

Property in Care (PIC) ID:	PIC045
Designations:	Scheduled Monument (SM90298)
Taken into State care:	1948 (Ownership)
Last Reviewed:	2019

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# TEALING DOVECOT



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.



© Historic Environment Scotland 2020

You may re-use this information (excluding logos and images) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated.

To view this licence, visit <http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3> or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gov.uk)

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

Edinburgh

EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

[www.historicenvironment.scot](http://www.historicenvironment.scot)

# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### TEALING DOVECOT

#### CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1	Introduction	3
1.2	Statement of significance	3
<b>2</b>	<b>Assessment of values</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1	Background	4
2.2	Evidential values	5
2.3	Historical values	6
2.4	Architectural and artistic values	8
2.5	Landscape and aesthetic values	8
2.6	Natural heritage values	8
2.7	Contemporary/use values	8
<b>3</b>	<b>Major gaps in understanding</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Associated properties</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Keywords</b>	<b>8</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>9</b>
	<b>APPENDICES</b>	
	Appendix 1: Timeline	9
	Appendix 2: General history of doocots	11

# 1 Summary

## 1.1 Introduction

Tealing Dovecot is located beside the Home Farm in the centre of Tealing Village, five miles north of Dundee on the A90 towards Forfar. It is a rare early example of a rectangular-plan, pitched-roof sandstone doocot, possibly dating from the late 16th century.

The structure was taken into State care in 1948 and scheduled on 9 January 1998.

Free public access to the exterior of the building is available throughout the year. Access to the doocot is across a grassed area and there is a step up into the doocot. The interior is generally open to the public at reasonable hours. As the site is not staffed, it is not possible to establish visitor numbers. However, the annual number of visitors in 2017-2018 is estimated to be over 1,000.

## 1.2 Statement of significance

Tealing Dovecot is a very well-preserved example of a rare rectangular-plan, pitched-roofed doocot, possibly of 1595, the date carved on a skewputt. The carved initials suggest that Sir David Maxwell and his wife, Helen Gray, constructed the doocot as an ancillary building to their towerhouse at Tealing. Although the house has been remodelled several times and ownership of the old estate is now fragmented, the traditional context of the doocot in relation to the house remains largely intact.

The significance of Tealing Dovecot lies primarily in its architectural, aesthetic and historic values:

- It is a largely complete and well-preserved example of a specialised and distinctive building type that is now defunct. The loss of original use makes the physical remains and archaeology of doocots particularly important for an understanding of food production methods and technology and of social history from the 16th to the 19th centuries.
- The design type is unusual for its date. Most surviving doocots of the 16th century are of the circular 'beehive' or rectangular 'lectern' types, but Tealing is a much rarer rectangular-plan structure with a pitched roof.
- The traditional context of Tealing Dovecot survives largely intact. Although ownership of the old country house estate is now fragmented, and houses have been constructed between the old mansion and the doocot, the doocot remains part of a group of structures and a landscape associated with Tealing House.
- The doocot forms a tangible link to the earlier history of the place, particularly in the use of local materials and the carved initials, date and armorial.
- Fine craftsmanship is a particular feature of the structure, notably the carved lintel and skewputt details and the moulded perching course.

A fuller description of the site and assessment of values is given in the following paragraphs.

## 2 Assessment of values

### 2.1 Background

Note on nomenclature:

1. Tealing: In historical documents the estate and parish are sometimes known as 'Tealing', 'Teling', 'Telling', 'Teilling', 'Tealling', 'Tealline', 'Tealine', 'Tealin', 'Telin', 'Telen', 'Tellon' and 'Tilland'. The modern name 'Tealing' is used throughout this document.
2. Dovecot: there are many alternative spellings of "doocot" and "dovecot" in old Scots, contemporary Scots and English (see Appendix 2). This property is named and is referred to in legal deeds as *Tealing Dovecot*. However, the Scots term *doocot* is used throughout this assessment when discussing the general building type.

Freestanding doocots, such as Tealing, are recognised as a specific and characterful building type associated with Scottish estates from the 16th to the 19th centuries. A detailed introduction to the practice of keeping pigeons, and an overview of doocots in Scotland, is given at Appendix 2.

