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Author: Edward Roberts, King Alfred's College, Winchester.

A POSSIBLE ICEHOUSE AT MILNETHORPE, WINCHESTER

Abstract

A survey of a later 19th century structure, possibly an icehouse at Milnethorpe, Winchester, was undertaken by Winchester Archaeology Office in 1986. It is of an unusual type and may have been used for the cold storage of foodstuffs

rather than the keeping of ice. The builders clearly considered its additional function as a landscape feature, showing concern for both its location and decoration.

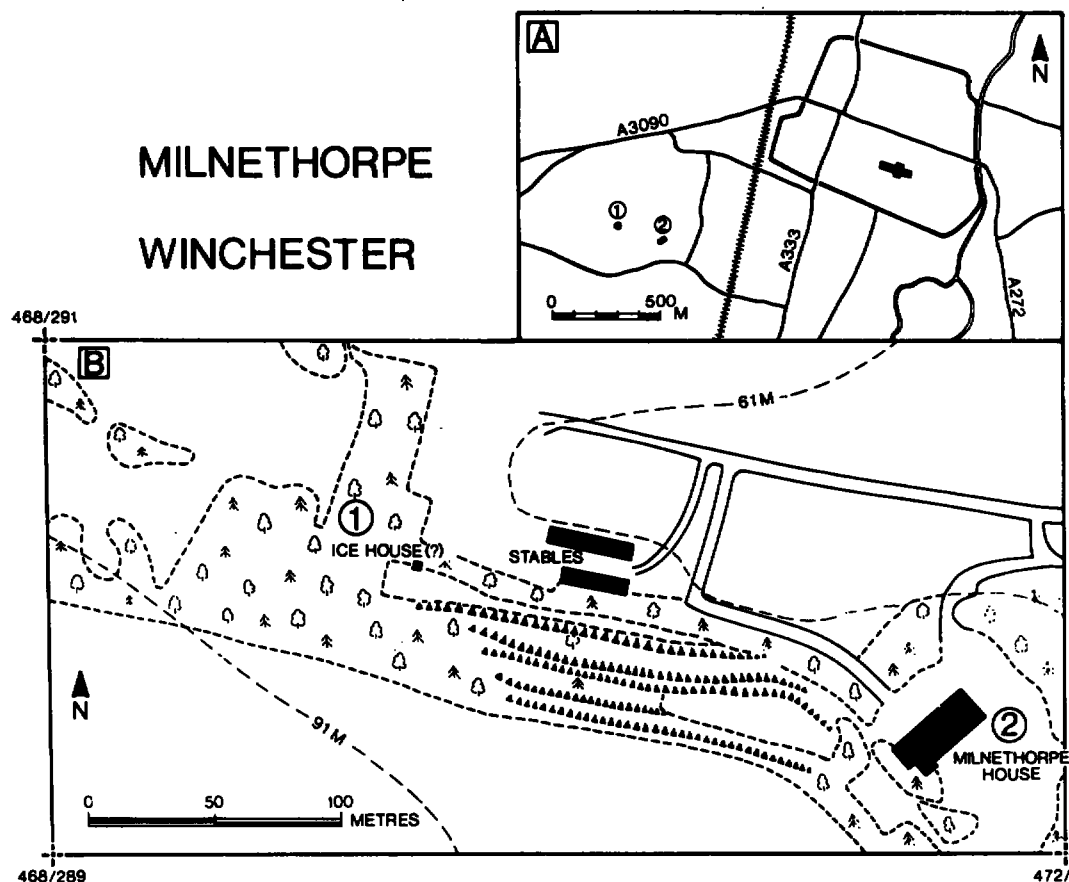


Fig 1. A Location of possible Icehouse in relation to Winchester. (1) The structure. (2) Milnethorpe House. B Plan showing major topographic features. Modern buildings have been excluded. Information from OS 25" 1970. Stables taken from 1909 edition.

