

## Dovecotes in King's Cliffe

### The history of dovecotes

The first record of dovecotes comes from 44BC: the Egyptians built them of mud with conical reed roofs with holes to allow the birds in and out.

The Romans had dovecotes, called *columbaria* – Latin for dove or pigeon. They were usually circular with a stone or slate roof, a small entrance and windows, latticed for the birds to get in and out. Inside there were perches for the birds to land on and individual nesting holes.

Did the Romans introduce dovecotes to Britain? We don't know for sure, but some archaeologists have identified the foundations of circular Roman buildings as dovecotes.

There are no dovecotes recorded anywhere in the Domesday Book (1086), but the Normans definitely kept pigeons. 12th century Norman castles have nest holes built into their fabric: places like Rochester Castle in Kent; Conisborough Castle in S Yorks and Barnard Castle in Co Durham. At Bodiam Castle in Sussex, the drum tower immediately above the kitchen was used for keeping pigeon. Talk about cutting down on food miles!

In Mediaeval times, only Lords of Manors, the aristocracy and monasteries were granted the privilege of keeping a dovecote, to supply themselves and their households with what was a luxurious food, the tender meat of young pigeons. As there was no resident Lord of the Manor of King's Cliffe – originally a Royal manor and then granted to Lord Burghley in the 1590s – there were probably no early dovecotes here. If the kings' hunting lodge here did have a dovecote, it was lost in the fire of 1462, along with much of the village.

From the 16th century onwards, the restrictions on who could have a dovecote were eased and thousands of dovecotes were built across the country – about 26,000 by the end of the 17th century. They became a status symbol and later, they were even built as garden ornaments.

### Why have a dovecote?

The reasons for keeping pigeon colonies in a dovecote changed over the centuries. In the early days, pigeons were kept to provide food; for feathers to stuff pillows, mattresses etc; and for fertilizer – pigeon droppings make a potent fertilizer. In the 16th – 18th centuries, pigeon droppings were used in the making of gunpowder. Finally, in the 19th century, pigeons were kept for the 'sport' of pigeon shooting and sometimes, just for the pleasure of keeping the birds.

Pigeons can breed all year round, but only a few pairs in a dovecote population would produce young in the winter months. The young birds are called 'squabs' and we get our word 'squabbling' from the noisy call of young pigeons. The small number of squabs produced in the winter were not enough to feed a Royal or aristocratic household, or even a community of monks; but they could be sold at market for very high prices as an 'out of season' delicacy.

In Mediaeval times, most pigeon meat was eaten from Easter to November each year. The first squabs of the year were hatched early in March and ready for eating 3 - 4 weeks later. But Lent got in the way! For forty days before Easter, religious custom forbade the eating of meat; so the first pigeon dishes appeared on the table on Easter Sunday. Squabs which matured during Lent were allowed to survive as breeding stock. Large quantities of young pigeons were taken from the dovecote for eating during April and May, then the supply dipped until August, September and October, when most young pigeons were produced.

Until the late 18th century, in England pigeon droppings (guano) were the main source of saltpetre (potassium nitrate), one of the ingredients of gunpowder and the Crown had the right to all the pigeon droppings in the country. In the 16th century, the recipe for extracting saltpetre was top secret, brought to England from Germany for the enormous sum of £300. Defeating the Spanish Armada relied on a good supply of pigeon droppings!

'Saltpetre men' had the unenviable task of scraping up and taking away the droppings from dovecotes all across the country: a very smelly job! Once processed, the saltpetre was added to charcoal and sulphur to make gunpowder. From the late 18th century, supplies of guano from other species of birds and bats began to be imported from islands far away; the Saltpetre men were out of a job!

In our corner of Northamptonshire, there were several early dovecotes. The nearest to us was a mediaeval dovecote at Prebendal Manor in Nassington (still there today); and in Collyweston, the remains of an Elizabethan dovecote associated with the Palace there which was the home Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Rockingham Castle had one gatehouse tower used for pigeon keeping. Around 40 stone dovecotes remain in East Northamptonshire - in various states of repair – and we have four of them here in King's Cliffe!

