Mudlarking for beginners:
Scouring the Thames with TV's original 'Mud Man'

Will Badger

All photographs courtesy of Valentina Ippolito

I recently reached out via email to plank-holding Mudlark and TV personality Steve Brooker, also known as Mud God from the hit show 'Mud Men', to ask him about his career foraging for history on the foreshores of London. Steve responded with an invitation to join him on the Thames for an introduction to mudlarking. I didn't think for a moment of passing up the opportunity, and it wasn't difficult to convince my partner, Valentina, to join me.

We met Steve 'Mud God' Brooker in front of the Cutty Sark Museum in Greenwich one Saturday. I was looking out for him but he still seemed to appear suddenly out of nowhere, towering over us in a baby blue down jacket in deference to the spring nip in the air and the intermittent rain. After his height and the jacket, it was impossible not to notice the beard, with its distinguished greying sideburns that evoked the actual Admiral Burnside and kept the nautical theme going – and then his bracelet, which wasn't actually a bracelet but rather a spanner bent round his wrist to meet end to end. Sizing him up, I half-wondered whether he had bent it with his bare hands.

Searching the north side of the Thames

Cartouche fragments from Bartmann (or Bellarmine) jugs

As we made our way through a tunnel beneath the Thames to the Isle of Dogs side of the river, Steve told us about upcoming projects – he was about to begin filming a scripted documentary series about male midlife crises – and regaled us with anecdotes from 'Mud Men' and his years mudlarking on the Thames. He told us about some of his favourite finds, including Roman children's shoes, complete with wear patterns where little toes gripped the leather and holes in the heels, the latter being the reason they were thrown out into London's watery skip.

When we got to the Isle of Dogs foreshore the tide was still going out. Steve's sessions tend to straddle low tide two hours either side of it. He explained that tides were assigned numbers from 1 to 16, with 1 being the lowest or strongest and 16 the least strong. Ours was a 9, which wasn't as bad as it sounds, because tides 1 to 5 can leave the foreshore quite muddy. The middling tides tend

to clean things off and make it easier to scrape and to see.

The rain stopped as we hit the foreshore, and the first shaft of sunlight stabbed down from the grey bellies of cloud that hung over the river. Mud God talked the whole time as we walked — an even more impressive feat considering that he was struggling with a bit of laryngitis after an earlier course participant with indifferent English ability had asked him to repeat everything he said until his voice finally gave out. He talked, musing and teaching and gesturing with his arms while keeping his eyes mostly trained on the foreshore, scanning for promising seams of metalwork – as he encouraged us also to do.

Australian George V penny (1920)

Twice a day, the tides classify objects, natural and manmade, by size, shape and weight. This accounts for the not unlikely possibility of finding a 20 yard streak of bricks on the sand, as though they had been sorted on a conveyor belt, or a metre-wide ribbon of rusted iron bolts.

The trick is to 'get your eye in', to train it to go from coarse to fine, from runs of large metalwork, through pockets of small metalwork, to promising shapes within those pockets and along the periphery.

One of the most promising shapes, of course, is the circle, for small, round bits of iron — nuts, washers, caps — are often deposited in the same spot as coins. When you find those spots and those likely seams of metalwork, usually at the borders where hardpack (a layer of mud so dense that it is essentially bedrock, with little or nothing deposited in it) meets pebbles, brick, or coarse sand, the trick is to cut in a line with your trowel and do some prospecting, scraping the foreshore towards yourself a bit at a time while looking for interesting shapes and colours. If you have a license from the Port of London Authority (about £70 for three years), you are allowed to scrape on certain areas of the foreshore up to a depth of 7.5cm. In many spots this is deep enough to get down to the hardpack layer, atop which most finds will be lying like a shag carpet woven of lost metal.

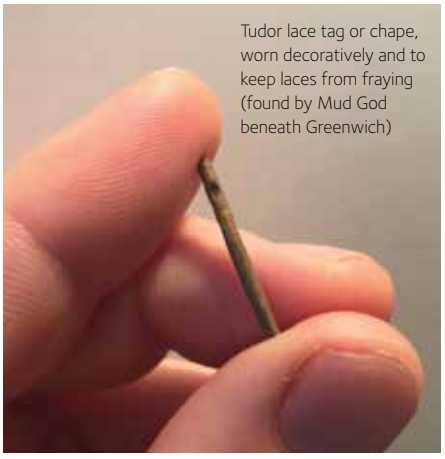
I applied for and received my PLA license two years ago, and I'd been 'mudlarking' on my own two or three times. Though my walks through the bowels of the city were lovely, however, offering views from below of its sharp buildings and bright people, I'd never found anything apart from the bowls and stems of pipes and indigo-glazed potsherds. After half an hour in Steve's company I realised the simple truth: I had been doing it wrong. The techniques Mud God taught us worked. This is because they involved set-ups, processes, and ways of looking rather than tips as specific as 'You'll find Roman minims if you search in spot x' — though he also had tips like the latter!

