

Mystery in the Hardwick woods – a bear pit, a grotto, an icehouse or what?

Many people walking in the woodlands above the Hardwick Stud will have come across a large pit containing some dilapidated structures. Sometimes known as the 'bear pit', it has been a bit of a puzzle for a long time. This article considers the possibilities.

At present the pit is fenced off for public safety. But approaching it from the footpath, the visitor would pass between a pair of curved, flint-built grotto-like gateway structures (*right*), each with a shelf inside, with the remains of an iron railing nearby. On the far bank of the pit a brick retaining wall can be seen, with what looks like an entrance. This gives access to a short tunnel leading to an abandoned icehouse. The progressive



collapse of the chalk bank has now half-covered the tunnel entrance and made the icehouse inaccessible, as well as hazardous for visitors. However, the interior can still be seen from one angle (*below*), revealing a domed circular chamber excavated within the



chalk, which is neatly lined with brick and stone. Insulated within the hillside, blocks of ice would have been taken there during the depths of winter and kept frozen for the benefit of the owners during the warmer months.

Those with long memories may recall a Whitchurch History Society evening when Lady Rose and William Barefield-Hutt answered

questions about Whitchurch past. One of the questions concerned Straw Hill and the little thatched cottage which perches above Hardwick House.

Lady Rose explained that Straw Hill was a feature on a leisurely tour for visitors to the woods – rather like at Stowe, but on a smaller scale. The “hundred steps” would lead up from the house and there would be a view of the “Baulk” – a house designed to look like a church. Visitors would pass a fiddler, and a maypole ground, before taking refreshment

at Straw Hill cottage. Lady Rose insisted that it was called Straw Hill Cottage, not Straw Hall (as shown on some OS maps). No doubt the visitors would also have admired the gates and dogs' gravestones at the entrance to the 'bear pit', where the ice-house was cut into the further bank.

Caroline Lybbe Powys (see below) wrote to a friend: "Hardwick Woods you may perhaps have heard of, as parties come so frequently to walk in them, and request to drink tea in a cottage erected for that purpose in a delightful spot commanding a noble view of the Thames."

William Barefield-Hutt calls the pit "The Sounding House" in his book on Hardwick – and indeed it is marked thus on the Ordnance Survey 1912 map and the 1949-70 map (*right*). The name came from the idea that a shout in the sounding house could be heard over the river in Tilehurst. Bill calls this a leg-pull, envisaging many children made hoarse after their elders had passed on this myth. I haven't found any other references to a sounding house in accounts of eighteenth-century gardens. His conclusion is that of the received wisdom among the older generation that this feature was a tun pit, where grain was stored in Anglo Saxon times. It seems rather large for this.



Emily Climenson, editor of *Passages From the Diaries of Mrs Philip Lybbe Powys of Hardwick House, 1756-1808*, quotes the verse by Thomas Powys written over the door of Straw Hill cottage:

*"Within this cot no polished marble shines,
Nor the rich product of Arabian mines;
The glare of splendour and the toys of state,
Resigned, unenvied, to the proud and great;
Whilst here reclined, those nobler scenes to view
Which Nature's bold unguided pencil drew."*

She also quotes Thomas' epitaph for Muff his dog whose grave she says is "in a grotto" (page 108):

*"From insults rude thy poor remains to save,
Thus faithful Muff thy Master makes thy grave".*

Grottos were fashionable at the time, as at Stourhead, Basildon House grotto by the river, and Stowe. Most grottos were cave-like and included a waterfall or running water, but the 'bear pit' seems too wide ever to have had a roof – and is not near a water source.

However, Emily Climenson was a friend of the Lybbe Powys family and probably echoed their way of talking about the situation of the dogs' graves at the entrance to the pit.

It seems likely that an old chalk quarry was used to site the icehouse and a grotto-like rustic dell built around it, creating another stop-off point on a woodland walk for the owners of the Hardwick estate. The idea of it having been a bear pit, an arena for the spectator sport of dogs fighting a bear, seems far-fetched.

What does the local authority have to say? The Heritage Gateway website offers an Oxfordshire Historic Environment Record on the site. This classifies the icehouse as Post Medieval (1540 to 1900) and carries this description: *A circular domed icehouse built of chalk blocks, with entrance tunnel. The later entrance is of very thin bricks. It is built into the north west end of a chalk hollow, possibly a quarry originally. This forms an amphitheatre with flint walls and an C18th flint entrance. It was converted to an air-raid shelter in WWII.*

The term 'sounding house' is puzzling, as there do not seem to be any other examples. Could it have been the acoustics of the icehouse itself that suggested the name? Was it a place where singing took place?

There is even a ghost story from less than twenty years ago, based on a child describing an encounter with a cloaked, tonsured monk-like figure, who then disappeared.

Plenty of opinions and still plenty of mystery about the site – though it seems unlikely to have been a bear pit! If you have any ideas, or information to offer, please let me know!

Vicky Jordan, March 2021
vickyjordan5@hotmail.com

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