



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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ALBA

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Last Reviewed:	2019

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# WESTQUARTER DOVECOT



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## WESTQUARTER DOVECOT

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# 1 Summary

## 1.1 Introduction

Westquarter Dovecot is located on the south side of Dovecot Road, Falkirk, just to the east of the junction with Westquarter Avenue. It is a traditional sandstone 'lectern' doocot with unusually decorative wallhead parapet details, probably dating from the early 18th century. The doocot incorporates an earlier armorial panel of 1647 over the doorway.

The structure was scheduled on 14 February 1948, taken into State care in 1950, category-A listed on 25 October 1972 and de-scheduled (to remove a dual designation) on 3 November 2017.

Free public access to the exterior of the building is available throughout the year. The short access path is wheelchair accessible, but there is a step up into the doocot. The interior is not generally open to the public. As the site is not staffed, it is not possible to establish visitor numbers. Since the site is located in a residential area, many people will pass by the doocot and it is something of a landmark.

## 1.2 Statement of significance

Westquarter Dovecot is a very well-preserved example of an ornate early 18th-century 'lectern' doocot, containing 868 nesting boxes. It was originally part of the estate of the Livingstone family at Westquarter House, though the main house is long-demolished and it is now set in an estate of Arts-and-Crafts-style housing, begun 1934.

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

- It is a largely complete and well-preserved example of a specialised building type which helps tell the story of food provision and social status in the 18th and 19th centuries.
- Architecturally, while lectern doocots are the most numerous type in Scotland, the parapet detailing and general level of finish is quite sophisticated.
- These architectural qualities, and the quality and care taken in its construction, give the doocot considerable aesthetic appeal which compliments the surrounding Arts and Crafts housing estate.
- In its local context, it is a tangible link to the earlier history of the place, particularly in the re-use of the armorial panel, and is a local landmark.
- Potentially, the doocot could be a bat-roost – this has to be established.

While the doocot in itself is well preserved, it has lost its original historic setting. Against this, its retention within the notable Arts and Crafts housing scheme seems appropriate to the guiding aesthetic of that movement.

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. Westquarter: In historical documents the estate is sometimes referred to as 'Westquarter', 'West Quarter', 'Edinbellie', 'Edinbelly', 'Ederbelly'. The modern name 'Westquarter' is used throughout this document.
2. Dovecot/Doocot: there are many different spellings of "doocot" in old Scots, contemporary Scots and English (see Appendix 2). The property is named *Westquarter Dovecot* in legal deeds, and its address is *Dovecot Road*. However, the Scots term *doocot* is used throughout this document when referring generally to this type of structure.

Freestanding doocots, such as Westquarter, 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.

Westquarter Dovecot is designed with a 'lean-to' roof in the form of a reading lectern that gives this doocot type its name. It is built of rubble sandstone with dressed quoins and door rybats (surrounds). The ground-plan is rectangular, 5.56m east to west by 4.95m north to south. The walls are 0.86m thick. All the main features, including the doorway, heraldic panel, moulded stone ledge, flight holes, crowstepped lean-to roof and decorative scooped parapet, face south and the design is symmetrical along an axis through the middle of the doorway. Three stone flight holes are located at the first stage above the doorway and the armorial panel. The lean-to gable walls are crowstepped with 'beaked' skewputts at the base, and a curvilinear parapet at the top. There are two panelled pedestals with dumpy obelisk finials at the lower level of the parapet, and four ball-finials along the scooped back wall. A rounded perching course runs all the way around the building. The door is constructed of boarded timber.

The roof is of slate in two tiers separated by a vertically-boarded panel containing six timber flight holes. The lower tier of roofing contains a skylight and there is a cast-iron gutter and downpipe.

Above the door is a carved armorial panel, which is described in some detail in the RCAHMS Inventory:

*The panel above the door bears, on a slightly sunk field, a shield enclosed by a line which probably represents a bordure and charged: Quarterly, 1st and 4th, three cinquefoils, two and one, within a tressure; 2nd and 3rd, a bend between six billets. Above the shield appear the letters S/D, and separated by it are the initials WL/HL; taken together these stand for Sir William Livingstone of Westquarter and his wife Dame Helenore Livingstone, whom he married in 1626. The arms are those registered as of Livingstone of Westquarter, and may either have been evolved from Livingstone's paternal arms, with a bordure for difference, or have been those of Dame Helenore, the heiress of Westquarter, and borne by Livingstone jure uxoris. Below the shield is the date 1647.<sup>1</sup>*

Internally the walls are lined with regular rows of nesting boxes, 0.23m in height, 0.20m wide and 0.46m deep. There are 868 boxes in total. The floor is of brick. A circular socket marks the location of a potence (revolving timber ladder mechanism, now missing) in the centre of the floor.

