

ICE HOUSE AT
NO.1 BELVEDERE DRIVE,
WIMBLEDON

London Borough of Merton

by

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1. Introduction

Historical information has been sought on this ice house, which has been recently rediscovered. The ice house survives in the rear garden of a grade II listed house. There are currently discussions between English Heritage, the local authority, and the new owners of 1 Belvedere Drive as to the treatment and future of the building. It has been suggested that the ice house should be considered for statutory listing.

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2. *The Ice House as a Building Type: its History, Design and Siting*

Ice houses were intended for the storage of ice, which was essential in keeping foods cold prior to the development of refrigeration. Ice was collected from natural or artificial freezing ponds and streams in winter, and was collected together in an ice house, until it was needed in hot summer weather. Ice lasted longer when stored *en masse*, and ice houses provided the protection of an insulated roof and walls. The architect John Papworth wrote in 1819 that 'the icehouse forms an excellent larder for the preservation of every kind of food liable to be injured by heat in summer; thus fish, game, poultry, butter, etc., may be kept for a considerable time'.¹ Food was placed either within the stored ice, on boards on top of it, or in trays and baskets which were hung in the cold air above.

Ice houses were built in a variety of forms, sizes and materials, but almost all conformed to general principles in having an entrance, a passage, an ice chamber and a vault or dome (Fig. 1). From the outside entrance ran a paved passage, intended to improve insulation and protection (Fig. 2). This often contained a number of doors, all set in solid wooden frames or masonry openings. The passage opened, via another door, onto the top half of the ice chamber itself, which was typically of masonry, and built down into the earth. The bottom half was filled with ice, and a sump or drain was provided to discharge the melting water. Most were connected via a drain to the base of a nearby lake or pond. At the top of the dome or vault was placed a ventilator, most often covered with a cap; noxious gases were a problem with ice houses, and ventilators not only removed them, but could prevent the gases from forming at all.²

The earliest surviving British ice houses date from the seventeenth century – that at Greenwich was built in 1619 – but the building type remained relatively rare until the middle of the eighteenth century. They first enjoyed widespread popularity under the owners of country houses or large estates, who built free-standing ice houses within their grounds, having come to appreciate the benefits for food storage that the building type offered. By the later part of the nineteenth century, over 3000 free-standing ice houses had been built in Great Britain, most in the period 1750-1875.³

There was much debate as to the most suitable position for an ice house, but the majority were built on sloping ground – a location which naturally aided drainage – on the banks of landscaped lakes or ponds. Because of the difficulties involved in the carrying of ice to these buildings, it was better to be nearer to the source of the ice than to the house. Proximity to an estate road was also considered. Some were placed under trees, in order to ensure added protection from sunlight.⁴

The most common form of free-standing ice house to be built on country estates was the 'cup and dome' variety, also known as globe-shaped or egg-shaped (see Figs 1 and 2). This consisted of a dome or vault, usually of masonry, covering an ice chamber or well, the sides of which sloped downwards into the earth towards a sump or drain. Although this form was expensive, it was extremely strong and durable, and many cup and dome ice houses have survived over two hundred years. The external face of the dome or vault was often rendered, and was then covered with earth (see Fig. 2). J. C. Loudon wrote in 1833

¹ Buxbaum 1992, p. 4

² General information from: Buxbaum 1992 and Beamon and Roaf 1990

³ Buxbaum 1992, p. 7

⁴ Ibid

that 'the whole superstructure may be covered, in Britain, to a depth of two or three feet with earth, planted with ivy and surrounded with trees. In warmer climates the depth of earth ought to be increased to eight to ten feet.'⁵ The result was that ice houses often appeared as little more than large mounds, and low walls were often provided to guide a person to the entrance, which remained otherwise largely hidden.

Ice houses continued to be built until the end of the nineteenth century, but began to fall out of favour at the beginning of the 1900s. Many had fallen into disuse by the time of the First World War, and were covered over with undergrowth and trees. Throughout the twentieth century, ice houses have been rediscovered – on most occasions, quite by accident – and many have been restored. Some were used as air-raid shelters during the Second World War, and now serve as stores. Around five hundred ice houses have been listed in Great Britain (the vast majority of these at grade II), a testament to their intrinsic historic value, and the great interest which they arouse.

3. The Building Described

The ice house under consideration here stands at the north corner of the rear garden of 1 Belvedere Drive, a grade II listed Edwardian house, built in 1901 to the designs of Ernest George and Yeates. The ice house has only recently been rediscovered, having been completely covered with earth for some number of years (Fig. 3). 1 Belvedere Drive is in close proximity to Wimbledon's historic High Street, and falls within a Conservation Area.

The ice house, of a considerable size, is of the free-standing cup and dome type which, as mentioned above, was the most widely built variety. It has a domed roof, built of red brick and rendered externally, which has a ventilation hole at its summit (Fig. 4). The entrance, on the building's north-west side, now enters straight onto the ice chamber. Externally, the entrance is of brick and is topped by bricks on end, a crude attempt at castellation (Fig. 5). The bricks of this entrance are of a different size and colour from those of the main ice chamber, and seem to belong to a later date. Originally, the ice house – as was standard – would have had its own entrance passageway, a feature which has been removed, with the innermost doorway being made the main entrance. A low wall of cement blocks sweeps around the outside of the earth mound on the entrance side, curving away from the door (Fig. 6). It is probable that these blocks were added when the passageway was removed, so as to provide an alternative support for the earth superstructure. The date of these alterations cannot be given with any certainty, though the bricks of the present entrance way appear to date from some time after the mid-nineteenth century.