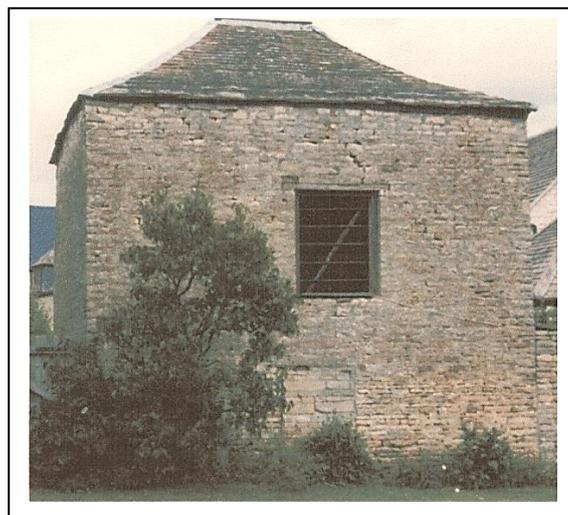
### Dovecotes in King's Cliffe

We know that by the second quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, dovecotes had come to King's Cliffe. In 1744 Rector Wilfred Pyemont complained that 'some parishioners who have lately built dovecotes refuse to pay tithes pigeons.' The Inclosure Map of 1813 shows a building in Dovecote Close, above Morehay Lane; the range of buildings behind 46 West Street, part of which was a dovecote; and the dovecote building at Wellington Farm.

### The dovecote in 'The Dovecote' off Park Street

Now part of no.4 The Dovecote, this was originally part of Wellington Farm (in Pig Lane, now Forest Approach) and it probably dates to the late 18th or early 19th century. Access for birds would have been through a louvred lantern structure on the top of the roof, but this is now missing.

This photo from 2004 shows the south wall, facing the farmhouse, with the original, low doorway entrance blocked in. These low entrances were very common in dovecotes. They were just high enough for the dovecote keeper to get in and out, but did not let in too much light to disturb the nesting pigeons, or allow them to fly out!



Theft from dovecotes was quite common and it was a form of security for the dovecote entrance to be positioned so it could be observed from the farmhouse.

The dovecote has recently been restored and the original doorway has been reinstated.

Inside, the walls are lined with 17 tiers of nesting ledges; about 520 nesting holes. They were built as part of the original walls. The nest holes are a curved "L" shape, alternating left- and right-facing on each tier. Each nesting pair of pigeons would typically produce two eggs. That's a lot of eggs and squabs!

The lowest nesting ledge is half a metre above the floor. This was a protection against Brown Rats, which first came to England in the 1730s and spread rapidly up the river network. Unlike Black Rats which are vegetarian (but now extinct in this country), Brown Rats are omnivorous and they posed a real threat to dovecote pigeons. So dovecote buildings built after the mid-1700s generally have no low nesting holes.



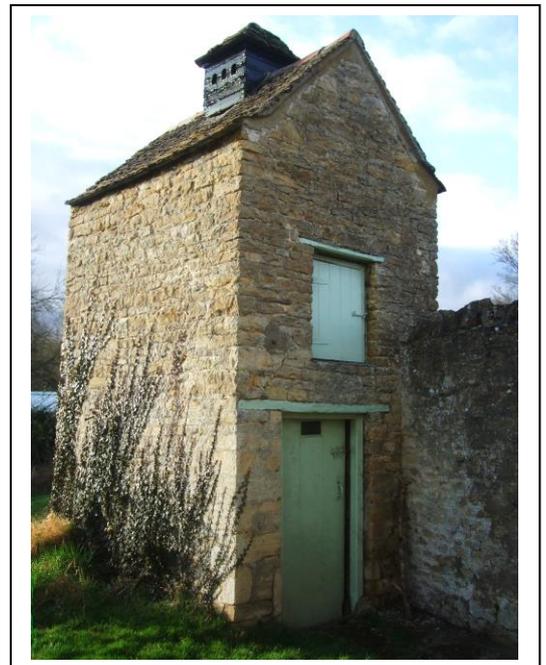
How did the dovecote-keeper get up to remove squabs from the pigeon nests? There might have been a ladder or maybe he simply climbed the walls, using the ledges and holes for support.

### Dovecote at The Rectory, Hall Yard

The Rectory was previously Mill Farm house, built before 1754 by Edward Applegarth. The dovecote is later, probably early 19th century.

The roof has a louvred lantern top where the birds could come and go. The only human access is on the east side of the building, seen here from the Rectory garden.

The small upper door gives onto the nesting area. Inside, three walls are lined with nesting boxes made of brick tiles. They sit on wide perching ledges of thin limestone. There were only about 100 nesting boxes in this dovecote: a very small number providing enough food for a family or perhaps the owner of the dovecote had an interest in keeping fancy pigeons. The ground floor has a full-height door and has always been used as storage space.

