls in these families, dolls could serve as instruments through which domesticity, dress, and future womanhood were rehearsed.

This contrasted with the experiences of many working-class children, some of whom entered paid employment within the rapidly industrialising economy that supported the manufacture and circulation of such commodities.[8] Nevertheless, doll culture was not exclusive to the wealthy. Working-class children participated through cheaper, second-hand, or makeshift dolls made from rags, stockings, pegs, or wood. Their making, repairing, and naming show that doll-play extended across social classes, regardless of material or monetary value.[8]

The doll head found by Monika can be situated within the expanding nineteenth-century market for mass-produced dolls. Its original glass sleep eyes are missing, making it impossible to determine whether they were blue, brown, or another colour, while the empty sockets expose the hollow interior of the head. With no moulded hair and an open crown, the head may have been designed to wear a removable wig. The modelling of the face, together with the painted brows and lips, resembles dolls produced by major Thuringian manufacturers such as Simon & Halbig and Heinrich Handwerck.

Regardless, the absence of a visible maker's mark prevents any firm attribution. The head terminates in a shoulder plate intended to be mounted onto a separate stuffed cloth, composition, or leather body. Reddish-brown patches cover much of the surviving surface, possibly iron-oxide deposits derived from both the Thames's natural sediments and industrial debris. The staining therefore suggests that this small face lay buried in the foreshore for many decades, perhaps more than a century.

The Uncanny Afterlife of the "China Doll"

Porcelain's fragility limited its suitability for everyday play. As cheaper, lighter, and more durable materials such as composition and plastic became common, china dolls gradually shifted from ordinary playthings into the sphere of antiques and adult collecting.[9] Yet its decline did not erase the meanings that had accumulated around it. If anything, those meanings became increasingly difficult to contain.

In George du Maurier's 'Chinamania' cartoons, "China" slips between incompatible forms. It names a country, but also the alluring yet brittle porcelain displayed on Victorian mantelpieces and inside cabinets as an object of taste and possession. At the same time, Victorian discourse represented China as sick, stagnant, and degenerating. Desire becomes irrational; collecting becomes mania.[10] I begin to lose track of what the word signifies: China, the place? China, the material? (Porcelain, the foundation shade?) China, the possession? China, the sickness? China White, the opioid? China doll, the stereotype.

Perhaps this uncertainty is where the uncanniness begins. The familiar word remains before me, but its associations multiply into a disquieting clamour. The doll undergoes the same disturbance. It is a face *and* a hollow shell. Its sockets contain only darkness, yet I continue to meet something there. I look away, then I return, as though expecting the face to have altered in my absence. But nothing has changed. The disturbance belongs elsewhere.

Without its eyes, wig, body, clothing, or maker's mark, the doll retains little of the identity it must once have possessed. Reduced to a disembodied and ungendered white visage, it has sat on my dressing table for the past month, seeming to watch through its empty sockets, as though 'sleeping with her eyes open', while I apply my makeup.[11] Gradually, I have begun to think of the object as a subject: as her.

Rust lies splattered across the porcelain skin like blood left to dry after her eyes jumped out. Her painted lips remain slightly parted, forever on the verge of whispering. A sound gathers behind her three ambered incisors.

She says, 'Ah–ah!'[11]

She says, 'We are not like that.'[12]

'She says, "Shh."'[13]

Left: *Elisabeth*, a bisque-headed doll with a composition body, manufactured by Simon & Halbig, Germany, c. 1898-1906. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Footnotes

1 'Chinese Blue-and-White Ceramics', *V&A*, 17 April 2024.

2 Duarte Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, trans. and ed. by Mansel Longworth Dames, Vol. 2 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1921), pp. 213-4.

3 Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), pp. 53-61.

4 'History', *Porcelain Manufactory Meissen*.

5 'The History of Dolls: In the 17th and 18th [century] wooden and wax dolls were the main materials used in making dolls', *Sheffield Auction Gallery*, 27 February 2025.

6 Jennifer Stewart, 'History of China Dolls', *Quintessential Antique Dolls*, n.d.

7 Maria Teresa Hart, 'How Porcelain Dolls Became the Ultimate Victorian Status Symbol', *Smithsonian Magazine*, 1 November 2022.

8 Emily Cuming, 'Makeshift Dolls and Working-class Childhood, c. 1880-1930', in *Objects of Poverty: Material Culture in Britain from 1700*, ed. by Vicky Holmes and Joseph Harley (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), pp. 115-128.

