A Provincial Frost Fair: Urban Space, Sociability and Spectacle in Shrewsbury during the Great Frost of 1739

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ABSTRACT

This article uses a contemporary print, antiquarian histories and newspapers to examine the frost fair that took place on the River Severn at Shrewsbury during the great frost of 1739. By comparing the Shrewsbury frost fair with others that were organised on the Rivers Thames, Ouse and Tyne (for which printed handbills survive), it demonstrates how Shrewsbury’s mirrored other frost fairs held during the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It included printing activities, promenading and sociability, as well as spectacles, notably Robert Cadman a ‘flying man’ who entertained the crowds, before plummeting to his death. The paper highlights an aspect of eighteenth-century culture by showing the transient nature of entertainments, urban spaces and forms of sociability and spectacle and argues that historians should consider frost fairs in localities outside London as events which provide insights into provincial urban culture.

Frost fairs in early modern England

Frost fairs have long attracted the attention of geographers and historians of climate and weather who have focused principally on those which were held on the River Thames in London and other major European rivers. During the Little Ice Age, which occurred between the mid-fourteenth and nineteenth centuries, the climate of England and Europe was significantly colder. There was a long succession of severe winters with heavy snow and...
thick ice often lasting several months which enabled a series of frost fairs to be held on the Thames in London. They were, of course, weather dependent and essentially climatic events.

Anecdotal evidence about the freezing of the Thames has been cited as being indicative of past climatic conditions with ‘freeze-overs’ and ‘frost fairs’ being recorded on no fewer than 23 occasions between 1408 and 1814. Reviewing the progress of historical climatology, Jones has pointed out that the wider arches of the new London Bridge completed in 1831 allowed the river to flow more freely, thereby reducing the likelihood of ice building up.

Frost fairs have attracted much popular interest, but remain largely neglected by historians. They are described in contemporary accounts like that of John Stowe (1524/5-1605), Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) and John Evelyn (1620–1706), as well as graphically depicted in numerous artistic works, such as those of the Dutch painter Abraham Hondius (1631-91). There are also printed ballads, handbills and woodcuts of the frost fairs held in the collections of the British Library, British Museum, Museum of London, Bodleian Library and Ashmolean Museum. These popular prints can essentially be interpreted as a form of cultural production. As Behringer has noted:

The frost fairs on the Thames became famous in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries: as soon as the ice could bear the weight, life in the capital city of London moved onto the river, complete with trading booths and winter sports. Even eating houses were set up there with open fires. The scene was so spectacular that it has been handed down to us in numerous woodcuts, copperplate engravings and oil paintings.

Consequently mainly art historians and literary scholars have examined the ballads and broadsides associated with the frost fairs and these events have also been mentioned in passing by historians of London.

Monteyne’s book, *The Printed Image in Early Modern London*, is the first significant academic study to consider the 1683-4 frost fair (the so-called ‘Blanket Fair’ which refers to the use of bedclothes and poles to construct tents upon the ice) with regard to print culture and the supposed ‘re-imagining of the city’. He argued that the frost was, ‘Comparable to plague and fire’, being ‘an unexpected natural intervention that descended upon the city and

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2The Central England Temperature series compiled by Gordon Manley (1902-80) which extends back to 1659 records the occurrence of numerous severe winters. G. Manley, Central England Temperatures: monthly means 1659 to 1973; Quarterly Journal of the Royal Meteorological Society, 100 (1974), 389-405. The monthly mean temperature for January, February and March 1740 was -2.8, -1.6 and 3.9°C respectively, see <http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/hadobs/hadcet/cetml1659on.dat> [accessed 7 March 2018]. For a history of English weather, see r.W. Jeffery, *Was it Wet or Fine? Being an Account of English Weather from Chronicles, Diaries and Registers* (Oxford: National Meteorological Library and Archive, 1933). Unpublished manuscript, National Meteorological Library and Archive, 551.506 part I and II. Chapter I concerns Frost and Snow, 1-122.

3P. Jones, ‘Historical climatology – a state of the art review’, *Weather*, 63 (2008), 182-3.

4Jones, ‘Historical climatology’, 182-3.

5For the 1683-4 London frost fair, see M. Srigley, ‘The Great Frost Fair of 1683-4’, *History Today*, 10, 12 (1960), 848-55. For a popular book, see I. Currie, *Frosts, Freezes and Fairs: Chronicles of the Frozen Thames and Harsh Winters in Britain from 1000 AD* (Coulson: Frosted Earth, 1996).

6For example, see *Annales; or, A general chronicle of England begun by John Stow, continued unto the ende of this present yeare 1614*, by Edmund Howes (An appendix or corollary of the universities of England, viz.: Cambridge, Oxford and London) (London: R. Meighen, 1631-2), 892-3; *The diary of Samuel Pepys* transcribed by M. Bright from the shorthand manuscript in the Pepysian Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge edited, with additions by H.B. Wheatley (London: George Bell and Sons, 1893-1899), vols. 1. 288, 2. 402, 405, 5. 176-7, 180, 185 and 6. 119; *The Diary of John Evelyn* ed. by E.S. de Beer (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 762-3. For Hondius, see J. Monteyne, *The Printed Image in Early Modern London: Urban Space, Visual Representation, and Social Exchange* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 224-7.

7For a nineteenth century discussion of these, see Old ballads illustrating the great frost of 1683-4, and the fair on the Thames collected and edited by Edward F. Rimbault (London: the Percy Society, 1834), ix-x, 1-38.

8Behringer, *Cultural History of Climate*, 91.

9For a history of London, see P. Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), 426.

10Monteyne, *Printed Image*; see chapter 5, ‘The Frost Fair of 1683-1684: print culture and the city re-imagined’, 215-57.
altered its face, giving rise to re-imaginings of urban space and social relations.11 Moreover, he tentatively claimed that the frost fair was equivalent to the seventeenth and eighteenth century coffee houses in the way that it formed a ‘heterogeneous and shifting space’ where popular print was produced and circulated.12 This provides a useful starting point of comparison, both in terms of the prominence of printing and print in contemporary society and how such visual representations can be interpreted. It offers a London-specific model of the format of a seventeenth-century frost fair, which has established the parameters of analysis for frost fairs more generally.

Andrew’s chronology of Famous Frosts and Frost Fairs in Great Britain is the most comprehensive list of frost fairs that have occurred throughout England.13 More recently, Kington has referred to the River Tyne freezing in 1740 and 1814 and remarked that in 1684 ‘Other English rivers frozen included the Trent and Tees, on which a tent was erected and sheep roasted; the intense frost lasting over 50 days.’14 Frost fairs were not just an English phenomenon, but occurred more widely in Europe. An engraving, with accompanying verses, of the 1670 frost fair held on the River Scheldt was printed at Antwerp in the Netherlands.15 Dutch artists in particular frequently painted winter landscape scenes.

