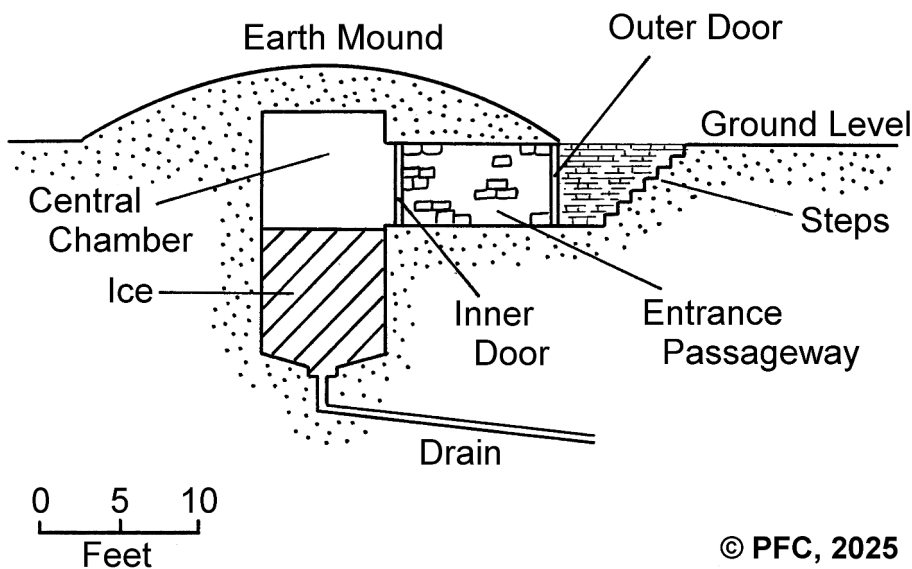


DEATH IN THE ICE-HOUSE

From around the mid seventeenth century until the advent of mechanical refrigeration in the latter half of the nineteenth century, ice-houses were common, but usually well-concealed features in the grounds of country mansions. Designed to preserve the local squire's meat, fish, butter, etc., as well as chilling his beer and wine in the hot summer months, the ice-house was the forerunner of the modern domestic freezer.

It was through a chance conversation with my late father, Frank Cholerton, that I first learned Chaddesden Hall had once possessed just such a structure, for he happened to mention 'Ice-house Corner' on Chaddesden Lane. When I asked him exactly where this was, he told me it was the name formerly applied to the slight bend in the lane, near its modern junction with Richmond Road. Unfortunately though, Dad could not recollect the ice-house itself.

What then did an ice-house look like? Individual designs varied enormously, but all shared some features in common. A typical ice-house occupied a well-drained site and from the outside all the casual observer might see would be a low, earthen mound some 30 or 40 ft in diameter and up to 6 or 7 ft in height.



As shown in this diagram, access into an ice-house might well be gained by descending a short flight of steps (usually located on the north side of the mound, away from the sun) down to a stoutly locked, heavy timber door, perhaps leather-lined for even greater insulation. Once through this outer door, the house-servant would have to traverse an inky-black, narrow, brick-lined passageway maybe 5 ft 6 ins high, 3 ft wide, and 10 to 15 ft long. At the far end of the passageway would be yet another sturdy door, behind

which, at the very heart of the ice-house and thus shielded as far as possible from the warming effects of the sun's rays, lay the deep pit of the brick or stone-built central chamber (or ice-well) partially filled with ice.

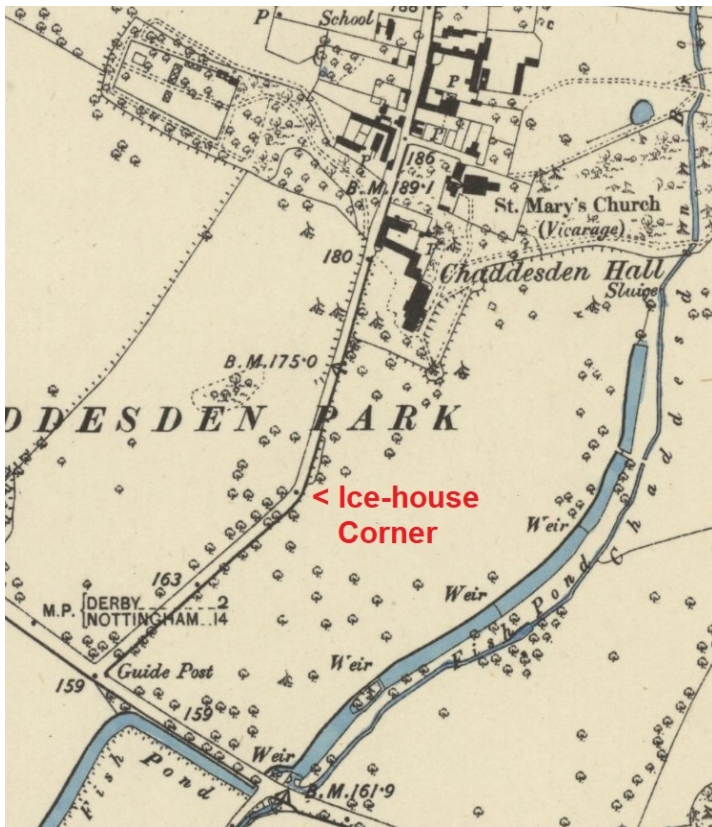
Going into an ice-house like this was not a job for the faint-hearted, for the poor servant, with just the light from a flickering lantern to guide him, would have the unenviable job of removing or replenishing the provisions which were stored either on a 'raft' of timber or straw on top of the solid mass of ice or hanging in the chilled air at the top of the chamber. Sometimes the passageway leading to the central chamber was also lagged with straw and this must have made the servant's task even more awkward. Back at the big house, the cook would use lead-lined ice-boxes in her larder in an effort to keep food fresh and, once again, it would be the responsibility of one of the house-servants to make regular trips to the ice-house to keep the ice-boxes full.