9 'Toys and Games from the Past', V&A educational resource, p. 6.

10 Amy Matthewson, 'George du Maurier's Visual Degeneration: Chinamaniacs and China in the British Imagination', *ImageTexT*, 15.1 (2024).

11 E. T. W. Hoffmann, 'The Sandman', in *Tales from the German*, trans. by John Oxenford and C. A. Feiling (London: Chapman and Hall, 1844), pp. 140-165.

12 Katie Gee Salisbury, *Not Your China Doll: The Wild and Shimmering Life of Anna May Wong* (New York: Dutton, 2024), pp. 202-3.

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Courtesy of Hannah Smiles

Signet ring

'I spotted a beautiful golden ring on the gravel, flush-set with three dazzling blue gemstones. I tried the ring on, and it was a perfect fit.'

Tom Chivers, Mudlark

Lost in the Thames: A Victorian Ring and the Reach of Empire

By Preesha Sanghrajka

Rediscovered along the banks of the Thames at Wapping, this copper ring – set with a sapphire and two spinels – is an intriguing object. Unpolished and misaligned, bearing inscriptions and half-moon carvings around the band, it dates to between 1850 and 1900, and fits a man's hand.

Lucinda Orr, antique jewellery expert and Trustee of the Government's Treasure Valuation Committee, concluded after close inspection that it was produced somewhere in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or north-western India, crudely set by what she called a 'bad gemsetter', though its stones (a Sri Lankan sapphire between two blue spinels) were cut by a 'talented lapidary' and thus are of high quality. Quartz encrustation on the inner band confirms it has spent many decades lost in the river. It is, as mudlark Tom Chivers states, 'an object which, having been assembled somewhere in British India with materials gathered from multiple sources, travelled thousands of miles to London, where it came to rest in the Thames at Wapping.'

The question of how it got there and who owned it may never be fully answered. But its materials, its making, and the world it moved through suggest a story worth attempting to piece together and can tell us much about Victorian Britain's relationship with the wider world.

The ring's discovery point can lend some insight into who it might have belonged to. Wapping, in London's East End, was a hub of maritime activity, with sailors and tradesmen from across the world inhabiting the area. The building of London Docks in 1805 meant that much of the area was dedicated to the trade of foreign goods, such as tobacco and rice.[1]



With this in mind, we can infer that the owner of the ring was likely a sailor, rather than a soldier or a merchant. The ring's recovery in Wapping would reflect maritime traffic rather than overland movement, meaning its assembly in British India points more naturally to someone who made that voyage in person than to someone purchasing imported goods on home soil. While the ring's owner is not guaranteed to be British, especially due to the migrant population of the area, the western cut of the stones can indicate that it was either made *for*, or to gift *to* a person with western taste. Nothing in the ring itself can speak to the moral character of its owner, and how these stones came to be in his possession, whether it was purchased, gifted, or taken, remains as unknowable as everything else.

Orr's assessment places the stones' origin in Sri Lanka, a major centre for the export of sapphires and other gems. Ratnapura, known as "the city of gems", would be the most likely place for the stones to have been acquired. Contemporary accounts warn that the trade was not always straightforward here, however, warning that one 'must be prepared for wilful or ignorant deception' due to the stones being 'classified by colour alone'.[2] This could give us an indication as to why the ring does not possess three sapphires, but all three stones are of similar size and colour. Perhaps our sailor was deceived or made an economic decision to have the two spinels complement the sapphire? Nonetheless, the account makes it clear that Sri Lankan sapphires are 'stones of perfect purity and lustre'.[2]

Sapphires held great significance in Victorian Britain, with Victoria herself popularising them as a symbol of great love. Albert designed a sapphire and diamond coronet for Victoria in 1840 (figure 2), which she then wore in her famous Winterhalter portrait, and the opening of parliament after Albert's death.[3] The sapphires within this coronet were also Sri Lankan, placing them as a globally visible emblem of royal love and fidelity.[4] Traditionally, sapphires would have also symbolised tranquillity, chastity, long life, and wisdom, as well as older sources believing that it would bring luck and cure poison.[5] By bringing this to Britain, our sailor could have been drawing on shared cultural vocabulary that the crown had amplified, perhaps bringing their great love to someone back home.

