



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD
EACHDRAIDHEIL
ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:	PIC133
Designations:	Listed Building (LB28135)
Taken into State care:	1950 (Ownership)
Last Reviewed:	2019

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CORSTORPHINE 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 2024

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

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

You can download this publication from our website at www.historicenvironment.scot

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CORSTORPHINE DOVECOT

Contents

1. SUMMARY	2
1.1 Introduction	2
1.2 Statement of Significance	2
2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES	3
2.1 Background	3
2.2 Evidential values	3
2.3 Historical values	5
2.4 Architectural and artistic values	5
2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values	6
2.6 Natural heritage values	6
2.7 Contemporary/use values	6
3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING	7
4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES	7
5. KEYWORDS	7
BIBLIOGRAPHY	7
APPENDICES	9
APPENDIX 1:Timeline	9
APPENDIX 2:General history of doocots	10

I. SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

Corstorphine Dovecot is located at the eastern end and northern side of Dovecot Road in the suburb of Corstorphine, just south of the A8/B701 junction, and 6km west of the centre of Edinburgh. It is a traditional sandstone beehive doocot dating from the 16th century.

The structure was scheduled on 30 September 1933, taken into State care in 1950, Category A listed on 14 December 1970 and de-scheduled (to remove a dual designation) on 14 March 2018.

Free public access to the exterior of the building is available throughout the year. The short access path is wheelchair accessible, but steps on the north side prevent a full circuit and the entrance gateway is narrow. The interior is not generally open to the public. As the site is unstaffed, it is not possible to establish visitor numbers. However, the annual number of visitors in 2017-2018 is estimated to be close to 600.

1.2 Statement of Significance

Corstorphine Dovecot is a very well-preserved example of a large 16th-century 'beehive' doocot, containing 1060 nesting boxes. It was originally associated with Corstorphine Castle, seat of the Forrester family, which was demolished in the 19th century.

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

- It is a substantial and complete structure surviving from the mid-16th century. Beehive doocots are typical of this period and were regarded as necessary ancillary structures to castles and mansions. They indicated prestige and wealth: their circular, domed and stone-built form is eye-catching.
- The doocot is largely complete. In common with most doocots, it has lost its timber potence (a timber ladder fixed to a central post which rotated to allow the keeper to access the nestboxes) but indications of its fixing survive.
- It is of comparable size to those still found at Aberdour and Dirleton Castles, which indicates the status of the site, and the resources of the Forrester family.
- In a more local context, the doocot forms an important component of the character of old Corstorphine Village as part of a wider grouping of historic buildings, property boundaries and road layouts.
- Potentially the doocot could be a bat-roost – this has yet to be established.

While the doocot in itself is well preserved, it has lost its original historic setting.

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

Note on nomenclature: There are many alternative spellings of “dooocot” and “dovecot” in old Scots, contemporary Scots and English (see Appendix 2). This property is named, and is referred to in legal deeds, as Corstorphine *Dovecot*. However, the Scots term doocot is used throughout this assessment when discussing the general building type.

2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

2.1 Background

Overall, the Corstorphine Dovecot resembles a very large circular bee skep. It is built of rubble sandstone in four tapering tiers divided by continuous courses of stone ledges. It has an external circumference of 26.5m, an internal diameter of 5.79m, and the walls are 1.17m thick. The roof is constructed of solid stone slabs. The small entrance doorway is at ground level on the north side of the doocot, and is now secured by an iron gate. Internally, starting at 0.4m above ground level, 28 rows of deep rectangular sandstone nesting boxes extend up to the roof. In total there are 1060 nesting boxes. A stone plinth with a slot for holding the potence still survives in the floor. Six flight holes are cut crudely in a large triangular stone above the ledge of the third tier in the middle of the south side. The doocot is set in a substantial area of private lawn, with a tight publicly accessible curtilage demarcated by a low hedge to the north, east and west, and a stone wall fronting Dovecot Road. A short footpath runs from the street to the doocot entrance and encircles the whole structure.

2.2 Evidential values

The doocot is in good condition and in spite of minor alterations and losses over the years, remains largely complete. The masonry has been repointed in lime mortar within the last three years. It is a well-preserved, but non-functioning, example of a typical ‘beehive doocot’ of the 16th century.

Beehive doocots are thought to be the oldest type of freestanding doocot in Scotland, and are usually associated with high-status residential complexes, including castles, tower houses and ecclesiastical institutions.