Ice-houses were frequently situated some distance away from the properties they served, so as not to spoil the picturesque setting of the big house. Sometimes they were given a decorative entrance-facade, like the Grade II listed example embellished with castellations at nearby Locko, where the ice-house is approximately 200 yds east of the Hall on rising ground at the edge of a small wooded plantation.



Two views of the ice-house at Locko Park taken in August 2015. Note the exposed and rendered dome of the ice-well visible in the second picture. © Peter Cholerton, 2025

At Chaddesden, the Wilmots' ice-house at its presumed location near 'Ice-house Corner' on Chaddesden Lane (see the map below) would have been a similar distance – approximately 200 yds or so – to the south-west of the Hall and would not have impaired the pleasant vistas the family and their guests enjoyed from within the mansion. Indeed, because the ice-house would almost certainly have been well-screened by trees and shrubs, many people in the village – certainly in later years – must have been completely unaware of its existence.



1885 Six-inch map of Chaddesden. National Library of Scotland (<https://maps.nls.uk/index.html>).

we can readily imagine that loading the ice-house did not rank amongst the more popular winter tasks!

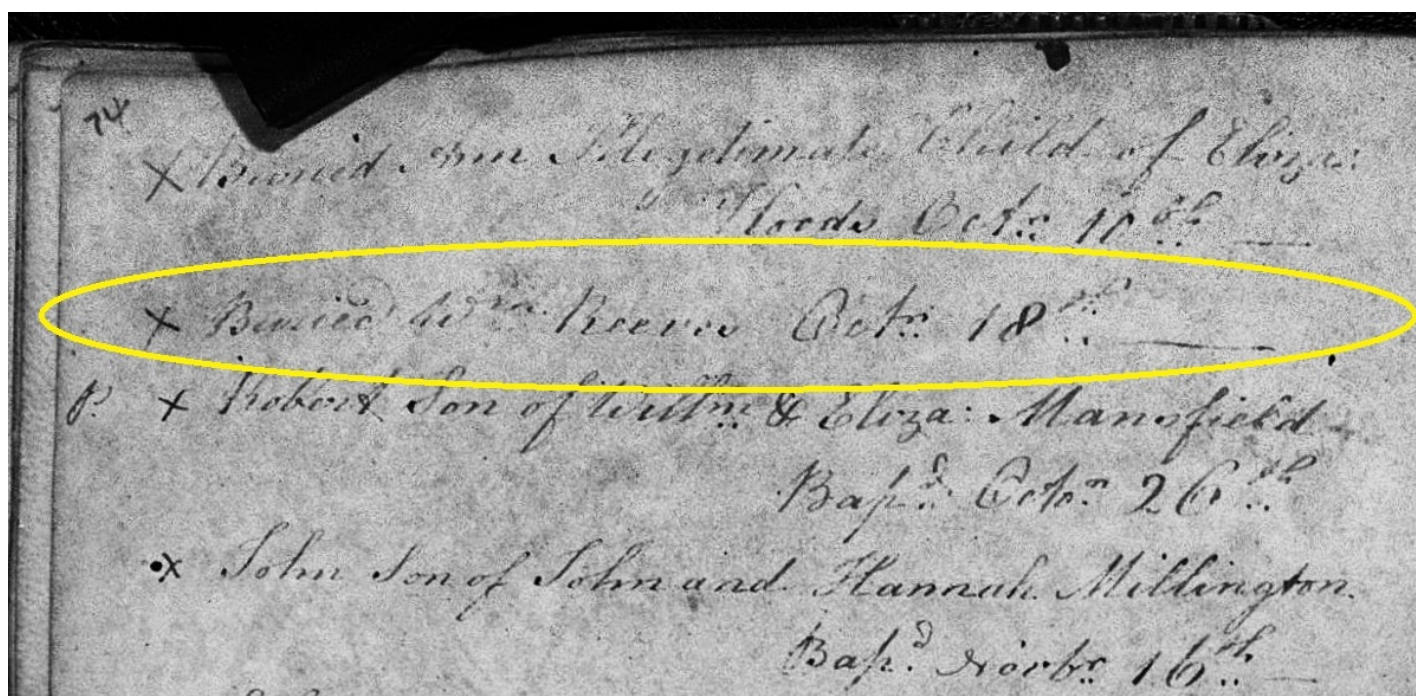
To load the chamber of an ice-house obviously required a vast quantity of ice, perhaps in the region of 10 to 15 tons. Fortunately here at Chaddesden the ice-house was conveniently situated only a couple of minutes' walk away from the extensive network of fishponds in the parkland surrounding the Hall. Each winter, a team of estate workers would be despatched down to the fishponds on a suitably cold day when the frost had formed a thick layer of ice on top of the water. Armed with hammers and pick-axes, the men then broke the ice into manageable lumps and carted it away in wheelbarrows.

