



Dovecotes

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The county's library service recently mounted an exhibition - Birds in Oxfordshire - in the Westgate Library, Oxford. Designed to coincide with the R.S.P.B.'s Jubilee it contained some mentions of dovecotes and had a fine line drawing, made in the early part of the century, of the circular pigeon house at Minster Lovell (near Witney), and a more recent photograph of the building. It is a very good example of a stone built, externally rendered building containing about 600 nest holes. It can be visited.

Also, during 1988, Shire Publications of Princes Risborough - well known for their 'Albums' ranging from 'Agricultural Hand Tool' to the 'Woollen Industry' -produced a new title (Album 213, price £1.50) on the subject of Dovecotes. The authors are Peter and Jean Hansell. This publication (32pp) features the same Minster Lovell dovecote at the head of its first page of text. Although the Hansell's booklet mentions another five sites in Oxfordshire, and illustrates four of them, (Wytham - by Oxford's western by-pass (A34); Cornwell Manor - near Chipping Norton; Brightwell Park - Wallingford; Chastleton Manor - between Moreton-in-Marsh and Chipping Norton) no reference is made to sites in our area and yet there are several sites and a few well-preserved examples close to Wantage.

One of the best and easiest to see is a circular example in the main street of Marcham. This is thick-walled and plastered and resembles the one at Minster Lovell. It is roofed with Stonesfield 'slates' and has a central cupola or 'glover'. It is on the south side of the A415 close to the war memorial, and can be photographed.

Marcham also has what appears to be a second pigeon house at the south-east end of the village. As you approach the series of dangerous bends on the A415 from the east, a square brick building can be seen, with what appears to be rows of exterior nest holes.

Two more well-preserved local examples are between Stanford in the Vale and Buckland. Both are octagonal brick structures roofed with slate and both seem to be of 18th century design built to a similar pattern, but there are differences. The first example is at SU355965, between Gimbro copse and Pusey hamlet. It is next to the stream which feeds the lake in the grounds of Pusey House. It is close to a public bridleway but can be seen from the B4508. It has no central Glover - instead access for pigeons is by a series of dormers on the roof. The side walls are also decorated with inset brickwork in a cross design. The second example is only a mile distant, at Home Farm SU340967. It is of similar design, but instead of the roof dormers it has a central cupola, which is quite tall. It too is decorated on the walls with inset brickwork. Both of these examples can easily be photographed from public rights of way.

In Violet M. Howse's 'Pusey, a Parish Record', there are references to dovecotes at Pusey. A deed of 1617 describes a parcel of land at Pusey called Lower Gillians containing 17

acres and the Pigeon House belonging to the ancient Manor House of Hugh Pusey (Hugh Pusey - the elder - lived 1565 to 1648).

Mention is also made in the same book that in 1688 Pusey Farm was let to a John Bowles for £150 a year for 4 years. In the list of reservations (i.e. parts of the estate not included in the lease) was the 'Dove House'. The agreement was most specific that John Bowles was to get "ye Dung of ye Dovehouse to be laid and spent in ye premises". Bowles was further constrained "not to move or carry off any soil, Dung or compost made ye last year of his terme". Dung from dovecotes was considered very valuable agriculturally; "one load is worth ten loads of other dung".

Not far from Pusey, in the grounds of Longworth Manor, there is a square four gabled cote, part of a larger range of buildings, again easily seen from the adjacent path. This is built in a mixture of stone and brick and seems to be an example of an upper storey type, with alternative use beneath.

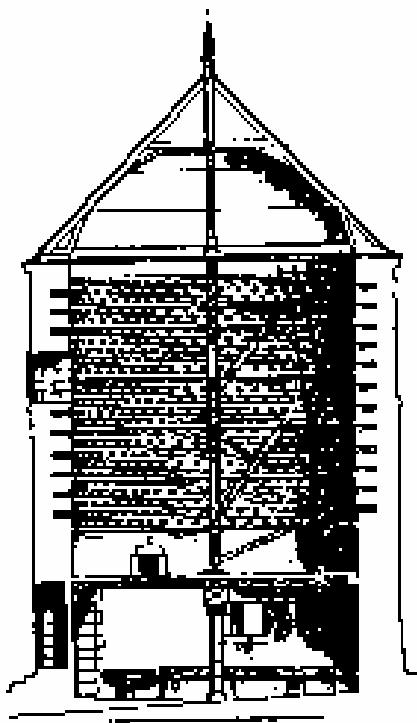
The nearest dovecote site to where I live is only about 200 metres from my house, in an adjacent field. Unfortunately this building, at Hatches Farm, Stanford in the Vale, was pulled down in the 1960's, but a few pieces of rubble and a slight mound testify to its former existence. (Interestingly a recent "infill" housing development in what was an adjacent farmyard has had its garage block built with a sham cupola. Did the architect know of the dovecote's former existence?) Hatches pigeon house appears to have been a square building of brick with a slated roof. Several elderly villagers in Stanford remember it and also have mentioned another site at Bear House, near the Vale Garage, but this also seems to have vanished.

Grove has a fairly well-preserved dovecote.(Editor's note. This is described fully in the article "Grove Dovecotes" by Bill Fuller on this Web site)

Another dovecote that is worth mentioning is at Stanton Harcourt. It is situated on the lawn before Parsonage House, and is a square rough-cast building with a very small door.

Access to both dovecotes and nestboxes was crucial to their design. Doorways tended to be very small, and were sometimes below ground level, down a few steps. Inside most pigeon houses, access to the nestboxes was by ladder - occasionally by stone steps, but in many there was an example of a "potence". This was a central timber, pivoted at the top and bottom with one or more lateral arms. Ladders were either attached or rested against these arms to give access to nests at all levels. The name "potence" comes from the French word for the gallows! Potences were generally a feature of circular pigeon houses. The diagram below (taken from 'A Book of Dovecotes' by A.O.Cooke, published in 1920 but now long out of print) shows the method of construction of a circular Dovecote, and its potence.

As an interesting footnote; reading Lis Garnish's excellent article on Wantage Manor House (available on this Web site) I noticed she mentions the reference to a dovecote and pigeons in the 'messuage' of Duces, and also reminds us that the site (close to Oakes Agricultural Machinery yard) was run as a tannery by Philip Allen in the late 17th century. There is a connection here, as dung from dovecotes, besides being excellent manure, was employed in the tanning industry to soften hides!



Dovecote interior showing Potence

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