Whilst the frost fairs in London are reasonably well documented, considerably less is known about comparable events in provincial town and urban settings throughout England. How widespread were such frost fairs elsewhere in provincial England? Inspired by an engraving held at Shrewsbury Museum by an anonymous artist entitled ‘A Prospect of the Town of Shrewsbury taken as it appeared in the Great Frost 1739’ (Figure 1), this article examines a provincial frost fair held on the River Severn at Shrewsbury which was undergoing a transition from a manufacturing and market centre to a ‘leisure town’.16

It considers to what extent the London frost fairs were replicated in provincial Midland centres like Shrewsbury and whether similarities and differences can be identified. It argues that historians need to consider provincial frost fairs, evidence of which is perhaps less widely available, but can nevertheless be identified, providing an alternative perspective to those that were held on the River Thames. The study of frost fairs can inform our understanding of broader historical processes, telling us much about the nature of urban space and practices of sociability and spectacle in the eighteenth century.

11Monteyne, *Printed Image*, 215.
12Monteyne, *Printed Image*, 230. For comparison, see chapter 1, “A Thousand Monster Opinions”: Producing the Space of the Coffee-House’, 31-72.
13W. Andrews, *Famous Frosts and Frost Fairs in Great Britain. Chronicled from the earliest to the present time* (London: George Redway, York Street, Covent Garden, 1887).
14J. Kington, *Climate and Weather* (Collins New Naturalist Library, Book 115) (London: Harper Collins, 2010), 274.
15British Library, London (hereafter BL), General Reference Collection C.20.f.2.(163.).
16A. McInnes, ‘The emergence of a leisure town: Shrewsbury 1660–1760’, *Past & Present*, 120 (1988), 53-87. This paper builds on the blog, ‘Getting into the archive – Shrewsbury in ‘The Great Frost’ of 1739’, <http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/weather-extremes/2014/03/10/getting-into-the-archive-shrewsbury-in-the-great-frost-of-1739/> [accessed 7 March 2018] and ‘A provincial frost fair and an ill-fated stuntman’, *Salopian Recorder* (September 2016), 2-3.
The engraving shows a panoramic view of Shrewsbury in the winter of 1739 during the so-called great frost when a fair was held on the River Severn. Whilst the term ‘great frost’ has been applied to several extremely cold winters, the frost that lasted from Christmas 1739 until March 1740 was exceptional, being the coldest for over two hundred years and the second coldest winter after 1684 since English instrumental recording began. Antiquarians and historians of Shrewsbury referred to the great frost: the most prominent commentators were Hugh Owen (1761-1827), Archdeacon of Shropshire and John Brickdale Blakeway.
(1765-1826), who in their *A History of Shrewsbury* published in 1825 wrote, ‘The great frost began on Christmas eve, and continued till March, thirteen weeks. The river Severn was froze up, and a tent was erected thereon, a sheep roasted, a printing-press set to work, &c.’ They also referred to the existence of the print commenting that, ‘There is an engraved view of the town taken as it appeared at that time.’ Furthermore it was noted ‘A rude engraving of the scene is now in the possession of Mr. Lawrence of St. Alkmond’s Churchyard.’ An entry in *The Antiquary* in 1892 refers to two oil paintings that hung in the town museum then located in the Free Grammar School, one of which was of the town during the great frost of 1739, although it was written: ‘They are of no artistic merit, but a comparison shows that they are reliable.’ At an exhibition of Shropshire antiquities held at the Music Hall, an important social and culture venue in Shrewsbury during the nineteenth century, between 10-21 May 1898 a print titled ‘Prospect of the Town of Shrewsbury, taken as it appeared in the great frost, 1739’ was loaned by Mr. R.W.O. Withers of Shrewsbury, whilst the mayor, Mr. E. Corbett and Shrewsbury Corporation lent an ‘Old Oil Painting’ of the same title.

But why was the engraving produced, how does it compare with the other traditional views of the town, and what difference did the frost fair make to life in Shrewsbury? This south-westerly view of Shrewsbury is a traditional viewpoint from which the town rises steeply from the River Severn, although this is perhaps not that obvious given the high perspective from which the engraving was made. Contemporary engravers and printmakers such as Samuel (1696-1779) and Nathaniel Buck (d. between 1759 and 1774) (Figure 2) and William Wynne Ryland (1738-1784) similarly produced south-west prospect views of Shrewsbury showing the surrounding topography, in particular the Quarry.

This view differs in that it was drawn from a different angle as indicated by the line of trees and from a higher perspective, with more emphasis on the townscape. John Bowen (d. 1773) is another artist who painted panoramic or bird’s eye views of Shrewsbury and the local area. Several of his works are in Shropshire Museum Service’s collection displayed at Shrewsbury

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19H. Owen and J.B. Blakeway, *A History of Shrewsbury*, vol. 1 (London: Harding, Lepard, and Co., 1825), 582. The great frost is recorded in T. Phillips, *The History and Antiquities of Shrewsbury: From its first Foundation to the present Time. Containing A recital of Occurrences and remarkable Events, for above Twelve Hundred Years. With an Appendix, Containing several Particulars relative to Castles, Monasteries, &c. in Shropshire* (Shrewsbury: Printed and sold by T. Wood. Sold also by G. Robinson, Bookseller, No. 25, Pater-Noster-Row London, 1779), 213. Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury (hereafter SA), q. D.64; H. Owen, *Some Account of the Ancient and Present State of Shrewsbury* (First printed 1808 by P. Sandford (bookseller), Shrewsbury. Republished by E.J. Morten, 10 Warburton Street, Didsbury, Manchester, 1972), 264-5. For Owen and Blakeway, see G.C. Baugh, ‘Shropshire’ in C.R.J. Currie and C.P. Lewis (eds.), *A Guide to English county histories* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 340-1. There is some variation in the duration of the great frost, as whilst Owen and Blakeway state that it lasted for thirteen weeks, manuscript notes on history of Shrewsbury detail that it lasted from Christmas Day until Candlemas (2 February) and that it froze again continuing until the beginning of March, a period of eight weeks in total. The notes also refer to walking, printing and ‘Several other things’ which were ‘done upon the ice, at that Time.’ SA, 6001/299 f. 73v.

20Owen and Blakeway, *Shrewsbury*, vol. 1, 582.

21Phillips, *History and Antiquities of Shrewsbury*, 266.

22J. Ward, ‘Notes on Archaeology in Provincial Museums. No. 10 – Shrewsbury’, *The Antiquary: A Magazine Devoted to the Study of the Past*, 25 (1892), 245-7.

23Shropshire Archaeological Society. Catalogue of the Loan Exhibition of Shropshire Antiquities, Music Hall Buildings, Shrewsbury, May 10-21, 1898. Opened by the Right Hon. Lord Kenon. Rev. T. Auden, M.A. F.S.A., Chairman of Committee. E.C. Peele, Esq., D.L. Hon. Treasurer. Compiled and arranged by H.R.H. Southam, Esq., F.R.Hist.S., Hon. Sec., *Trans. Salop. Arch. & Nat. Hist. Soc.* Second Series, 10 (Special Exhibition Part) (Printed for the Society. Shrewsbury: Adnitt and Naunton, The Square and Oswestry: Woodall, Minshall and Co., 1898), 70, 74-5; *VCH Salop*, vi, l, 267. On the Music Hall, *VCH Salop*, vi, l, 267 states: ‘Throughout the 19th century it was the venue for public celebrations, balls, ceremonial dinners, and exhibitions.’

