

Etching with aquatint.

“THE THAMES PRESENTED A COMPLETE FIELD OF ICE”

The Fair on the Thames

Author
CLENNELL, Luke; and [Richard] REEVE

Publication date
1814.

Publisher
Hassall & Rickards, no 344 Strand and T & I Elveu, 63 Fleet Street and 30 Castle Street,

Publication place
London

Physical description
Etching with aquatint.

Dimensions
432 by 538mm (17 by 21.25 inches).

Notes
Clennell’s depiction of the Frost Fair on the frozen River Thames of 1814 became very popular and was published by numerous printers in London. He has captured the carnival atmosphere of the event, showing the wide range of the activities and entertainments enjoyed by all: from a band to a barbecue, fortunetelling to fairground rides; and even one of the many printing presses that worked on the ice to issue souvenirs.

People from all walks of life seem to be attending, with some dressed in suits and top hats, others in shawls and caps. On the left, the prow of a small boat is visible, held fast by the presumably thick ice that has formed around it. Some punters enjoy a ride on swing boats, a fair-ground attraction which gained popularity during the Victorian era. St. Paul's Cathedral and Blackfriars Bridge are visible in the background.

This example, aquatinted by Richard Reeve, has descriptive text below in both English and French, which is somewhat strange given the ardent hostilities between Britain and France at this time. The note records that "On Monday Jan 31, 1814 the Thames presented a complete field of ice between London and Blackfriars Bridges and on February the 4th a Fair was. Held, and the whole space between the two Bridges covered with thousands of spectators, attracted. By curiosity from all parts of London and its vicinity".

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".

The last Frost Fair took place between Blackfriars Bridge and London Bridge for four days at the beginning of February 1814. There was feasting, drinking, and activities such as nine-pin bowling, dancing, and swings. One of the highlights included an elephant being led across the river! On February the 5th, the fair ended when the ice began to break up, tragically resulting in several deaths. Since then, on account of the milder climate, the replacement of the Old London Bridge with a new one with wider arches, and the incremental embankment of the river, the Thames has not frozen over so completely as to allow another fair to take place upon it.

Bibliography
BM 1880,1113.1759

Provenance

Price: £5000

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