

Ice, ice, baby

What do you do when the Thames freezes solid? For the Stuarts and Georgians of London, the great frosts that descended on the city meant wrapping up and making merry, writes Deborah Nicholls-Lee

TREES split 'as if lightning-struck' and the seas were 'so locked up with ice, that no vessels could stir out or come in', recorded 17th-century diarist and courtier John Evelyn during the Great Frost of 1684. The biting cold caused misery and hardship, but, on the frozen River Thames, a 'bacchanalian triumph' was lifting spirits, he wrote, as 'a carnival on the water' drew intrepid pleasure seekers to its glassy surface.

Between 1607 and 1814, the Thames froze over some two dozen times, prompting seven major 'frost fairs', as these gatherings became known, and numerous minor ones. A procession of stalls fashioned from blankets and the ferrymen's now redundant oars were thrown up on the Thames, which acquired



the moniker 'Freezeland Street'. The festivities drew everyone to the ice, from peasants to princes, enticed by the jolly atmosphere, libations and wide-ranging diversions: skating, football, horse and coach races, bear-baiting and fox hunting, as well as puppet shows and plays performed on the decks of stranded barges. Indeed, the whole extravaganza had a theatricality about it. 'Behold the Wonder of this present Age, A Famous RIVER now becomes a Stage,' announced a woodcut sold on the river in 1684. 'Question not what I now declare to you, The Thames is now both Fair and Market too.'

Wider and shallower than today, the Thames froze more easily, particularly between London and Blackfriars bridges, the piers of which slowed the water. In some places, the ice was

so thick that oxen and sheep were roasted over an open fire. 'All sorts of men, women, and children went boldly upon the ice,' wrote chronicler Edmund Howes in 1611. 'Some shot at prickles [archery], others bowled and danced' or 'set up boothes and standings upon the ice, as fruit-sellers, victuallers, that sold beere and wine, shoemakers, and a barber's tent...'

Boatmen, their livelihood literally put on ice, played a key role, styling themselves as custodians of the Thames and taking up positions on its banks to charge entry to the festival. Some attached runners to their barges to take customers on sleigh rides, as others, as reported in *Saunders's News-Letter* on February 8, 1814, became impromptu tour guides: 'The Watermen taking advantage of this circumstance, placed notices at the

end of all streets leading to the City-side of the river, announcing a safe footway over the river, which, as might be expected, attracted an immense crowd to witness a scene so novel.'

Entrepreneurs of all trades were quick to monetise the spectacle. Merchandise, such as engraved tankards and spoons, was touted and printing presses were dragged onto the ice to sell attendees—including Charles II, who attended in January 1684—personalised keepsakes of the event. All involved sensed that they were participating in something extraordinary. Marked by an orange standard flapping in the icy wind, an 1814 press issued →

A festival on ice: London Bridge forms the backdrop to an action-packed, colourful 1680s frost fair on the frozen River Thames



The freeze that slowed time

The last time the Thames froze over was during the Big Freeze of 1962–63, when anticyclone winds from Siberia dragged British temperatures down to -20°C . Snow drifts formed up to 20ft deep, the sea froze on seaside promenades and at ferry ports and treacherous icicles hung from ledges like poised daggers. Yet there was a lighter side, too: skaters did figures of eight in front of Buckingham Palace, children built snowmen as high as houses, a milkman did his round on skis and one brave motorist drove his Austin 7 across the Thames in Oxford. The cold blast began in December and continued into March the following year, bringing the country to a near standstill. Even time seemed to slow: as the new year dawned, Big Ben's midnight chimes rang out nine minutes late due to the weight of ice on the hands.

notices urging customers to buy a souvenir: 'You that walk here, and do design to tell/ Your Children's Children what this Year befell,/ Come, buy this print, and it will then be seen/ That such a Year as this has seldom been.'

According to the 1814 book *Frostiana*, which chronicled the last frost fair and discourses on all things cold, from glaciers to snow baths, 'every day brought a fresh accession of pedlars to sell their wares; and the greatest rubbish of all sorts was raked up and sold at double and treble the original cost'. Even a preacher, we learn, capitalised on the crowds, 'holding forth to a motley congregation on the mighty waters, with a zeal fiery enough to have thawed himself through the ice'. Yet, *Frostiana* itself was no less opportunistic. It was sold to visitors to commemorate the occasion and made a big show of having printed the book's title page on the ice.

'The Little Ice Age led to crop failures, famine and social unrest'

The attendees of these merry frost fairs lived during the Little Ice Age, a period from the 14th to the 19th centuries when temperatures were uncommonly low, leading to crop failures, famine and social unrest. Abraham Hondius's painting *A Frost Fair on the Thames at Temple Stairs* depicts a celebration on the ice amid the coldest winter of all. Conveying the bitter cold by draping the Thames in a diaphanous white mist, the work was completed in 1684, temperatures that winter having reportedly nosedived to



The white stuff: there was only one way to make milk deliveries in the winter chill of 1962

a record -30°C . The Thames remained frozen for two months, its icy crust reaching a depth of nearly a foot. The painting depicts a trail of stalls stretching from one side of the river to the other, bordered by a fenced arena. Yet, as children play skittles and horse-drawn carriages convey visitors across the ice, a puddle hints at potential danger. Not everyone who took part in the revelries would make it home. *Frostiana* tells of a young plumber named Davis, who 'having imprudently ventured to cross with some lead in his hands... sank between two masses of ice, to rise no more'.

By the early 1800s, the Little Ice Age was drawing to a close and warmer temperatures were bringing the open-air gala to a natural end. When, in 1831, London Bridge's replacement was installed, with its broader arches and fewer piers, the water's faster pace sealed the frost fair's fate.

A slice of gingerbread cake, now at the London Museum, is a rare relic from the final frost fair of 1813–14, which, in a flamboyant

farewell, made a bold display of the Thames's resilience by marching an elephant across its marble-topped waters. On February 5, 1814, the chill that had enveloped London for weeks began to disperse, ending the celebrations abruptly. 'MAISTER ICE gave some loud cracks,' reports a witness in *Frostiana*, and 'this icy palace of Momus, this fairy frost work, was soon to be dissolved.' Fragments of the last frost fair began to drift away on the tide. A booth lit by candles broke free from the concourse, catching fire as it was propelled towards Blackfriars Bridge, and high winds and huge sheets of floating ice parted boats from their moorings, making scattered wrecks of them further downstream. Although some printing presses had already slipped through the ice, a fearless press operator with a fondness for puns seized one last sales opportunity, churning out an epitaph to the event, memorialising 'J Frost who began to expire this day Feb 5 1814', and pointing the finger at his attacker: 'A Thaw.' ❄️