"A Presse to print where Men so oft were droun'd": self-reference and the visual culture of the Thames 'frost fairs', 1683 – 1814.

Paper delivered at the SASSY symposium, Saturday 1st February, 2014.

Though traders and revellers had for centuries been attracted to the novel space occasioned by the freezing over of the Thames, in 1683 a new sort of tradesman – the printer – wheeled his wares onto the ice, creating a new genre of print whose novelty and attraction lay in its claim to have been "printed upon the ice". As well as providing the first opportunity for those not associated with the trade to actually *see* the mechanical process of printing – the products of which were infiltrating all walks of life in the metropolis – many of these traders offered *personalisation*, the opportunity for your name to be printed for posterity. Crucially, all of the images included a printed boast of their having been "printed on the ice", the intriguing self-reference of which is at the core of this paper.

The first recorded instance of a frost-fair "proper" over the Thames (that is, not just an account of people or horses moving on the ice), occurs in the winter of 1608-9, a view of which is provided by this contemporary woodcut (Fig. 1). It includes many of the attractions which would appear in the later frost fairs: drunken revelry; games; services (such as this barber) and vendors – at a later fair, an ingenious entrepreneur roasted a sheep and sold it as "Lapland Mutton", albeit for double what you would expect to pay on land: so, ordinary life – or at least an approximation of it - in an extraordinary place.

However, what makes the fair of 75 years later, in 1683-4, so exciting, is the migration of printers and their presses into this new part of the city: a feature of the fair which has, admittedly, been much discussed – from John Evelyn's 1684 diary entries, through pamphlet *An Account of All the Principal Frosts*, (Fig. 2), by the suspiciously named Icedore Frostiface, to the current Frost Fair exhibition showing at the Museum of London. The frost fairs discussed here will be the six which occurred between the arrival of the printer on the ice in 1683, and the replacement of 'Old London Bridge' in 1831 with the current structure, the wider arches of which allow the river to flow more freely, and thus prevent the river freezing.

The Thames frost fairs continue to capture both the popular and academic imagination, spreading over many disciplines: literary historians have worked on the ballads in the souvenir broadsides: (Fig. 3; Fig. 4). One of my favourite lines from this genre is "Beer, Ale, Tobacco, Apples, Nuts and Figs / There might be Cakes and roasted Pigs", which I feel is a fairly representative sample of the very high literary standard of these poems! – Meteorologists, cartographers, and social historians too have clambered onto the academic space of the ice and set out their stalls. Yet - despite the extraordinary aesthetics of the fairs themselves, as spectacles, and the incredible visual culture that sprang up around them, art historians have been largely missing from this debate – with the important exception of Joseph Monteyne, whose work on these images and the liminal spaces in which they were produced has been invaluable.

At the heart of what I want to talk about today is the *location* of printing, the intangible add-on that gave – and still *gives* - these scraps of paper their value – perhaps a bit like a Polaroid photograph, which both records, and participates in, its own content. Of course, it was standard for an early modern printed piece of material to state where, when by and for whom it was printed. But the difference here is, in images like this (Fig. 5; Fig. 6), the *reason for the print's*

existence is to impart its printed status. Rather than being an incidental vehicle for the communication of information, here the "printedness" of the image is its content – and the content is its "printedness". This occurs in varying degrees, and in various ways, throughout the different sorts of images.

The topographical broadsides, combinations of image and text functioned as a multi-purpose, interactive souvenir guide. You might use the top part as a sort of map, especially versions with an A-Z key to the attractions (which included, in 1739, a makeshift pub called *The Flying Piss Pot*). The lower part, usually in crude rhyming couplets, might be sung *in situ* by you and your party, or re-read nostalgically at a later date – and such nostalgia would of course be helped by the fact that the broadside, like your afternoon out, was produced in the middle of the Thames. Of course the "printing" going on in the fair is always referred to in the text (most dramatically in the line used in this paper's title, "A Presse to Print where men so oft were Droun'd"). The printing booths are also referred to visually: stalls labelled as "the printing press" are often placed right in the centre of the view of the fair.

