

## Nynehead's Icehouse

Until only five years ago Nynehead Icehouse was being used as a rubbish pit and was completely overgrown with blackberries, sapling trees and nettles. To all intents and purposes it did not exist except in the minds of a few locals who still remembered it from the 1950's or earlier. Then in 1995 Andrew Paul and Jim Skeggs, working on behalf of Taunton Deane Borough Council, were carrying out a survey of the most important historic gardens within the Borough came across it. Working with volunteers, the Council was able to empty the icehouse of all 50 cubic metres of rubbish. It took several months to complete the removal of the rubbish but what emerged was well worth the effort.

The icehouse was built in 1803. The estate accounts show that Thos. Bond (the miller!) was paid £18 10s 2d on the 29th March for 'grinding and drawing bricks and lime for the icehouse'. The Nynehead Icehouse is typical in construction of icehouses of its time although it is larger than many found locally. It is brick built with an iron drain cover at the base. It was important to drain any melt water from the ice as quickly as possible to avoid temperatures rising within the icehouse. There appears to be a locked up entrance on the far side of the icehouse and the remains of an entranceway on the outside northern side of the structure but researches so far have not revealed its purpose.



*An engraving published in 1683 illustrating an Italian icehouse as described by John Evelyn. Note the conical well (presumably made of brick) with a sump and the roof of insulating thatch. (From Robert Boyle's 'New Experiments and Observations... Touching Cold.') (British Library)*

The present entranceway probably had two or three doorways to act as insulation between the warm outside air and the cool inside of the icehouse. It is surprising that the entranceway is on the southern side of the structure as this would be more likely to catch the sun rather than the northern side of the structure where the blocked up entranceway still appears to exist.

The brickwork within the structure still appears to be in very good condition considering its age, the amount of soil above it and the neglect that it has received over the last fifty years. Many of the bricks must have been specially fired or 'rubbed' to fit as well as they do. Nothing of the doors remained when the icehouse was emptied but it would be nice to think that at some point in the future appropriate doors could be replaced.

More recently the outside of the Ice House has been landscaped and the brickwork paving exposed and rendered.

### The Funders

'*Captain Adam Marneros*, the present owner of Nynehead Court has invested a substantial amount of money in the restoration of the Ice House. He would like to take this opportunity to thank Taunton Deane Borough Council and the Somerset Garden Trust for their contributions towards the restoration of this fine Icehouse.

*We would like to take this opportunity to thank the British Library and Tim Buxbaum for use of their illustrations and would recommend 'Icehouses' written by Tim Buxbaum and produced by Shire Publications Ltd (ISBN 0 7478 0150 9) for anyone interested in finding out more about Icehouses. We would also like to thank David Rabson, a local historian, for his help in preparing this leaflet.*

**Location:** Nynehead Court is one mile north of Wellington about 5 minutes drive from the A38 and junction 26 of the M5 Motorway.

**Opening times:** Open to the public on Wednesdays and Sundays from April until end of October.

**Contact:** Nynehead Court, Nynehead, Nr Wellington, Somerset. Tel: 01823 662481 or Heritage and Landscape Team, Taunton Deane Borough Council, Belvedere Road, Taunton, Somerset TA1 1HE. Tel: 01823 356491

VISIT  
**NYNEHEAD  
COURT  
ICEHOUSE**  
AN HISTORIC ATTRACTION

...and Discover the  
**History of Ice Storage**

# Nynehead Court and the History of the Icehouse

Nynehead Court gardens are nationally recognised by English Heritage as being important. The gardens, registered as Grade II\*, are one of only six within the Borough of Taunton Deane. The other gardens are Cothelstone Manor (II), Hatch Court (II), Hestercombe Gardens (I), Poundisford (II) and Wellington Park (II).

The Nynehead Court building is separately listed by English Heritage and is also Grade II\*. Together the Court and garden make a very impressive contribution to the historic amenity of the local area and to the Borough as a whole.