Introduction

In Spring 1986 the existence of a previously unrecorded and unusual structure was brought to the attention of Winchester Archaeology Office. It is located to the southwest of the city at SU 4694 2901 on land formerly belonging to Milnethorpe House (Fig 1a). The house was constructed in 1856 (HRO

48m 84 W/311) in the Gothic style. In 1888 it passed into the hands of the Airlie family who held it until the turn of the century. The estate was originally some 24 acres in extent. The structure is not visible on any known map or plan, although the first edition OS 6" map (1874) shows a well house on the site. It is felt

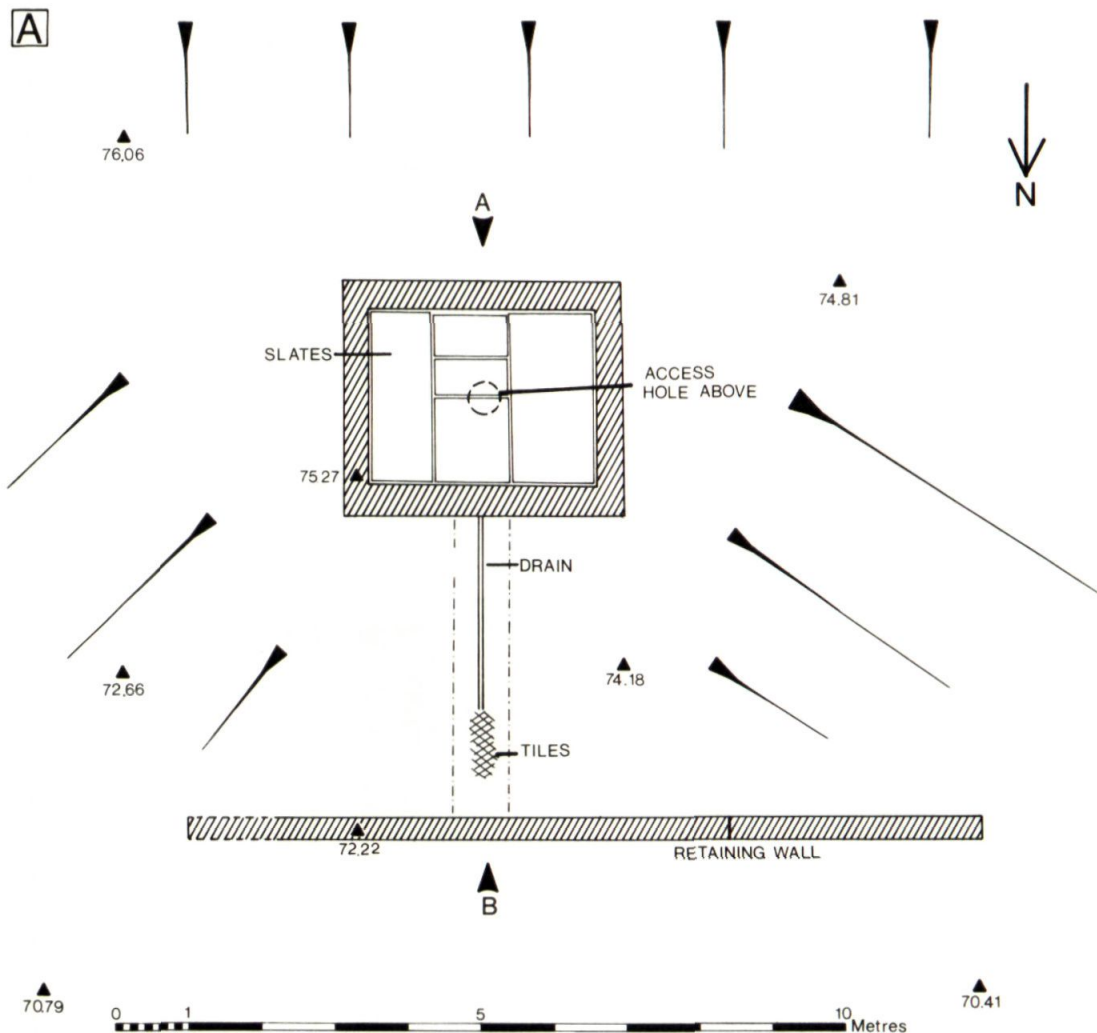
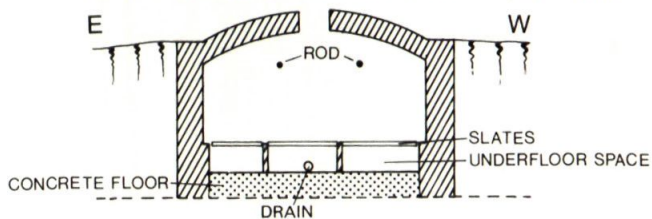