Tealing Dovecot is a pitched-roofed, rectangular-plan, single-cell doocot, apparently of late 16th century date. It is built of coursed brown-red rubble sandstone with blue-grey dressed quoins (corner stones) and door rybats (margins). The doorway and boarded and studded oak door are in the long south elevation, and the two flight-holes and ledges for the pigeons are in the shorter east and west gables. The north elevation has no openings. Intertwined initials 'DM' and 'HG' are carved on the lintel over the doorway. There is a moulded perching course around the building. The gables are crowstepped and the roof is of thick grey slate with a stone ridge and diminishing courses towards the ridge. The lowest eastern skewputt is 'beaked' and carved with the date 1595 and the Maxwell family arms. A metal information board is attached to the front right-hand side of the doocot. Internally the walls are lined with flagstone nesting boxes set above a stone 'plinth'. Flooring is of flagstone. The roof timbers appear to be relatively modern replacements. There is no evidence of a potence (ladder) structure.

The doocot is set in a small, grassed area adjacent to the driveway to the Home Farm. A gravelled area, approximately 1m wide, surrounds the building for drainage purposes, but there is no formal enclosure. An informal car park stands to the south of the grassed area. To the west is a belt of mature trees along Tealing Burn.

Tealing Dovecot is probably the oldest of a number of ancillary structures and landscape features associated historically with Tealing House, including an ice house, a walled garden, a lodge, drives, trees, the Home Farm, a corn and barley mill, and cottages. **Tealing Earth House** (also a Property in Care), an Iron Age souterrain, was discovered west of the burn in the 19th century.

## 2.2 Evidential values

Tealing Dovecot is in good condition, but there has been considerable erosion of the sandstone walling, and damp has been a problem in the past. The perching course has a lead cap to protect the underside mouldings, and to throw water away from the walls (there are no rainwater rhones or downpipes). The roof timbers have been replaced and the door is also a modern replacement.

The age of the doocot is a matter of conjecture. Although the carved arms and initials are thought to relate to Sir David Maxwell (d. 1610) and Helen Gray (d.1630), and the south-east skewputt bears the date 1595, some sources suggest that these features came from other locations and were added to a later structure.<sup>1</sup>

According to the antiquary Alexander Warden, a small chapel once stood 'a few yards to the north of the mansion house of Tealing ... but the remains of it were removed a considerable time ago'.<sup>2</sup> Warden described an aumbry from the chapel as being built into the stackyard of the Home Farm in 1885. Although the aumbry was again recorded in the stackyard in 1938, it has long since been relocated to an unknown site.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that some of the fabric of the demolished chapel was reused in the construction of the doocot, giving it a much older appearance than is actually the case, but there is no definitive evidence for this. The west range of the Home Farm is believed to date from the earlier 18th century, but a blocked doorway with chamfered margins suggests a date of circa 1600, perhaps incorporated or reused from an earlier structure.<sup>4</sup> The fabric of the doocot appears to belong to a single phase of construction, and it is possible that the doocot in its entirety dates from the late 16th century. Certainly other pitched-roofed doocots of the late 16th to early 17th centuries are in existence elsewhere, for example at Kinnaber in Angus, Glenkindie and Corsindae in Aberdeenshire and Earlshall (dated 1599), Wormiston, Kenly Green and Rosyth Castle in Fife.

The siting and fabric of the doocot provides interesting evidence about the historic practice of breeding pigeons for food. The doocot is located about 150m north of the house, at enough of a distance to prevent disturbance to the birds or the occupants of the house, but sufficiently close to enable maintenance of the birds and use of their dung in the gardens. Plentiful grain and seeds would have been available for the birds in the surrounding fields. The Tealing Burn provided water for drinking and bathing. The materials of the doocot appear to be local. Angus flagstone is particularly suited for the construction of the nesting boxes. The ridge of the doocot is aligned east-

---

<sup>1</sup> See the Angus Sites and Monuments Record: <https://online.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/smrpub/master/detail.aspx?Authority=ANG&refno=NO43NW0003>

<sup>2</sup> Warden 1885, p.210.

