

A BRIEF  
HISTORY OF

# SEWING TREASURES

*in the Thames*

Unearth London's sewing past with  
mudlarker & author Lara Maiklem



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Lara Maiklem is the author of *Mudlarking: Lost and Found on the River Thames* (Bloomsbury) and *A Field Guide to Larking: Beachcombing, Mudlarking, Fieldwalking and More* (Bloomsbury).

You can follow her on Instagram [london.mudlark](#) or Twitter and Facebook [@londonmudlark](#)



Lara Maiklem has spent 20 years mudlarking, which is the practice of scouring rivers for objects that have been lost, dropped or dumped. She searches the Thames at low tide and always returns with something beautiful, weird or fascinating. We caught up with her to discuss her favourite sewing finds.

### What area of the Thames do you cover?

I mudlark on the tidal Thames, which stretches from Teddington to the Estuary, although there are rules and regulations, and you are not allowed to mudlark beyond the Thames Barrier. The Thames is probably the best place in the world to mudlark because it's tidal (we can access the river bed twice a day), and there have been 2,000 years of intense human activity along it, so there is plenty to find. I don't use a metal detector or dig into the foreshore – I only collect what erodes naturally from the mud or washes up, so in many ways, I let the river choose what objects it gives me, and it never disappoints.

### Amongst the many objects you find, pins are one of the most common – why is that?

Pins are one of my favourite things to find on the foreshore, even though they are ordinary. They survive because they derive from copper alloy, so they don't rust. Each one is handmade – the wire drawn to gauge, the head made from wrapping another small piece of wire three times around the top, soldered, sharpened and polished – and little works of art in their own right. They date from around 1400 to 1800, when pin making was mechanised, and there are millions of them in the mud because everyone was pinned into their clothes. Even babies were pinned into swaddling, and at the end of life, you were pinned into your death shroud. Of course, they were also used by tailors and lace makers. The pinning industry was huge, and pins were made, used and lost in vast quantities – pin money was the money given to women to buy the household's pins. They come in all sizes, large fat ones for thick woollen cloth



and thin pins as fine as baby hair for delicate fabrics.

**What do they reveal about the areas where you find a lot of them?**

You can find pins along most of the foreshore in central London, where the river was busy, and there was a lot going on beside it. The pins would have fallen from people's clothes as they boarded the many wherries (rowing boats) that took them up and down and across the river. They fell from the clothes of the river workers as they toiled along the docks

and on ships. They would also have gone into the river in the rubbish thrown in – the contents of cesspits and middens and street sweepings. There is one particular stretch of the foreshore where I

encounter more pins than anywhere else. I've also found five pinner's bones, animal bones with grooves cut into them to hold the pins as they were being polished and sharpened, which makes me think there must have been pin-making workshops nearby.

*In many ways I let the river choose what objects it gives me, and it never disappoints*

**I'm guessing you also find lots of buttons!**

People have been losing buttons for as long as they have been wearing them. My favourites are the little round Tudor buttons worn in tight rows – my absolute favourite is one in the shape of a tiny acorn. At the other end of the spectrum are

the large and ostentatious 18th-century 'macaroni buttons' worn to dazzle and impress by fashionable gentlemen in the 18th century. I also have a good collection of Navy buttons, including some with



*A pinner's bone*



*Buckles from the past*



*Lara's collection of thimbles*



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*Clothing accessories are one of my favourite finds because of the intimate link they make with the past*  
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a rose on predated the fouled anchor adopted by the Royal Navy in 1774. The most common buttons are simple bone buttons and 19th-century fly/suspender buttons, often with the names of East End Victorian tailors on them that can be fascinating to research.

**What other types of fastenings have you found?**

I find a lot of hooks and eyes – many of them are handmade and probably date from before machines started making them around 1800. I have Tudor dress hooks used to keep women’s skirts out the mud and muck, of which there would have been a lot in 16th century London; Georgian cufflinks, or sleeve buttons, some of which are set with a glass paste jewel; and lots of buckles – small iron medieval shoe buckles, a buckle for a 17th century hat, large Georgian shoe buckles, harness buckles, spur and belt buckles.

**Have you found tools such as needles, thimbles and scissors?**

Needles are far rarer than pins, less were made because they were more expensive and looked after better. In 20 years, I’ve only found 12 of them. Most are made of copper alloy, but the oldest is part of a Roman needle made of bone. Thimbles are a little more common – I have 18 dating from around the 14th to 19th century and a lead palm guard, which would have been held in place by a special leather strap for sewing thick material like sail canvas. I have leather punches and a beautiful little 16th-century decorated, pewter needle case

The foreshore is home to a wealth of sewing history





that may once have hung from a fairly well-to-do lady's chatelaine!

**What do you think is the oldest object you have found related to clothing and sewing?**

The oldest sewing-related object I have is probably the Roman needle, followed by two cast copper alloy medieval thimbles called beehive thimbles because they look just like tiny beehives!

**And what is your favourite?**

Clothing accessories are one of my favourite finds because of the intimate link they share with the past. Through them, you get an idea of an individual's taste, the skill of the craftsperson and the moment it was lost. Buckles are sometimes bent and buttons shankless from where they caught and ripped off, needles are worn to blunt stubs, and pins are often bent from the last time they were used, a forgotten moment captured in time. I think my favourite clothing-related object is a 17th-century silver

bodkin. It has the initials S.E. scratched onto it. It was once a prize possession, probably worn in the hair until needed to lace a corset or bodice. It is badly bent out of shape, but this adds to its story. Perhaps it fell out of a woman's hair one day into a dusty street and was trodden on by a horse before it was swept up with the dung and rotting vegetables and thrown into the river. We will never know, but this kind of speculation is what I love about mudlarking.

**How does it feel to discover these items after they have laid buried in the mud for so long?**

However humble, everything tells a story, which makes mudlarking the closest thing I can imagine to time travel. Picking up an object that hasn't been touched since its original owner lost or dropped is like reaching back through time to shake hands with history, and every tide turns another page in this giant, beautiful history book.



*Pins can be found in abundance*



*A beautiful bodkin*

## MUDLARKING

If you're feeling inspired to head out on your own mudlarking adventure, you need to know the following first:

- You need a licence to mudlark on the tidal Thames. They are available from the Port of London Authority: [www.pla.co.uk/Environment/Thames-foreshore-permits](http://www.pla.co.uk/Environment/Thames-foreshore-permits)
- There are parts of the foreshore where you are not allowed to mudlark and places where you are not permitted to disturb the surface in your search.
- Finds over 300 years old and of archaeological importance should be recorded with the Portable Antiquities Scheme: [www.finds.org.uk](http://www.finds.org.uk)
- Anything apart from a single coin made of a precious metal (gold or silver) and over 300 years old qualifies as a Treasure and, by law, should be reported to a coroner.
- Mudlarking can be dangerous, and care should be taken. Dress for the weather and wear appropriate footwear. Always check the tide times, be aware of exit points and take a telephone with you for safety. If you are new to mudlarking, go with someone else and beware of the mud, it can be deep and treacherous.
- For a safe introduction to mudlarking, take an organised tour led by a licensed expert with Thames Discovery [www.thamesdiscovery.org](http://www.thamesdiscovery.org)