The stones' western-style, table-faceted cut points away from Sri Lanka, where gems were traditionally cut by hand using the *hanaporuwa* machine, which used a bow to shape the stone.[6] This produced a cabochon finish more consistent with local taste than European. However, Jaipur in Rajasthan, which by the mid-Victorian period had developed a significant jewellery and gem-cutting industry, would have been able to work to western standard, and thus is the more likely candidate.[7] This suggests the stones passed through multiple hands before reaching their setting, travelling from Sri Lanka to Rajasthan in north-western India, and then to the "bad gemsetter" who created the ring.

It is here that the ring's contradictions become most telling. The copper band is bulky and heavy, but this places it within Indian craft tradition. Birdwood, in *The Industrial Arts of India*, notes that the 'object of the [Indian] jeweller seems to be to bestow the least amount of work on the greatest amount of metal'.[8] The ring's bulk corroborates Orr's assessment that it was produced somewhere in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or north-western India. Whether the band was fashioned from a length of copper piping before the stones were inserted, or whether the stones were chosen first and the setting built around them, is impossible to establish with certainty. What the misaligned engravings and half-moon carvings suggest is that the priority was not ornament but structure – something that would hold and endure. That it has survived decades in the Thames is indicative of *good* craftsmanship. Whether the copper was always intended as a permanent home for these stones, or as a sturdy vessel to carry them back to England to be reset, worn for luck on the voyage, or placed into the hands of someone waiting, is a question the ring cannot ever answer.

This ring, assembled from materials gathered across South Asia and carried to the Thames, shows us that the wealth of empire was not solely the preserve of royalty, but woven into the ordinary lives of the men who moved through it, in the stones a sailor chose, and the journey they made.



Previous page: The ring at the site of discovery by Tom Chivers.

Left: Queen Victoria's sapphire and diamond coronet, designed by Prince Albert in 1840. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Footnotes

1. 'London Dock', *London Museum*.
2. Ralph S. G. Stokes, *Mines and Minerals of the British Empire: Being a Description of the Historical, Physical, & Industrial Features of the Principal Centres of Mineral Production in the British Dominions Beyond the Seas* (London: Edward Arnold, 1908), p. 48.
3. 'Queen Victoria's Sapphire and Diamond Coronet', *V&A*, 1 September 2025.
4. Sonia Dandona Hirdaramani, 'The Journey of Sri Lankan Sapphires Through History with Helen Molesworth, Senior Jewellery Curator of the Victoria and Albert Museum', *Daily Mirror Online*, 18 January 2025.
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6. Justin K. Prim, 'The Modern History of Gemstone Faceting in Sri Lanka', *Journal of Gemmology*, 36.5 (2019), 416-423 (p. 417).
7. Andrew Lucas et al, 'Jaipur, India: The Global Gem and Jewellery Power of the Pink City', *Gems & Gemology*, 52.4 (2017), 332-367 (p. 334).
8. George Christopher Molesworth Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India*, Vol. 2 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1884), p. 249.



Courtesy of Hannah Smiles

Coquilla nut

'I was about to leave the foreshore when I spotted this curious object looking like a seed pod. Then I noticed a hole in the side.'

Nicola White, Mudlark

In the Palm of Empire

By Nsiya Mangu

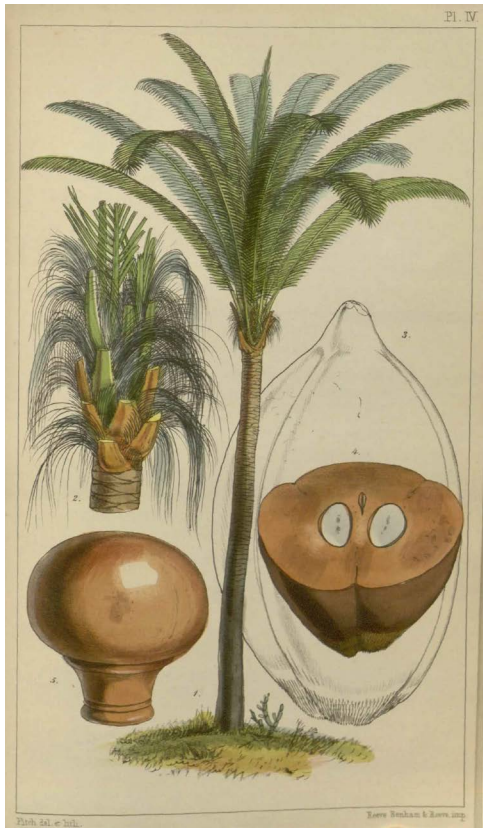
Between a rock and a hard place never seems to be an unidentified location for a mudlarker. Buried behind waves and layers of a complex empire lies the treasures of the Thames. The river forgets nothing. I have seen more rebirth than death laying there; is peaceful fleeting fair?

