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FROST FAIRS ON THE THAMES

News of the recent severe cold spell in England recalls the fact that not since the year 1814 have Londoners held a "frost fair" on the frozen surface of the Thames. In former times there were several of these events, and there is an extensive literature concerning them. The earliest was that which began at the close of the year 1564. Says Holinshed's Chronicle:

"On New Year's even people went over and along the Thames on the ice from London Bridge to Westminster. Some played at football as boldly there as if it had been on dry land. Divers of the court, being daily at Westminster, shot at pricks set upon the Thames; and the people, both men and women, went daily on the Thames in greater numbers than in any street of the City of London."

A much greater fair occurred in January, 1608. Many booths and tents were set up on the ice for the sale of food and liquors, and some of them, it is said, had fires in them. The great fair of 1683-4 lasted from the beginning of December to the 5th of February. Evelyn has described this fair at considerable length in his diary. King Charles with several others of the royal household visited the sports on the river and had their names printed on one of the several presses installed on the ice. During the fair of 1715-16 printing presses were again in operation on the river. Many documents printed on the ice at this time and also during the fair of 1739-40 have been preserved.

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