

AN ICE-HOUSE AT GREEN-STREET-GREEN, DARENTH

By JOHN E. L. CAIGER

IN the grounds of an old house known as the Clock House, at Green-Street-Green, Darenth, is a curious construction known locally as *The Dungeons* and described as such on the O.S. maps dating back to the 1909 edition. Although the house has remained substantially unchanged for a large number of years parts of a much older house have been incorporated into the present building. Hasted¹ relates that this house was formerly the home of Sir Edmund Davenport and that 'he kept his shrievalty for the county here in 1694.' These historical facts have probably given substance to the local legend that prisoners who were awaiting trial at Sir Edmund's court were held captive in *The Dungeons*. A subterranean passage is said to connect this place of confinement with the old court house which is now a public house known as the Ship Inn. This stands some 700 ft. distant across the village green. In order to investigate the legend, permission to examine the dungeons was obtained and also leave was given to make an accurate underground survey of them. Our member Mr. R. Legear kindly assisted with the measurements. As a result of this work it was apparent from the beginning that the *Dungeons* were in fact a rather elaborate ice-house, comprising an ice-well and an associated cold storage chamber connected by staircases and an L-shaped passageway.

Some general notes on Ice-wells and Ice-houses

Before the advent of the railway and later, the invention of mechanical refrigeration, most large mansions possessed an ice-house. This was usually located at some distance from the dwelling, preferably near a lake or pond from which ice for storage could be gathered in winter-time. Ice-houses were built to ensure that the household was supplied with ice during the warm months of the year and additionally, to provide a cool and even cold storage place for the bulk preservation of meat and game, etc. The ice was used in several ways; for cooling wines, the making of iced confectionery and occasionally for the treatment of fevers and other ailments. It is recorded that an ice-house was made in Upper St. James Park (now Green Park) as early as October 1660²

¹ E. Hasted, *History of Kent*, Vol. II (1797), 368.

² *Dictionary of Architecture*, Vol. IV, 130.

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in order to supply ice to the royal household for cooling wines. During the latter part of the eighteenth century the making of ice-wells became commonplace. This was a period when many new mansions were erected and it became customary for the owners to have an ice-well built in the grounds of their estate.

The construction took the basic form of a large well, ovoid in shape, with two thirds of its structure sunk below ground level. The domed portion above ground level was entered by way of a porch and passage which was hipped to the dome like the top of a dormer. A well-fitting door at each end of the passage completed the arrangement above ground.³ These visible architectural features of the ice-well were often skilfully disguised by the landscape gardeners to harmonize with the surroundings. On smaller estates a more modest arrangement for the ice-well was employed. In this case, the domed portion above ground level was entirely covered with a large earthen mound. In order to ensure a cool and dry environment for the ice-well the mound would be planted with ivy and a circle of shady trees set around it. A doorway and short passage at the base of the mound gave access to the well. The orientation of the outside doorway in both types of ice-well was always carefully sited. It faced north in order to minimize the risk of thawing the stored ice. The short passage between the outer and inner doors contained shelving for storage purposes, whilst occasionally, a floor for storage was accommodated within the dome.

The ice-well was filled each winter with beaten snow or ice. This task of filling was undertaken by the estate gardeners who prepared the well with considerable care as the stored ice was required to last throughout the summer months.

First of all the ice-well was thoroughly dried by leaving the doors open or by putting in bags containing unslaked lime. These were removed when they had absorbed the excess moisture. A wooden slatted trestle was then erected a foot or so above the floor of the well and barley straw laid across the slats to form a mat. This kept the snow from dropping through. Broken ice or beaten snow was then laid on the straw to a thickness of one foot: then alternate layers of straw and ice or compacted snow were added until the well was loaded to its capacity. The use of the wooden trestle and straw mat ensured that as the ice inevitably thawed a little during the summer it could easily drain away into the unpaved floor and not stagnate. An accumulation of water at the base was most undesirable as it tended to thaw the main volume of ice above it. Clean barley straw was used to line the walls where it served as a heat insulant. In warm weather when ice was required, a servant entered the ice-well and with the aid of a pick axe

³ Papworth (1818). *Rural Residences*.

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would extract sufficient ice for the immediate needs of the household.

