

BULLETIN 2.4.

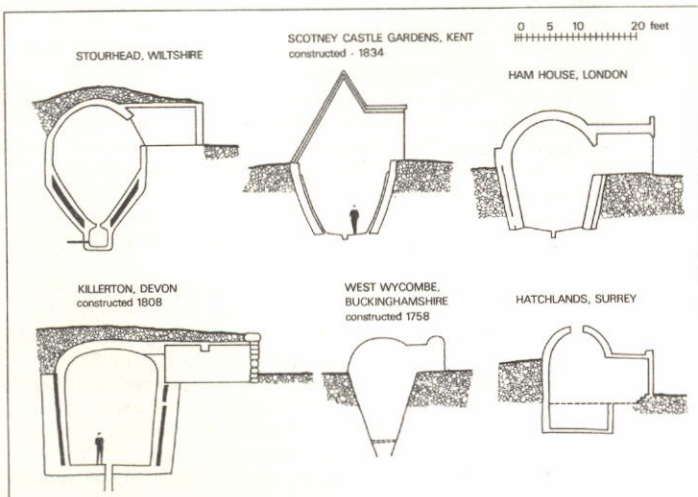
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ICE HOUSES

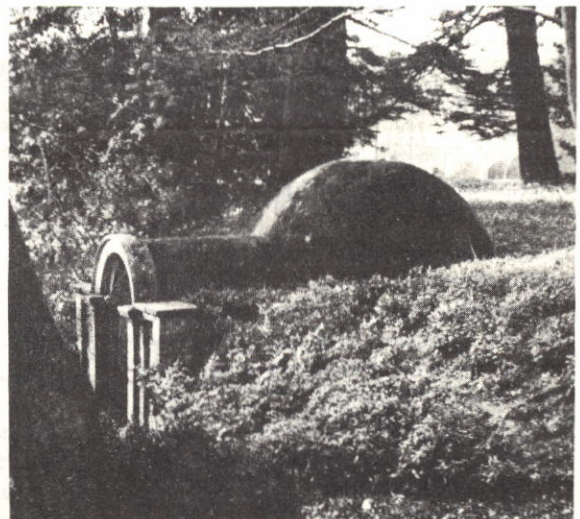
by GEOFFREY LOCKE

Before refrigerators were available ice was harvested in the winter and stored in special buildings called ice houses. From 1750 to 1900 it was usual at a large residence to have such a store in which ice could be kept until the summer. The practice of storing ice and snow was introduced to Britain from warmer countries in about 1650. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to have ice in summer was considered a luxury but by the early nineteenth century the use of ice, particularly for food preservation and the preparation of ice cream and water ices, was common among the wealthier members of society. The remains of ice houses are to be found at many Trust properties, and some of them are well preserved. Particularly interesting ones can be seen at Killerton Garden, Devon, and at Scotney Castle, Kent.



Most ice houses comprised a brick lined circular pit or well with a domed brick roof which was usually covered with soil. The illustration above shows the wide variation in the shape and size of some of the better preserved ones at National Trust properties. The common feature of these and most ice houses is that the bottom part is built below

ground level to take advantage of the fairly low and steady temperature which exists underground. From the bottom of the well a drain with an air trap was constructed because, unless the water from the ice which melted drained away freely, the walls and straw, which was usually packed around the ice, became saturated and their insulation properties were impaired. There were two schools of thought regarding the direction in which the entrance should face, whether to a cool northerly direction or, as J. B. Papworth, architect, wrote in 1818 to an airy south-easterly direction to 'allow the morning sun to expel the damp'. Since the ice house had to be built in a position where drainage could be arranged this often resulted in it being some distance from the residence which it served. At Scotney Castle the ice house, which is thatched, is very close to the old moat from which the ice was collected, but is several hundred metres from the house.



The ice house in the grounds of Hatchlands, near East Clandon, Surrey

The task of filling the ice house was usually the responsibility of the head gardener. He would lead the team of men who, at the first hard frosts, would collect the ice from frozen rivers or ponds and take it to be broken up and rammed down in the store. It is recorded that when the large ice house at Killerton was filled in 1809 the task took thirty men more than five days to stow forty tons of ice. It was hoped this quantity would last the household two or three years. The practice of having a large enough store to hold ice for two successive years was widely recommended although this policy does not seem to have been often adopted. Once filled, the store was shut up and the entrance tunnel filled with more ice or sometimes straw. It would not be opened up until the summer months when the ice was taken to the house. It was used in the kitchens and cellars for keeping fish, meat and dairy products cool and for