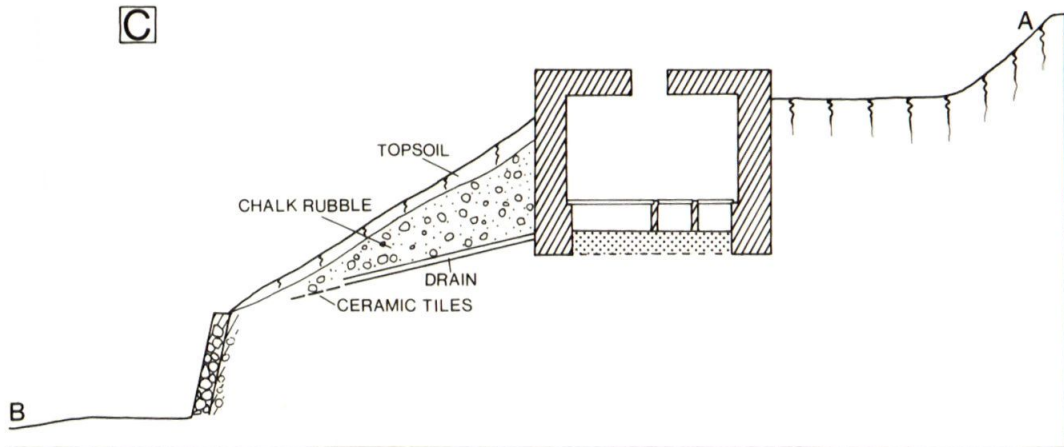
Fig 2. A possible Icehouse at Milnethorpe, Winchester. A Plan. B,C Sections. D Elevation. The trench-edge is shown in A and D as a dashed-and-dotted line.

NOTES: A POSSIBLE ICEHOUSE AT MILNETHORPE, WINCHESTER

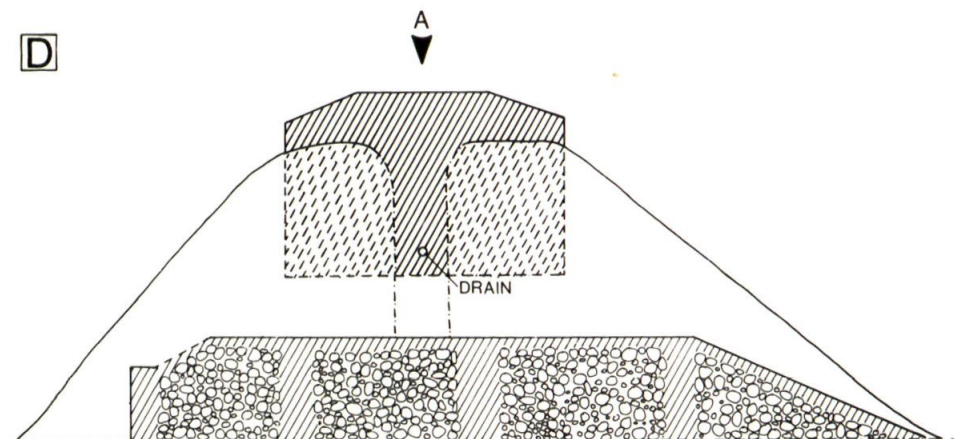
B



C



D



0 1 5 10 Metres

Concrete

Brick

Chalk Rubble

Flint Rubble

DAC

likely that this was a mis-identification of the building described in this note.

It lies on the north facing slope of a dry valley approximately 50m to the west of the site of the stable block which was demolished some years ago (Fig 1b). The site had been chosen with care, at a distinct break in slope: uphill is a steep tree-covered incline, downhill is gently sloping open ground. The topography of the immediate area appears to be little altered from that shown on the 1874 OS map.