Furthermore, the threefold shared impermanence of the ice, the miniature city upon it, and the very paper of the souvenir, is crucial to the self-reference used by the image, and thus integral to its appeal: although there is a certain irony in the fact that these (often low-quality) pieces of paper were being sold as enduring mementoes – as exemplified by the ticket of Mrs Sarah Baker, (Fig. 7), which is one of the tattier surviving souvenirs: there's something very interesting going on in the mind of the eighteenth-century fair-goer who chooses to "immortalise" themselves in a piece of ephemera. The fair's appeal lay in its transitory nature, its fundamental mutability; the stalls were made out of watermen's oars and sails, and were as impermanent as the ice they stood on. That the tickets themselves share these qualities is surely not coincidental.

Perhaps the King print-type in this body of visual culture is one from the 1715-16 fair, here purchased by Mr William Robins. (Fig. 8). Incredibly, at the top of the images are portraits of, arguably, two of the most important men in the history of print – Johannes Gutenberg, who brought moveable type to Europe in the fifteenth century, and William Caxon, who brought the printing press to England not long after. By having your name inscribed next to these legends of print, is to demand your own place in printing history, to emphasise a new, modern era of accessible print. The format s indebted to the content: and the content is a result of the format.

It has been widely acknowledged, by Miles Ogborn and others, that these tickets are the *first secular souvenirs* to be mass-produced in early-modern England: of course, no discussion of these images would be complete without reference to Walter Benjamin's theory of souvenirs as "secular relics", and the comparison between relics and the tickets under discussion is certainly an interesting one – just as a relic is (supposedly) unique whilst at the same time having been drawn from a body which has produced *other* relics, these tickets are "unique" items, but "unique" items whose value comes from being part of a wider "body" of print – the same effect could not be achieved by something "handwritten" on the ice. Like medieval relics, their special-ness was derived from personal proximity to the items, via an appreciation for where the objects had been.

The construction of 'new' London Bridge in the first half of the nineteenth century means that the frost fairs which express themselves with print fall neatly into, and could perhaps even

define, what we call the “long eighteenth century” – in this case, 1683 - 1814. We might even be able to use these fairs, to elucidate the long problematized shift between “early modern” and simply “modern” – or, if not to elucidate it (because, after all, such periodization is just a construct), perhaps to allegorize it. Joseph Monteyne has suggested that this “decisive early modern transformation will be seen to emerge at the centre of this marginal space” i.e the frost fair: I’d like to suggest that the fair’s role as a site for a new, emerging modernity is tied up with the relentless self-reference of its images – a concept which has been hitherto unexplored, despite the scholarly attention the fairs have received.

This is a splendid commemorative mug, from 1683-4. (Fig. 9). To my knowledge, this is the only item of its kind to survive from any of the fairs included in this survey, and they are certainly not referred to in the large literature which surrounds the fair. Londoners were instead attracted to, even obsessed by*, printing*, a process which became visible at, and helped to visualise, the frost fairs. It was self-reference that they were looking for in their souvenirs: the tickets reflected their experience: they were produced at the same time, in the same space. For those who had their names printed on the tickets, it was a souvenir which operated on two levels: it was an assertion of personal identity, a “unique” item… but one produced by printing – the purpose of which is usually to produce lots of things that look the same. The fact that printing is usually something which works to duplicate, rather than create, is also significant – the tickets emphasise the fair as a social space in which the ticket-holder participates, whilst also literally inscribes their autonomy.

If, like me, you’re interested in the location of meaning in images, then the mass popularity of visual material in which the sign and the signified are the same, is enormously fascinating. I would argue that these self-referential ephemeral fragments represent more than just a new commercial enterprise, but rather embody a new approach to meaning.

Thanks for listening.