Back at the ice-house, and depending upon its method of construction, the ice was either dropped through a central loading chute straight down into the chamber beneath, or man-handled with great difficulty along the entrance passageway. As the main chamber gradually filled up, the men might well have mixed saltpetre with the ice and sandwiched it between layers of straw to make an effective freezing mixture. Bearing in mind the nature of the work – handling large amounts of ice on the coldest days of the

Certainly the ordinary domestic staff at Chaddesden Hall, whose jobs usually entailed working indoors, might not have found the experience of visiting the ice-house a pleasant one. After all, given the choice, who would want to walk several hundred yards in all weathers to the ice-house, descend into a dark, dank passageway and then attempt to retrieve stores from the freezing and slippery central chamber? Unfortunately such work was expected of the house servants, and here at Chaddesden in 1788 one poor individual died whilst trying to enter the ice-house. The *Derby Mercury* of Thursday 23 October 1788 recounted the story as follows:¹

On Friday Morning a melancholy Accident happened at Chaddesden, near this Town;—the Servants of Sir Robert Mead Wilmot, Bart. having Occasion to open the Ice-House, on their Entrance, it was found to contain such foul Air, that it obliged them to retreat; however, one more daring than the rest, ventured in, but was soon brought out suffocated; and notwithstanding all possible Help, and every Method tried to restore him, it was found ineffectual.—The poor Man, it is said, has left a Wife and several Children.

Such a tragic event was quickly picked up by other papers at Stamford, Sheffield and Birmingham, where the accounts given were broadly the same, although the *Sheffield Register* did add the fact that the ice-house 'had been some time shut' before that fateful day. The one detail omitted by all the papers was the name of the hapless servant who died, but it seems fairly certain that he was William Reeves, who, according to St. Mary's parish register, was buried at Chaddesden on 18 October 1788, the day after this tragic incident.



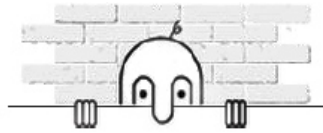
Extract from St. Mary's parish register recording the burial of William Reeves on 18 October 1788.

Clearly the ice-house had been so well sealed that a high concentration of noxious gas (carbon dioxide perhaps?) had built up, and once in the confined passageway or equally claustrophobic central chamber the man had been overcome so quickly by the suffocating atmosphere that he was unable to drag himself to safety – a truly awful death considering that at no time was he further than 20 ft or so from the external door and an abundant supply of wholesome, fresh air.

¹ My thanks to Mr. & Mrs. Bosworth for first bringing this reference to my attention some years ago.

The ice-house at Chaddesden Hall probably continued in use for much of the next century until it was rendered obsolete by new freezing methods; after that its subsequent fate is unknown.² Perhaps it was used for storage before eventually being filled-in; or maybe its entrance gradually silted up over the ensuing years until the ice-house was completely forgotten. A low, irregularly-shaped mound approximately 50 ft in diameter, which can be seen today in Chaddesden Park some 40 yds to the south-west of the former cricket pavilion, is probably too near the site of the Hall to have been the ice-house.³ It does not appear to feature on aerial photographs of the 1940s and may therefore represent nothing more than a grassed-over spoil heap. It seems more likely that the remains of the ice-house were later unknowingly incorporated into the gardens of the houses on Chaddesden Lane. Householders on the east side of the lane do from time to time unearth fragments of masonry belonging to the Hall or its various outbuildings, however, as far as I am aware, no-one has yet found any definite traces of the old ice-house. So if you happen to live anywhere near, say, numbers 28–50 Chaddesden Lane do keep a watchful eye on your back garden the next time you dig it – you never know what you might find!

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2 In the context of later developments in food storage, it is interesting to note that in an inventory of the contents of Chaddesden Hall drawn up in 1916, one of the items listed in the larder was an 'Old Refrigerator', worth 15s 0d (DRO, D5126/1/119).

3 At grid ref. SK 3811 3669 this mound is only 90 yds from the site of the Hall.