Across this page lies a tropical seed pod, found in the mud at Limehouse. It has a single, circular hole – possibly for a cord, a hinge, a lid? It is dark, smooth, and worn. Its bark holds memory – a mapping of routes, displacement, and rebirth.

The *Attalea funifera* is native to the Atlantic coastal forests of eastern Bahia, Brazil. Exploited commercially since the late sixteenth-century for its sheath fibre, and by the 1890s, destructive harvesting had rendered the palm commercially extinct as an export commodity.[1] Its branches are resilient, allowing it to dominate the post-fire environment. Seedlings emerge from blackened soil: dormant seeds waiting for fire or sunlight to trigger new growth. This intrinsic resilience – meant for survival – was harnessed by colonial powers, transformed from ecological adaptation into a commodity of empire.[1]

Picture this: it is 1806 and you have crossed the Thames to the Surrey side, making your way to the Blackfriars Rotunda. Outside, eager faces cluster – all holding the auction catalogue for the Leverian Museum sale. The Leverian had been housed in Leicester Square from 1775 to 1786, at the heart of a "physical internet" of objects and knowledge – a network connecting Leicester Square to Charing Cross, Covent Garden, and the Surrey Rotunda. Through this network, objects from across the empire circulated, were bought and sold, and eventually found their way into the Thames. Among the crowd was Richard Cuming, an amateur naturalist who then acquired at least 40 objects – each annotated in his copy of the catalogue. He was part of a community of "common collectors" who built cabinets of curiosity across London. Only friends and fellow collectors were invited to visit. More commonly known in the West as a coquilla nut, this seed was harvested by local communities, processed by enslaved Africans, and traded through networks that spanned the Atlantic. Yet in London cabinets, these objects were stripped of their origins and displayed as exotica, with their histories reduced to curiosity.

Hooker's Journal of Botany and Kew Garden Miscellany includes a catalogue of species brought into the British Empire, and its very first volume features the *Attalea funifera*.[2] The image of our palm seed lies within its pages as a testament to how botanical illustration was used to document,





Top: *Attalea funifera*. Courtesy of Biodiversity Heritage Library.

Right: Opening of the British Empire Exhibition, 1924. Courtesy of George W. F. Ellis, London Picture Archive.

classify, and control the natural world for imperial ends.[2] But the coquilla nut was not a rare curiosity: it was an everyday object in London, used for street-sweeping brushes, umbrella handles, and snuff boxes. Hooker acknowledged his debt to Glasgow merchants, confirming the nut was a "considerable article of commerce", driven by British demand for its durable fibre and hard shell.

Botany was never neutral – it was an instrument of empire.[3] The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, founded in 1759, became a hub of imperial intelligence, mapping the world's flora and directing its flow toward British markets.[4] The Hooker family, particularly Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, who succeeded his father as Director of Kew and became a close friend of Charles Darwin, shaped botanical science around their own beliefs, systematically obscuring Indigenous knowledge and spiritual practices.[5]

Yet in circumstances of fate alone, the plant was reclaimed. In 1975, the empty Grade II-listed Palm Court Hotel in Richmond was squatted by Chiswick Women's Aid, who transformed it into a refuge for women and children escaping domestic violence.[6] The name "Palm" remained, but its meaning inverted – from colonial reach to shelter and solidarity.

Juniper Kiss at Kew's Millennium Seed Bank suggested the hole in this seed pod might be natural. This opened a door to another reading. The natural holes on the *Attalea funifera* create a material parallel to the ikin used in the Ifa divination tradition, which must have three or more natural "eyes" to be sacred.[7] While the coquilla nut was carved into snuff boxes and beads, the presence of a natural hole connects the object to a world where seeds are not commodities but carriers of meaning.[8]

The seed was found at London's first Chinatown, a hub for maritime trade and traffic. To understand how it came to be there, I viewed the Cuming Collection at Southwark Archives, housing an array of snuff boxes, seeds, and the Leverian sale catalogue with Richard Cuming's handwriting. Objects travelled from the hands of their makers into private cabinets; their origins stripped, their makers unnamed. But who were these makers?