<sup>3</sup> See CANMORE website: <https://canmore.org.uk/site/33354/tealing-house>.

<sup>4</sup> See the Angus Sites and Monuments Record: <https://online.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/smrpub/master/detail.aspx?tab=main&refno=NO43NW0078>

west, which allows a south-facing roof slope and crowsteps for the pigeons to perch and sunbathe.

An unusual feature of the Tealing Dovecot is the small number of flight holes – just two, one in each of the gables. There are no other openings for light or ventilation. There is no evidence of a potence, or any permanent ladder structure, for accessing the nesting boxes within the doocot. Such a structure would have been made of timber and could have been removed, or perhaps there was only ever a movable ladder. The nesting boxes are raised off the floor by about half a metre to allow for the accumulation of dung, and ease of cleaning.

No known archaeological work has been carried out on, or in the vicinity of, the doocot. However, terrestrial laser scanning data of the doocot was collected as part of the Rae Project, providing an objective digital record of the structure.

### 2.3 Historical values

The Maxwell family owned the lands at Tealing for ten generations from 1425 until 1704, when John Scrymsoure (or Scrymsour or Scrymgeour), a merchant-burgess of Dundee, purchased the estate.<sup>5</sup> From the Scrymsoures the estate passed by marriage to James Fotheringham of Powrie and through the Steuart Fortheringham family until 1923, when it was sold to Edmund Connel Cox of the Dundee jute family.<sup>6</sup> After Cox's sudden death in October 1931, his widow, Eliza, continued to occupy the house until her death ten years later. In 1937 the Department of Health purchased eight of the estate farms, comprising 1500 acres, in order to create 68 smallholdings for farming by unemployed men.<sup>7</sup> This marked the beginning of the fragmentation of ownership of the estate. Tealing Earth House was scheduled as an ancient monument in the same year and taken into State care (guardianship) in 1939.

The house was used as temporary billets for the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and as an officers' mess for the Tealing Airfield during the war. In 1944 William L. Bowie purchased the house and walled garden for a commercial market garden, which was in operation until 1975. By 1988 the house had become derelict; a new owner repaired the house.<sup>8</sup>

The earliest known depiction of Tealing House is on Timothy Pont's map of Lower Angus and Perthshire of 1593-96.<sup>9</sup> Many of the houses marked on

---

<sup>5</sup> Warden 1885, pp.219-20.

<sup>6</sup> National Records of Scotland, ref. GD121/3/281 (sales particulars and description of the estate of Tealing, 1921).

<sup>7</sup> *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 20 November 1937, p.1 (<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>).

<sup>8</sup> Angus Sites and Monuments Record (<https://online.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/smrpub/master/detail.aspx?Authority=ANG&refno=NO43NW0042>).

<sup>9</sup> National Library of Scotland, ref. Adv.MS.70.2.9 (Pont 26) (<https://maps.nls.uk/view/00002323-zoom=5&lat=2966&lon=4133&layers=BT>).

Pont's maps are pictograms, but more important structures have pen sketches that reflect the actual building. In the case of Tealing, it is not just the standard pictogram, but a substantial 5-storey tower with symmetrical wings is shown as 'Teling'. The scale is too small for features such as doocots to be marked. Roy's Military Survey of 1747-55 shows 'Tilland House' at the centre of a small designed landscape of walled rectangular plots of fields and woods or orchards, with a southern axial avenue. Again the scale is too small to show ancillary buildings, and the doocot is not marked. If the general layout of the house and gardens is roughly accurate, it seems likely that the doocot stood at the north-west corner of the enclosed wooded area to the north of the house.

Sir David Maxwell and Helen Gray are thought to have remodelled the tower into a more commodious mansion house in about 1600.<sup>10</sup> A large number of alterations and additions were made to the house in the first thirty years of the 19th century. A stable and coachhouse were built in 1810. An ice house was excavated and constructed to the north of the doocot in 1823.<sup>11</sup> The architect William Burn added the east service and nursery wing, the west wing and the south entrance porch in 1827-9.