24SA, PR/4/45; BL, Maps K.Top.36.18.1.a b.; R. Hyde, ‘Buck, Samuel (1696–1779)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3850> [accessed 7 March 2018].
Museum and Art Gallery. In the late nineteenth century influential local figures purchased artistic works by subscription and presented them to the emerging Shrewsbury Museum.

Despite the uniqueness of the frost, the engraving is a conventional eighteenth century view of Shrewsbury that foregrounds the fair and the townscape. Whilst it has not been used to study the frost fair it has incidentally been used by historians and archaeologists to gain insight into the architecture and built environment of the town. Equally important is how the engraving served as a valuable visual historical representation of the event. A critical evaluation of this image is necessary because it is an artistic portrayal which is subject to bias, inaccuracies and interpretation. Late eighteenth and early nineteenth century engravings of towns were produced in order to present them in a positive image, as Sweet has pertinently observed, ‘Engravings of town scenes, which illustrated urban histories, guide books and travel literature, all depicted wide, clean streets, with ample lighting, impressive buildings, with classical facades, and human figures fashionably dressed or seated in a sedan chair’.

The engraving shows the medieval town walls delineating the built-up area which appear to be intact at the beginning of the eighteenth century with the exception of a minor breach at the top of Claremont Hill. Topographically the town remained almost the same as it had been in c.1640. Also identifiable are numerous landmarks in particular the castle sited on the promontory overlooking the river, the old medieval Welsh Bridge with its arches and two storey crenelated gate tower (taken down in April 1773) and the riverside Quarry Park

Figure 2. ‘The South West Prospect of Shrewsbury’ by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck dated 1732. This view, which has been coloured, emphasises the walks and offers fine views of the surrounding countryside. Shropshire Archives, PR/4/45, reproduced by permission of Shropshire Archives.
which was landscaped in 1719-20 with formal tree lined avenues. Later in the eighteenth century the medieval walls, gates and fortified bridges were replaced. The print depicts the chimneys and roofs of the townscape with the towers and spires of St. Alkmund’s, St. Mary’s and St. Julian’s churches dominating the skyline and other prominent buildings like Shrewsbury Abbey and the Market Hall. During this period a considerable proportion of the domestic townscape was rebuilt or re-fronted in brick. One possible motivation for producing this prospect view may have been to emphasise the improved appearance of the town. In the bottom right corner of the engraving there is an alphabetical key explaining the main points of interest, some of which are different from the earlier views by Buck and Ryland: for example, the Summer House in the Quarry which was built in 1734.

Like the Thames, the Severn meanders around Shrewsbury in a defensive loop forming one of the most important physical boundaries of the town and was an outstanding feature of its economic, civic and visual identity. Frost fairs significantly altered the nature of rivers, turning them into spaces that could be accessed by all. The role of rivers in urban space and the ways in which frost fairs came to temporarily change their meaning and use is significant, meriting greater consideration. Just as with the frost fair imagery for London, the desire of the artist to produce the prospect view lay arguably in its transitory nature and the impermanence of the ice on which the fair was held. The frost fair and the activities which characterised it were typically urban, distinguishing the town from its surrounding rural hinterland. Furthermore it emphasised the county town’s inherent civic pride, culture and identity shaped in part by the River Severn.

McInnes has argued that between 1660 and 1760 Shrewsbury, which was becoming a fashionable county and regional capital, developed a culture and leisure function as it emerged as a booming ‘leisure town’. Borsay has also suggested that the town’s urban development in the eighteenth century reflected a broader ‘urban renaissance’ throughout provincial England. As the county town it served an important administrative, legal and political function being where the quarter sessions and assizes courts met. Shrewsbury was evolving into a ‘polite and elegant town’, displaying many of the features highlighted by Girouard: ‘a decayed local industry, leading to cheap property, a good situation, plenty of country houses in the neighbourhood, the provision of assembly rooms and walks, and

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30 For the town walls, see Baker, Archaeological Assessment, 129-33; see also, ‘The late modern town, 1700-1900: a summary account’, 199-210; VCH Salop., VI, I, 216. For the documentary and pictorial evidence of the old Welsh Bridge, see B. Watson and C. Phillpotts, ‘The Old Welsh Bridge, Shrewsbury Excavations at The Severn Theatre Venue, Frankwell, Shrewsbury, 2006-7’, Trans. Salop. Arch. & Hist. Soc., 90 (2015), 43-52.
31 VCH Salop., VI, I, 4. The Kingsland in Shrewsbury was an open space where the annual guild processions were held, see Sweet, English Town, 242.
32 For the architectural history of Shrewsbury, see J. Newman and N. Pevsner, The Buildings of England: Shropshire (Pevsner Architectural Guides: Buildings of England) (Yale: Yale University Press, 2006), 510-73. It was not until later in the eighteenth century that new public buildings and amenities were built, for example, the Royal Shropshire Infirmary was opened in 1747 and the Shrewsbury Foundling Hospital and Workhouse (now Shrewsbury School) was built in 1760, see Baker, Archaeological Assessment, 204; VCH Salop., VI, I, 206.
33 VCH Salop., VI, I, 4.
34 Baker, Archaeological Assessment, 205.
35 T. Rowley, The Shropshire Landscape (The Making of the English Landscape) (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), 194; VCH Salop., VI, I, 12-4.
36 McInnes, ‘Shrewsbury 1660–1760’, 53-87.
37 P. Borsay, ‘The Emergence of a Leisure Town: Or an Urban Renaissance?’ Past & Present, 126 (1990), 189-96; P. Borsay, The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002); VCH Salop., VI, I, 210-3. For the function of county towns, see A.M. Everitt, ‘Country, County and Town: Patterns of Regional Evolution in England,’ Trans Roy. Hist. Soc., 29 (1979), 91-6.
38 McInnes, ‘Shrewsbury 1660–1760’, 81.
the existence of some local event – assizes, fair, or races – to act as a social magnet for the right kind of people.\textsuperscript{39}

The holding of the frost fair was an example of leisure and recreational pursuits in the town. Monteyne has argued that the 1683–4 London frost fair served as a ‘space of cultured leisure, an arena for forms of polite sociability’, a picture which is similarly being evoked in the case of Shrewsbury.\textsuperscript{40} Indeed, frost fairs were important sites of politeness, sociability and spectacle and the holding of this frost fair should be viewed as another example of how the town was becoming a recognised social and cultural centre.\textsuperscript{41} As with concerts and plays, pleasure gardens, horse racing, auctions, scientific experiments, assemblies, balls and travelling menageries, they created a temporary space in which people could gather and take their leisure, but also be seen and see others.\textsuperscript{42} With the increasing circulation of cheap print during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is likely that the townspeople of Shrewsbury were acquainted with the spectacle of frost fairs that had taken place on the River Thames from contemporary literature and artistic representations showing carnival activities, entertainment, market exchange and consumption and sought to emulate them. In that sense frost fairs provide an example of how news of such events and urban culture was re-circulated between the metropolis and provincial towns.

