

Frost fair: When an elephant walked on the frozen River Thames



It is 200 years ago since the last "frost fair" - an impromptu festival on a frozen Thames, complete with dancing, skittles and temporary pubs. Could such hedonism be repeated today?

Londoners stood on the Thames eating gingerbread and sipping gin. The party on the frozen river had begun on 1 February and would carry on for another four days.

The ice was thick enough to support printing presses churning out souvenirs. Oxen were roasted in front of roaring fires, drink was liberally taken and dances were held. An elephant was marched across the river alongside Blackfriars Bridge.

It was February 1814. George III was on the throne, Lord Liverpool was prime minister and the Napoleonic wars would soon be won.

People didn't know it then but this "frost fair" - a cross between a Christmas market, circus and illegal rave - would be the last. In the 200 years that have elapsed since, the Thames has never frozen solid enough for such hedonism to be repeated.

But between 1309 and 1814, the Thames froze at least 23 times and on five of these occasions -1683-4, 1716, 1739-40, 1789 and 1814 - the ice was thick enough to hold a fair.

The fair came about through necessity. London was the pre-eminent port in the world. But without a navigable Thames many livelihoods were at risk.

When the river froze, the watermen, who transported people along the Thames, and the lightermen, who moved goods, lost their ability to earn. They followed the tradition of their forbears and organised a frost fair, charging traders and punters for access to the ice.

The Times of 2 February 1814 reported that "in some parts the ice was several feet thick, while in others it was dangerous to venture upon". The action was focused between London Bridge and Blackfriars Bridge in the heart of the city.

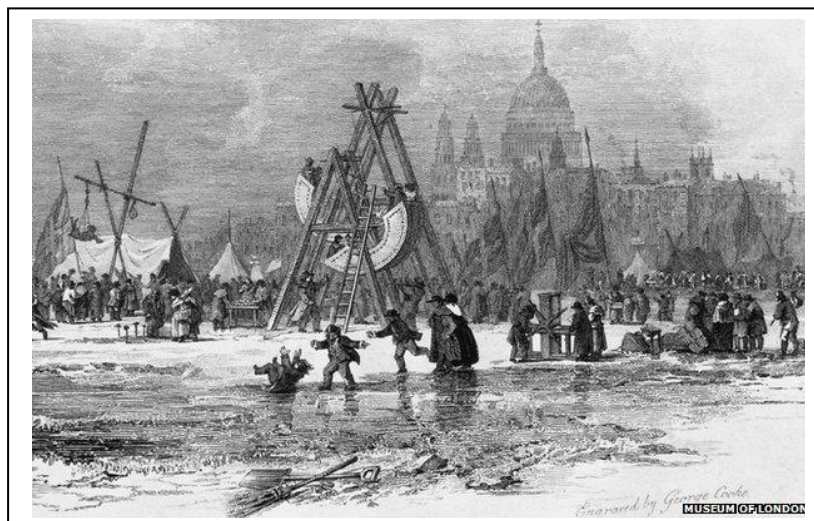


Activities were various. An illustration from 1864 shows figures "throwing at cocks", hunting a fox, bull-baiting, sledging and nine-pin bowling. By 1814 food and drink seemed to be the main draw.

The highlight was the roast ox. Food historian Ivan Day, who has tried to replicate the revellers' cooking techniques, says it would take over 24 hours to roast the animal in front of a fire. A single animal could have fed 800 people. Mutton was also served - both in slices and in mince pies.

Tea, coffee and hot chocolate were on sale. But alcohol permeated the occasion. Ginger bread vendors sold cups of gin. A particularly strong gin was called Old Tom - records describe it as "incredibly ardent".

There was Purl - a mix of gin and wormwood wine, similar to vermouth. It was drunk hot and "you'd get absolutely wrecked on it", Day says. There was also a "very spiky" beer called Mum infused with spices similar to a winter ale. The tents - made out of sails and propped up with oars - were called "fuddling tents" for the ruinous effect of the strong liquor.



The temporary pubs - like modern day pop-ups - had interesting names. In 1814, one was called The City of Moscow to reflect the freezing conditions. "It was very boisterous," Day says. "It was fun, very drunken and there was a lot of cheating people out of money going on."