Illustrations

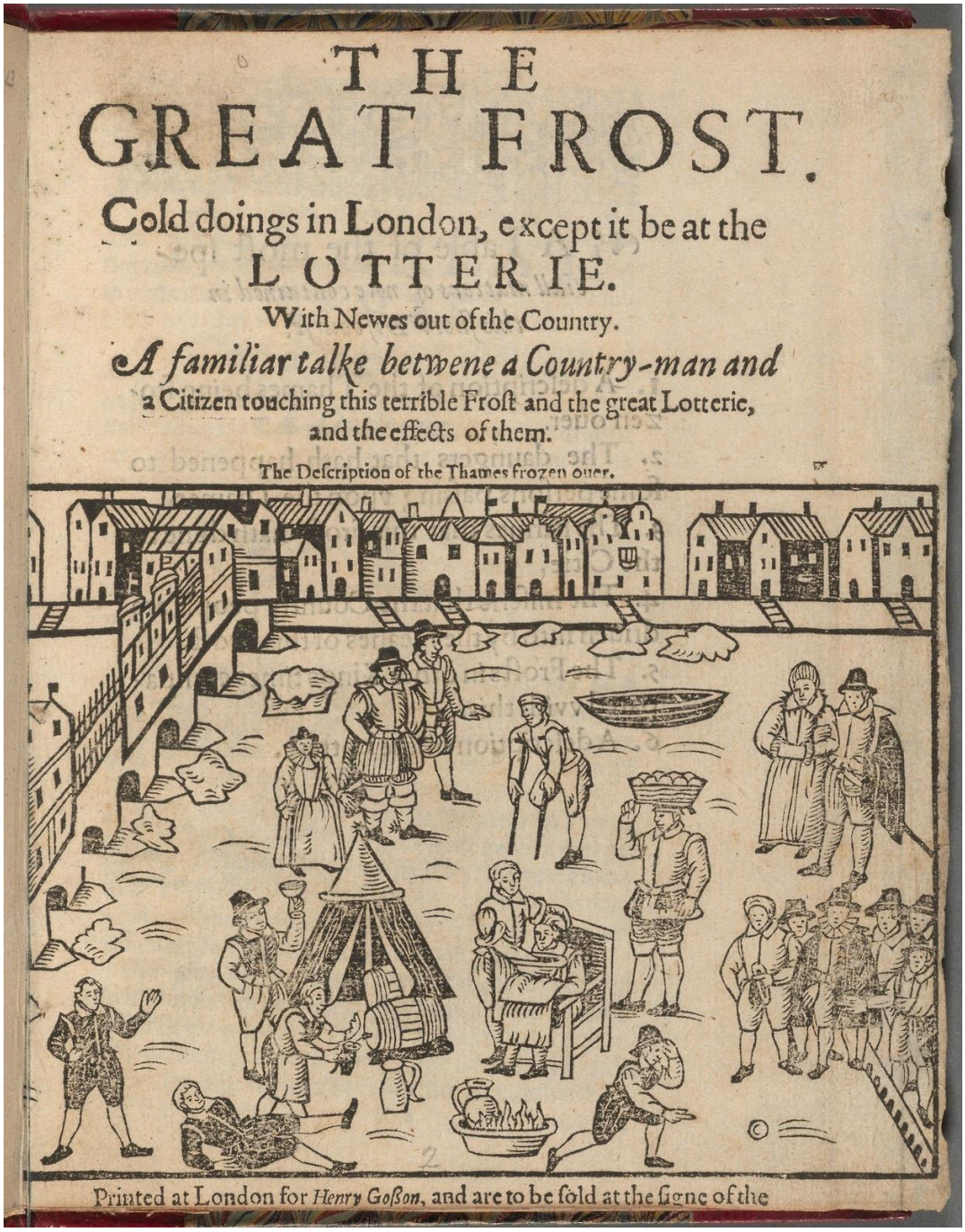


Fig. 1. *The Great Frost: Cold Doings in London*. Woodcut, 1608, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

AN

ACCOUNT

OF ALL THE

Principal FROSTS for above an Hundred Years paſt:

WITH

Political Remarks and Poetical Deſcriptions.

To which are added,

A Philoſophical Theory of FREEZING;