Recent scholarship reveals that coquilla nut snuff boxes were a distinctive Afro-Brazilian artform, produced by enslaved Africans in Brazil and by Black mariners on shipboard during voyages across the Atlantic.[9] Their carvings depict animals, religious scenes, and portraits of people at the margins of colonial society.[9]

In north-eastern Brazil, our seed pod is known locally as *Quitanda* or *Piaçava*. The palm's leaves are used as thatch, its leaf stalks cut into strips to make brooms, and inner flesh eaten or turned into cooking oil.[10] Fishermen weave palm fronds through fish to carry them to the market and use the stalks to build crab traps.[10] The palm is not a symbol of empire here; it is a tool for living. Today, in Quilombola communities, there is a revival of crafts using piassava, creating new income from bio-jewellery and handicrafts.[11]

When the seed sits in the palm of your hand, it's small, round, and unassuming. Yet it contains a map etched in wood – of trade routes and empire, of craftsmanship and Transatlantic Slavery, of collecting and loss. And while it arrived on the banks of the Thames by somewhat of an accident, it forces us to ask: whose history do we preserve, and whose do we lose? I still do not know exactly how it came to be in the mud. But I know it has a story worth telling.

Footnotes

1 Robert A. Voeks, 'Reproductive Ecology of the Piassava Palm (*Attalea funifera)* of Bahia, Brazil', *Journal of Tropical Ecology*, 18.1 (2002), 121-136 (p. 121).

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4 Ray Desmond, *Kew: The History of the Royal Botanic Gardens*, 2nd edn (London: Harvill Press, 2007), pp. ix, 259.

5 Jim Endersby, *Imperial Nature: Joseph Hooker and the Practices of Victorian Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 301, 30.

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9 'Exhibit – Coquilla Nut Carvings: An Afro-Brazilian Artform', *New Bedford Whaling Museum*, 2025.

10 David Y. P. Tng et al, 'Plant Uses in a Traditional Fisherman Community in Northeastern Brazil', Federal University of Bahia Research Report (2019), 1-39 (p. 23).

11 Egnaldo Rocha da Silva, 'The Piaçava Revival: Afro-Indigenous Crafts Save a Local Tree Species', *Garland Magazine*, 1 June 2024.



Courtesy of Hannah Smiles

Piccolo and Fretboard

'It was magical finding these instrument parts. Knowing they'd been silent for so long, I could not help wondering who last played them and when…'

Nicola White, Mudlark

When Words Fail: Music, Memory, and Archives

By Georgia Sheridan

"For us music, gesture, dance are forms of communication, just as important as the gift of speech."[1] – Édouard Glissant

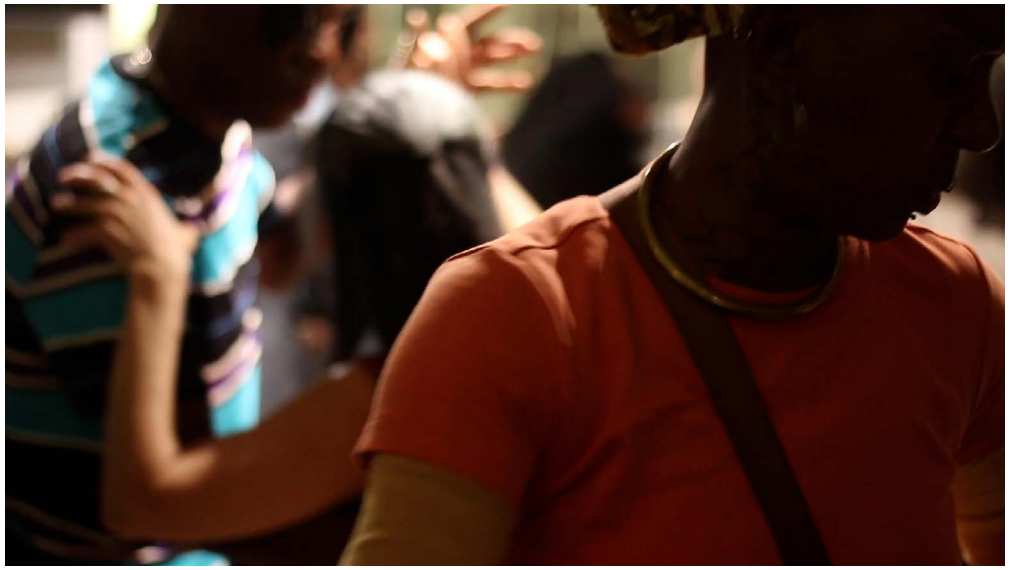
The only certainty I have about the two objects in front of me is their journey from the Thames to my bedside table. Beyond that, their histories become increasingly difficult to trace. A wooden piccolo and a fretboard, now separated from the sounds they once produced and the people who once held them.

