

Update March 2015: The Ice House at 42 St John Street, Wirksworth.

Built into the garden terrace wall of Ian's lower garden is what has always been regarded as a domestic Ice House.

Ice Houses were common on country estates and in the grounds of Stately Homes, one being constructed as early as 1619 in Greenwich Park by James I. These were specialist structures, often cylindrical or cone shaped and they were used to store ice from frozen rivers or other sources. Ice wasn't originally used as a preservative but for its uses in making Ice Cream, cold drinks and for medicinal purposes. Gradually the supply of ice improved even to the point of Icebergs being towed from the north Atlantic and being used in industrial quantities, also brought from America and Norway once its use in preservation (initially of fish) was understood. As the middle classes and understanding during the industrial revolution developed it was possible for the well-off to use ice on a domestic basis for food preservation and storage, before the domestic gas or electric fridge made an impact in the 1930s. Ice was transported by train and then by horse and cart and stored in domestic Ice Houses for daily use, these were generally of a much simpler design than the ones in the grounds of country estates.



The Ice House entrance

The Ice House in the terrace wall of number 42 dates from between 1821 and 1837 and is a relatively simple brick vault construction. It has two chambers, the outer and the inner, and in so far as the outer chamber has a small window, the smaller inner chamber must have been used for the storage of the ice.



The entrance porch of the Ice House, down 4 steps, looking east. The drain for the Ice House is a little forward of the ranging pole but not very obvious in this picture.



The outer chamber approx 5 metres square and 2 metres high to the top of the brick barrel vault. The floor is also brick, looking north.



The inner chamber formerly had a door and is half the size of the outer chamber.

By the end of the Victorian age, the vapour-compression fridge invention was still not fully developed and domestic “refridgerators” were essentially a box with block of ice in the bottom, which had to be changed from time to time as it melted, and a new block taken from the Ice House. Ice supply to domestic houses continued until the 1930s but the decline of the Ice House was extremely rapid because of the impact, expansion and popularity amongst the well-off of the electric fridge during the 1930s. By the start of the Second World War domestic Ice Houses had largely fallen out of use.