The doocot is set in a small grassed enclosure surrounded by a low post-and-wire fence and a hedge. The tall back of the doocot faces Dovecot Road. Access to the doocot is via a short path from the south. There are additional areas of grass surrounding the enclosure (outside the property boundary). Looking southwards from Dovecot Road towards the doocot, there is a view across the neighbouring supermarket site and Redding Road to an open field beside the railway.

On stylistic and detailing grounds, the doocot appears to have been constructed in the early 18th century. It is very similar in size and form to the doocot at Drumquhassle, Drymen, dated 1711.<sup>2</sup> There was certainly a doocot in place at Westquarter by 1724, when the estate was advertised for sale (see Historical Values below). The armorial panel of 1647 is likely to have been added to the doocot at a later date, possibly when the 17th-century mansionhouse was demolished in 1883 and a number of other 17th-century carved stones were salvaged for re-use on the replacement house.

## 2.2 Evidential values

Westquarter is important for its survival as a remarkably complete doocot of the early 18th century: the timber potence<sup>3</sup> is the only major missing feature. The doocot provides insight into the methods of pigeon farming and the culinary and social culture of the period. The original siting of the doocot at some distance from the main house, but close to the service offices and the walled garden, demonstrates the concerns for the tranquillity, security and maintenance of the birds, and the ease of transport of the dung as fertiliser for the garden. Food for the pigeons, in the form of seeds and grains, would have been readily available from the surrounding fields. In order to maximise the chances of successful pigeon-breeding, the doocot is oriented to the south for

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<sup>1</sup> RCAHMS Stirlingshire 1963, p.397.

<sup>2</sup> See Plate 208A and p.396 of RCAHMS 1963, vol.II.

<sup>3</sup> The potence was a timber ladder used to access nest boxes and harvest young birds.

the sunshine, with lots of perching places on the ledge, roof and crowsteps, and the raised parapet walls provide shelter from the wind. Internally the nesting boxes and brick floor remain as designed.

The doocot appears on the first two editions of the 25-inch Ordnance Survey maps as a simple rectangle, but the 1917 edition of the map marks a structure attached on the south side.<sup>4</sup> A photograph of about 1930 in the National Record of the Historic Environment shows a timber-framed lean-to structure covered in netting, against the south side of the doocot, enclosing all the flight holes.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of the structure is not known for sure, but it seems likely that the structure modified the doocot for use as an aviary. The photograph is interesting because it shows the doocot in its original context before the development of the surrounding housing in the 1930s. The doocot appears in excellent condition in the image: the ball finials were all intact; the roofing slates were in place; the bright white of the masonry joints suggests that the building had been recently repointed with lime mortar; and there was a continuous row of flight holes across the whole width of the middle panel of the roof. The rooflight, gutter and downpipe, shown in the photograph, were probably added in the later 19th century and involved cutting through the perching course.

Routine maintenance works have been ongoing since the property came into State care, and more recently included selective pointing, and roof and lead flashing repairs. The main works to the property were carried out in 1958-9 when the site was re-levelled, a walnut tree removed and the ground re-seeded. A new fence and an iron gate were fitted at this time, with the current privet hedge planted on the north, south and west boundaries to match that on the east boundary. Repairs to the roof were carried out in 1959 comprising a new timber beam, and the stripping and re-slating of the roof. Since then the routine maintenance has continued, with only a reasonably large area of defective pointing raked out and tamped in 1987 being noteworthy outside of these works.

It is intended to record the entire structure via terrestrial laser scanning as part of the Rae Project. This objective digital record will underpin site management and any future conservation works, as required.

No archaeological excavation is recorded as having taking place in the immediate vicinity of the structure, and its archaeological potential therefore remains unknown.

### 2.3 Historical values

Westquarter Dooocot has historical significance as the only major surviving structure from the old estate of Westquarter.

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<sup>4</sup> National Library of Scotland, ref. OS 25-inch, Stirlingshire nXXX.8 (Falkirk, Grangemouth, published 1917)[<https://maps.nls.uk/view/82907082>].

<sup>5</sup> Historic Environment Scotland, National Record of the Historic Environment, ref. SC1174539 [<https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1174539>].

