



Stipple engraving with contemporary hand-colour, laid on card.

THE FROST OF 1789

A view of the Thames, from Rotherhithe Stairs

Author

BIRCH, William,

Publication date

1789

Publisher

W.m Birch, Hampstead Heath, & sold by T. Thornton, Southampton Str.t Cov.t Garden

Publication place

[London],

Physical description

Stipple engraving with contemporary hand-colour, laid on card.

Dimensions

168 by 201mm. (6.5 by 8 inches).

Notes

One of the most memorable Frost Fairs on the frozen River Thames occurred in 1789, when vendors and entertainers set up all manner of stalls on the ice, from puppet-shows to pubs. One gingerbread

seller placed a sign beside his booth reading “no shop tax nor window duty”, in sardonic reference to William Pitt the Younger’s infamous tax regime. The merriment was also accompanied by tragedy, however, as the melting ice dragged away a ship which was anchored to a riverside pub in Rotherhithe. As reported in ‘Gentleman’s Magazine’ at the time:

“The captain of a vessel lying off Rotherhithe, the better to secure the ship’s cables, made an agreement with a publican for fastening a cable to his premises. In consequence, a small anchor was carried on shore, and deposited in the cellar, while another cable was fastened round a beam in another part of the house. In the night the ship veered about, and the cables holding fast, carried away the beam, and levelled the house with the ground, by which accident five persons asleep in their beds were killed.”

These prints were engraved and published with William Birch, after a painting by George Samuel, showing a view of the frozen Thames, ships beset by the ice, numerous attendees wandering around, and a large tent filled with people drinking. Above the makeshift tavern, a hanging cage bears the sign “The original Cat in the Cage by T. Roberts”.

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:

“Streetes of Boothes 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”.

Bibliography

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Provenance

Price: £750

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