Several ice-wells still exist in this part of Kent, although due to the hazard they present, their entrances have been effectively sealed against entry. Three examples are: The Grange at Darenth, Danson Park, Bexley, and May Place Manor House, Crayford.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ICE-HOUSE AT GREEN-STREET-GREEN

(See plan)

Access to the ice-house is gained through a door set in a stone façade. Above the doorway on the fascia are the initials T.E. in relief and the date 1812. These initials belong to a former owner of the Clock House, a Thomas Edmeades;⁴ later in 1843, a James Edmed (sic)⁵ is recorded as having lived there.

On entering the doorway a staircase leads downward for 17 ft. and turns into a passageway. At the right hand end of the staircase a doorway (marked A on the plan) is open at high level into the ice-storing well. An iron bar set across this opening prevents the unwary visitor of today from accidentally falling into the well. On the left of the staircase the passage continues and turns a right angle leftwards. Directly ahead is the entrance into the cold storage chamber. A second, lower staircase is positioned directly under the entrance staircase and this leads downwards through an opening, onto the floor of the ice-well itself. Strong iron hasps fixed to the wall on either side of this opening indicate that this entrance could be effectively sealed when the ice-well was full.

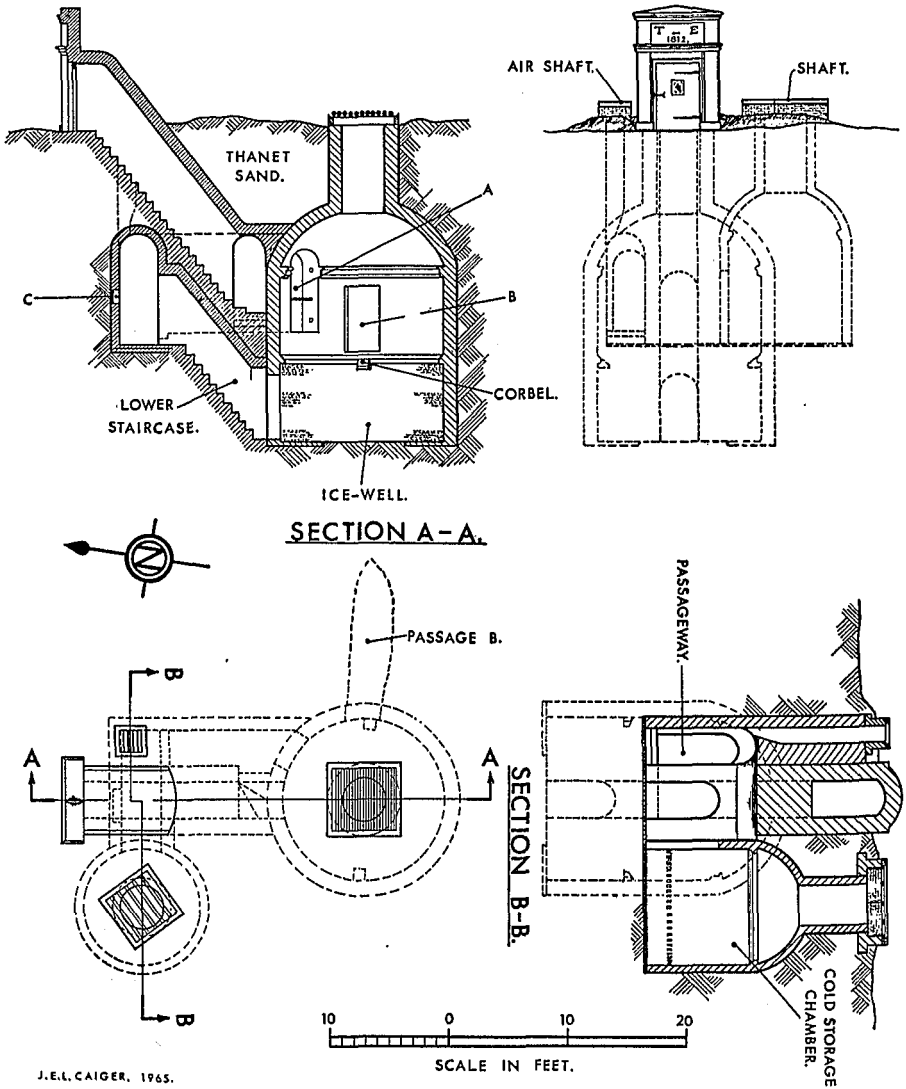
ICE-WELL (For ice storage)