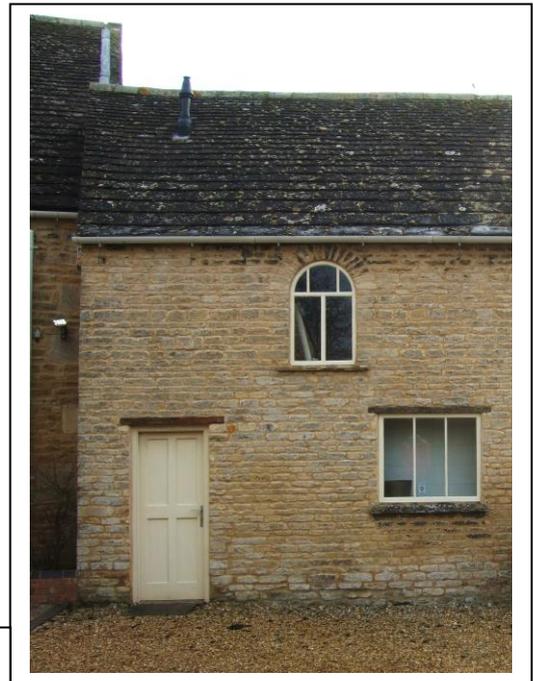


### Dovecote now part of 46A West Street

This dovecote is part of a combination building from the early 19th century with an adjoining cartshed - part of a range of buildings which in 1813 belonged to John Boughton, a farmer.

Seen from the outside, you would not know it was a dovecote. The original dovecote door was at the rear, where there is a low blocked doorway. The existing door and windows seen here were added later. The entrance for the birds was probably through a louvre at the top of the roof, no longer there.

Inside, the walls were lined with nesting boxes built of brick and added to the walls as a separate skin. Before the later door and windows were inserted, there was space for around 900 nesting boxes.



### The dovecote at Manor House, West Street

This dovecote was dated by the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments to the latter part of the 18th century. However, it is not visible on our Inclosure map from 1813 when that piece of land belonged to William Dakin – a hawker of Cliffe turned woodware - and the purpose-made brick nesting boxes are typical of the 19th century.

Perhaps it was built for Dr Dain, who lived at Manor House from the 1850s until 1890. We certainly know that the dovecote was in use during Dr Dain's time. We have this report in the Stamford Mercury:

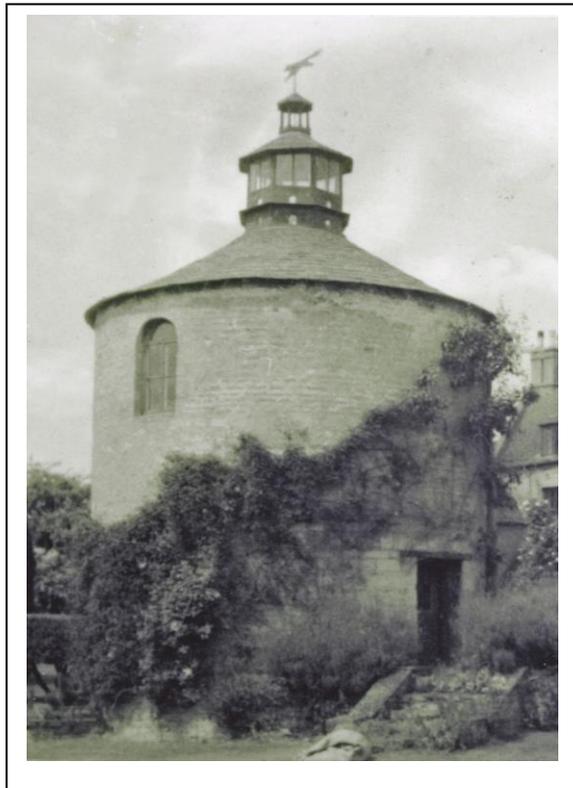
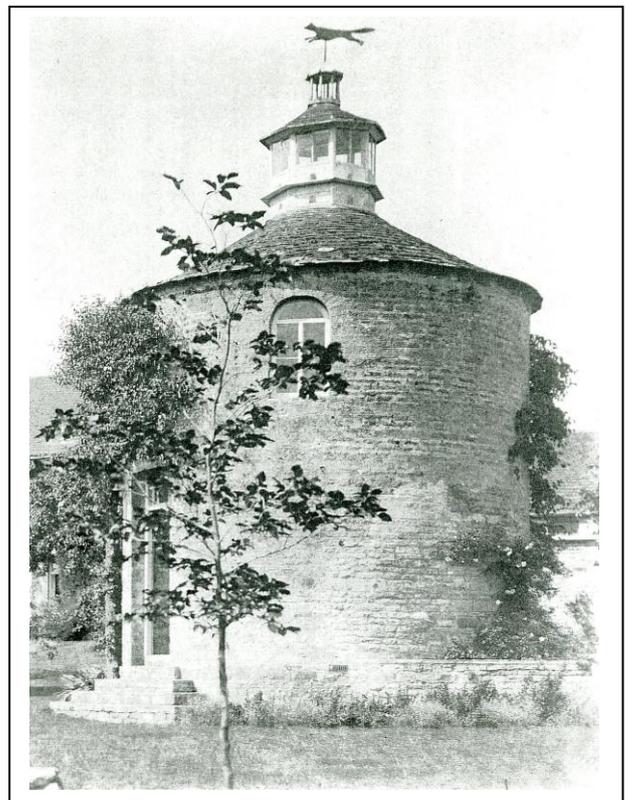
Oundle Petty Sessions, 7th December 1857