Summarising the work of urban historians, Sweet has persuasively argued that in the eighteenth century ‘urban culture did change very significantly; new cultural forms were developed, new kinds of entertainment were popularized, and the provision of ‘leisure facilities’ became a substantial part of the urban economy of almost all towns, to a greater or lesser extent.’\textsuperscript{43} The frost fair was an outstanding example of a new form of cultural entertainment and leisure that was popularised and adopted by provincial towns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Frost fairs provided the opportunity for a popular celebration of the season. Bushaway has pointed out that seasonal carnivals as customary events, saw the breakdown of the conventional social bonds with crowds seeking to ‘establish a temporary state of equilibrium in which customary consciousness could set up for a brief time a kind of counter-ideology of the governed in opposition to the prevailing one of the governors.’\textsuperscript{44} In the case of the 1683–4 London frost fair it has been shown that, ‘The hardened surface of the Thames became a looking-glass, and the likeness of the city returned by this mirror was both strikingly familiar and remarkably new at the same time.’\textsuperscript{45} A parallel can be drawn with the image of the frozen River Severn, which is fulfilling a similar function: the artist sought to focus the viewers’ attention on Shrewsbury during its apparent heyday in the eighteenth century.

Moreover, it can with a great deal of justification be argued that given the frost fair took place during the long eighteenth century, it represents the pivotal point between the early modern and modern periods. Shrewsbury, like London, underwent a transformation

\textsuperscript{39}M. Girouard, \textit{The English Town} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 84.
\textsuperscript{40}Monteyne, \textit{Printed Image}, 227.
\textsuperscript{41}For politeness and sociability, see P. Langford, \textit{A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), especially Chapter 3 ‘The Progress of Politeness’, 59–121 and Chapter 10 ‘The Birth of Sensibility’, 461–518.
\textsuperscript{42}P. Clark and R.A. Houston, ‘Culture and leisure 1700–1840’, in P. Clark (ed.), \textit{The Cambridge Urban History of Britain}, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 575–613.
\textsuperscript{43}Sweet, \textit{English Town}, 230.
\textsuperscript{44}B. Bushaway, ‘Popular Culture’ in H. T. Dickinson (ed.), \textit{A Companion to Eighteenth Century Britain} (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 354.
\textsuperscript{45}Monteyne, \textit{Printed Image}, 220.
suggested by the self-reference of engravings, prints and paintings to the improved urban townscape.\textsuperscript{46} In the early eighteenth century Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) described Shrewsbury as a ‘beautiful, large, pleasant, populous, and rich town; full of gentry and yet full of trade too; for here too, is a great manufacture, as well of flannel, as also of white broadcloth, which enriches all the country round it.’\textsuperscript{47} During the winter months the wealthy owners of neighbouring country houses would mingle with professional townspeople and leading manufacturers as well as members of the local gentry. Improved communications, for example turnpike roads, meant that the number of permanently resident gentry families decreased, although they continued to attend events in the town.\textsuperscript{48} Discussion will now examine the activities that took place on the ice which feature prominently in the engraving, the disruptive effects of the frost fair on the river trade and a flying man, as a tragic entertainment spectacle.

**Walking and promenading**

Walks and terraces were an important feature of towns in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{49} In the case of Shrewsbury the town walls, river bank and the Quarry were popular venues for walks and promenading.\textsuperscript{50} In 1739 the frozen River Severn offered a temporary public space along which townspeople could walk and promenade.\textsuperscript{51} It appears to have been completely frozen with figures walking on the ice beyond the medieval Welsh Bridge towards Frankwell and the castle. An unpublished history of Shrewsbury dating from the eighteenth century states that ‘the River was so much Froze that people walk’d upon the Ice, from the Stone Bridge to the Welch Bridge.’\textsuperscript{52} The engraving shows various activities taking place on the ice (Figure 3).

There are people ice skating which was a popular pursuit at frost fairs, portraying bodily grace and performance. Jackson’s Oxford Journal reported that on 6 January 1763 a skating match was held on ‘The Isis’ from below Iffley to Sandford and back and the “celebrated Mr. Martin” was beaten by an apprentice cook at Corpus [Christi College].\textsuperscript{53} Also shown in the engraving of Shrewsbury is a horse and rider and groups of people congregating and playing games on the ice. Many of these recreational activities would have typically taken place at fairs and wakes.\textsuperscript{54} A number of people appear to be carrying and sliding branches of wood, presumably for fuel or perhaps to smooth the ice, whilst others are shown wandering in all directions.

\textsuperscript{46}Monteyne, *Printed Image*, 216-20.
\textsuperscript{47}D. Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, vol. 2 with introductions by G.D.H. Cole and D.C. Browning (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1962), 75.
\textsuperscript{48}Baker, *Archaeological Assessment*, 201.
\textsuperscript{49}Sweet, *English Town*, 241-3.
\textsuperscript{50}McInnes, ‘Shrewsbury 1660–1760’, 67-8; P.A. Stamper, *Historic Parks and Gardens of Shropshire* (Shrewsbury: Shropshire Books, 1996), 38-9.
\textsuperscript{51}Earlier in 1698 Celia Fiennes remarked that in Shrewsbury: ‘There are many good houses but mostly old buildings, timber; there is some remaines of a great abbey and just by it y’ great Church, but nothing fine or worth notice save ye abbey Gardens wth gravell walks set full of all sorts of greens – orange and Lemmon trees. […] Every Wednesday most of ye town ye Ladies and Gentleman walk there as in St James’ parke, and there are abundance of people of Quality Lives in Shrewsbury, more than any town Except nottingham.’ C. Fiennes, *Through England on a Side Saddle in the Time of William and Mary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 191.
\textsuperscript{52}SA, 6001/299 f. 73v.
\textsuperscript{53}Jackson’s Oxford Journal, 6 January 1763, 3; E.C. Davies, *A Chronological Synopsis and Index to Oxfordshire Items in Jackson’s Oxford Journal*, 1753-1780 (Oxford: University of Oxford, 1967) Bodleian Library, Oxford, R. Top 731/1-4.
\textsuperscript{54}R.W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
The roasting of sheep referred to by Owen and Blakeway is visible. Animal roasting was a common feature of all types of fairs. Again a parallel can be drawn with Oxford where on 18 January 1763 it was advertised ‘a Sheep roasted whole on frozen river nr. High Bridge; ox roast nr. Folly Bridge planned for next week if Isis continues frozen.’ Similarly a notice for a market to be held at Charlbury in Oxfordshire on 27 July 1753 referred to the roasting of a sheep. At London’s frost fair of 1814 contemporaries jokingly referred to sheep that were roasted whole as ‘Lapland mutton’ which was sold for 1s a slice whilst bystanders paid a further 6d to watch them being roasted and to warm themselves by the fire. Sheep were also roasted on the frozen River Severn at Bewdley and Worcester in 1855. Food and drink was typically bought and sold at the London frost fairs by street vendors working from booths and stalls erected on the ice and this, along with printing presses implies the presence of an entrepreneurial culture. A recent chapter by Day has highlighted that the roasting of an ox or sheep on a spit, sometimes surrounded by an enclosure, was frequently depicted in frost fair imagery and that fashionable hot drinks such a tea, coffee, chocolate