The Thames foreshore acts as an archive, preserving the objects that find their way into its mud.[2] Unlike a written record, however, these objects do not arrive with names, dates, or descriptions attached. Their provenance is mostly lost. But their absence of documentation does not make them empty. Instead, they hold a different kind of record: one shaped by movement, memory, and the lives of those who used them.

Found musical instruments are fragments of sonic history. Instruments do not simply produce music; they carry the memories, emotions, and experiences of the communities that create and use them. Long after the final note has disappeared, the object itself can remain as evidence of those who once held them.

Although I know nothing of the people who owned these instruments, their physical characteristics offer small clues. The fretboard appears to come from a smaller stringed instrument, while the wooden piccolo is compact enough to be carried easily. Neither object reveals where it came from or who played it, but both suggest movement. Unlike larger instruments tied to particular spaces, these were objects that could travel with their owners, transferred through journeys and moments of change. As people moved across the world, they carried musical traditions with them. Music can be a powerful tool in maintaining connections to home while adapting to new places. Passed down through performance, dance, and oral tradition, music preserves histories that are not always captured in written records.

Still, music can be difficult for archives and museums to capture. Instruments are often preserved as objects, but separated from the people and cultures that gave them meaning. A piccolo behind glass cannot recreate the sound of a marching band; a fretboard cannot reveal the hands that once moved across it. What remains is not the complete story, but a fragment that invites us to imagine what came before.



Objects can only preserve so much. Their materials survive, but the sounds that gave them meaning often do not. The question then becomes: where do these histories continue when they are no longer captured by traditional records?

In a backstreet just off Windrush Square in Brixton lies the pub, The Effra Hall. For over thirty years, it has been under the care of the same Caribbean family. More than a pub, it has become a space where music, performance, and community continue to meet.

I first walked into The Effra at the age of twenty, looking for part-time bar work. My trial shift was on a Thursday night, when Jamaica Jazz play. As the crowd began to swell, the only thing distinguishing band member from customer, was who was holding an instrument. As they played, people danced, one regular even throwing chalk onto the floor for better grip. The room grew hot, the windows condensed, and the outside world slowly disappeared, along with its associated worries. I got the job, and I have been listening ever since. Seven years later, the setlist has barely changed, apart from the occasional "Happy Birthday" sung to a regular: but that familiarity is part of what makes the night meaningful. The songs are not simply repeated; they are remembered. Each performance becomes another layer of the pub's history, connecting those who have been coming for decades with those discovering the space for the first time.



Top: *Figures Dancing at The Effra Hall*, June 2023. Courtesy of Georgia Sheridan.

Left: *Plaque Commemorating the River Effra*, located outside The Effra Hall on Kellett Road, Brixton, June 2023. Courtesy of Georgia Sheridan.

Ralph Ellison described jazz as a relationship between individual expression, collective identity, and tradition.[3] In many ways, this is what continues to happen at The Effra each Thursday night.

Despite its rich history, much of The Effra's story exists outside institutional archives. Yet, every Thursday, its history is performed again. It survives because people continue to inhabit it. Rather than conforming to the conventions of formal archives, The Effra functions as a living archive.[4] Its history is not stored in boxes or catalogues, but carried through performances, relationships, and community memory. Rather than being interpreted from a distance, its history is created by the people who continue to gather there.

The piccolo and fretboard found on the Thames foreshore cannot tell us who played them, where they travelled, or what memories they carried. They survive only as fragments.

Nevertheless, places like The Effra remind us that the histories held within musical objects do not disappear when their documentation does. They continue through the people who remember them. Perhaps that is what these two fragments offer us most. Not a complete history, but an invitation to listen more carefully to the histories that survive beyond the written archive. In doing so, the Thames foreshore becomes more than a place to find objects, it becomes a way into histories that are still being lived across London today.

Footnotes

1 Édouard Glissant, 'Cross-Cultural Poetics: National Literatures', in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), pp. 248-9.

