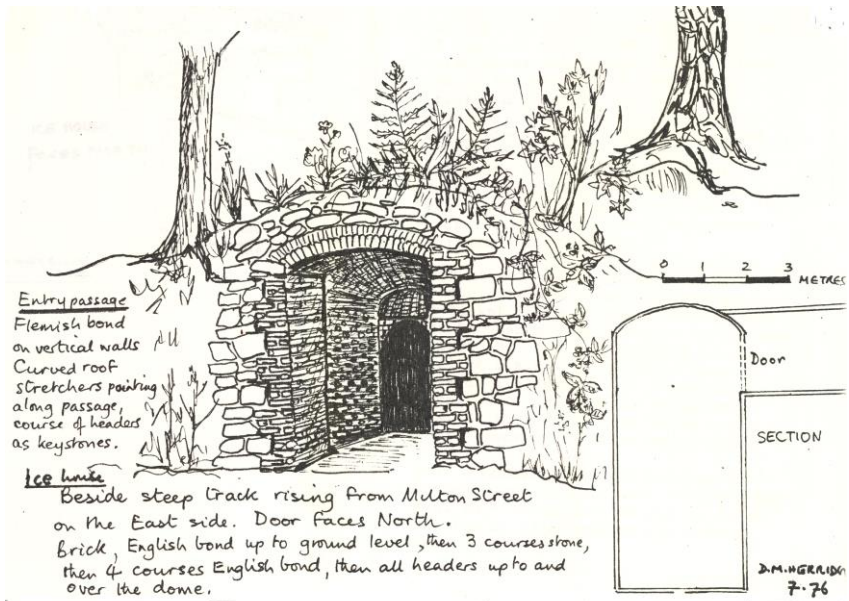


Westcott Ice Houses

When diarist John Evelyn returned from a visit to Venice in 1645 he extolled the virtues of Italian 'snow pits' from which a year-long supply of ice could be obtained to cool drinks, preserve food and ease fevers. He subsequently drafted a 'Plan for a Royal Garden' which included 'conservatories of ice and snow' and although the work was never completed ice houses soon became 'highly desirable' and by the 19th century they had become standard features of large country estates.

This was certainly true in Westcott. Both Bury Hill and The Rookery had an icehouse and when Maria Fuller was widowed and had to leave The Rookery to make way for her brother in law she included an icehouse in the specification for her new residence at Rokefield. Although the three mansions have gone, Bury Hill partially destroyed by fire and made into flats, The Rookery demolished and replaced by modern housing and Rokefield converted into apartments, all three ice houses have survived.



Bury Hill Ice House as surveyed by Marion Herridge for in 1976

The Bury Hill Ice House (TQ150484) is the most accessible and probably the oldest of the three. Its entrance is a brick-arched doorway, almost invisible in steep bank on the right hand side of the footpath that leads from Milton Street towards Old Bury Hill Lodge. The date 1808 is carved into the first full brick header inside an arched passage 10ft (3m) long, 3ft (1m) wide and 8ft (2.5cm) high that leads to the edge of the ice well. The well has a brick dome above and descends 20ft (6m) to a natural rock floor.

The Rookery Ice House (TQ131479) is not accessible at all. It is private property, part of the Mill House land that includes the whole of the Rookery Lake, but it can be seen from the Greensand Way in 'Ice House Wood' not far from the last of the modern Rookery houses. It does not appear on an 1818 Rookery Estate map but has the date 1866 scratched against one of several tally marks.

The Rokefield Ice House (TQ137490) is also on private property insofar as it lies within the gated boundary of the modern Rokefield development, but it can be seen near the top of the main drive, close to the third lamppost on the left as you approach the house. It has far fewer tally marks than the others and the brickwork is much less worn, and it is unlikely to have been built before the house itself was constructed in the 1860's.

The Domestic Buildings Research Group (Surrey) have surveyed all the ice houses and confirm that their construction follows a fairly standard pattern viz.:

- a sheltered position, generally north facing, which avoids exposure to the sun;
- access via a passage and/or steps to provide further protection from the elements;
- a brickbuilt storage chamber, most of which is below ground level, with an integral drain to dispose of any melted ice.

When in use, the task of filling the ice house chamber would normally have been the responsibility of the Head Gardener. Having made the chamber as dry as possible, blocks of ice would be collected from the lake (Bury Hill and the Rookery) or mill pond (Rokefield) by horse and cart. The ice would be broken into small pieces by labourers using wooden flails before being packed into the Ice House with alternate

layers of ice and straw. There it would lay until the summer when it would be brought to the surface in buckets by a man using a ladder, usually on the instructions of the Butler or possibly the cook. The ice would be used to fill kitchen ice boxes and was also needed in the pantry and in the dining room to fill lead-lined wooden cellarets wherein bottles of wine would be cooled. Occasionally it might be called for in an emergency. For example, Mrs O'Connell, who was born in Grove Cottages on the main road in 1890, remembered being sent to Bury Hill as a small girl to fetch ice for an elder sister who was ill with a fever.

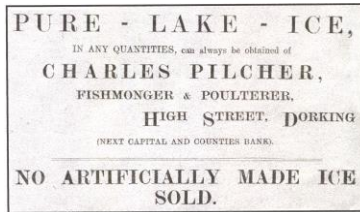
The Rookery Ice House actually faces south east, rather than north, but to compensate was constructed with two doors instead of one.

It now has a concrete cover but when interviewed in the 1970's, Mr Anscomb, the local thatcher, recalled that the roof was originally thatched with heather and/or the long shavings gathered after the coopers had been splitting staves.



As the 20th century progressed, there was less reliance on ice stored from the previous winter. It was increasingly possible to obtain commercially produced ice. Initially this was natural block ice shipped from Wenham Lake, near Boston, Massachusetts and later from Norway. Great emphasis was placed on the purity of the ice and it was claimed that a newspaper could be read through a block two feet (60cm) thick! Having arrived at London or a coastal port the ice was delivered by rail, packed in sacking and sawdust, to inland towns such as Dorking.

In any event no winters in recent times have been sufficiently severe to allow lakes to freeze to such an extent that large scale retrieval of ice has been practicable.



Harold Wakeford recalled that in the mid-1920s when he earned pocket money working at Parton's shop opposite the Green (now the Second User Centre) there was a small store leading from the front shop where ice was kept, and that this was delivered by lorry once a week.

Then manufactured ice became available. Using steam at first, and then gas or electricity, refrigeration machines became available in all the major towns to produce ice as a result of the cooling process generated by the evaporation of ammonia. With the arrival of domestic refrigerators in the twentieth century there was no longer a need to rely on ice houses and they were abandoned.

The following illustration of the Rookery Icehouse was drawn by Marian Herridge in 1976 to support the DBRG(S) survey.