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55Owen and Blakeway, Shrewsbury, vol. 1, 582.
56Jackson’s, 28 January 1763, 3.
57Jackson’s, 12 July 1753, 4. The notice stated ‘a very large fat sheep (above seven Foot and a half long, and weighing upwards of forty Stone)’ was to be roasted whole in the market place.
58Ayto, London Phrase and Fable, 282.
59<https://www.exploretthepast.co.uk/2016/12/river-severn-frozen-at-bewdley-1895/> [accessed 7 March 2018].
and alcoholic beverages were sold.\textsuperscript{60} At Shrewsbury only a single ‘booth’ or tent like structure appears to have been set up on the ice.

\textbf{River trade}

During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries prior to the development of effective long-distance overland transport, the river served as an important inland transport route. The river trade was a significant contributor to Shrewsbury’s economy providing a source of employment.\textsuperscript{61} Like many other county towns Shrewsbury was a trading and marketing centre for a much wider region.\textsuperscript{62} Sailing boats (possibly trows, the cargo boats which operated on the Rivers Severn and Wye) are shown locked in the ice. However, by the beginning of the eighteenth century the river trade was declining as navigational difficulties and larger vessel size meant Shrewsbury was no longer viable as a port with the trade being monopolised by downriver ports like Gloucester which was better suited for the trans-shipment of goods to and from Bristol.\textsuperscript{63} The Gloucester Port Books database does not contain entries for the years 1736-41 so it is not possible to ascertain the impact of the great frost of 1739 on the river trade.\textsuperscript{64} It has been pointed out that the river trade was already in a period of chronic decline. In 1725 there were only four recorded sailings for Shrewsbury compared with forty five twenty years earlier.\textsuperscript{65} It is therefore probable that by 1739 the river trade had ceased due to more efficient road transport. More generally the economy of Shrewsbury appears to have stagnated in the eighteenth century as the Welsh cloth, leather and textile trades declined.\textsuperscript{66}

Nevertheless for Worcester, which was downstream from Shrewsbury, the Chamber Order book records that on 7 July 1740 it was likely that inn keepers would be unable to get sufficient hay to feed their horses over the winter because of the dryness of the season which had led to a ‘scarcity of grass for several miles round about the city’. This shortage was compounded by the reduction in the hay crop as a direct result of ‘the late severe winter’.\textsuperscript{67} Several months later at a Chamber meeting on 26 November 1740 the impact of the severe winter on the river traffic was also cited. It was ordered that George Southorne, the water bailiff and coal weigher ‘be abated twenty pounds out of his last years rent in consideration of the long continuance of the Frost last winter and the lowness of the water last summer

\textsuperscript{60}For food at the London frost fairs, see I. Day, ‘Street cries on the frozen Thames: food hawkers at London frost fairs, 1608-1814’ in M. Calaresu and D. van den Heuvel (eds.), \textit{Food Hawkers: Selling in the Streets from Antiquity to the Present} (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 62-83.

\textsuperscript{61}For the river trade, see M.D.G. Wanklyn, ‘The Severn Navigation in the Seventeenth Century: Long-Distance Trade of Shrewsbury Boats’, \textit{Midland History}, 13, 1 (1988), 34-58; M.D.G. Wanklyn, ‘The Impact of Water Transport Facilities on the Economies of English River Ports, c.1660-c.1760’, \textit{Economic History Review}, New Series, 49, 1 (1996), 1-19; B. Trinder, \textit{Barges and Bargemen: A Social History of the Upper Severn Navigation 1660-1900} (Chichester: Phillimore, 2005), 9-10.

\textsuperscript{62}Everitt, ‘Country, county and town’, 93-4.

\textsuperscript{63}\textit{VCH Salop.}, VI, I, 209.

\textsuperscript{64}The database for the years 1734-1745 does not record a single voyage from or to Shrewsbury. N. Cox, D.P. Hussey and G. Milne, \textit{The Gloucester Port Books Database}, 1575-1765, on CD-ROM, in association with the University of Wolverhampton (Marlborough: Adam Matthew, 1998).

\textsuperscript{65}\textit{VCH Salop.}, VI, I, 209.

\textsuperscript{66}\textit{VCH Salop.}, VI, I, 209-10.

\textsuperscript{67}Worcestershire Archives and Archaeology Service, Worcester (hereafter WAAS). 496.5 BA9360/A14/Box 2/2, 201 Chamber Order Books, 1722-42. I would like to thank David Whitehead for suggesting this source. Urban communities often had their own system of courts. Worcester had a low and high Chamber of the Common Council consisting of two bailiffs and 48 and 24 council members, see \textit{VCH Worcs.}, IV, 386.
which hindered the navigation of vessels upon the River and reduced the Tolls belonging to his office a great degree.68

Drawing on John Evelyn’s account it has been argued that in the case of London the river was ‘altered from a maritime space into an urban one’ and this is clearly apparent in frost fair imagery.69 Similarly, in the Shrewsbury engraving the River Severn has changed from being a commercial highway into an additional urban leisure and social space. This parallels with the disruption to the river traffic on the Thames which meant that it ceased to function ‘as a support for the economic and cultural vitality of the city’, but rather served ‘as a marker for the displacement of these very processes’.70 A particular effect of the frost was the disruption which the icing of rivers caused for shipping, illustrated by the song ‘The Thames Uncas’d: or, The Watermans Song upon the Thaw’, the final verse of which celebrates the river thawing.71

**Printing and print culture**

Printing was an activity that is frequently foregrounded in frost fair imagery and is evident in the depiction of the Shrewsbury frost fair (Figure 4). Following its invention in Germany by Joannes Gutenberg in the fifteenth century, printing was brought to England by William Caxton in the 1470s and the revolutionary technology remained essentially the same until the end of the eighteenth century.72 Monteyne has observed that by the mid- or late-eighteenth century, frost fair imagery was primarily concerned with replicating ‘the centrality of print culture and the locus of its consumption’.73 He pointed out with regard to London that, ‘It appears as if, by the early eighteenth century, this utopian city of pure consumption contained nothing worthy of note except print culture and the spaces in which it found its most significant circulation.’74

Included centrally in the engraving of Shrewsbury is a printing press, emphasising both the thickness of the ice and the significance of printing during this period. Provincial frost fairs like Shrewsbury followed the tradition of setting up printing presses on the ice to produce ballads, poems and verses which celebrated the transformation of the river into a public space and thoroughfare. Whilst frozen rivers had long enticed people on to the ice, frost fairs resulted in a new form of special print genre whose attraction to contemporaries was that it was ‘printed upon the ice’.75 Rather than simply an act of consumption, by moving the printing press to the frozen river, printers encouraged consumers with the novelty of engaging with the opportunity to observe at first hand the printing of the document. Printing was also a form of spectacle in its own right, which is illustrated by the artist locating the printing press centrally in the image.