The estate was in the hands of a cadet branch of the Livingstone of Callendar (earls of Callendar) family for several centuries. The extremely complicated family history is described in Edwin Livingston's note for the *Scottish Antiquary*.<sup>6</sup> Sir William Livingstone, who is thought to have substantially remodelled the house in the second quarter of the 17th century, was part of the unsuccessful attempt to rescue Charles I in 1648.

A substantial house and enclosure are marked at 'W. Quarter' on the Timothy Pont map of the East Central Lowlands of circa 1583-96.<sup>7</sup> Pont uses pictograms to mark features. Generally the size of the pictogram provides an indication of the size and importance of the building or town. For the most important structures, the pictogram can resemble the actual building, but lesser structures have more generic pictograms. In the case of Westquarter, the pictogram appears to be generic, but it shows a substantial tower (on a lesser scale than the neighbouring 'Calendar Castle' however). The scale of the map is such that smaller buildings, such as the doocot, are not marked individually. Westquarter and its enclosure are also shown in Joan Blaeu's Atlas of Scotland of 1654, which relies heavily on the earlier map by Timothy Pont.<sup>8</sup>

A line drawing of the 17th-century house can be found in J. S. Fleming's *Ancient Castles and Mansions of Stirling*.<sup>9</sup> It is described in Nimmo's *History of Stirlingshire*:

*The mansion, which is of considerable size, circularly built, with steep slated roofs and notched gables, is not unlike, in extent and character, the chief chateaux of Normandy and Brittany. On the walls of the southern and more modern portion of the building are the dates 1626 and 1648, but the original edifice is much older.*<sup>10</sup>

The carved date stones of 1626 are now in Falkirk Museum and bear the initials 'SWL' (Sir William Livingstone) and 'DHL' (Dame Helenore Livingstone). The same initials can also be found on the armorial panel of Westquarter Dooocot.

James Livingstone inherited the Westquarter Estate as a minor in 1705 via an entail by the Countess of Findlater (Mary Hamilton, daughter of the 1st Duke of Hamilton). On coming of age in 1717, James spent prodigiously, possibly on the house and estate, to the extent that he soon needed to sell up to pay off his debts.<sup>11</sup> An advertisement for the sale in 1724 records 'a Manor-place of 30 Fire-rooms, most of them finished and painted; having 32 Acres of inclos'd Ground about it, with Stone and Lime Dykes [walls], a good Dovecot and Office-houses, and beautified with much old planting and a Rookery...'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Livingston 1889, pp.75-85 for a list of owners of the Westquarter Estate.

<sup>7</sup> National Library of Scotland, ref. Adv.MS.70.2.9 (Pont 32, Map of the East Central Lowlands)[<https://maps.nls.uk/view/00002329>].

<sup>8</sup> National Library of Scotland, ref. EMW.X.015 (Joan Blaeu, Atlas of Scotland, 1654)[<https://maps.nls.uk/view/00000441-zoom=5&lat=2802&lon=4841&layers=BT>].

<sup>9</sup> Fleming 1902, p.306 [<https://archive.org/details/ancientcastlesma00flem/page/306>].

<sup>10</sup> Nimmo 1880, p.388 [<https://archive.org/details/historyofstirli01nimm/page/388>].

<sup>11</sup> See Brown 1926, pp.636-8, for the later legal challenges to this sale.

<sup>12</sup> Caledonian Mercury, 6 August 1724, p.5 [via <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>].

Westquarter was for sale again in 1734, when Francis Lord Napier bought it from William Drummond:

*The House is rather too large so that they [Lord Napier] can want no conveniency of that kind, he [Drummond] has made several alterations of Stairs Doors and Windows, and besides the Stair Case which you have heard much of, and is indeed very handsome he has a new finish'd a Dining Room, stone Parlour, and lay'd a floor in the Drawing Room, besides the Kitchen and new Doors, windows and other little reparations through the house, All the new work is not only good and substantial but very nice. The rest of the finishing is old fashion'd and the Windows but indifferent however all very habitable and requiring nothing to be done in hast. The furniture is not fine but clean and whole and a great deal of it new, in a word many good useful things. Without Doors there seems little wanting but Bake house and Brew house which he has not. He has been at a good deal of expense in making a little Garden and several Walks. And has inclosed with a good stone and Lime wall as they reckon above thirty acres in wholewith some divisions.<sup>13</sup>*

