



Lithographed reproduction of an earlier woodcut with contemporary hand-colour, laid on card.

“ALL THE USUAL SPORTS AND FESTIVITIES OF A FAIR WERE KEPT UP FOR SEVERAL DAYS”... ON ICE

Frost Fair on the Thames in February, 1814.

Author

[ANONYMOUS]

Publication date

[20th century].

Publisher

Publication place

Physical description

Lithographed reproduction of an earlier woodcut with contemporary hand-colour, laid on card.

Dimensions

190 by 240mm. (7.5 by 9.5 inches).

Notes

The British Museum records an earlier impression of the original undamaged woodblock. The current example, printed in the early twentieth century, from a deteriorated woodblock includes a caption: “The beginning of the year 1814 was remarkable for the severity of the weather. In the beginning of February, the Thames being choked up with Ice, and in many places completely frozen over, Booths were erected in all directions between London and Blackfriars Bridges; Bullocks and Sheep were roasted whole, and all the usual Sports and Festivities of a Fair were kept up for several

days”, and together it appears to have been used to illustrate a German meteorological report in 1917.

The River Thames has been known to freeze over on several occasions, especially during the “Little Ice Age” of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, upon which the inhabitants of London took to the solid ice for business and pleasure. The most important of these “Frost Fairs” occurred in 695, 1608, 1683-4, 1716, 1739-40, 1789, and 1814. In 1684, during the Great Freeze of 1683-4, which was the longest in London’s history and during which the ice reached depths of around 28cm, the diarist John Evelyn recorded the attractions of the Frost Fair:

“Streets of Booths were set upon the Thames... all sorts of Trades and shops furnished, & full of Commodities... Coaches plied from Westminster to the Temple, and from several other stairs too and fro, as in the streets, sleds, sliding with skates, bull-baiting, horse and coach races, puppet plays and interludes, cooks, tippling and other lewd places, so that it seemed to be a bacchanalian triumph, or a carnival on water”.

Many of London’s printmakers capitalized on this carnival atmosphere by producing souvenirs of the great event. These included engraved scenes, portraits, poems and, perhaps most prolifically, personalized tickets, which gave attendees the opportunity to commemorate their trip onto the ice with a print bearing their own name.

During the fair of 1814, some printmakers actually installed their presses on the ice; their souvenirs, “printed on the River Thames”, were extremely popular. These tickets are all similar in style: they make clear that they were produced on the river itself, and several contain short verses to commemorate the event.

Bibliography

BM 1880,0911.1008 for earlier issue

Provenance

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