The nature of the property boundaries designated at the turn of the twentieth century meant that the ice house had to be divided in two; the majority of the building lies within the grounds of 1 Belvedere Drive, but at least a quarter falls within the grounds of the neighbouring property, 3 Belvedere Drive (Fig. 7). At an unspecified date in the past, the owners of 3 Belvedere Drive decided to demolish their section of the ice house. The result is that the interior of the ice house is somewhat confusing. A vertical wall forms the building's north-east termination, rather than the graceful curve of the dome and well which one would expect (Fig. 8). The vertical wall, constructed of brick, is supported by unattractive timber shoring. The base of the ice chamber is covered with debris, and it is not possible to see either sump or drain (Fig. 9).

The ice house is, on the whole, in poor repair. The vertical wall mentioned above has come away from the bricks of the dome, and the roots of a large tree – which is growing on top of the superstructure – have begun to cause damage.

⁵ Beamon and Roaf 1990, p. 90

Although the brick dome and ice well are substantially intact, the original passageway and entrance doors have – as has been stated – been lost. The building cannot therefore be considered complete, even if it were to retain its north-east side.

4. *Belvedere House and the History of the Site*

There can be no doubt that this ice house once stood in the grounds of one of Wimbledon's most important houses, Belvedere House. In the first edition Ordnance Survey map, dating from the 1870s, the land now occupied by Belvedere Drive is shown to be within the house's boundary. Furthermore, a mound appears in a position which corresponds with that of the ice house (Fig. 10). The mound is set adjacent to a landscaped lake, a situation that was – as we have seen – that most favoured for ice houses, and is close to the public highway.

Belvedere House, as it was named in the later nineteenth century because of its superb views, was built in the Palladian style c.1720 by Sir Theodore Janssen, a City merchant and financier (Fig. 11).⁶ Janssen had previously owned the original Elizabethan Manor House but, finding it not suited to his requirements, decided to construct an entirely new home on land nearby, opposite St Mary's Church (to the south of the modern Alan Road) (Fig. 12). However, his occupation of Belvedere House was short-lived; Janssen lost a great part of his wealth as a result of the collapse of the South Sea Company in 1724, and moved to a smaller house on the corner formed by the High Street and Church Road. Belvedere House was acquired by Janssen's son-in-law, Alexander Eustace, who leased it out to friends.⁷

In 1748, the estate was bought by Mrs Martha Rush and, having passed through the hands of her son, came to Sir William Beaumaris Rush in 1783. Sir William was responsible for an enlarging of both house and grounds, which involved the demolition of Janssen's house next door, and the incorporation of its land within his own.⁸ The Rush family continued to live at the property until 1834, when it was sold to James Courthope Peache, who renamed it Belvedere House. Nevertheless, with the suburban growth of the late nineteenth century – the District Line and Wimbledon Station opened in 1889 – the building's future was limited. Belvedere House was finally demolished in 1900 and its grounds were broken up for building.⁹

It seems most likely that the ice house now at 1 Belvedere Drive was constructed during one of the more major landscapings of the estate grounds. At the time John Rocque's map was drawn in 1746, it appears that the grounds of Belvedere House had been little landscaped, and there is no sign of an ice house (Fig. 13). It was under the Rushes, from 1748 to 1834, that the greatest work was done, in particular under Sir William Rush, after 1783. By the nineteenth century, the grounds of Belvedere House extended as far south as Woodside and across to Wimbledon Hill Road.¹⁰

Other landscaping was carried out in the area. The Spencer family, at Marlborough House (also known as Wimbledon Park), increased the size of the park fourfold to over 1,200 acres after 1761, employing Capability Brown, who visited Lord Spencer at Wimbledon in 1764 in order to prepare a design.¹¹ Furthermore, Sir Ellis Cunliffe bought Janssen's old house near Wimbledon High Street in the mid-1760s, and employed there both Robert

⁶ *Huguenot Society* 1995, p. 275

⁷ Milward 1986, pp. 28-29

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7 and p. 47

Adam and Capability Brown.¹² The grounds of Janssen's House extended along of the north side of the High Street as far as the present Belvedere Drive, and were joined to those of Belvedere House by Sir William Rush.¹³

5. *Conclusion*

It seems sensible to conclude that the ice house now at Belvedere Drive was built as part of the major landscaping of the grounds of Belvedere House carried out under the Rushes. This would place its date somewhere between 1748 and 1834, the period when cup and dome ice-houses were especially popular. The building could possibly have been built as part of Capability Brown's work for Ellis Cunliffe in the late 1760s, and then incorporated into the Rush estate along with the rest of the old Janssen House grounds, but there is no proof for this. It is equally possible that the ice house dates from after the 1780s, when Sir William Rush was most active, or even later.

Whatever the case, the ice house remains a remarkable survival. It is the only building of its form and type known to exist in Wimbledon, and is one of few structures left which record the existence of the area's once great manor houses. It is to be regretted that the ice house does not remain in its original, complete form, but its historic interest – at least locally – make it worthy of some form of protection.