Perhaps the most serious losses are to the doocot’s original rural context as an ancillary structure to Corstorphine Castle and its function as a pigeon house. The castle has entirely disappeared, and the doocot alone survives

in what is now a suburban setting. The doocots at Dirleton Castle in East Lothian and Aberdour Castle in Fife appear to be contemporary structures of comparable size and completeness in their original contexts. Apart from its own intrinsic interest as a structure, Corstorphine Dovecot provides some indication of the scale and importance of the lost associated castle.

Complete structures of 16th century origin are rare, but because of their massy stone construction, beehive doocots have survived in a number of locations throughout Scotland, from Hall of Rendell on Orkney, to Castle Kennedy in Dumfries and Galloway. The size of the doocot at Corstorphine, and the substantial number of nesting boxes, indicates that it was built for a household of some wealth and prestige. The siting of the doocot, some 150m distant from the castle, and near to the castle access route, is typical. The distance is far enough to keep the birds from disturbing occupants of the castle, but near enough to keep an eye on the birds and the security of the doocot. Dung or guano from the doocot could be easily transferred to the castle gardens, and water supplied from the castle well. As is also typical of other beehive doocots, the flight holes are oriented to the sunny south side favoured by the pigeons, and the human entrance is to the north, to minimise light disturbance. Flight holes are sized to allow pigeons to enter easily, but to block larger predator birds, such as peregrine falcons. The roof and three levels of ledges were designed to encourage the birds in their natural desire to sunbathe for warmth and vitamins. The original surrounding context of productive fields would have supplied the birds with ample grain, seed, and the grit necessary for the production of crop milk.

There is both documentary and physical evidence of alterations to the structure over time. The triangular flight hole stone is set slightly awkwardly within a recessed panel, or window/louvred ventilator recess, suggesting that it was a later alteration. The flight holes are now blocked to prevent birds entering. It is likely that the original flight holes were contained in a small cupola-type structure (now missing) known as a 'glover' in the centre of the slightly domed roof. Niven Robertson's description of the structure in 1946, and indentations on the inner wall, indicate that there were inner and outer doors with a substantial gap (the depth of the wall) between them. Such an arrangement would allow the pigeon keeper to enter the building without letting in light and disturbing the nesting birds. A 'yett', or gridded iron gate, now secures the entrance, and no inner door is visible. Although the timber structure of the potence has been lost, the stone plinth and supporting timber cross-beam survive.

There has been no formal archaeological investigation of the area within and around the doocot. Archaeological monitoring for a new access path revealed nothing of archaeological significance, but stratified layers may exist beneath the level disturbed by the path. Further archaeological monitoring was undertaken in July 2003 while contractors excavated a

short trench from the doocot to the nearby garden wall. There were no features or finds of archaeological significance.

2.3 Historical values

The historical values of the site are largely in respect of the connections with Corstorphine Castle and the Forrester family. Sir John Forrester, founder of St John's Church, was Master of the Household and Lord High Chamberlain to James I. Later generations achieved royal favour too, notably George Forrester, who was ennobled by Charles I in 1633.

Standing near to the main access to the castle, the doocot probably served as a symbol to announce the wealth and status of the family within. The meat and eggs from the doocot were probably used as home-grown delicacies in the kitchens of the castle, and the guano was likely used to fertilise the gardens of the castle. The building and daily use of freestanding doocots died out in the 19th century, leaving the surviving structures as evidence of a way of life that has now completely vanished.

A famous sycamore tree stood to the east of the doocot until it was destroyed in the Boxing Day storms of 1998. It marked the site where in 1679 Christian Nimmo murdered her uncle, James Forrester, 2nd Lord Forrester, with whom she was having an affair. Nimmo was tried and sentenced, but escaped to Fala Moor, before being recaptured and beheaded in 1679.¹

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

The doocot has a strong architectural value as a largely complete example of an important Scottish Renaissance building type that is now rare and redundant for its original purpose. The monumental walls and beehive form with the impressive internal arrangement of nesting boxes are characteristic of the construction technology of the 16th century.