“Robert Cunnington, baker, King's Cliffe, fined 30s penalty and costs for shooting two pigeons, the property of Mr F R Dain, surgeon, on the 23rd of last month.”

Dr Dain died in 1890, perhaps that is when pigeons ceased to be kept and the dovecote building became a garden feature.

The picture on the right, taken in the early 1920s, shows the door which opens onto the garden - a full-height door inserted after the dovecote had ceased to be used for pigeons. Note the fox weathervane atop the large lantern with glass above the pigeon entrances.

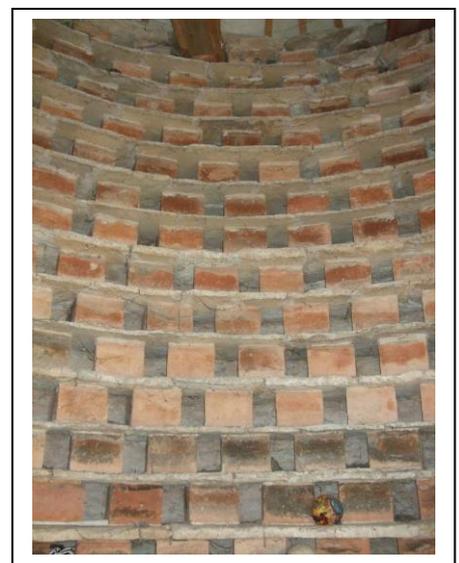
The picture below was taken in 1939. It shows the original low door into the dovecote, on the Eagle Lane side of the building.



Around the walls inside, brick nesting boxes rise from the floor up to the roof: 20 tiers with 36 nesting holes on each - 720 in all.

Getting up to raid the nests for squabs would most likely

have been done from a revolving ladder structure, but nothing remains of this.



In 1998 the dovecote was fully restored. The entire roof structure was replaced, including the lantern top. A new weathervane in the shape of a red kite – reintroduced locally and now a common sight over the village – takes pride of place above the new lantern and can be glimpsed from West Street.

### The lost dovecote of Dovecote Close

The field immediately above and to the east of Morehay Lane as you walk up from Bridge Street is called 'Dovecote Close'. This is an ancient name found in records of the field and furlong names of 1766, and almost certainly so-called because of a dovecote which once stood in this field. In 1813, when the open fields were inclosed, Dovecote Close belonged to Thomas Law. He also owned Calvehay Cottage which stands on Bridge Street, on the edge of Dovecote Close. Mr Law's tenant there was responsible for tending to the pigeons in the dovecote.

The lost dovecote can be seen clearly in the centre distance of this view down Bridge Street which dates to no earlier than 1909 – the year the chapel extension was built. The late Joan Schuleit could recall seeing the ruins of the dovecote in the 1920s, but all the stone was robbed out. All that can be seen today, in the right conditions, is an indistinct square outline in the grass of Dovecote Close.



### Why did dovecotes fall out of use – not just here but across the country?

Brown Rats arrived in England in 1730 and spread quickly to become a major predator on pigeon colonies.

In the later 18th century guano began to be imported from far-flung places, so home-grown pigeon droppings were no longer needed for gunpowder or fertiliser.

Pigeons were increasingly seen as a nuisance! Remember the old farmer's proverb when sowing seeds, four in a row: "One for the pigeon, one for the crow, one to rot and one to grow".

The process of Inclosure from the 1790s onwards meant larger farms instead of individual strips in open fields. Farmers complained about the devastation of their crops caused by large flocks of marauding pigeons. The pigeons were particularly fond of brassicas including turnips grown to feed livestock. These changes in farming also meant there was less reliance on pigeon meat to supplement people's diets.

*Sue Trow-Smith, August 2020*