The earliest known mapping evidence for the doocot dates from the first edition of the Ordnance Survey maps, the 25-inch edition published in 1862.<sup>12</sup> This shows the doocot located on the edge of the trees lining the east side of Tealing Burn and just west of the Home Farm. Woodland is marked between the house and the doocot. The house itself was completely surrounded by woods, and the site of a 'cave or subterranean building' was marked to the north of the walled garden (possibly the remains of the chapel). A tree nursery stood to the east of the walled garden. Other structures in the vicinity include the Home Farm, ice house, corn and barley mill, weirs and a mill pond.

The second edition of the Ordnance Survey map, published in 1902, shows some changes affecting the doocot and home farm.<sup>13</sup> The eastern range of the Home Farm appears to have been rebuilt in a U-plan form. The western range of the Home Farm is shown as linked to the doocot by three narrow structures in an L-plan arrangement, creating a small courtyard with a wall to the south. The east lodge had been constructed by this date. By the next iteration of the Ordnance Survey map in 1922, two of the linking structures had been removed, but the southern wall between the doocot and the west range of the Home Farm remained.<sup>14</sup> Aerial photographs of 1967 show that the area between the house and the doocot remained wooded. In the last

---

<sup>10</sup> Angus Sites and Monuments Record

(<https://online.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/smrpub/master/detail.aspx?Authority=ANG&refno=NO43NW0042>).

<sup>11</sup> National Records of Scotland, ref. GD121/3/245 (accounts for building an ice house, 1823).

<sup>12</sup> National Library of Scotland, ref. OS Forfarshire L.6 (Tealing) 1862  
(<https://maps.nls.uk/view/74947171>).

<sup>13</sup> National Library of Scotland, ref. OS Forfarshire L.6 (Murroes; Tealing) 1902  
(<https://maps.nls.uk/view/82884564>).

<sup>14</sup> National Library of Scotland, ref. OS Forfarshire L.6 (Murroes; Tealing) 1922  
(<https://maps.nls.uk/view/82884567>).



decades of the 20th century, three houses were built between the mansion and the doocot, and the wall linking the doocot to the Home Farm was removed.

A large 1960s agricultural shed stood on the site of the doocot car park until at least the 1970s.<sup>15</sup>

#### 2.4 Architectural and artistic values

The majority of surviving doocots of this date are of the circular-plan 'beehive' type with massive walls, making Tealing a particularly unusual example of a more modern structure. The carved initials, arms and date are finely crafted embellishments of the late 16th century.

#### 2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Tealing Dovecot nestles on the edge of a belt of mature trees that follows the course of Tealing Burn. The textures and colours derived from the natural resources of the area are reflected in the construction of the doocot.

#### 2.6 Natural heritage values

The doocot could potentially be used as a bat roost, but this has not been confirmed. There are no other known natural heritage values for this property.

#### 2.7 Contemporary/use values

The original use of the building as a doocot has long since ceased, and it now serves as a visitor attraction alongside Tealing Earth House.

The monument has no identified spiritual qualities.

### 3 Major gaps in understanding

There are major gaps in understanding including the circumstances and date of construction of the doocot, and whether the carved date stone and initials are original to the building. It is not known when the doocot fell out of use for pigeon farming. Further detailed research into Tealing House and Estate, and the Maxwell of Tealing family may provide more information.

### 4 Associated properties

- **Tealing Earth House**
- Kinnaber Doocot
- Malleny Doocot (NTS)
- Rosyth Castle Doocot
- Earlshall Doocot

#### **Other free-standing doocots in the care of HES**

- **Aberdour Castle Doocot**
- **Blackness Castle Doocot**
- **Dirleton Castle Doocot**

---

<sup>15</sup> Shed marked on OS 1965 map, but not 1959 – see National Library of Scotland, ref. OS 1:2500, NO4038-NO4138 (published 1965)(<https://maps.nls.uk/view/130194181>); Historic Environment Scotland, National Record of the Historic Environment, ref. [SC 1547298](#) (oblique aerial view centred on the souterrain at Tealing, September 1970).