¹² Ibid, p. 28 and p. 47

¹³ Ibid, p. 29

Sources and References

Published Material

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Society 1995 *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society*, Vol. XXVI, no.2, (1995)
- Milward 1977 Richard Milward, *A Short History of Wimbledon*, (1977)
- Milward 1982 Richard Milward, *Wimbledon’s Manor Houses*, (1982)
- Milward 1986 Richard Milward, *A Georgian Village: Wimbledon 1724-1765*, (1986)
- Milward 1998 Richard Milward, *Wimbledon Past*, (1998)

**ICE HOUSE, 1 BELVEDERE DRIVE, WIMBLEDON:
Notes and Corrections**

- p. 4 – Belvedere House was not named after its ‘superb views’, but after Belvedere Road on the South Bank where James Peache had managed his timber business.
- p. 4 – Wimbledon Station was opened in 1838, fifty years before the District Line.
- p. 5 – The ice house is not the only building of its type to survive in Wimbledon. There is an ice house in the grounds of Cannizaro House (above the pond by the kitchen garden), and there may be another by Christ Church on Cope Hill.

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14 August 2001

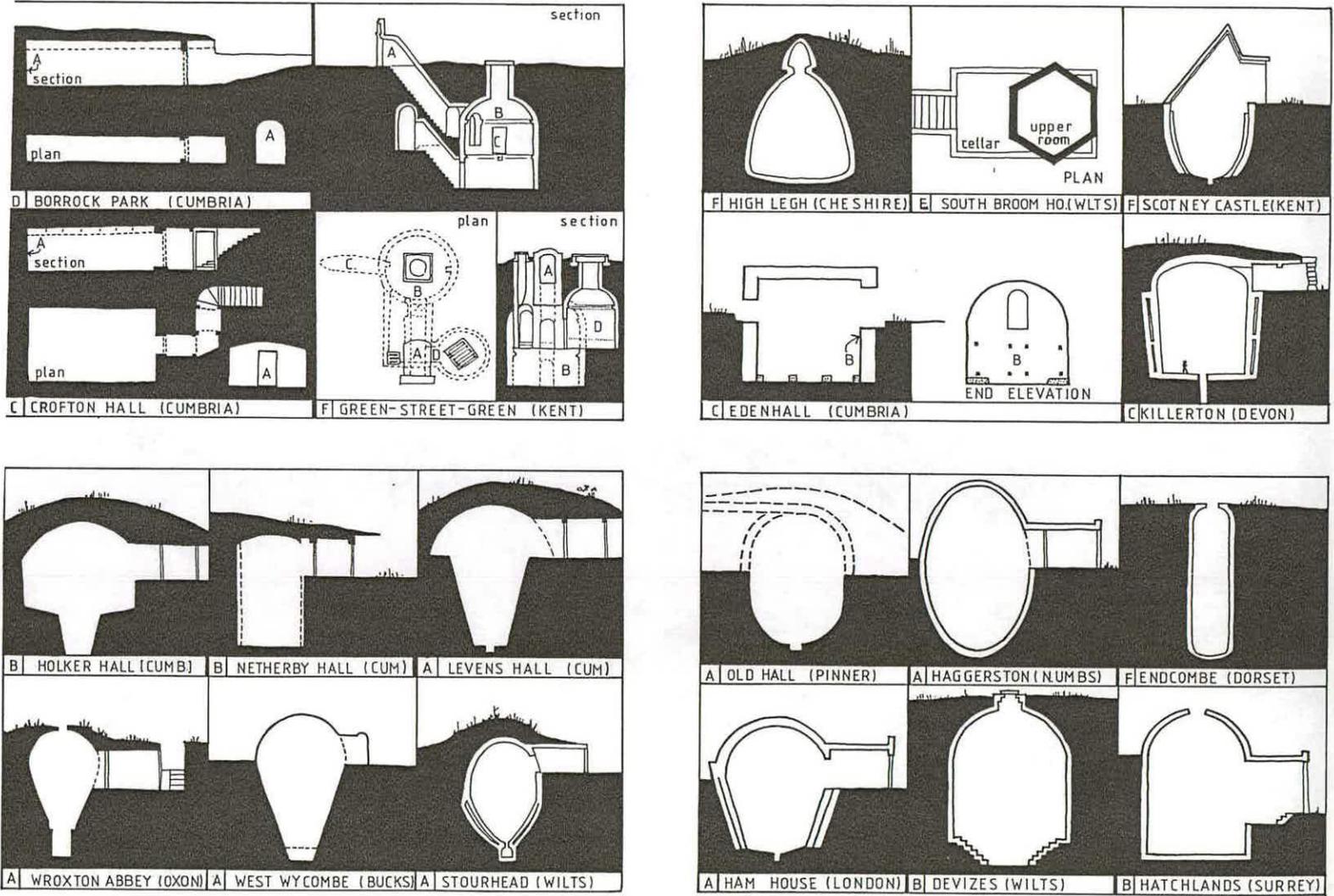


Figure 1: Drawing showing various forms of ice houses, taken from Sylvia P. Beamon and Susan Roaf's *The Ice-Houses of Britain*, (1990). The letter A shows ice houses of the 'cup and dome' form.

