

Face down in the mud: the conservation of the Tideway boots.

Press expectations versus salvaging the leather

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Introduction

In July 2018, a skeleton was found prone at the Chamber’s Wharf site during excavations for the Tideway Super Sewer. Discovering complete human skeletons is not unusual in London excavations, but this differed from most cases as it was found still wearing a pair of **knee-high leather boots**. In December of the same year, the story was released to the press and quickly went **viral**. Very little mention was made in the media as to how they were retrieved from site or stabilised.

The site

Chamber’s Wharf is a riverine site by London Bridge. The skeleton was found in a layer of alluvium with a high water content. This provided a favourable environment for the preservation of the leather. The conservation process started on-site when a block lift was required to lift the boots due to the **fragility** of the deteriorated material and the fact that the skeleton was wearing the objects. Because of the hot weather, it started drying quickly and was rewetted regularly until it could be transported to the laboratory.



Significance and condition

The condition of the leather was assessed using the Criterion Anchored Rating Scale (CARS) for flexibility, cohesion, friability and physical integrity. It scored a 6 out of 12 before treatment and progressed to a 9 after drying. The leather was brittle and friable, unable to support its own weight. The objects were fragmentary, the long bones and heels having protruded through the leather.

It was apparent that the boots were not cohesive objects and would have to be handled with extreme even after the drying process.

Construction and decoration of footwear can provide information on social status, gender, age and any potential foot related ailments. A consultation with a leather specialist at MOLA lead to the identification of most significant features:

- The uppers, soles and heels
- Any evidence of stitching
- Knee flaps

Results and discussion

- Leather is now **dry** and stable but very **friable** .
- The clay held the boot fragments together. Once the clay and the bones were removed, the complete boot shape desired for **media attention** was less distinct.
- Although the drying process was complete, the surface of the leather remained greasy to the touch as though the glycerol had not been completely absorbed.
- Essential features such as the folded flap and the construction of the sole and heel were successfully preserved for further analysis.
- It appeared that the structure of the leather was so deteriorated before treatment, that the glycerol had not absorbed completely, leaving excess on the surface.
- Some concerns about making the object look as complete as possible for the recorded media. The press release emphasized how intact and well preserved they were and made no mention of its very fragmentary state.
- Although a conservator was involved in the press releases and recording, conservation processes were not specifically recorded.

Conserving the leather

The current method in use to conserve wet leather at MOLA is to:

- Clean under running tap water
- Immerse in a 20% solution of water and glycerol for three days
- Drain and place overnight in a freezer
- Place in freeze-dryer until weight stabilises



The treatment differed only in its implementation and was adapted to the size of the object

- Releasing leather from soil block
- Clean the exposed surface and face with Japanese tissue paper **1**
- Pad the faced surface and flip the block
- Clean the new surface **2**

The boots overrode each other and could not be separated before the immersion

- Standard immersion in a glycerol solution on a larger scale **3**
- Overnight in freezer
- Freeze-dried until weight settled
- Further cleaning and consolidation

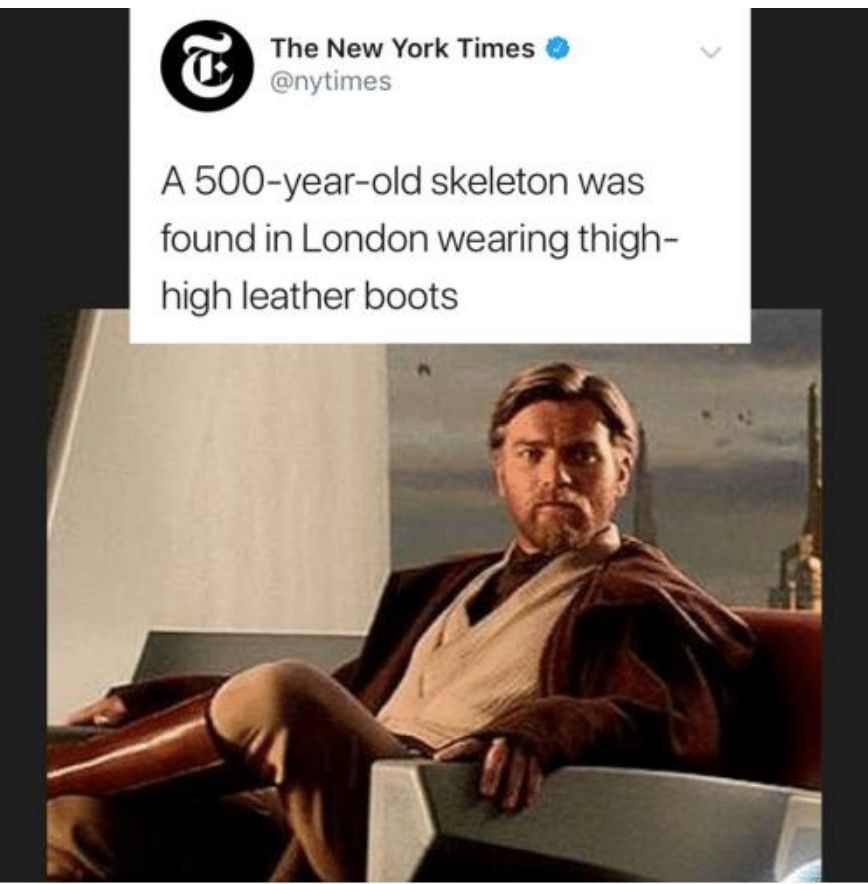


1

2

3

The boots in the public eye



These boots were made for walking—and surviving the ravages of time. In London, archaeologists discovered the 500-year-old skeleton of a man lying face down in the mud of the River Thames, wearing thigh-high leather boots that were basically still intact. History.com

leather boots that have been extremely well preserved over the last half century. Metro.co.uk

Kinky Boots, Geek.com

an 18th- or 19th-century child have been discovered there. And, thanks to the anaerobic nature of Thames' mud, such treasures found in the oxygen-free space are exceptionally preserved. But several features of the man's remains gave archaeologists pause. Smithsonian.com



perhaps waders. They were built to last: conservators revealed that they were reinforced with extra soles and stuffed with an unidentified material (possibly moss) perhaps to make them warmer or improve the fit. Medievalist.net

Ongoing conservation work on the boots will hopefully reveal more about material reality - what people wore, how they wore it, and their relationship with the dangerous river that has proven to be an incredible thread woven throughout history. Sciencealert.com



Durant des travaux menés sur les rives de la Tamise à Londres, des archéologues ont eu la surprise de tomber sur un squelette portant des bottes en cuir dans un excellent état de conservation. Geo.fr

Ses bottes, particulièrement résistantes, étaient quasiment intactes. 24matins.fr

bottes en cuir ayant particulièrement bien résisté au temps Cnews.fr

Face-down, one arm upflung, the only remnants of his clothing a pair of half-rotted, thigh-high black leather boots. Sciencealert.com

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