The inside diameter of this well is 14 ft. and is constructed of brickwork 13½ in. thick; the upper portion is domed and pierced by a shaft to the surface. The top of the shaft is covered by a modern protective iron grille which is 27 ft. above the floor level. This grille replaces a wooden trap door formerly rebated into the shaft. Two prominent bands of plain moulding are set into the brickwork at 7 ft. and 19 ft. from floor level. The brickwork from floor level to the first moulding has been left unrendered but above this division the bricks have been rendered in plaster and lime-washed. The upper moulding supports the dome and shaft. The floor of the ice-well has not been completely covered with brick and a large central area, some 8 ft. in diameter has been left unpaved to allow for drainage. The Thanet Sand on which the entire structure rests can be clearly seen in this area of the floor. Two large corbels have been set into the wall at the lower moulding

⁴ Land Tax Return for Stone Parish (1812).

⁵ Tithe Map, Stone (1843).

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J. E. L. CAIGER, 1965.

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level and these probably once supported a heavy wood beam spanning the ice-well. There is evidence to suggest that a wooden circular gallery was formerly fixed around the well some 6 in. above the moulding level. With these arrangements the stored ice could be safely reached from any part of the well after entering through the opening

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(marked A on the plan). On the eastern side of the well there is another opening (marked B on the plan) 7 ft. 6 in. above the floor. This opening is not associated with the passageway and staircases and due to its inaccessible position a short ladder was required for the writer to make a proper examination of it. The passage leading from this opening was found to be partly choked with Thanet Sand as the entire brick vaulting had collapsed. However, it was just possible to ascertain its former length, a distance of about 15 ft. It is difficult to state what function this passage had originally. It may have been a storage place for the barley straw or more possibly, to temporarily accommodate the cross beam when ice was being shot down the shaft during loading operations. This opening must be the underground passage of the local legend and it is interesting to note that F. C. J. Spurrell mentions this chamber⁶ and refers to 'a passage half way up the well.' He further states: 'It was, according to tradition, the prison attached to the mansion of a former Sheriff of Kent.'

THE COLD STORAGE CHAMBER (For game and meat storage)

This chamber is built in a similar manner to the main ice-well but is dimensionally smaller. The floor is entirely paved with bricks and the completely rendered walls are lime-washed. At a height of 1 ft. 6 in. from the floor there are 38 slots cut radially into the walls and which would have held supports for a circular shelf. Higher up the walls are other slots and heavy iron nails probably used for suspending game, meats, etc.

The remains of a door-case can still be seen in the opening to this chamber. Immediately outside this doorway and opposite the lower staircase is a small recess in the passage wall (C on the plan). This probably served to stand a lamp within to illuminate the passageway and dark lower staircase leading down to the floor of the ice-well. The L-shaped passageway is ventilated by an air-shaft contrived in the vaulting. An iron grille covers this opening at ground level. It will be noted from the plan that the two staircases have an unusually steep pitch with narrow treads and high risers. At the top of the entrance staircase on the left hand side is a lead plaque bearing the raised initials E.D. (Edmund Davenport) together with the date 1674. This plaque appears by its form and lettering to have been removed from another building and set in its present position sometime during the nineteenth century. Another plaque, in terra cotta, on the opposite wall, has the initials A.H. and the date 1857. These initials are those of Alexander Hassell who owned the property at that time.

The ice-house probably fell into disuse sometime in the middle of

⁶ F. C. J. Spurrell, *Deneholes*, *Arch. Journal*, XXXIX.

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the nineteenth century when the present railway line was completed. The railway enabled imported ice and later, artificial ice to be transported long distances both quickly and cheaply. Doubtless the owners of the Clock House soon took advantage of these new facilities. It might be fairly assumed that the *Dungeons* legend came into being many years after the ice-well had fallen into disuse.

Finally, it is interesting to note that an elderly Darenth resident, who in 1894 was employed as a gardener at the Clock House, has recorded the fact that the ice-house was used for a different purpose at that time by a Mr. Percy Hassell and the Rev. G. W. Bancks, M.A., in a venture concerned with making vinegar from bees' honeycomb. Mr Bancks was a keen apiarist and owned a large number of hives.