- Corstorphine Dovecot
- Tantallon Castle Doocot
- Westquarter Dovecot

## 5 Keywords

Tealing Dovecot; doocot; pigeon house; Tealing House; nesting boxes; Maxwell of Tealing; agricultural building; crowsteps; skewputt.

## Bibliography

### *Tealing Dovecot*

John Gifford, *Buildings of Scotland: Dundee & Angus* (London & New Haven, 2012), p.680.

Alexander Johnston Warden, *Angus or Forfarshire, the Land and People, Descriptive and Historical*, vol.V (Dundee, 1885), pp.219-21  
[\[https://archive.org/details/angusorforfarshi05warduoft/page/218\]](https://archive.org/details/angusorforfarshi05warduoft/page/218)

Bruce Walker & Graham Ritchie, *Exploring Scotland's Heritage: Fife and Tayside* (Edinburgh, 1987), pp.27 [\[https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1471278\]](https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1471278).

### *Doocots in general*

G. Bailey, 'Doocots in the Falkirk District' in *Calatria*, vol.1, 1991, pp.33-56.

D. C. Bailey & M. C. Tindall, *Dovecotes of East Lothian*, 1963.

Elizabeth Beaton, *Doocots of Moray*, (Moray Field Club, Elgin, 1978).

Ruth Blasco & Clive Finlayson, *Scientific Reports volume 4*,  
 Article number: 5971 (2014) via [\[https://www.nature.com/articles/srep05971\]](https://www.nature.com/articles/srep05971).

Nicholas A. Brown, *The doocots of Moray: a holistic approach to their evolutionary development* (Robert Gordon University PhD thesis, 2000: <http://openair.rgu.ac.uk>).

Tim Buxbaum, *Scottish Doocots* (Haverfordwest, 1987).

E. S. Dixon, *The Dovecote and the Aviary* (London, 1851)  
[\[https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/106351 - page/5/mode/1up\]](https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/106351 - page/5/mode/1up).

Robert Douglas, *The Dovecotes of Moray* (Elgin, 1931).

Jean Hansell, *The Pigeon in History; or the dove's tale* (Bath, 1998).

Peter & Jean Hansell, *Dovecotes* (Princes Risborough, 1988).

Elinor M. Husselman, 'The Dovecotes of Karanis.' in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol. 84, 1953, pp. 81–91 [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/283401>].

Randa Kakish, 'Evidence for Dove Breeding in the Iron Age: A Newly Discovered Dovecote at 'Ain al-Baida/'Amman' in *Jordan Journal for History and Archaeology*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2012), pp.175-193.

Bill & Alison Logie, *Doocots of Stirlingshire* (Stirling Council Libraries, 2003).

Grant A.G. Peterkin, *Scottish Dovecots* (Culross, 1980).

Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt: From Alexander to Cleopatra* (Detroit, 1984), p.115.

Glen Pride, *Dictionary of Scottish Building* (Edinburgh, 1996) p. 30.

Adam Niven Robertson, *The Old Dovecots of Scotland* (illustrated typescript, Edinburgh City Library, XDA 875,1961).

*P. Sked, Preston Mill and Phantassie Doocot (NTS guide, Edinburgh, n/d). Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group, Borders (2013), Caithness (1980), Dumfries & Galloway (2016), East Lothian (2010), Lanarkshire (2006), Moray (2004), Highland, Orkney & Shetland (2008).*

Una Robertson, 'Pigeons as a Source of Food in Eighteenth-Century Scotland' in *Review of Scottish Culture*, volume 4, 1998, Edinburgh, pages 89-103.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Timeline

- 1580s** A major towerhouse is depicted at Tealing on Sheet 26 of Timothy Pont's map of Lower Angus and Perthshire east of the Tay.
- 1595** Date carved on the skewputt of Tealing Dovecot. Initials DM and HG thought to refer to Sir David Maxwell and Helen Gray.
- 1600** Tealing House remodelled by Sir David Maxwell and Helen Gray.
- 1862** The doocot is recorded on the first edition Ordnance Survey map.
- 1937** Eight farms are sold and the estate ownership starts to become fragmented
- 1939** Tealing Earth House taken into State care (Guardianship).
- 1948** Tealing Dovecot taken into State care (Ownership).

