



Fig. 1: domed entrance to the structure

The Cowley Hole – what was it?

Colin Bowlt and Ken Pearce

Introduction

In March 2009 the occupants of a 1950's house on Cowley Road, Hillingdon, Middlesex, (TQ 05440 82483) observed a hole developing in their back-garden lawn. Investigation revealed the top of a round brick structure at a depth of 0.74 m from the lawn surface. Further clearance revealed a domed top, with a circular opening of 0.60 m diameter (Fig. 1).

The interior had been filled with black loam containing a variety of sherds, bottles, window glass, etc. Using an auger, it was established that the structure was not a well but had a solid bottom. The infill was dug out with some difficulty due to the restricted access. There was no evidence to suggest any stratification of the fill, which was probably dumped over a short period. The finds appeared

to be confined in date from the 19th to the early 20th centuries.

The site

The site is in the rear garden of a short row of houses built in 1954. An 1887 map (Fig. 2) shows the site then occupied by a pair of cottages (nos. 1 and 2 Ivy Cottages) with their gardens divided by a wall. An old wall (18th-century?) still stands along the north side of the garden. Its angle indicates that the site is within the garden of the southernmost cottage. In 1887 this cottage appears to have had a large rear extension extending as far as the old wall (see Fig. 2). From 1891, and possibly earlier, until 1933 it was Cowley Post Office. It also housed a bakery business from 1891 until about 1914, the owners combining the two businesses. There are several old buildings still standing in the immediate

vicinity, including the 16th-century *Crown Inn* shown on Fig. 2.

The structure

The top of the structure was 0.74 m below the surface of the lawn. The garden soil is of made-up material, so that the structure may have been closer to the original surface. This brick well-like chamber is 1.40 m (55 inches) in diameter and 2.13 m (7 feet) in depth – sufficient for easy upright standing. The top is domed with six layers of largely half bricks, but with a circular opening of 0.62 m diameter (24 inches) – just wide enough to allow entry. The bricks are of dimension 9.0 by 4.50 by 2.25 inches without frogs, and laid in stretcher bond (Fig. 3). Some are yellow and softish and set in a sandy mortar. The floor of the structure is level and of brick. The chamber walls are of single brick thickness.

THE COWLEY HOLE

The entrance was set with tiles (see Fig. 1) with remains of some brickwork at the corners. There were no openings or pipes in the walls or floor for water to run in or out.

Discussion

Rob Whytehead (EH) has pointed out finds of somewhat similar type, but probably for different functions. At Bentley Priory, Stanmore, Middlesex, a group of fourteen brick-lined cisterns was uncovered buried 0.45 m below ground level.¹ Their form appeared typically 18th-century, each having a dome-shaped half brick cap with a large access hole, some still covered with a stone lid. The exact depth was not established due to the accumulated deposits, but the overall diameter was 1.20 m. Their exact purpose was uncertain, but it was concluded that they formed part of a water-supply system.

Examples of cesspools have been recorded with an entrance hole in a domed top. However, these had inlet and outlet pipes, usually in the sidewall.

In 1979 HADAS excavated in Highgate a circular brick-lined chamber, 3 m deep and 1.40 m diameter.² It had a corbelled roof with a 0.52 m square entrance, and a flat brick floor. It was concluded it was most probably a water cistern, but could have been an