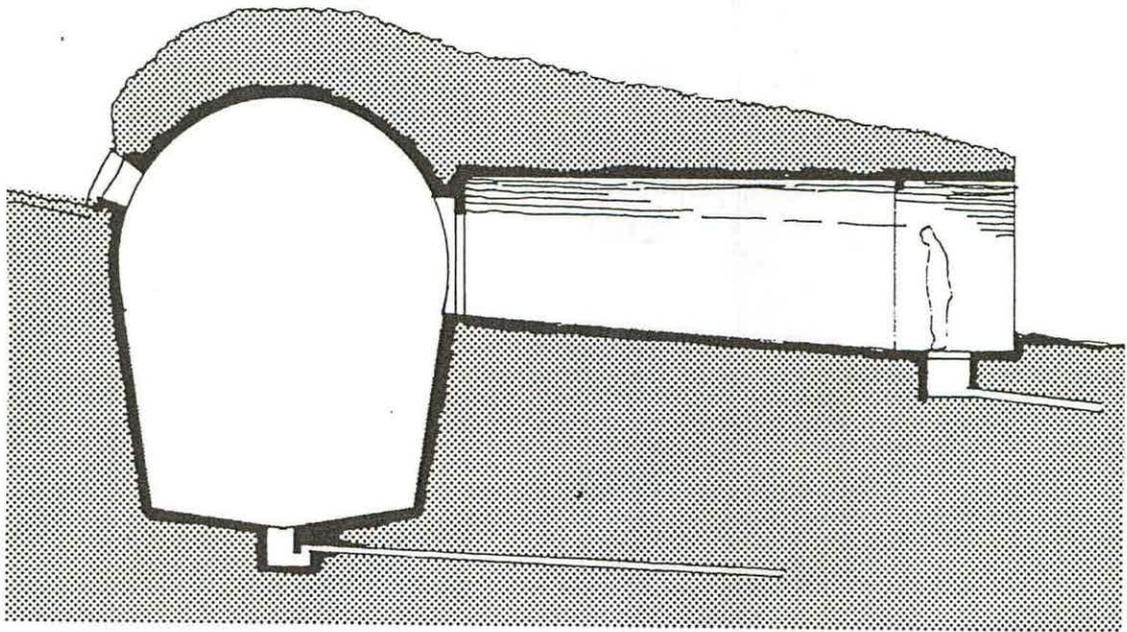


Figure 2; Drawing from Tim Buxbaum's *Icehouses* (1992), showing the form of the cup and dome ice house at Hanbury Hall, Worcestershire, built around 1730



Figure 3; Photograph showing the ice house at the rear of 1 Belvedere Drive, from the south



Figure 4; Photograph of the ice house from the west, showing an exposed area of its rendered brick dome



Figure 5; View of the present brick entrance to the ice house



Figure 6; The ice house from the west, showing the wall of cement blocks which sweeps around the entrance side of the mound