First Steve taught us to 'bash' bullets on the foreshore of the Isle of Dogs. Historically it wasn't a wealthy area, merely the location of the royal kennels which gave it its name. But a munitions factory had gone up near there around the time of the Second War, and the foreshore was littered with the metal fasteners for grenade canisters and especially with .303 bullets. Steve's teaching methodology was based on the simple idea that you've got to crawl before you can walk. Beginning in a historically quite poor area, he showed us what to look for and how to scrape, so that when we got to more promising ground we'd be less likely to miss objects.

Val struck first, pulling a bit of Victorian brooch from the foreshore. In earlier days, it probably would have had bits of coloured glass in the apertures.

Meanwhile, Mud God was still demonstrating proper scraping

Our coin haul for the day



Tudor lace tag or chape, worn decoratively and to keep laces from fraying (found by Mud God beneath Greenwich)

My Canterbury penny of Henry VIII; rose farthing; with a bit of gold leaf found by Mud God (being recorded)

technique, darting from spot to spot and then slowing to peer into the pebbles and sand for promising bits, talking and teaching all the while. He was pulling coin after coin from the silt, mostly modern clad, but often also pre-decimal and even Georgian. Before we knew it he had two Romans up, a lovely radiate that might have been struck only the year before and a rather knackered nummus.

He also was kind enough to make me feel at home – I moved from the States five years ago to attend Oxford – by turning up a US Jefferson nickel (1943). It was a wartime nickel, so it was actually 35% silver alloy, as nickel had been reserved for the war effort.

Soon thereafter, he plucked from the foreshore a silver 5 cent piece from Sierra Leone (1964), featuring the serious mien of the first Prime Minister, Sir Milton Margai.

At that point, we'd had Roman coins, as well as decimal and pre-decimal coins from three countries — talk about armchair travel! Amazingly, it was the modern decimal coinage lying closest to the surface that was in the worst nick. Georgian, Victorian and earlier coins emerged looking shiny, as though they'd been recently minted. Mud God clocked a fourth country when he turned up a lovely George V Australian penny (1920).

Not only was Mud God a dedicated teacher and a force of nature like the tide against which we were racing, but also he was generous. When I found my first coin, a pre-decimal Lizzie penny, he said, 'Well done, mate! You've got your eye in already,' as though I'd made a significant discovery – and he seemed to mean it.

Once we'd completed our 'apprenticeship' on the Isle of Dogs, we crossed back under the Thames to Greenwich. Where the Old Royal Naval College now is once stood the Palace of Placentia, originally built by Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester (the endower of Duke Humfrey's Library, the oldest bit of the Bodleian Library in Oxford), but perhaps most associated with Henry VIII; future Queens Mary and Elizabeth were born there. Mud God explained that just as the Thames generally was London's skip, the bit of it beneath Placentia was the dump for all the rubbish, intended and not, from the palace: animal bones and oyster shells from Henry's tables showed up on this bit of foreshore, as did window leading and floor tiles from the demolition of Placentia in the 1660s. As we made our way down the steps beneath the Old Royal Naval College to the foreshore, Mud God explained that he'd once even found the entire upper frame of a mullioned stone window jutting up from the sand here.

Mud God's Roman radiate

Again we employed the techniques that Mud God had taught us on the north side of the river. The coarse sorting of materials was less obvious here; the conditions were sandier, and Mud God suggested we look closely at darker, muddier spots of pebbles and metalwork deposited on the lighter sands and hardpack.

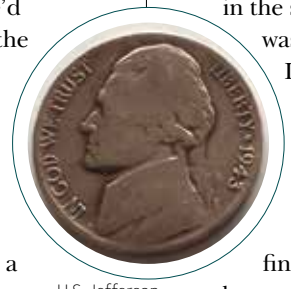
There was an additional, specific indicator present at this location: dressing pins. A Tudor noblewoman clad in a sumptuous gown might have had dozens, even hundreds of dressing pins about her person at any given time. They were long and short and fat and thin; some even had decorated heads. Mud God said that these pins, bundled in metal windings, were once one of the chief imports of Tudor London. Millions of them now littered the foreshore in small pockets and seams.

Where you find these pins in numbers, you will also find other small bits of metal, including coins. The tides are constantly classifying, however, and we saw that principle at first hand in the Tudor dumps. Mud God had been down just the day before, and he'd found seams of pins about mid-way up the

L to R, Row 1 (top): pottery sherds, Tudor, mostly green glaze. Row 2: salt glaze; fragments of Bartmann jug cartouches; oyster shell; floor tile fragment, probably from the Palace of Placentia. Row 3: Tudor dress pins and the windings in which they are bound; button; old padlock; marble bottle stopper; modern marble; casket key; window leading. Row 4: .303 bullets; metal fragments

foreshore. Today these same spots were devoid of metalwork.