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68WAAS, 496.5 BA9360/A14/Box 2/2, 206.
69Monteyne, *Printed Image*, 219.
70Monteyne, *Printed Image*, 220.
71*The Thames uncas’d: or, The watermans song upon the thaw* (London: printed for the author and sold by J. Norris at the Kings Arms without Temple bar, 1684). BL, General Reference Collection C.20.f.2.(166.).
72E. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformation in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
73Monteyne, *Printed Image*, 246.
74Monteyne, *Printed Image*, 247.
75For example, see ‘The Printed on the Ice’ material in the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, <http://johnjohnson.chadwyck.co.uk/browse/collection.do?selectedNode=Prints-I-Printed%20on%20the%20Ice-I-#here> [accessed 7 March 2018].
Printing on the ice was a lucrative activity. Printers could earn large sums of money producing what were essentially early forms of souvenirs such as broadsides, engravings, maps, prints and tickets reflecting the commercialisation of eighteenth century popular culture. As has been pointed out by Monteyne, ‘These [small sheets or tickets] are almost certainly the first such secular souvenir objects produced in early modern England.’ The frost fairs offered an opportunity for both consumption and conspicuous display. In this respect print can be seen to have been influential in promoting frost fairs as a distinctive form of sociability, having their own print culture. It is the survival of such printed ephemera which partly explains the popular interest in frost fairs held, for instance, on the River Thames.

No printed items have been discovered relating to the Shrewsbury frost fair which is surprising given the significance of the print trade in the town. This raises the question about whether there was in reality a printing press on the ice or if the artist used artistic licence, including it amongst other expected frost-fair imagery. Printed handbills have survived from frost fairs held on the Rivers Ouse and Tyne at York and Newcastle upon Tyne respectively which

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76Monteyne, Printed Image, 237.
77The presence of a printing press is corroborated by published histories of Shrewsbury; however, they refer to the print which suggests that this may have been their source for the great frost.
were regional capitals and civic centres. The print trade was nevertheless significant in Shrewsbury and also served the town’s Welsh hinterland. There does not appear to be a bookseller or stationer on the ice and this could explain why the print and other printed ephemera were not more widely circulated. Whilst a one-off event, the frost fair provided an opportunity for print to be produced and circulated and in that sense can be seen as serving a similar function as the coffee houses which appeared in the town from the 1680s.

The engraving illustrates many fascinating details of the town in 1739 and the temporary reconfiguration it experienced as a consequence. It can be compared with other visual representations of the fairs held on the River Thames. Moreover, it might be the only such artistic depiction of a frost fair held on a major river in provincial England. The River Severn froze again at Shrewsbury in 1763, when according to A.W. Ward, borough surveyor, ‘The river was a playground for the people and, amongst other diversions, a printing press was again set up on the ice’, and the following ‘seasonable verses’ comparable with those produced for London and other provincial frost fairs in England were issued:

His hoary Frost, this fleecy Snow,  
Descend and clothe the Ground,  
The Liquid Streams forbear to flow,  
In Icy Fetters bound.

Clearly the frost fair of 1739 was one of at least two fairs held at Shrewsbury.

The spectacle of a daredevil flying man

At frost fairs as well as fairs, markets and festivities more generally, there was often provision for entertainment and public spectacles for those attending. A popular form of entertainment in the eighteenth century were flying men whose escapades are widely recorded. A dare devil ‘flying man’ was recorded entertaining the crowds in Shrewsbury during the great frost before plummeting to his death: an event not portrayed in the engraving. The 1730s witnessed the emergence of a national craze for rope dancing, sliding and walking.

78 VCH Salop, VI, 1, 212-3. Thomas Gent (1693-1778), a well-known printer based in York, set up his printing press on the frozen River Ouse and produced a handbill dated 8 January 1739 and titled ‘When good King George the 1st sat on the throne etc.’, a copy of which survives in York Minster Library, Gent 1740. A fourteen verse ballad commemorating the frost fair held on the River Tyne between 31 January and 1 February 1814 which was ‘printed on the ice’ by G. Angus of Newcastle survives in Robinson Library Special Collections, Newcastle University, B/W 2 (Bell/White).

79 VCH Salop, VI, 1, 213.

80 Baker, Archaeological Assessment, 205.

81 A.W. Ward, The Bridges of Shrewsbury (Shrewsbury: Shropshire Libraries, 1983), 23.

82 M. Berg, Luxury and pleasure in eighteenth-century Britain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 259; J. Van Horn Melton, The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 167; Reed, ‘The urban landscape 1540-1700: 306-9.

83 For example in 1733 a flying man flew from the top of the castle into bailey gate in Newcastle. At Pocklington in the East Riding of Yorkshire Thomas Pelling from Burton upon Stather in Lincolnshire fell to his death. A ‘high flying stranger’ visited Bromham in Wiltshire in 1735, falling in a tree in the churchyard when the church steeple collapsed and in 1736 Thomas Kidman, flew in Bristol attracting thousands of spectators from Gloucestershire and Somerset. The latter was possibly the same person who performed in Shrewsbury. Newcastle Courant, 15 December 1733, Stamford Mercury, 27 December 1733; The Borthwick Institute for Archives at the University of York, http://borthwickinstitute.blogspot.co.uk/2013_05_01_archive.html (accessed 7 March 2018), the reference to the original parish register is PR/POCK/2; Gentleman's Magazine, 5 (December 1735), 733; ‘Wilts Notes and Queries’, The Wilts. Arch. & Nat. Hist. Mag., 1 (1854), 351-2; VCH Wilts, VII, 180; Ipswich Journal, 13 December 1735; Derby Mercury, Stamford Mercury and Caledonian Mercury, 18 December 1735; The Weekly Miscellany, 17 April 1736.
Evidence for such entertainment predates the Shrewsbury frost fair of 1739. On 8 September 1732, for example, it was observed in Shrewsbury that ‘A man slid or fled down a rope from the first holes or windows above the tower part of St. Mary’s steeple.’\(^84\) The other end of the rope was ‘fastened to a post in a shop below the market cross.’\(^85\) Furthermore it was observed: ‘He also went up the rope, and beat a point of war near the middle, and drank a mug of ale. When he came down he had a pistol in each hand, which he fired in his passage, arms and leg extended, with his head foremost.’\(^86\)