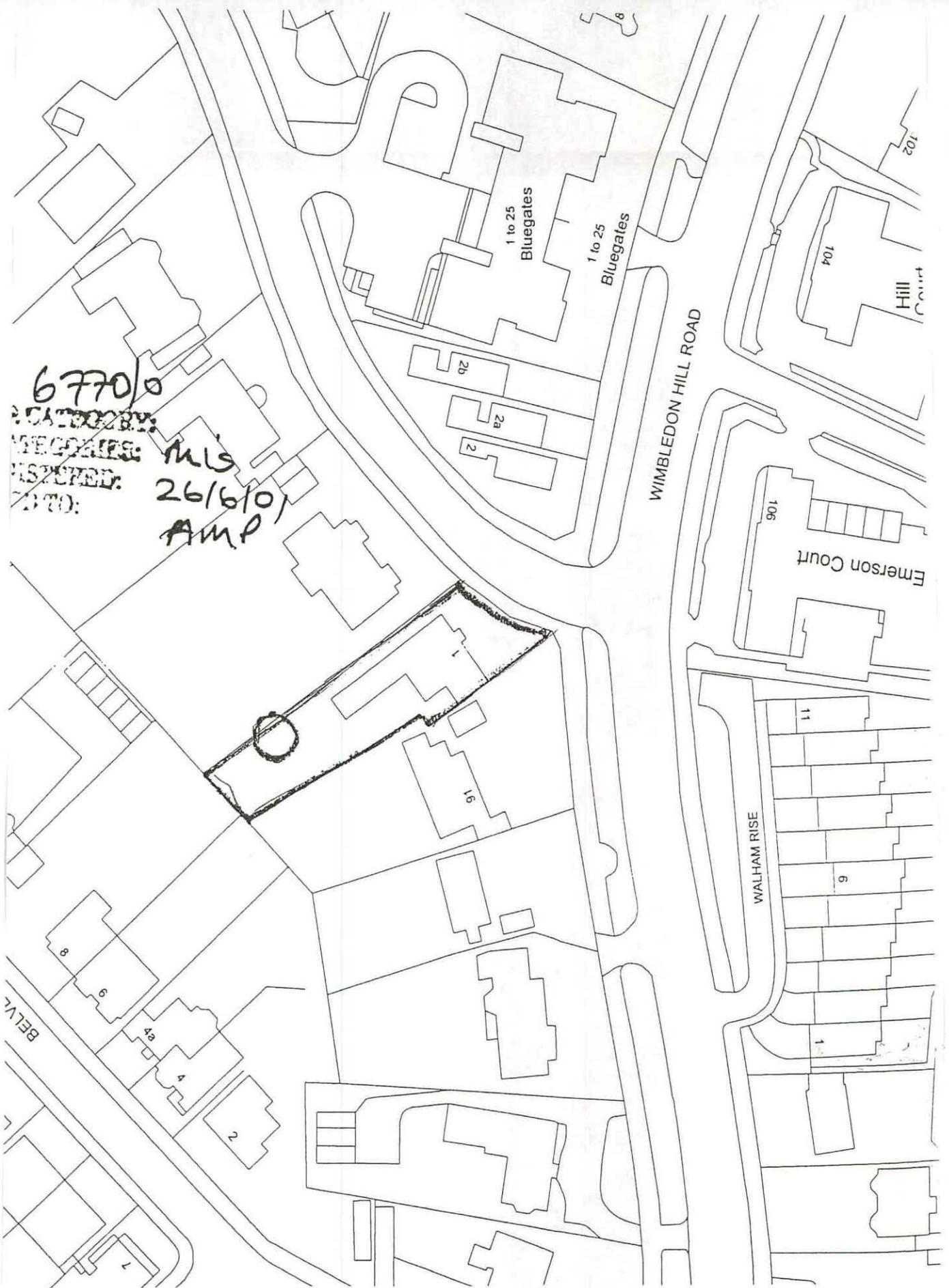


Figure 7; Modern map showing the position of the ice house. The area of the ice house shown as falling within 3 Belvedere Drive has been demolished



Figure 8; Photograph of the vertical wall which was added at the north-east of the ice house when it was part demolished

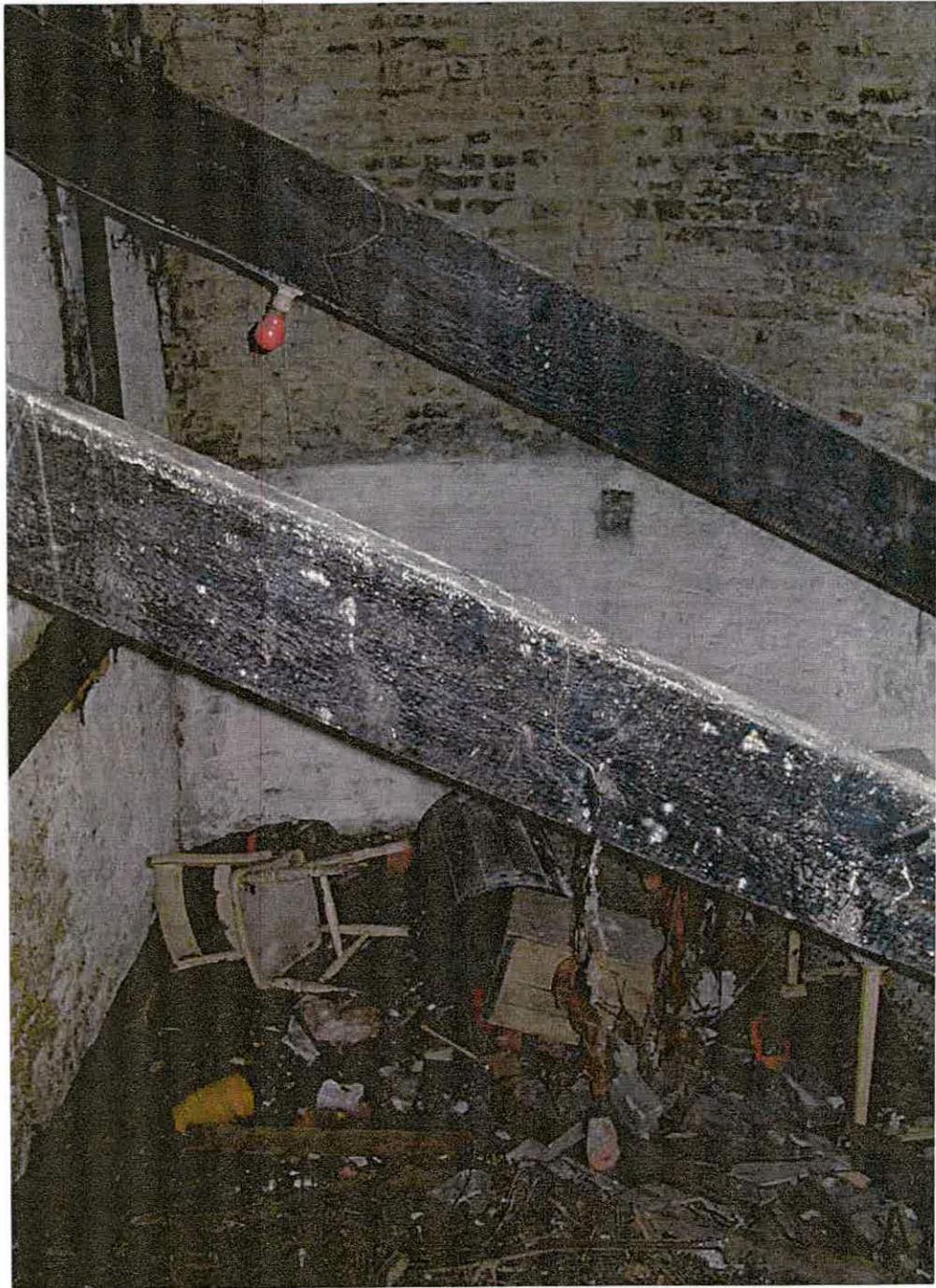


Figure 9; The interior of the ice house, showing the base of the well of the ice chamber full of debris