AND

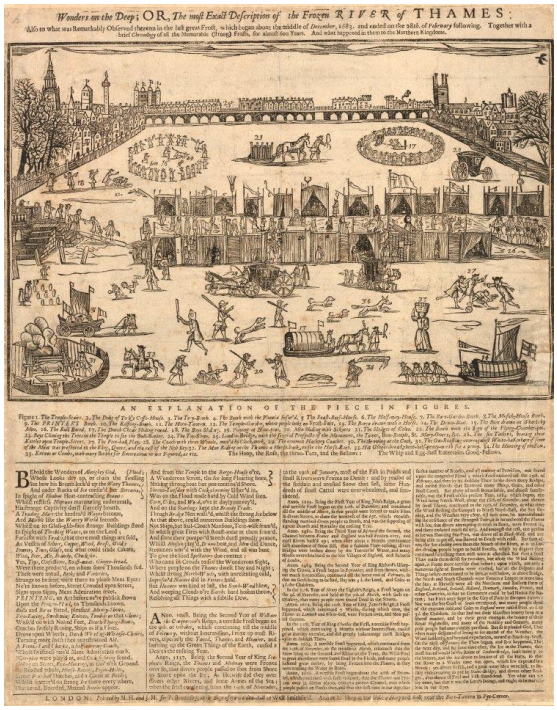
A Frigid Eſſay upon FROST-FAIR.

By ICEDORE FROSTIFACE, of *Freeſland*, Aſtrologer.

No longer THAMES *the Shores of* London *laves,*
But Chains of Ice conſtrain his riſing Waves;
A rugged Proſpect the wide Surface crowns,
Rocks, Ruins, Boats infix'd, and Men, and Towns.

Printed and Sold at the *Goldeen King's-Head* Printing-Booth, in *Froſt-Fair*; and by C. CORBETT, Publiſher, over-againſt *St. Dunſtan's* Church, *Fleet-Street*. 1740.
Price Sixpence.

Fig. 2. Frontispiece of *An Account of all the Principal Frosts.* (London, 1740).

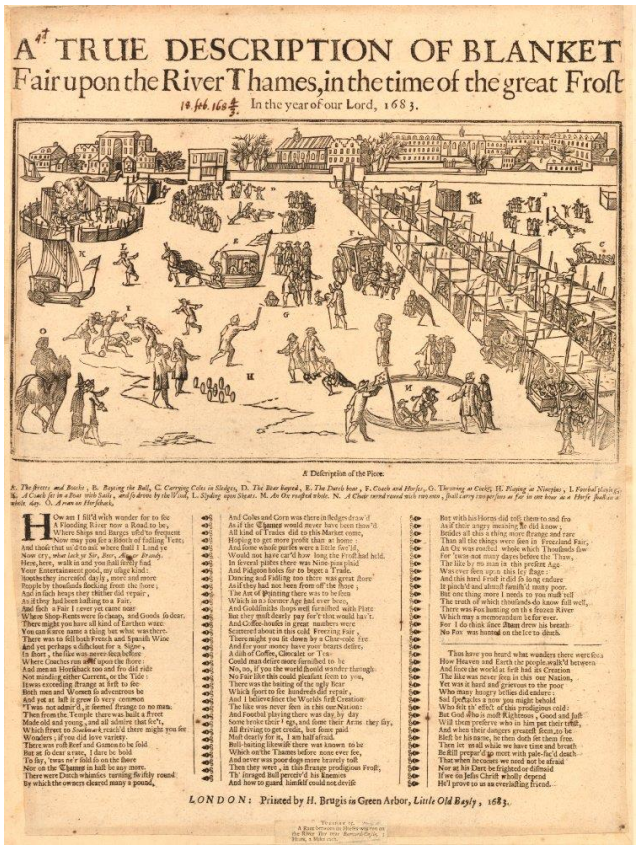


Wonders on the Deep; OR, The most Exact Description of the Frozen RIVER of THAMES:

AN EXPLANATION OF THE PIECE IN FIGURES.

LONDON: Printed by H. Bruges in Green Arbor, Little Old Bayly, 1683.

Fig. 3. *Wonders on the Deep; Or, The most Exact Description of the Frozen River of Thames*. Letterpress and woodcut, 1683, British Museum.



A TRUE DESCRIPTION OF BLANKET Fair upon the River Thames, in the time of the great Frost

In the year of our Lord, 1683.

A Description of the Piece.

LONDON: Printed by H. Bruges in Green Arbor, Little Old Bayly, 1683.

Fig. 4. *A True Description of Blanket Fair upon the River Thames*. Letterpress and woodcut, 1683, British Museum.