2 Malcolm Russell, 'Exploring London's Intoxicating Spaces Through Mudlarking', *Intoxicating Spaces*, 2 December 2020.

3 Ralph Ellison, 'The Charlie Christian Story', in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 234.

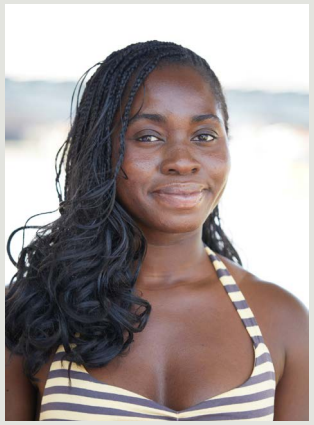
4 Stuart Hall, 'Constituting an Archive', *Third Text*, 15.54 (2001), 89-92 (p. 89).



Alisha-Iman Holness is a heritage trainee and UCL Archaeology graduate specialising in the archaeology of Egypt and Sudan. Passionate about collections, archives, and community engagement, she enjoys uncovering the stories behind everyday objects and connecting people with London's diverse heritage. Through research, curation, and public engagement, she hopes to make archaeology and history more accessible to wider audiences.



Maya Wood is an MA Public History student, holding a BA in Ancient History. Her work explores the different ways that the public engages with history, and how to encourage people to interact with history, whether that be through utilising different mediums, or by exploring underrepresented interests on the national, local, or community level.



Emmanuella Bamfo is an emerging heritage practitioner whose work explores how cultural expressions preserve memory, identity, and resistance. Her research examines the power of material and creative forms, from Ghanaian cloth and nation-building to anti-Apartheid music as a tool of political reclamation. She is passionate about creating accessible narratives that connect diverse audiences with overlooked histories.



Simran Sehmbi is an aspiring curator. She is passionate about working on diverse public programming to connect wider communities with diverse museum collections. Through her work, she hopes to bring forward the voices of those from marginalised communities, and she is particularly interested in exploring themes of identity, culture, belonging, resistance, and migration within London's history.



Sylvia Cordara is a London-based researcher and artist with a BA in Archaeology and a background in art from Central Saint Martins. Her interests centre on the secret lives of objects, particularly exploring how material culture reveals memory, identity, and everyday human experience.



Madeleine Beaumont-Grice spent her first years in London grappling with questions big and small whilst wandering up and down canals – the water's transience influencing her thoughts on history and everyday life. With work that touches the tangible and its elusive dealings to and with incorporeal connections, she is concerned with material culture and its interactions with people's history.



Sam Loi Wong came to London to study a BA in Fine Art and History of Art but became increasingly interested in uncovering the city's overlooked stories. Through her time on the traineeship with Thames Festival Trust, she has begun exploring different areas of heritage practice and possible paths into conservation or museum studies. In her spare time, she makes jewellery.



Preesha Sanghrajka holds a BMus in Music from King's College London and is due to start her Master's in Music at the University of Oxford. She is currently an intern at the V&A's South Asia Gallery, working with the Interpretation department on the gallery's redevelopment. She is interested in exploring underrepresented narratives within heritage, particularly those suppressed through colonialism and the patriarchy.



Nsiya Mangu is a hobby researcher who believes that heritage is not just found in archives – it's in the mud, communal memory, and in buildings records overlook. She is building the Black British Heritage Atlas, an open dataset that maps the places history forgot, using GIS and machine learning to ask: whose stories get preserved, and whose get left behind? She lives and works in London.



Georgia Sheridan holds an MA in Archives and Records Management and a BA in Photojournalism and Documentary Photography. Their work explores the relationship between archives, photography, and community memory, with a particular interest in public engagement, and the histories preserved through visual culture and everyday experience.



Amouraé Bhola-Chin is an artist-researcher, writer, and the Heritage Project Manager at Thames Festival Trust. Interested in (post-)colonial histories shaped by watery archives, she explores the rippling of narratives marked by rupture, activating diasporic archives as a means of speculatively reimagining found, archival, and familial material. Last year, she curated UNESCO International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition in collaboration with Royal Museums Greenwich, and took part in various panels on her curatorial and creative projects. She continues to co-curate programmes, exhibitions and facilitate workshops, whilst developing a research-led new mixed media practice.



From left to right - Georgia Sheridan, Preesha Sanghrajka, Maya Wood, Nsiya Mangu, Simran Sehmbi, and Madeleine Beaumont-Grice during a site visit to the Institute of Historical Research, July 2026. Photograph courtesy of Shilonite Simon-Mathurin.

Credits

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