## Appendix 2 – General history of doocots

### **Spelling and definition**

The Scottish National Dictionary states that 'doocot', 'dooket' and 'dookit' are current Scots forms of the English term 'dovecot'.<sup>16</sup> Obsolete Scots forms, found in various historical documents, include 'dow-cot', 'dow-cat(e)', 'dou(c)ket', 'doucat', 'doucote', 'ducat' and 'douket'. A 'doo' is a rock pigeon and a 'cot' is a shelter. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a 'dovecot' or 'dovecote' as a noun with the principal meaning of 'a house for doves or pigeons; usually placed at a height above the ground, with openings for the doves to enter by, and internal provision for roosting and breeding'.<sup>17</sup> Again there are numerous synonyms for the English terms. For the purpose of consistency, the terms 'doocot' and 'pigeon house' are used throughout this document.

### **Background**

The exploitation of pigeons for food and other purposes has an extremely long history. There is evidence from the Gorham's Cave complex in Gibraltar, showing that Neanderthals exploited rock doves for food for a period of over 40 thousand years, the earliest evidence dating to at least 67 thousand years ago.<sup>18</sup> Purpose-built structures by *homo sapiens* for pigeon cultivation followed much later. Certainly some Iron Age cultures, such as the Ammonites at 'Ain al-Baida in modern-day Jordan, created and adapted caves for pigeon-rearing.<sup>19</sup> By 100 BC the Ancient Egyptians were imposing substantial taxes on pigeon houses.<sup>20</sup> The Ancient Greeks and Romans too were keen pigeon-keepers. The Nile mosaic of Palestrina (east of Rome), a late Hellenistic floor mosaic of about 100 BC, depicts a freestanding circular *columbarium* (doocot) in the bottom right-hand corner. The Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote about pigeons in his *History of Animals* of 350 BC, and the Roman authors Varro, Pliny, Columella, Ovid and Cato the Elder all documented various aspects of pigeon-rearing.<sup>21</sup> Pliny described the Roman

---

<sup>16</sup> "Doocot n.". *Dictionary of the Scots Language*. 2004. Scottish Language Dictionaries Ltd. [<http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/doocot>; accessed 29 Dec 2018].

<sup>17</sup> "dovecot | dovecote, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, [<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/57150>; accessed 29 December 2018].

<sup>18</sup> Blasco et al. 2014, p1.

<sup>19</sup> Kakish 21012, pp.175-193.

<sup>20</sup> Pomeroy 1984, p.115.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle (translated from the original Greek by D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson), *Historia Animalium*, Book VI, (350BCE, trans. 1910)

[<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/aristotle/histanimals6.html>]; M. Terenti Varronis (translated from the Latin by Lloyd Storr-Best) *Rerum rusticarum* (36BCE; trans. 1912)

[<https://archive.org/details/varroonfarmingmt00varr/page/281>]; Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella (translated from the original Latin by E S Forster and Edward H Heffner) *On*

craze for pigeons, 'building turrets for them on house roofs and tracing the pedigrees of single birds'.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of their enthusiasm for breeding pigeons, there is no physical or documentary evidence that the Roman invaders constructed pigeon houses in Britain. It is likely that the Norman nobility introduced them in the 11th century. Doocots are mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086, and other documentary and archaeological evidence suggests that the Norman settlers used them extensively. The oldest dated freestanding doocot in England is that at Garway in Herefordshire, built in 1324 by the Knights Hospitaller, to replace an earlier structure.