Fig. 3: inside view of the wall and domed top

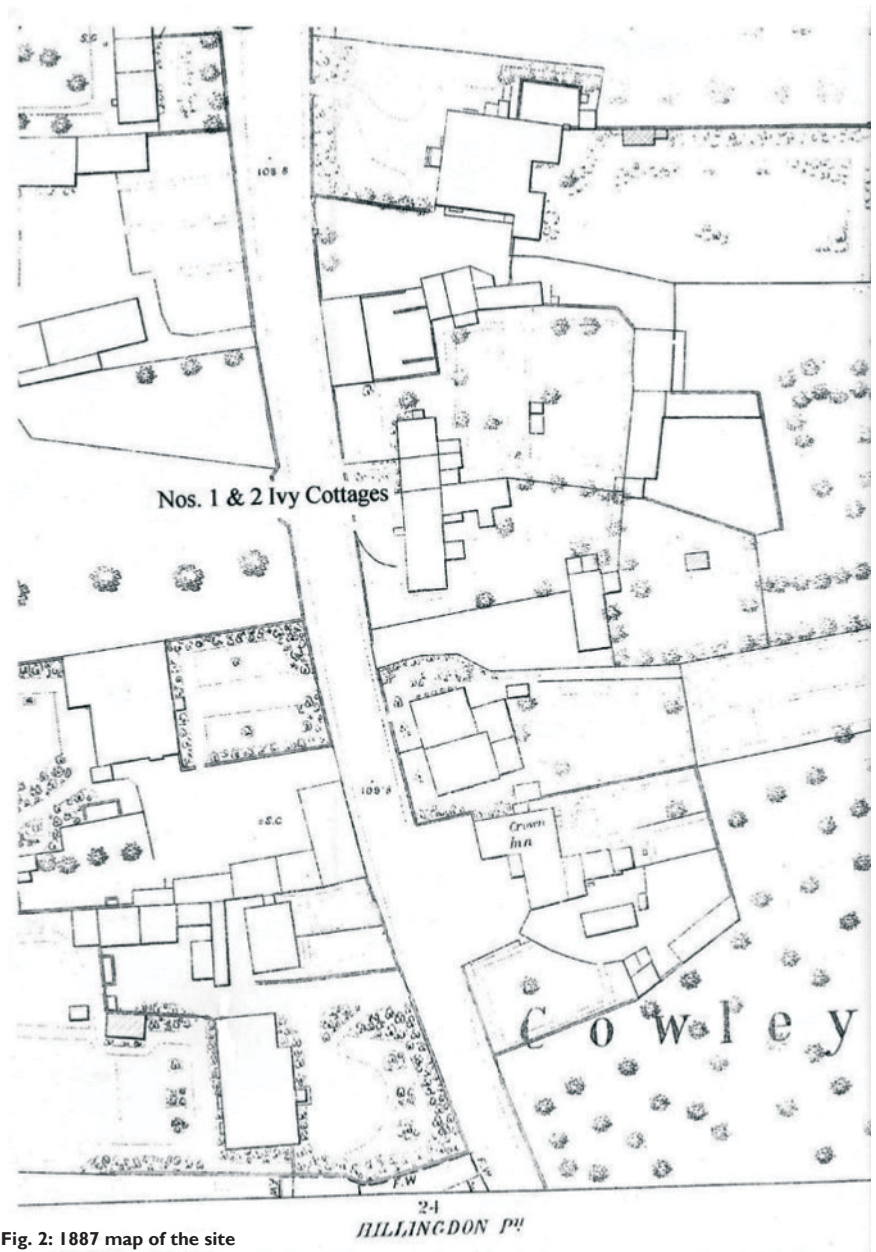


Fig. 2: 1887 map of the site

icehouse or a brewery store.

In 2008 a circular brick feature was briefly revealed approximately west of the north-west corner of Manor Farm, Ruislip, Middlesex.³ The structure had a diameter of 2.80 m, with a domed (corbelled) top with a 0.68 m access hole. The lower sides of the feature appeared vertical but excavation did not proceed beyond 1.0 m during the watching brief. The feature was interpreted as probably a large well of 19th-century construction, rather than a soakaway, although another possibility was that it was a small icehouse.

The Cowley structure has no inlet or outlets associated with water systems or cesspools. It appears to be similar to the Highgate chamber, whose function was

not positively identified but it seems likely that both these structures were for dry containment. In the case of the Cowley "hole" this might have been either a food store associated with the bakery, or a safe for valuables associated with the Cowley Post Office.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the Waine family for allowing us access to record this structure, and particularly to Adam Waine for the photographs and for showing us the material that he and Alex White dug out during their clearance of the structure.

We are also indebted to Rob Whytehead (EH) for pointing out some similar structures.

1. A. Wittrick 'Bentley Priory' EH Report 51 (2001).

2. P. Venning '97 Southwood Lane, Highgate' in B.

Richardson 'Excavation Round-up 1979' *London Archaeol* 3 (1980) 386.