

# Transferware from the Thames

by Richard Hemery

A bit of detective work is part of the fun of collecting and researching transferware. Trying to decipher a glaze-filled impressed back-stamp, track down a possible maker, or find all the patterns from a particular series, is part and parcel of that. It can be difficult, time consuming and frustrating, hopefully ending with a satisfying moment of success. But imagine if, like me, you only had one small piece of the design to start with, a jigsaw with only one piece left?

The tidal Thames stretches 95 miles from Teddington to the Estuary where it joins the North Sea. The river has a very high tidal range, as much as a 7 metre rise and fall in a 12 hour period. At low tide a huge area of foreshore is revealed, stretching through London, one of the world's most historic cities, resulting in the Thames being named 'the world's largest archaeological site' (Figure 1).

Those who descend the steps and search the foreshore are known as mudlarks. The first mudlarks are recorded in Georgian and Victorian London. They were mostly street chil-



**Figure 1: The remains of centuries old wharves, jetties and embankments appear at low tide.**

dren who scavenged the river for saleable items such as coal, metals, and bone. Since the 1970s a new breed of mudlarks has emerged whose interest is mostly in the history and archaeol-

ogy of the river. I have been a mudlark for 20 years and pretty soon developed a keen interest in pottery sherds of all types and ages.

It is necessary to apply for a licence from the Port of London authority to become a mudlark. This is to help conserve this historic environment and ensure the proper recording of finds. Over the 2000 years of London's history, the river has been a convenient dumping ground for the capital's rubbish. Embankment works have encroached on the river over the centuries, and these were also backfilled with rubbish, and as the embankments decay over time, this material is also added to the river. It is possible to find metal artefacts, leather and wood, preserved by the anaerobic mud of the foreshore, glass, and of course pottery. Pottery, along with brick and tile, is the most common find along the foreshore. Due to the action of time, tide and man, there is little stratification on the foreshore, and Roman, medieval, and post medieval pottery sherds lie next to modern china lost

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**Figure 2: Small sherds of transferware at low tide.**



**Figure 3: Some pieces of Willow pattern plates and platters found on one visit to the foreshore.**



**Figure 4: Willow pattern plate rims fused together by great heat.**

from river cruise boats.

Among this material there is of course, transferware, and this is the subject of this article (Figure 2). London is better known for its tin glazed earthenware, industrial quantities of stoneware, and in the 18th century, porcelain, a small amount of which was transfer printed. But there were no potteries making transfer printed ware in London in the 19th century, so the material we find was brought in from Staffordshire, Yorkshire, Bristol, and other centres of production.

Most of the transferware dates from the Georgian period, from 1790 to 1840. It is mostly pearlware, and sometimes a pooling of blue glaze appears in the base or around handles.

After this time, the London boroughs were more organised in the collection of rubbish, and large quantities no longer entered the river in the city itself. Rubbish was taken by barge and up until the 1950s dumped along the Estuary. It is possible to find these dumps eroding onto the beaches of the Thames estuary, and there, late Victorian and early 20th century transfer printed pottery predominates. In the city itself, the transferware sherds are generally smaller than those found in the Estuary.

Personally I have never seen any of the early 19th century bat printed ware found along the Thames. Archaeologically speaking, this was only made for a short time, and as the transfers were applied overglaze, they may not have survived well in the river. The classic blue and white patterns predominate, with two patterns being far more numerous than the others. First place, of course, goes to the ubiquitous Willow pattern (Figure 3).

An intriguing find was the remains of a stack of three plate rims, with a chinoiserie design, probably also willow (Figure 4). These have been subjected to such intense heat that



**Figure 5: Some Nuneham Courtenay pieces I have found on the Thames foreshore, placed on a platter.**

they have fused together, possibly the result of a house fire, or maybe even during the Blitz of the Second World War.

The next most frequently found pattern is that featuring Nuneham



**Figure 6: Port of London Authority mug sherd.**

Courtenay with a Wild Rose border (Figure 5). I do not know why, but this pattern was obviously very popular in Georgian London, as pieces from it are found all along the Thames. Perhaps it is because the house itself is situated on the River Thames, in Oxfordshire. Of course it's possible the pieces of Wild Rose border may have originally surrounded another design. The sharp-eyed reader will notice small differences between the sherds and the platter, reminding us that many manufacturers made this popular pattern.

A much more recent find, but with a strong connection to the river, is a piece from a mug with the transfer printed initials P.L.A. (Figure 6). These

initials stand for the Port of London Authority.

Most of the sherds found are earthenware, but there are a few porcelain and bone china fragments



**Figure 7: Pagoda sherds.**



**Figure 8: Girl at the Well sherd.**

among them, often very small due to the thinness of the original vessel walls. These unidentified pieces portray parts of pagodas, and probably date to around 1800 (Figure 7). The smaller sherd is printed inside the rim, and probably comes from a teacup or tea bowl.

I have used the Transferware Collectors Club Database of Patterns and Sources (DB) to identify several of my sherds, and have had good results even when there is little to go on. For example, this piece has a border, a girl's head, and some disembodied leaves (Figure 8). However, she is wearing a cap, and sure enough, on page 2 of a 'cap' predominant features search, I found the pattern listed as 'Girl at the Well'. The wide rim of my sherd shows this sherd came from a chamber pot, and the plate rim pattern has been used on the chamber pot rim, with the design on the body of the pot. It was made by several makers including Spode and Thomas Rathbone & Co.

I identified two additional patterns (Figures 9 and 10) with a DB search. One of the fragments (Figure 9) took a little longer to identify. I tried searching columns, groom, reins, harness, and rider. (I was reluctant to search horse as there were too many results). Finally I tried searching plume, and found the pattern is called 'The Sundial', pattern number 1493, made by an unknown maker. It just goes to show what a useful resource the DB can be in matching fragments as well as whole objects. Even a tiny sherd can be matched if it is distinctive enough. I thought this hooded figure with icicles (the second pattern, Figure 10) might be Arctic Scenery but it ended up being Snow Scenes by Davenport, pattern number 6157.

Another type of transfer printed item that occasionally turns up on the foreshore is Victorian pot lids. A few lucky mudlarks have recently found complete pot lids. Normally a fragment will be all that remains, such as this sherd that once held anchovy paste (Figure 11). The brand was Burgess's and their pot lids were adorned with a rather fabulous royal crest.



Figure 9: Sundial sherd.



Figure 10: Snow Scenes sherd.



Figure 11: Burgess's Anchovy Paste.

In the future I hope to use the Database for more successful identifications of found objects.

Editor's Note: Richard is the author of two books on British pottery - *Identifying the Pottery of the Thames Foreshore*, a comprehensive guide to the many types of pottery commonly found by mudlarks. The book is modestly priced and is available for download on Etsy in PDF format. *Sherd (identifying Britain's Pottery, one piece at a time)* ISBN 9781399950176, is a much more comprehensive work covering the pottery of the British Isles from the Stone Age to 1900. It is available on Ebay or Etsy, or direct from the author,

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