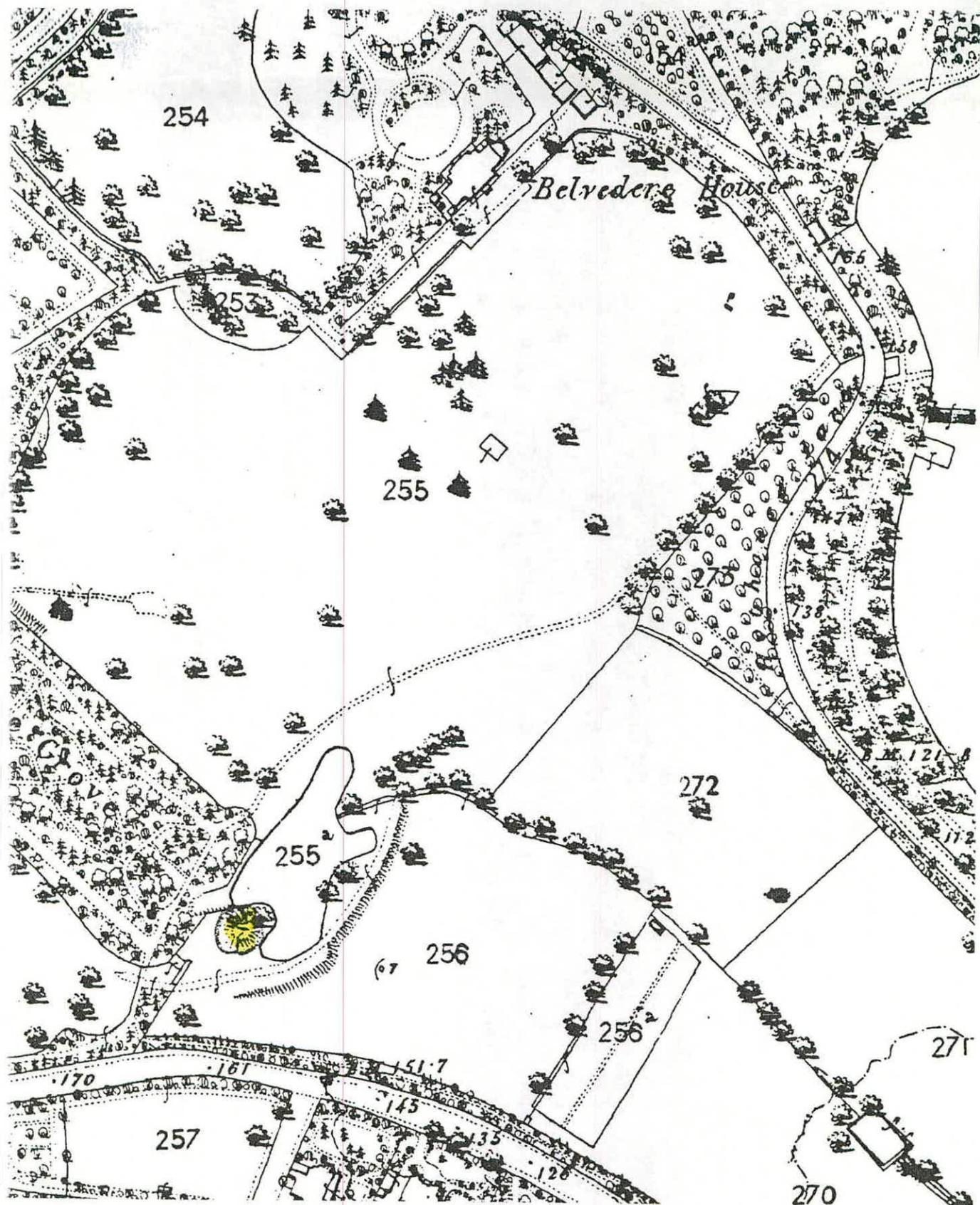


Figure 10; Detail of first edition Ordnance Survey map, drawn in the 1870s. The ice house appears as a mound at the foot of a lake