An artistic association with Corstorphine Dovecot is through the Dovecot Studios, a tapestry workshop established adjacent to the doocot in 1912 by the 4th Marquess of Bute. On 31 October 1911 Heatley Dickson of the Corstorphine estate granted an area of ground in Dovecot Road near to, but excluding, the historic doocot to the Marquess. The workshop was founded on Arts and Crafts principles under the tapestry historian W. G. Thomson, using the skills of the Edinburgh artist Skeoch Cumming and the master weavers John Glassbrook and Gordon Berry from William Morris' Merton Abbey Mills in London.² The Marquess commissioned the

¹ Coventry 2001, p.148.

² The Scotsman, 19 April 1919, p.6. British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk).

studios to produce large tapestries for Mount Stuart House, his home on the Isle of Bute. Some of the leading artists and craftspeople of the 20th and 21stst centuries have worked with the Dovecot Tapestry Studio (Edinburgh Tapestry Company from 1946), creating an international reputation. Although the workshop relocated to Infirmary Street in 2008, the name and the logo recall the original bucolic location in Corstorphine.

Niven Robertson (1945, p.178) states that the Marquess of Bute commissioned decorative alterations to the outer door. This solid timber door, its decorative hinges and bolt are visible in an undated photograph held by Historic Environment Scotland.³

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

The characteristic dome of the doocot stands out as an unusual feature in the streetscape of an otherwise suburban street of domestic villas and bungalows. The planning of the Dovecot Road in 1881 perhaps intentionally placed the road so that the doocot stands in front of the building line and has a greater prominence in the street that bears its name. A photograph of 1900, in the possession of the Corstorphine Trust, shows the doocot standing in its own 'villa' plot with a timber fence and gate fronting the street. From 1911 the Dovecot Studios occupied the back (north of the plot), still leaving a suitable area of green breathing space. The wall to the street was built before 1949.⁴

2.6 Natural heritage values

There is the potential for the doocot to be used as a roost for bats, but this has not been confirmed. Other than this potential there are no noted natural heritage values for the doocot.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

For centuries the Corstorphine Village stood at the centre of its own parish, and had its own rural identity, distinct from the neighbouring royal burgh of Edinburgh. Along with St John's Kirk and the Dower House, the doocot forms part of a group of buildings that form the historic core of old Corstorphine Village. The ancient road layout of the High Street turning sharply into Saughton Road North and the linking 'Loan' (Kirk Loan) and 'Slap' (Manse Road) contributes to the distinctive character of the old

³ Historic Environment Scotland, National Historic Environment Record, ref. ED 1093 (<https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1225117>).

⁴ See Scotsman photograph of 1949 via SCRAN ref. 000-000-037-450 (<https://www.scran.ac.uk/database/record.php?usi=000-000-037-450&scache=27gssbklie&searchdb=scranf>)

village. A second 'high' village grew up around the Edinburgh-Glasgow road (St John's Road) in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The doocot is the only remnant of Corstorphine Castle, and is a landmark on Dovecot Road. It is signposted as part of the village's 'heritage trail'. Since being taken into State care, the exterior of the doocot has been made accessible to the public and an interpretation board explains the history of the site. The Corstorphine Trust promotes public interest in the character, history and preservation of the village, including the doocot.

The doocot has never had an identified spiritual role. However, there was once a popular belief that if a doocot was demolished, the wife of the laird would be dead within the year. This may explain why so many doocots survive, including Corstorphine Dovecot, when their parent castles have been demolished. The site of the old sycamore tree to the east of the doocot is said to be haunted by a woman in white (Christian Nimmo) wielding a bloody sword and wailing as she does so.

3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

There are major gaps in understanding the circumstances and date of construction of the doocot. Further detailed research into Corstorphine Castle and the Forrester Family may provide more information. The RCAHMS Inventory (1929, p.27) describes inner and outer doors. Niven Robertson (1945, p.178) states that the Marquess of Bute commissioned decorative alterations to the outer door. Further research would also aid an understanding of the alterations that have created the doocot as we know it today.

4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

(Other beehive doocots in the care of Historic Environment Scotland)

- Dirleton Castle Doocot;
- Aberdour Castle Doocot.