Renovation of the structure was undertaken by the owners in April 1986, which involved the clearance of undergrowth, the digging of a narrow trench at 90° to the north wall, and emptying of the interior. This work presented the opportunity for detailed recording, the results of which are given below. I am grateful to the owners, Mr and Mrs Chapman for making the site available for inspection and to Monica Ellis for highlighting certain difficulties over its interpretation.

The Structure

The building is rectangular in plan, measuring 3.8 x 3.2m, and is 2.5m high although only 0.7m protrudes above ground level (Fig 2). It is of Flemish bond brickwork with alternate headers and stretchers on each course. The bricks are machine made and well fired, measuring 0.22 x 0.07m and are mid-red in colour. The roof is vaulted; the exterior is rendered with concrete, while in the interior the bricks remain exposed. The structure is partly stepped into the slope, and chalk rubble and soil (probably derived from this operation) has been banked up against its front (Fig 2c). An iron drainpipe 0.05m wide runs from the base of the front wall for 2.6m. Two red ceramic tiles were observed at its termination, perhaps representing the continuation of the drainage facility.

The interior was found to be largely empty, containing only a deposit of clean gravel and a thin accumulation of branches and rubbish. Access is by means of a centrally placed circular hole 0.45m in diameter. No evidence for a trapdoor or cover was found. The internal

walls are rendered with a mortary concrete to within 0.25m of the highest point of the roof. At the base of the structure is a floor of pebbled concrete onto which narrow brick dividing walls 0.35m high have been constructed. These support a raised floor consisting of five well-fitted slate slabs. Each is 0.02m thick and pierced by small holes 0.005m across, spaced regularly at intervals of 0.05m. The central rear slate has an additional hole in one corner 0.03m across, presumably to facilitate lifting. Gaps have been left at the base of each underfloor wall to allow drainage to the pipe in the front exterior wall. Across the upper part of the chamber are two iron rods which were perhaps used for hanging game, etc (Fig 2b).

The Retaining Wall

The structure and associated mound are retained by a substantial wall. This is constructed of large flints in mortar with bricks incorporated at four points along its length to add both decoration and stability. The top of the wall is capped with a course of brick headers. A core of brick rubble set in concrete was observed where the flints had fallen away from the wall face. The elevation of the wall is not symmetrical, having a vertical edge to the east and a gentle slope to the west. No investigations were carried out to establish the thickness of the core or the depth of foundations. A number of ferns are present on the wall and at its base, perhaps reflecting deliberate landscaping of this feature.

Discussion

The character of the brickwork is suggestive of a later nineteenth century date. There is no evidence to indicate alterations to the structure. It is well sited to avoid high temperatures; the valley forms a local frost pocket and the location of the building on the cold north-facing slope is consistent with the aspect of the majority of icehouses in the area (Ellis 1982, 87). Also good insulation would have been provided by the soil cover. The structure is, however, very different from the traditional icehouse and icewell lacking both an entrance

passage and an ice pit. One possibility is that it acted as a cold store rather than an icehouse. Indeed if ice was used in the structure at all it may have been packed in the space below the slates, and foodstuffs stored on the slates and hung from the rods. The weight and relative fragility of the slates might suggest that access beneath them was only gained occasionally. Equally they would not appear to be a suitable base on which to compact large quantities of ice. It is conceivable that the gravel deposit found on the slates may have related to use of the structure, perhaps as a bedding for ice. Access to the main chamber is rather impractical; gaining entry through the narrow hole is rather difficult for an adult, and there is no evidence for a fixed ladder to assist in the

process. At the present time, the function of the structure remains a mystery.

The building and its retaining wall provide an interesting landscape feature visible, though not obtrusive, from a considerable distance. Attention was also apparently given to the detailed appearance of the structure. Ferns were commonly used in Victorian landscape gardening and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that some of the plants found in the vicinity of the retaining wall were provided as deliberate decoration. It is therefore probable that in common with many icehouses, visual appearance as well as practical function was of considerable importance to its builders (cf Ellis 1982, 4–8).

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Ellis, M 1982 *Ice and Icehouses Through the Ages with a Gazetteer for Hampshire*.

Author: Michael Morris, Winchester Archaeology Office, Historic Resources Centre, 75 Hyde Street, Winchester, Hants SO23 7DW.

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