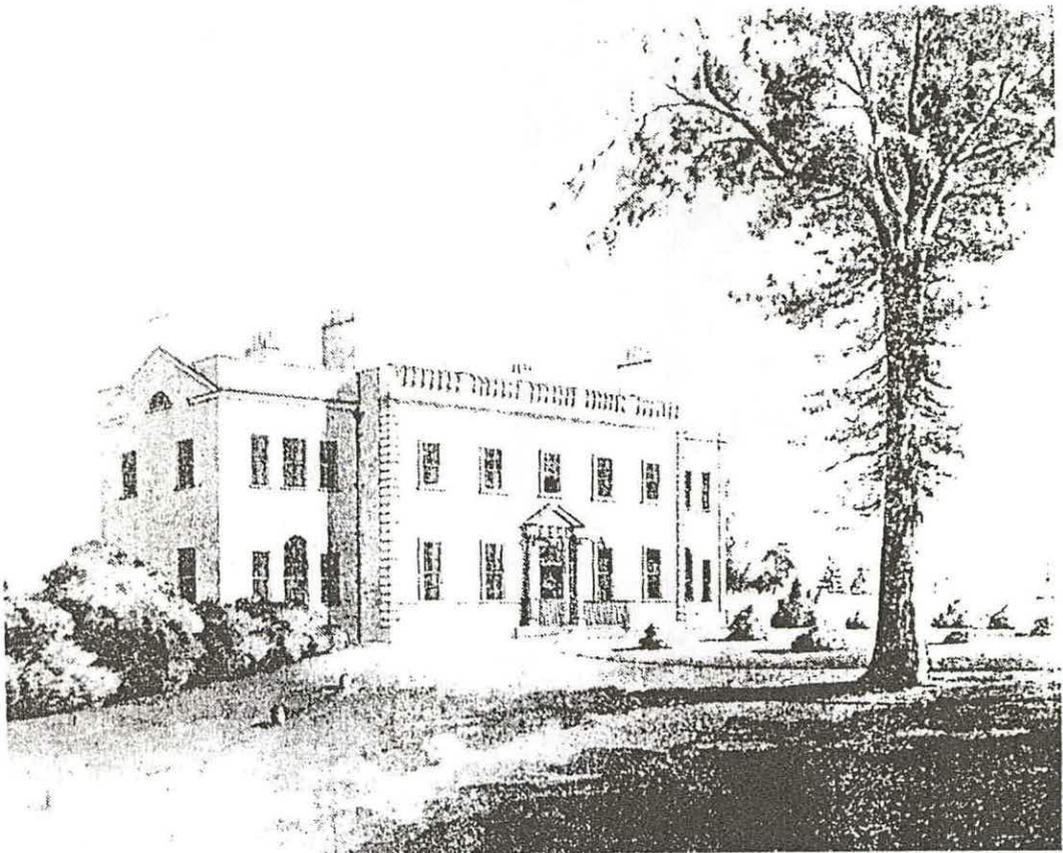


Figure 11; Painting of c. 1770 of Belvedere House, by an unknown artist. The painting is reproduced in Richard Milward's *A Georgian Village: Wimbledon 1724-1765*, (1986)