Norman settlers and ecclesiastical followers of David I are thought to be responsible for introducing pigeon breeding to Scotland. The first written references to doocots in Scotland occur in the 13th century, but no structures from this period survive. Early freestanding structures might have included long-perished timber doocots. Several laws relating to doocots were enacted in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries.<sup>23</sup> An Act of James I in 1424 set punishments for 'distroyars of conygars and of dowcotts'. Theft of birds from doocots seems to have been a constant problem, with Acts of 1474, 1503, 1535, 1555 and 1617 all setting penalties for the crime. A further Act of Parliament of 1503 required all 'lords and lairds to have parks with dowcats'. By 1617 doocot-mania had taken hold, resulting in numerous disputes over pigeon feeding grounds. In that year James VI restricted the building of doocots to landowners with holdings producing more than ten chalders of corn within two miles of the proposed location. All these regulations appear to have lapsed by the 19th century, when larger numbers of middle class owners began building many more small-scale doocots.

The earliest remains of stone-built doocots date from the 16th century. Most of the 16th century examples take the form of 'beehive' doocots, named for the similarity in shape to the traditional domed straw 'skeps' used for keeping bees. Through the 17th and 18th centuries a wide variety of shapes, sizes and ornamentation of doocot design emerged, including hexagonal, lectern or lean-to (single and double-chambered), rectangular (double pitch), cylindrical and octagonal. Doocots were also built into the roofs and gables of farm buildings.

### **Purpose**

Throughout history, the reasons for keeping pigeons are numerous, including:

- as a source of food;
- as messengers;
- as providers of nitrogen- and phosphorus-rich dung for fertiliser, gunpowder ingredients or tanning, bleaching and dyeing agents;
- for sacrificial purposes;

---

*Agriculture*, vol.II, (Book VIII) (circa 50CE; trans. 1954), pp.361-69.

[<https://archive.org/details/L407ColumellaOnAgriculture159/page/n375>].

<sup>22</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, X, 37(53), 110.

<sup>23</sup> Brown 2000, pp.324-5.

- as sport for shooting/hawking/owling/racing;
- as ingredients for medicine;
- for companionship, ornament or symbolism.

The purpose of the breeding does not seem to have influenced the architecture of pigeon houses, and it is difficult to say without additional documentary material why an owner built a particular doocot. In most cases in Scotland it seems likely that the primary purpose of the doocot was for providing food and fertiliser.

### **Birds**

The birds that were housed in doocots were *Columba livia*, the 'rock dove', 'rock pigeon', or 'common pigeon', normally referred to simply as pigeons or doves in everyday usage.

Pigeons are about 32-37cm long, 11cm tall, and 10cm wide with a 64-72cm wingspan. They have dark blue-grey heads, necks and chests with green/red/purple iridescent neck and wing feathers, distinctive pairs of black wing bars, black bills with white 'cere' (fleshy growth that sits on top of the bill), and red feet and legs. Unlike most birds, pigeons suck water and throw their heads back to swallow. They need a reasonable depth of water in order to be able to drink and bathe. Pigeons feed on the open ground, preferring grain and seeds. They are capable of flying some 600-700 miles in a day, and reaching speeds of 78mph.<sup>24</sup>

Pigeons usually live for about five years, but can live up to 15 years. A good breeding pair will mate between 12 and 14 times a year. The same pair will mate for life. Light, but not necessarily heat, is thought to be a key factor in successful mating. Breeding is most prolific in the spring and summer, when the daylight hours are longest, and tails off in the autumn and winter. Breeding and roosting usually takes place in dark, sheltered locations, replicating the conditions of the caves and rock faces inhabited by the original wild pigeons. New eggs are frequently laid before the first peesers have matured. Rock pigeons never nest in trees, and indeed avoid tall trees that might harbour their main predators, peregrine falcons and sparrow hawks.

Each breeding cycle usually comprises two eggs, laid within 44 hours of each other and incubated in turns by each parent for 17 days. Parents feed the juveniles, called 'peesers', on a thick, creamy 'crop milk' of regurgitated food. The peesers were most valued for their tender meat at about 25 to 28 days old, when they were almost fully grown, and feathered under the wings, but had not yet developed muscles through flying. Old breeder pigeons could be eaten, but were tougher and not considered such a delicacy. They were frequently given to servants and estate workers, who would steam them for hours before roasting or stewing. As the birds were less likely to fly in the dark, the pigeon keeper selected suitable young birds by touch, and wrung

---

<sup>24</sup> Pigeon Control Resource Centre website:  
<https://www.pigeoncontrolresourcecentre.org/html/about-pigeons.html> [accessed 28 January 2019].

their necks inside the doocot. April (after Easter), May, August, September and October were peak months for harvesting the peesers, with a slump in June and July during the moulting season.