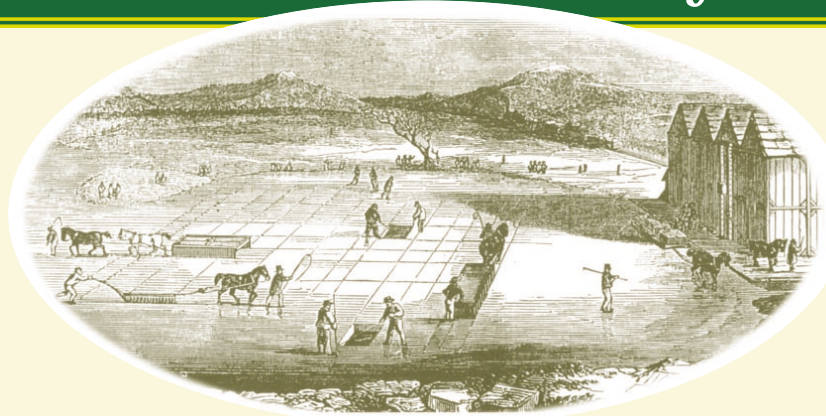
## Nynehead Court and its grounds

The earliest parts of Nynehead Court were built in the late 14th century with major additions in 1675 and the 18th century. The landscape park was laid out in the 18th century, although major landscaping works were carried out in the early 19th century. The parkland is crossed by serpentine loops of the River Tone, running west to east. The loops were originally part of a much larger man made lake but this has become silted up over the last two centuries.

The ornamental parterre to the south of the Court was laid out in the late 19th century. The clipped box hedges were a typical feature of sixteenth century gardens and may have been laid out to reflect the original character of the Court.



The collection and transport of ice from London marshes in 1850. (British Library)



Wenham Ice Lake, from the 'Illustrated London News' of 17th May 1845. The ice is being cross-cut before transport by rail to Boston; a train can be seen in the background. (Tim Buxbaum.)

The Pinetum to the south east of the Court has suffered from storm damage over the years but has recently been replanted with a mix of conifers. Over time it is hoped to extend the range of tree species and increase the botanical interest of the pinetum.

The avenue of trees, running due south from the Court, are Sweet Chestnuts (*Castanea sativa*). From their appearance they must be at least several hundred years old and may well have been laid out at the same time as the remodelling of the house in 1675.

## The history of Icehouses

What are icehouses? Before the introduction of refrigerators the only way to store ice was by keeping the ice in specially designed icehouses. It was found that by packing the ice together into a large block it slowed down melting and that by insulating the ice with walls and a roof it could be kept even longer.

The ice was used to help to preserve foods, such as meat which would otherwise have to be salted, cool drinks during the heat of the summer and it was often sculpted to impress visitors.

Through links with France and Italy people in Britain would have been aware of the delicious summer sherbets enjoyed in Naples in about 1600, made possible there by

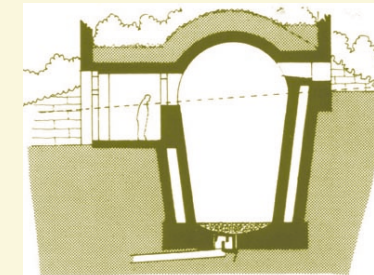
the organised supply and storage of snow. British travellers must have been very impressed during the intense heat of the Italian summer to be offered sherbets. The fashion took root in England and became a symbol of wealth and prestige for the upper middle classes and the landed gentry. One of the first recorded icehouses in London was built at Greenwich in 1619. It comprised a bricked out well, 30 feet (9.1 metres) deep and 16 feet (4.8 metres) across covered with a thatched timber roof structure.

Apart from icehouses associated with country estates, there were commercial icehouses in towns and cities across Britain. Many were simple barrel-vaulted chambers but others had the capacity for storage of large volumes of ice. Grocers, confectioners and coffee houses were among the first to use such structures.

Icehouses take many different forms but the most common domestic icehouses were built partly underground where it was easier to regulate the inside temperature of the building.

The ice was either collected locally from streams or rivers or later on if no ice could be found locally, it was imported from Scandinavia or Canada. The ice was packed in straw to insulate it during passage and was transported from the ships, by waiting wagons, to icehouses as fast as the wagons would allow. The development of icehouses in the 18th and early 19th centuries was helped by the very cold

winters of the Little Ice Age.



Tim Buxbaum.