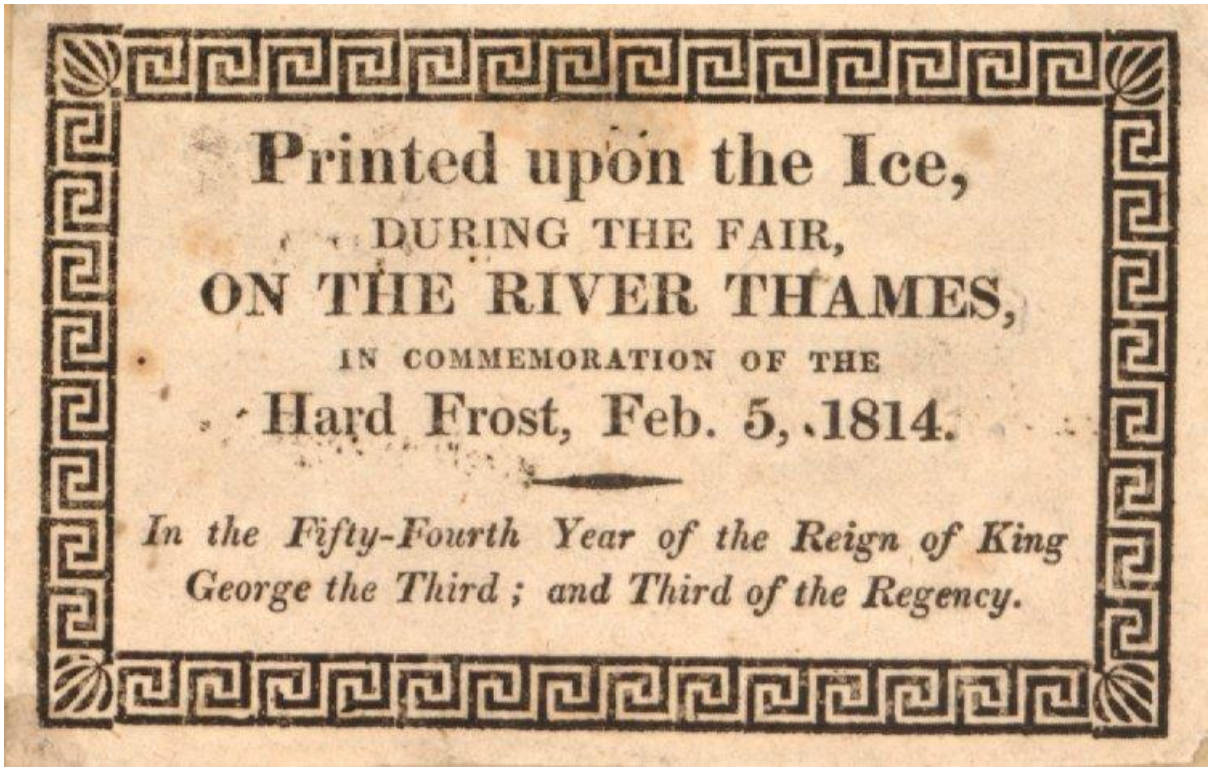
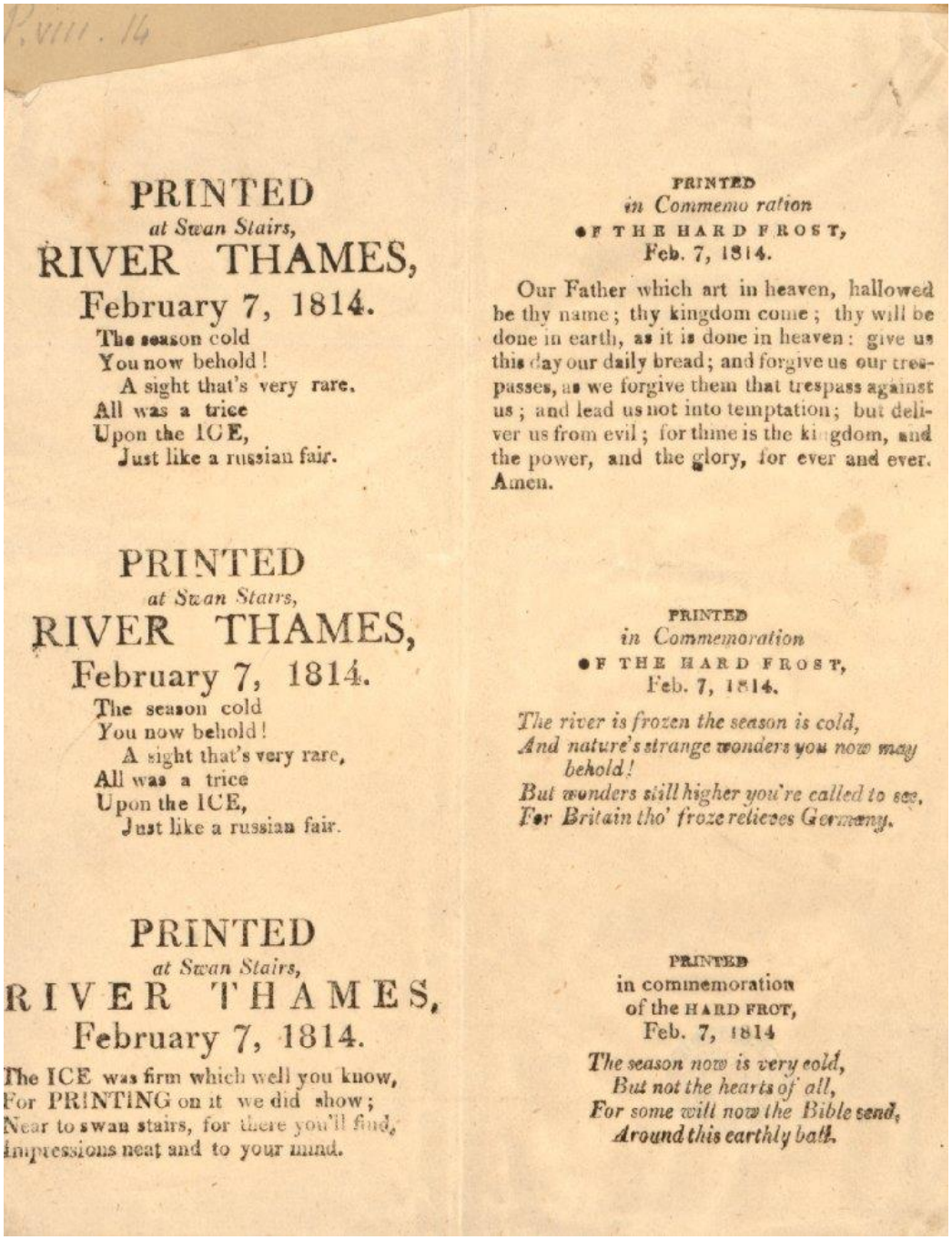