### ***Dooocot Design***

Siting and orientation of a doocot were important design considerations. The doocot needed to be accessible for maintenance and security, but far enough away from a domestic habitation to avoid disturbance to the birds or vice versa. Dooocots were ideally placed within a short distance of open ground and sources of food for foraging, such as grains and seeds, and water for drinking and bathing. If guano production for fertiliser was a particular requirement, it helped to place the doocot near to the area to be fertilised. Pigeons favour sunny locations where they can sunbathe for warmth and vitamins. Flight holes tended to be placed on the bird-favoured south side of the doocot, and human entrances on the north side, where the pigeons were less likely to perch and the light levels were lower when opening the doors. Some doocots were rendered externally, while others were left with natural stone finishes.

The most important conditions for successful pigeon nesting are a dark, dry, sheltered, quiet and well-ventilated environment. Sudden noise or light will cause disturbance. A landing ledge or shelf was required at the entrance to allow the pigeons to land and walk individually through the flight holes. Usually the nesting boxes were of a rectangular design in stone, typically 25cm in height and width and 30cm in depth, but they could be built from other materials, such as timber, brick or slate. In order to deter looting of eggs and peesers by ground-based predators, and also to facilitate the removal of droppings, the nesting boxes were often raised off the ground by a metre or so. Black Rats (*Rattus rattus*), which were the only species of rat in Scotland until the early 18th century, lived off fruit and grain, and were not a common threat to early doocots and their inhabitants. However, Brown Rats (*Rattus norvegicus*), introduced via ports in the early 18th century, became a significant problem for later pigeon keepers. The birds placed only a few twigs or stems of straw to personalise their nesting boxes. They perched on the edge of the box to defecate, leaving the nest clean and coating the floor of the doocot in guano. Often a permanent ladder or scaffold system was built into the doocot.

Beehive, circular, hexagonal and octagonal doocots usually had a 'potence'; a revolving timber column with a ladder, or pair of ladders, attached on gallows (arms) that allowed human access to the upper reaches of the nesting boxes. These turned on a groove in a stone plinth in the floor. Floors were usually slabbed with solid stone to prevent access by burrowing animals. Walls were frequently lime-washed for hygiene purposes.

### ***Distribution***

Nick Brown made a preliminary analysis of the distribution of doocots in Scotland in his PhD thesis for Robert Gordon University in 2000.<sup>25</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the distribution of doocots in Scotland appears to be closely

---

<sup>25</sup> Brown 2000, p.217-20.

allied with the ready availability of pigeon food in highly productive rural lowlands and building materials in the Old Red Sandstone zones of Moray, Angus, Fife and Lothian. High densities of doocot sites are clustered around the major East Coast firths, ecclesiastical centres, the periphery of large burghs and near important trading routes. These sites also correspond with concentrations of tower houses, bee boles, and possibly also windmills (numerous 17th century windmills were later converted for use as doocots).

### ***Food***

A number of conclusions about how pigeon meat was used can be drawn from a variety of documentary sources, such as household accounts and recipe books.<sup>26</sup> Firstly, pigeon was just one part of a wider luxury meat diet for the upper classes until the 19th century. There is little evidence to suggest that it was used to replace a lack of other fresh meats in the winter months. Pigeon eggs do not appear to have been eaten.

### ***Decline***

The reasons for the decline of doocot construction in the 19th century are complex, relating to changes in diet, reduction in the prestige of meat-eating, a decline in the number, size and value of landed estates, changes in the landlord/tenant relationship, and more diverse and efficient farming methods and technology replacing what was then considered a primitive, inefficient and uneconomic method of meat and fertiliser production.

---

<sup>26</sup> Brown 2000, p.330.