

Manor House Gardens Ice House welcomes its 30,000th visitor

The Lee Manor Society welcomed its 30,000th visitor to the Manor House Gardens Ice House on April 17, 2022. The Ice House in the grounds of the Manor House Lee has been open for the past 22 years following its reopening by the Society in the Millennium Year 2000. Although the Society was keen to bring the Ice House back to life we had no idea how popular it would prove over the long term. It was possible, we feared, that after the lengthy queues that built up on the opening day in June 2000 interest would die away and we would be left with a fine but once again forgotten building. That has not proved to be the case. Stalwart support for the project from Society members has meant we have opened every summer since. From April to September every year we are open for the first and third Sundays of the month between 3pm and 5pm. On warm summer days and cold early Spring and late Autumn days Society volunteers staff a welcome table and explain to visitors the workings of the Ice House and its history. Built in 1773 to serve the wealthy owners of the Manor House, the Ice House, as its name suggests, provided ice to the big house to preserve foodstuffs and for table decorations. Ice would have been cut from the lake in the gardens and packed into the egg-shaped ice well under ground. Straw packing round the ice and several wooden doors to reduce air movement would have kept the ice solid for at least a year. Until the invention of mechanical refrigeration, powered by gas or electricity, the options for preserving food were limited. Ice was one option alongside salting, pickling or smoking. Canning emerged later. A common feature of many large estates, after the First World War most ice houses fell into disuse and were forgotten. This ice house was part of a set of farm buildings from which the surrounding farmland and orchards were managed. At the turn of the last century the side chambers were used for the stabling of a local builder's ponies. It also made a convenient air raid shelter for the occupants of nearby houses in Manor Lane during the Second World War. The food preserving properties of ice have been known since ancient times. The first record of an ice house was found in the Middle East and dates from about 2000 BC. Ice was particularly prized in the very hot summers and would be brought down from the mountains for storage. There is little evidence of ice houses in western Europe before the early 17thC. One of the first in England was built at Greenwich in 1619. The Manor House Gardens Ice House was filled from the nearby lake. But there was also a thriving global trade with imported ice being brought in from North America and

Scandinavia. Reopening the ice house had long been an ambition of the Society but the spread of Victorian London meant access was only possible through the back gardens of the houses on Manor Lane. Creating a new means of access was a challenge. We finally opted for a staircase leading down to a newly created opening in the Ice House wall. Mounds of rubbish were cleared from the chambers and the rough soil floor smoothed and covered in brick. Funds were raised from The Pilgrim Trust, Heritage of London Trust, The Heritage Lottery Fund, Lewisham Borough and local residents. Architect for the work was Timpson Manley.



Sian Ruddick, the 30,000th visitor, with mother Izzy