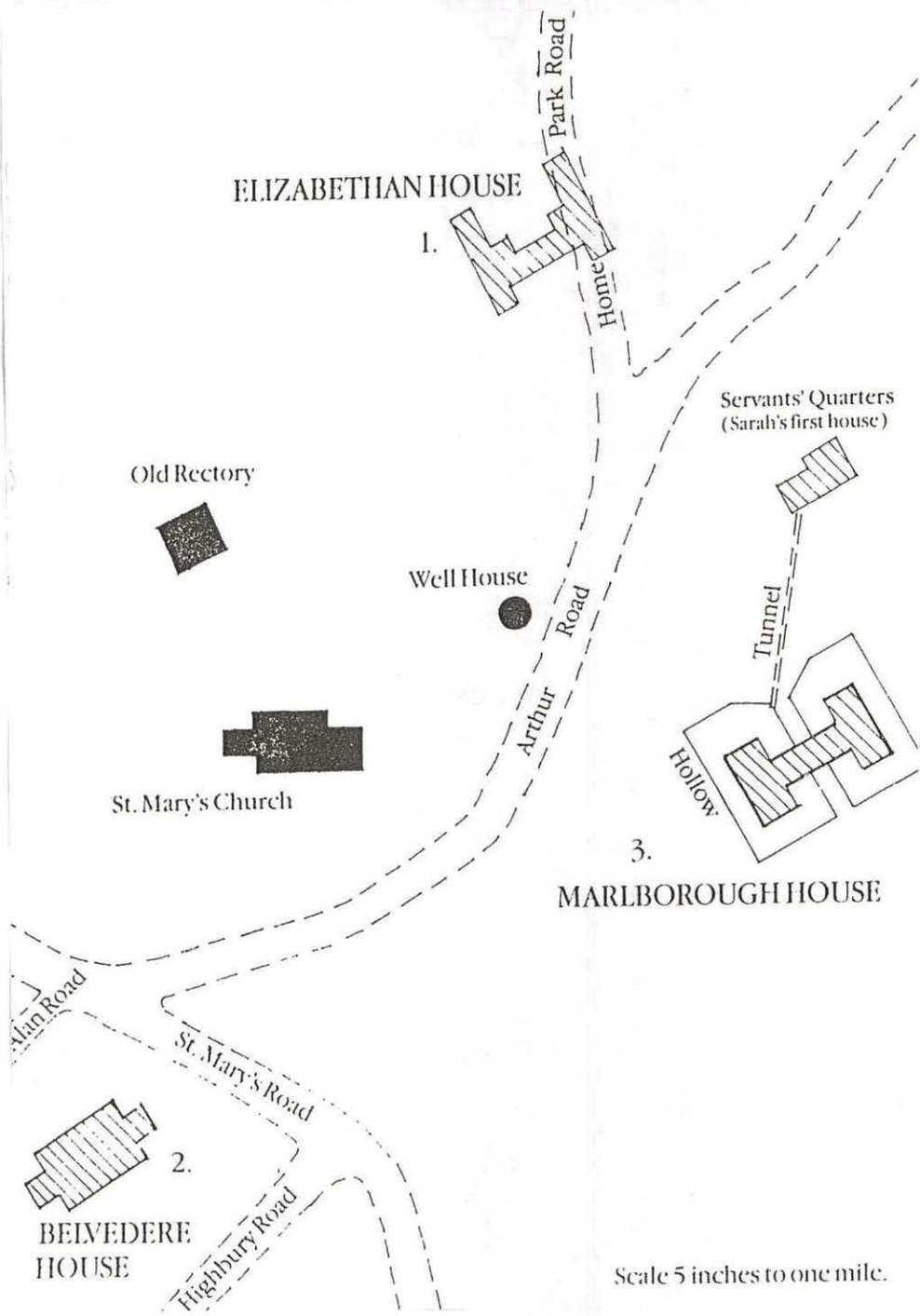


Figure 12; Map, published in Richard Milward's *A Georgian Village: Wimbleton 1724-1765*, (1986), showing the position of Wimbleton's great manor houses, including Belvedere House

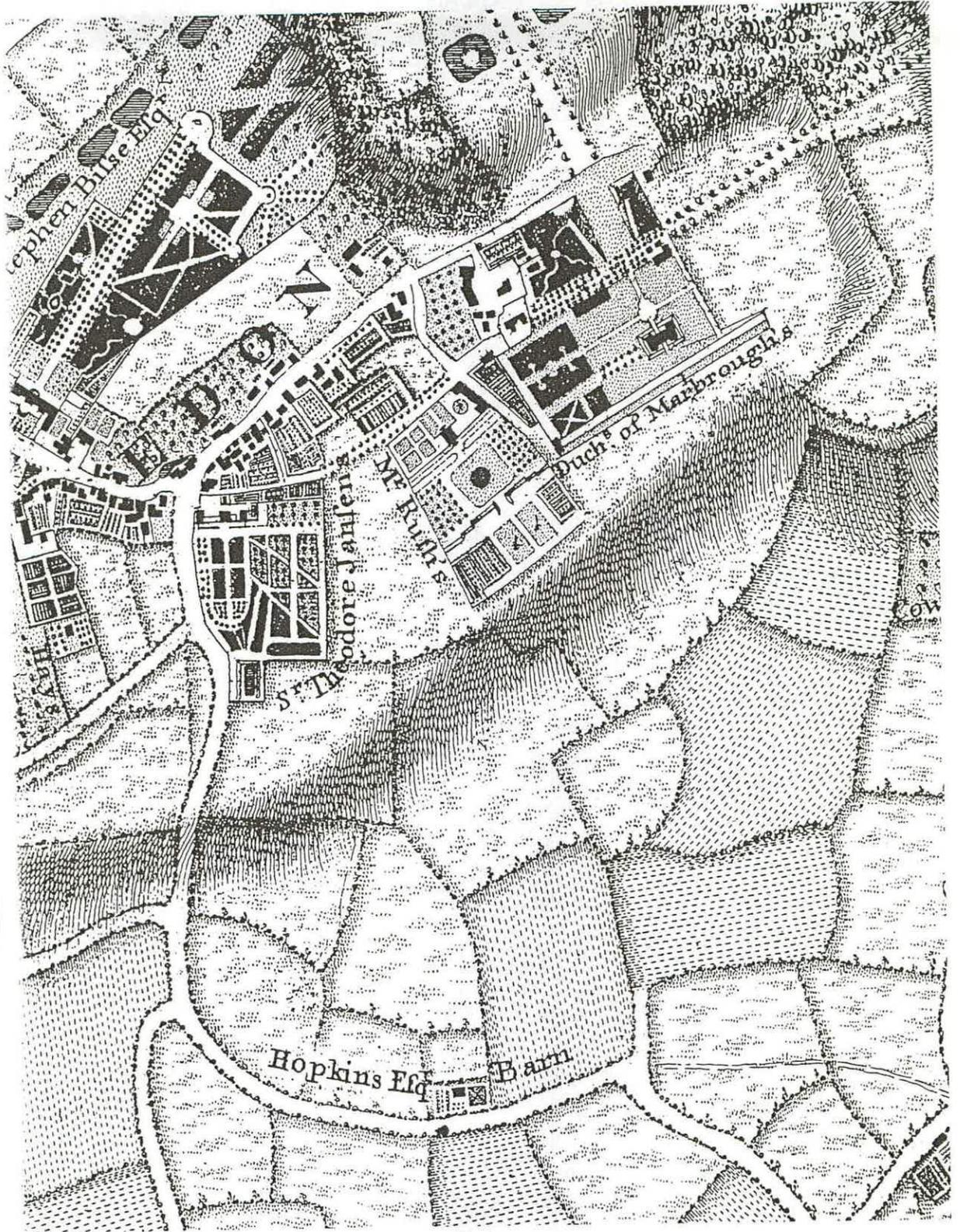


Figure 13; Detail of John Rocque's map of 1746. The landscaping of the grounds of Belvedere House did not then extend to the area now occupied by Belvedere Drive