Fig. 5. *Unaddressed ticket with royal dedication*. Letterpress with woodcut border, 1814, British Museum.



PRINTED
at Swan Stairs,
RIVER THAMES,
February 7, 1814.

The season cold
You now behold!
A sight that's very rare.
All was a trice
Upon the ICE,
Just like a russian fair.

PRINTED
in Commemo ration
OF THE HARD FROST,
Feb. 7, 1814.

Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done in earth, as it is done in heaven: give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

PRINTED
at Swan Stairs,
RIVER THAMES,
February 7, 1814.

The season cold
You now behold!
A sight that's very rare,
All was a trice
Upon the ICE,
Just like a russian fair.

PRINTED
in Commemoration
OF THE HARD FROST,
Feb. 7, 1814.

The river is frozen the season is cold,
And nature's strange wonders you now may behold!
But wonders still higher you're called to see,
For Britain tho' froze relieves Germany.

PRINTED
at Swan Stairs,
RIVER THAMES,
February 7, 1814.

The ICE was firm which well you know,
For PRINTING on it we did show;
Near to swan stairs, for there you'll find,
impressions neat and to your mind.

PRINTED
in commemoration
of the HARD FROT,
Feb. 7, 1814

The season now is very cold,
But not the hearts of all,
For some will now the Bible send,
Around this earthly ball.

Fig. 6. *Uncut sheet of fair souvenirs*. Letterpress, 1814, British Museum.

Fig. 7. *Souvenir of Mrs Sarah Baker*. Letterpress and engraving (?), 1715, Museum of London.