During the great frost in 1739 Cadman (1711/2–1740), or Kidman, a well-known steeplejack and ‘ropeslider’ – ‘the famed Icarus of the rope’ – along with his wife appeared at Shrewsbury.\(^87\) He had been engaged to restore the damaged weathercock of St. Mary’s Church that had been ‘blown aside by a high Wind’.\(^88\) Coinciding with the town’s celebrations of the great frost, he attached a rope from the spire of the church to a point in a field called ‘Corbets Gay’ on the opposite side of the River Severn.\(^89\) It has been suggested that Cadman may have been a native of Shropshire having been born ‘at or near Shrewsbury’.\(^90\) As on previous occasions, he entertained the gathering crowd with a variety of daredevil rope stunts. A handbill, dated 24 January 1740, described his flight on 2 February (Candlemas day) from St. Mary’s steeple over the River Severn to the meadow opposite, however, this time the rope broke, and he plummeted to his death.\(^91\) It was noted that ‘the Rope failing he fell in St. Mary’s fryers, & Dash’d to Pieces.’\(^92\) It is likely that a significant number of the town’s populace were in attendance potentially amounting to thousands of people.

Owen and Blakeway wrote that ‘just before he set out on his mad career, Cadman found the rope a little too tight, and gave a signal to slacken it: but that the persons employed, misconceiving his meaning, drew it tighter.’ It snapped in two as he was passing over St. Mary’s Friars, and he fell amid thousands of spectators.\(^93\) As the ground was frozen, it was recalled that his body, ‘after reaching the earth, rebounded upwards several feet.’\(^94\) His wife, who had been passing round a hat to collect money from the gathering spectators, ‘threw away her money in an agony of grief, and ran to him in hopes of affording some

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\(^84\)Owen and Blakeway, *Shrewsbury*, vol. 2, 410.
\(^85\)Owen and Blakeway, *Shrewsbury*, vol. 2, 410.
\(^86\)Owen and Blakeway, *Shrewsbury*, vol. 2, 410.
\(^87\)P. Life, ‘Cadman, Robert (1711/12–1740),’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, October 2005; online edition, May 2007, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/64323> [accessed 7 March 2018].
\(^88\)SA, 6001/299 f. 73v.
\(^89\)There are numerous fields with ‘gay’ in their name on the fieldname map produced by H.D.G. Foxhall based on the 1842 tithe map.
\(^90\)Life, ‘Cadman, Robert’. The Shrewsbury Burgess Roll records that John Cadman, a tobacconist of Abbey Foregate in 1713 had four children Thomas (5), John (2), Elizabeth (8) and Susanna (1/2). There is no reference to a Robert Cadman. H. E. Forrest (ed.), *Shrewsbury Burgess Roll Abstracted and Edited* (Shrewsbury: W.B. Walker, 1924), 49. The parish register of St. Mary’s, Shrewsbury records the marriage of John Cadman, a ‘tobaccoman in ye Abbey Forehd’ and Susanna Morris on 27 February 1703/4. *The register of St. Mary’s Shrewsbury, 1584-1812* transcribed and edited by G.W.S. Sparrow (Shrewsbury: Shropshire Parish Register Society, 1911), 357.
\(^91\)A copy of the handbill of Cadman’s flight was printed by J.E. Mabbott a wholesale newsagent, 80 Coton Hill, Shrewsbury, see SA, P257/U/3/1. Cadman fell to his death on 2 February 1739 as the monument records and the engraving refers to the Great Frost of 1739. Prior to the calendar reform in 1750 the year started 25 March rather than 1 January. By the calendar of the time Cadman died 2 February 1739, however, according to the modern calendar it would now be 1740. Candlemas is a traditional Christian festival and was a significant date in the year, when there were popular celebrations and servants were hired.
\(^92\)SA, 6001/299 f. 73v.
\(^93\)Owen and Blakeway, *Shrewsbury*, vol. 2, 410.
\(^94\)Owen and Blakeway, *Shrewsbury*, vol. 2, 410.
relief'.

A mock-heroic, yet sympathetic poem, written by an unnamed 'J.A.', who was possibly an eyewitness, was published in February 1740 in the Gentleman's Magazine:

Nothing could ought avail but limbs of brass,
When ground was iron, and the Severn glass.
As quick as lightning down his line he skims,
Secure in equal poise of agile limbs,
But see the trusted cordage faithless prove!
Headlong he falls, and leaves his soul above:
The gazing town was shock'd at the rebound
of shatter'd bones, that rattled on the ground.

The reference to the ground being 'iron, and the Severn glass', conveys something of the severe winter conditions which existed in 1739–40.

Cadman's death was likened to classical mythology in verses that vividly describe his final tragic flight. The London Evening Post reported that Cadman was killed 'by the cutting off of the Rope where it came through the Steeple, it being fasten'd to the Frames of the Bells.' Cadman was buried at St. Mary's Church, Shrewsbury on 4 February 1740 and his name recorded in the parish register. The report of Cadman's death was later reprinted in the Gloucester Journal and the Stamford Mercury, one of Britain's earliest newspapers under 'Country-News'. The newspaper report claimed that he had 'narrowly escap'd Death at a place in Wiltshire' and the report gave the same cause of the accident. Furthermore it described how 'He was a very extraordinary Fellow in his Way, but was grown too daring; for notwithstanding he was frequently caution'd by people here, he would not be prevail'd on so much as to let anything between the Rope and the Stone to prevent it cutting off.' There is a commemorative plaque or tablet in his memory adjacent to the main door of St. Mary's Church with a ten-line epitaph. Cadman's dramatic death enhanced his reputation posthumously and led to eulogies in respect of his achievements. It also seems to have contributed to the end of the golden age of flying men by the late 1730s.