It didn't fox Mud God for even a moment though – he knows the foreshore like his pockets. He told us that because the beach was empty here, we'd find loads of pins up against the back wall as the tide pushed us higher up the foreshore. We still searched the lower areas, as it gave him a chance to teach us about pottery – gamely, in his increasingly husky voice from a throat which by now must have felt as though it was being stabbed by a bundle of the Tudor pins.



U.S. Jefferson nickel (1943)

The stuff was mostly bits of so-called Tudor Green – fragments of eating vessels, mainly, with a delicate green glaze. There were also bits of later white salt glaze, and best of all, two pieces of Bellarmine jug. The Bellarmine, or Bartmann, jugs are decorated with a bearded face and come originally from the Germanies. They were occasionally filled with nasty bits and stoppered up for use as witch pots – a complete one of these has recently been found. The sherds Mud God and I found this day were from the cartouches on the jugs, where the specific pottery or potter's mark could be read.

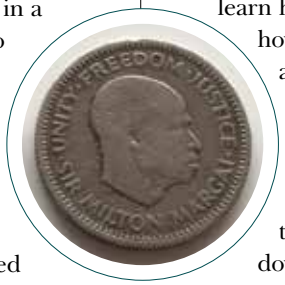
Meanwhile, the tide was relentless. Steve's sessions last four hours, because that's all the tide gives you, if you're lucky. Soon we were being pushed closer to the back wall. For the first time on the foreshore I felt the presence of people, as kids whose parents had taken them to visit Greenwich leaned over the fence above the seawall and called down to us to ask what we were doing and what we had found.

And suddenly, just as Steve had predicted, we were on the pins. Pins everywhere, thousands of them in little ribbons of metal. Coins followed, mostly pennies and two-pences, and then, 'A rose farthing!' I said, darting my hand forward. Sure enough, I'd found a tiny Charles I rose farthing (1620s). I could tell Mud God was chuffed. 'It's better when the people you bring find the stuff', he said, and more than anything else, this tiny, eyes-only find (the area beneath Placentia is protected, and even scraping is prohibited) was proof of Steve's method. Not only can he mudlark, but he can teach you to do it too.

Half a minute later, as he'd paused his search to tell me a story about a club walk on the Thames when his bid for find-of-the-day was upset at the very end of the trip by someone finding a Bronze-Age axehead right beneath the spot he, Steve, was standing on, I found the next coin. 'There's another', I said, and sure enough, in the sandy silt in front of Steve was a glint of silver. A hammy! It turned out to be a rare Canterbury penny of Henry VIII; a remarkable memento of our visit to that monarch's long-vanished palace.

Mud God finished off the finds as spectacularly as he'd begun them four hours before. Throughout our time on the dumps he'd been searching for an elusive lace chape, an unbelievably tiny bit of metal that would have hung from the tips of Tudor pockets and fringes – sometimes dozens together – to keep laces and ties from fraying. But finding a chape among all the pins (see picture on page 16) was like finding a piece of hay in a needlestack. Steve managed to find one.

The tide came in. Back up the stairs to Greenwich where we shed our kneepads and handed our trowels over to land with a thump in the bucket Steve carried. We poured our finds into a plastic carrier bag, thanked Mud God for the revelatory day, and said our goodbyes. He wandered into the late afternoon Greenwich crowd until even his unmissable frame vanished.



Silver 5-cent piece, Sierra Leone (1964)

It felt sudden somehow. Val and I walked slowly back to the railing overlooking the river. Behind us, the white neo-classical regularity of the Old Royal Naval College stood guard over bits of rectangular Lincoln-green lawn. Ahead, the clipper-roiled water of the Thames slithered muddily from wall to wall, like the corniced belly of a sand serpent, completely obscuring the fields we'd searched only an hour before. I turned to Val and smiled, looked down at the Tesco's bag that held our finds. 'I can't wait to do this again', I said.

Postscript: Steve says it can take anywhere from three months to three years of mudlarking to get your eye in; without his teaching and training it might have taken us three decades! Perhaps the best review I can give of Mud God's mudlarking sessions is that they do what it says on the tin: you will learn how to read the foreshore; how, where, and why to search; and best of all, you will develop a sound foundation on which to build. Val and I are still just beginners, obviously, but following our trip I feel like we could go down the foreshore on our own and find things, and – along with the fresh air, expansive views, and (usual) solitude in the midst of a teeming city – that sense of discovery is what it's all about. ●