5. KEYWORDS

Corstorphine; dovecot; doocot; pigeon house; Corstorphine Castle; nesting boxes; Forrester of Corstorphine; agricultural building

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Corstorphine Dovecot

John R. Baldwin, Exploring Scotland's Heritage: Lothian and the Borders (Edinburgh, 1985), pp.171-2

City of Edinburgh Council, Corstorphine Conservation Area Appraisal (Edinburgh, 2001)

Martin Coventry, The Castles of Scotland (3rd edition, Aberdeen, 2001), p.148

Gifford, John, Colin McWilliam and David Walker, The Buildings of Scotland: Edinburgh (London and New Haven, 1991), p.528

Adam Niven Robertson, 'Dovecotes in and around Edinburgh' in Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, vol.xxv (Edinburgh, 1945), p.178

Royal Commission on the Ancient & Historical Monuments of Scotland, Inventory Of Monuments and Constructions in the Counties of Midlothian And West Lothian (Edinburgh, 1929), p.27

Dooocots in general

G Bailey, 'Dooocots 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, Dooocots 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>].

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

Tim Buxbaum, Scottish Dooocots (Haverfordwest, 1987).

E S Dixon, The Dovecote and the Aviary (London, 1851)[<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, *Dooocots 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 Dooocot* (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 I:TIMELINE

Date	Event
1374	Sir Adam Forrester acquires the lands of Corstorphine from William More of Abercorn and begins to build a castle. Descriptions and views of the remnants in the early 19th century suggest that it was a tower with a defensive outer wall forming a square of about 30m, and circular corner towers of 12m in height, surrounded by a moat.
1547	Sir James Forrester of Corstorphine is killed at the Battle of Pinkie. The dovecot is thought to have been built around this date, some 150m to the north-east of the main castle structure.
1698	The Forrester family sell the Corstorphine Estate.
1729	Sir William Dick (born Cunningham) 2nd Bt. (1706-1746) lived at 'Corstorphine'. It seems likely he was living in Corstorphine Castle from about 1729 , when he had the

Date	Event
	building harled and a room painted, until his death in 1746. National Records of Scotland, ref.RH15/36/1-48, information per Joe Rock.
1747	The doocot appears to be marked on Roy's Map to the south of a walled enclosure adjoining an avenue or approach to Corstorphine Castle from Corstorphine Village.
1790	Corstorphine Castle is burned to the ground and largely demolished. The estate is broken up and several fine villas are built on it.1881 – Dovecot Road is laid out for development as part of the late 19th-century expansion of Corstorphine Village.
1911	The 4th Marquess of Bute opens a tapestry workshop adjacent the doocot.
1920	Corstorphine Parish absorbed into the City of Edinburgh and development undertaken on large parts of the old Corstorphine Estate.
1950	The doocot is taken into State care (the same year as the 'lectern-type' doocot at Westquarter).

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'.⁵ 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'.⁶ Again there are numerous synonyms for the English terms. For

⁵ "Dooocot n.". *Dictionary of the Scots Language*. 2004. Scottish Language Dictionaries Ltd. [<http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/doocot>; accessed 29 Dec 2018].

⁶ "dovecot | dovecote, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, [<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/57150>; accessed 29 December 2018].

the purpose of consistency, the terms ‘doocot’ and ‘pigeon house’ are used throughout this appendix.

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.⁷ 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.⁸ By 100 BC the Ancient Egyptians were imposing substantial taxes on pigeon houses.⁹ 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.¹⁰ Pliny described the Roman craze for pigeons, ‘building turrets for them on house roofs and tracing the pedigrees of single birds’.¹¹

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.

⁷ Blasco et al. 2014, p1.

⁸ Kakish 21012, pp.175-193.

⁹ Pomeroy 1984, p.115.

¹⁰ 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 Agriculture*, vol.II, (Book VIII) (circa 50CE; trans. 1954), pp.361-69. [<https://archive.org/details/L407ColumellaOnAgricultureII59/page/n375>].

¹¹ Pliny, *Natural History*, X, 37(53), 110.

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.¹² 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;
- 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

¹² Brown 2000, pp.324-5.

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, 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.¹³

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 their necks inside the doocot. April (after Easter), May, August, September and October were peak months for

¹³ Pigeon Control Resource Centre website:
<https://www.pigeoncontrolresourcecentre.org/html/about-pigeons.html> [accessed 28 January 2019].

harvesting the peesers, with a slump in June and July during the moulting season.

Doocot 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. Doocots 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 gallews (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 Gordons University in 2000.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, the distribution of doocots in Scotland appears to be closely 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.¹⁵ 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.

¹⁴ Brown 2000, p.217-20.

¹⁵ Brown 2000, p.330.