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95Owen and Blakeway, Shrewsbury, vol. 2, 410.
96'The Death of a Famous FLYER on the Rope,' Gentleman's Magazine, 10 (February 1740), 89.
97London Evening Post, 7 February 1740.
98'1739-40 Feb 4. Robert Cadman, bur. The register of St. Mary's, Shrewsbury, 1584-1812, 357. There seems to be some confusion as to whether the flying man was Thomas Cadman or Kidman or Robert Cadman. Whilst the parish register refers to the latter, the inscription of the plaque simply refers to 'Cadman' and the Shrewsbury Burgess Roll does not refer to a Robert, but rather a Thomas who was 5 in 1713 which would make him 34 years old, not 28 as stated on the plaque. It is possible that Robert Cadman was in fact Thomas Cadman.
99Gloucester Journal, 12 February 1739-40; Stamford Mercury, 14 February 1739-40. It was reported in the Gloucester Journal: Shrewsbury Feb 4 - On Saturday last the famous Robert Cadman (who so narrowly esca'od death at a place in Wiltshire) in attempting to fly from a Steeple in this Town, was killed by the cutting-off of the Rope where it came through the Steeple it being fasten'd to the Frames of the Bells. He was a very extraordinary fellow in his Way, but was grown too daring; for notwithstanding he was frequently caution'd by people here, he would not be prevail'd on so much as to let anything between the Rope and the Stone to prevent it cutting off.'
100Stamford Mercury, 14 February 1739-40.
101T. Friedman, 'Modern Icarus, or the Unfortunate Accident,' Church Monuments, 9 (1994), 68-71. For photographs of the plaque, see SA, PH/S/13/S/11/16, 17 and 18. There is also a postcard showing 'The Cadman Tablet, St. Mary's Church, Shrewsbury', SA, P257/U/3/2. The plaque is discussed in histories of Shrewsbury, see SA, 6001/299 f. 73v. and Owen, Some Account of the Ancient and Present State of Shrewsbury, 264-5.
The celebrated poet and historian of Birmingham, William Hutton (1723-1815) wrote that: ‘No amusement was seen but the rope; walls, posts, trees, and houses, were mounted for the pleasure of flying down: if a straggling scaffold pole could be found, it was reared for the convenience of flying.’ He referred to Cadman, as a ‘small figure of a man, seemingly composed of spirit and gristle’, who had earlier entertained the crowds at Derby in October 1732 by sliding from the steeple of All Saints Church (178 feet) to the bottom of St. Michael’s Church, a horizontal distance of approximately eighty yards. Hutton described this daredevil stunt writing,

A breast-plate of wood, with a groove to fit the rope, and his own equilibrium, were to be his security, while sliding down upon his belly, with his arms and legs extended. He could not be more than six or seven seconds in this airy journey, in which he fired a pistol and blew a trumpet. The velocity with which he flew raised a fire by friction, and a bold stream of smoke followed him.

Cadman performed the dramatic act for three successive days, descending twice each day. It is also claimed that he once marched up the rope, taking him an hour during which he ‘exhibited many surprizing atchievements.’ This included sitting with his arms folded, lying across the rope on his back and then his chest, blowing the trumpet, swinging round and hanging by his chin, hand, heels and toes. There may have been a tendency to exaggerate his achievements following his tragic death. Hutton clearly knew about Cadman’s fate during the great frost as he wrote, ‘Though he succeeded at Derby, yet, in exhibiting soon after at Shrewsbury, he fell, and lost his life.’ This is evidence of how news of Cadman’s heroic death was circulated throughout the Midlands and nationally and how his exploits during the frost fair were embedded into the oral tradition and popular memory not just within Shrewsbury but the wider region.

An impression of Cadman’s performance can be gained from William Hogarth’s (1697-1764) ‘polite’ painting of Southwark Fair of 1733 in which a rope dancer features ‘flying’ from a church tower to a nearby building with a large crowd of spectators assembled. John Nichols (1745-1826) explained that: ‘The man flying from the steeple was one Cadman, who, within the recollection of some persons now living, descended in the manner here described from the steeple of St. Martin’s into The Mews. He broke his neck soon after, in an experiment of the like kinds, at Shrewsbury.’ In London flying often took place from the steeples of Old St. Paul’s Church and the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Frost fairs provided an opportunity for polite and popular or plebian culture to interact. The example of a flying man similarly reflects the growing demand for cultural activities like theatrical and musical performances as the town’s leisure function grew.

103W. Hutton, History of Derby (London: Printed by J. Nichols, 1791), 247; C.R. Elrington, ‘Hutton, William (1723–1815)’, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Sept 2013, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14317>[accessed 7 March 2018].
104Hutton, Derby, 245-6.
105Hutton, Derby, 246.
106Hutton, Derby, 246-7.
107W. Hogarth (1697-1764), Southwark Fair (or The Humours of a Fair), January 1733. Museum of London; J. Nichols, Biographical Anecdotes of William Hogarth; and a Catalogue of his works chronologically arranged; with occasional remarks (London, 1781), 87.
108Nichols, Biographical Anecdotes of William Hogarth, 88; J. Pooley, R. Myers, ‘Nichols family (per. c. 1760–1939)’, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/63494>[accessed 7 March 2018].
109McInnes, Shrewsbury 1660–1760, 69.
Conclusion

The engraving of Shrewsbury during the great frost in 1739 provides insight into a provincial frost fair when Shropshire’s county town was prospering. The dramatic story of daredevil Cadman is also an integral part of Shropshire folklore and an example of the popularity of flying men as entertainment in England during the 1730s. Whilst Shrewsbury’s frost fair was not on the same scale as those held at London, York and Newcastle, it shares many features including printing and skating undertaken on the ice. The writers of eighteenth and nineteenth century antiquarian histories indicate that the frost fair was a significant event in the popular memory of the town. The engraving illustrates the importance of the fair and it is perhaps surprising that it was not more widely circulated at the time or that it has not been extensively studied by historians, other than those concerned with the architectural history of Shrewsbury. Like those in London, the Shrewsbury event is a cultural phenomenon which deserves closer examination.

This provincial case study endorses Monteyne’s analysis of the London frost fair of 1683-4 and his view that ‘Studying representations of the frost fair reveals a significant connection materializing between early modern print culture and the transformation of urban space and subjectivity’. This research demonstrates how this can be recognised in a provincial urban setting. The engraving not only preserves the occurrence of this notable event and its relevance in Shrewsbury’s history, but also it reveals how one artist represented the town and its civic culture. The frost fair became part of the town’s cultural memory after it was conceived and remembered by a contemporary print maker.

Frost fairs, in London or in provincial towns were a distinctive form of leisure and recreation. The holding of frost fairs was also indicative of the spread of a national urban culture which was London-inspired and an example of eighteenth century popular culture. Frost fairs, as specialist fairs, were a popular celebration of the season, following a tradition which included the spectacle of printing, entertainments, recreational pursuits and the selling of food and goods. These activities were evidence of polite sociability and entrepreneurial culture. Bushaway has argued that popular culture should not be viewed ‘simply as the accumulation of events, activities, forms of collective behaviour and systems of belief, bellowed by antiquaries as survivals’. Instead, frost fairs like Shrewsbury’s reflected a growing customary consciousness and shared experiences of work and leisure. This is similarly reflected in the examples of York and Newcastle upon Tyne.

Further research is required in local archives, record offices, galleries and museums to investigate whether frost fairs were held on other rivers in England and how far they compare to those in London, Newcastle, Shrewsbury and York. Evidence shows that frost fairs were not confined exclusively to the River Thames in London, but were held in towns elsewhere. This approach can only add to our knowledge of a provincial culture of work and leisure in urban England.

110 Owen and Blakeway, Shrewsbury, vol. 1, 582; Phillips, History and Antiquities of Shrewsbury, 213.
111 Monteyne, Printed image, 248.
112 McInnes, ‘Shrewsbury 1660–1760’, 83-4.
113 Bushaway, ‘Popular culture’, 351.
114 York Minster Library, Gant 1740; Robinson Library Special Collections, Newcastle University, B/W 2 (Bell/White).
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