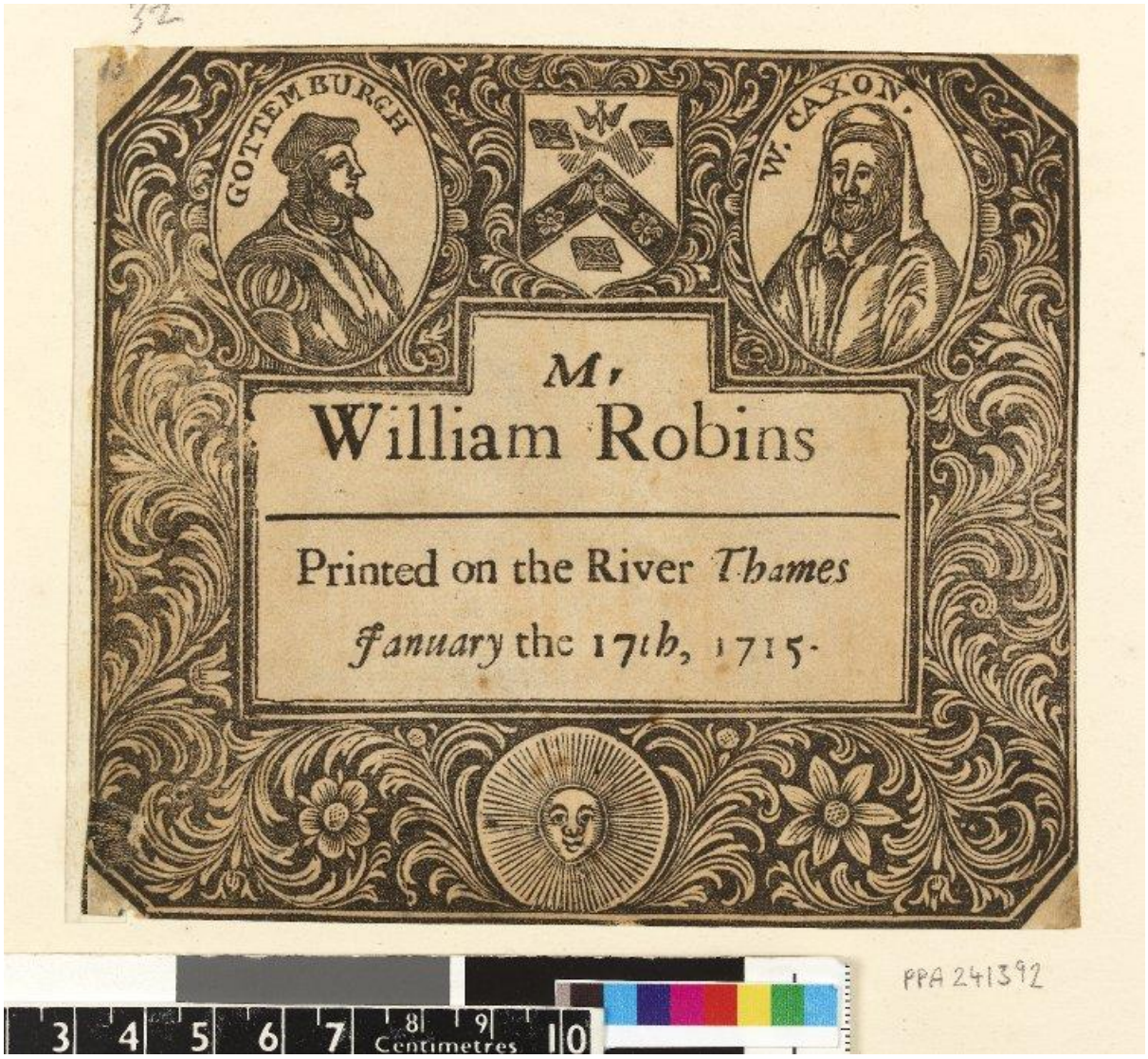


Fig. 8. *Souvenir of Mr William Robins, with 'Gottemburgh' and Caxon*. Letterpress and woodcut, 1715, British Museum.

Fig. 9. *Frost Fair Mug.* Glass with silver mount, 1683, V & A.