Further plans containing some detail of the Westquarter area are the two maps by General William Roy in the 18th century. Forming part of his great Military Survey of 1747-55, the first of these maps marks Westquarter as 'Edinbelly' and shows a small surrounding designed landscape.<sup>14</sup> The landscape is focussed on the house, marked in red, and comprises two distinct avenues to the north and north-east of the house. There is also a network of walled enclosures to the south, south-west and south-east of the house, also marked in red. The scale is again too small to show the doocot clearly, if at all. The second map by Roy, probably drawn in the mid-18th century, but not published until 1793, is on a 'Plan shewing the course of the Roman wall called Grime's Dyke'.<sup>15</sup> The estate is marked as 'Ederbelly' and shows a network of avenues radiating out from the house to the east. Again, the scale is too small to show ancillary structures such as the doocot. By the 1750s the legality of James Livingstone's sale of the estate was in question and the ownership dispute continued until resolved by the Court of Session in 1777.<sup>16</sup>

The first modern detailed mapping of the estate is the Ordnance Survey 25-inch map published in 1860.<sup>17</sup> This shows the old mansionhouse with a large

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<sup>13</sup> National Records of Scotland, ref. Seafield MSS GD248/565/82/12 (letter from Lady Hopetoun to Lord Findlater, 3 August 1734)[via <https://canmore.org.uk/site/221499/westquarter-house>].

<sup>14</sup> British Library, ref. Maps K.Top.48.25-1.a-f (Roy Military Survey of Scotland, 1747-55)[via National Library of Scotland: [https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/ - zoom=15&lat=55.9940&lon=-3.7508&layers=4&b=3](https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/-zoom=15&lat=55.9940&lon=-3.7508&layers=4&b=3)].

<sup>15</sup> National Library of Scotland, ref. Newman.360 (Military Antiquities of the Romans in North Britain, 1793, Plate XXXV) [[https://maps.nls.uk/view/74486036 - zoom=6&lat=6622&lon=20247&layers=BT](https://maps.nls.uk/view/74486036-zoom=6&lat=6622&lon=20247&layers=BT)].

<sup>16</sup> Brown 1926, pp.636-8.

<sup>17</sup> National Library of Scotland, ref. OS 25-inch, Stirlingshire XXX.8 (Polmont)

walled garden to the south. A steading, or 'offices', is marked to the south-east of the house. The doocot is not identified specifically, but is clearly the small rectangular structure attached by an L-plan wall to the south-east of the steading. A separate tree-lined footpath led to the doocot along south of the steading. There seem to be a number of trees to the south of the doocot. By the time of the second edition Ordnance Survey mapping in 1897, the old house had been demolished and a Baronial style replacement stood on the same site. The steading appears enlarged and the doocot unaltered.

In 1909 the Glasgow coal master, James Nimmo, who owned the enormous Redding pit nearby, purchased the Westquarter Estate, ending centuries of Livingstone family ownership. Nimmo was probably responsible for the conversion of the doocot to an aviary. The Falkirk Historical Pageant took place on the estate in June 1932. It attracted significant publicity and remains a significant event in the community history.

Stirling County Council purchased half of the Westquarter Estate in 1934, including the house, steading and doocot, with the intention of creating a model village to replace the miners' slum housing in Standburn. The 1935 layout by the architect John A. W. Grant provided for 132 flatted houses and 77 cottage type houses, along with a school, shops, recreation hall and playing field. An important concern of the design was to preserve the bucolic natural features of the glen, woodlands and avenues, and to integrate the new community within the landscape, allowing generous green spaces. The main street, Westquarter Avenue, followed the route of the old winding drive from the east lodge, and much of the new housing was constructed within the old field boundaries in order to maintain the mature planting. At the time of its construction in 1935-6, the Arts and Crafts scheme was described as 'the most important development in the history of Scottish housing' and it won a Saltire Award in 1938.<sup>18</sup>

#### 2.4 Architectural and artistic values

The building belongs to perhaps the most common form of doocot in Scotland, the 'lectern' type, but it is unusually ornate and sophisticated in the treatment of the parapet. A similar scooped parapet with ball-finials can be found on a much grander scale in the linking walls at William Adam's 1734 hunting lodge for the Duke of Hamilton at Chatelherault in Hamilton. The building is crafted beautifully and the carving of the armorial panel shows a high degree of skill.

#### 2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

To the west of the estate, the Westquarter Burn runs north through a picturesque, wooded glen which was integrated into the designed landscape surrounding the original 17th-century house. The burn then runs in an eastwardly direction through a wider valley bottom. The land rises gently in the east towards Redding and to the south towards Overton. Beyond the Westquarter Burn to the north and west is a wooded scarp. These natural

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[\[https://maps.nls.uk/view/74984070\]](https://maps.nls.uk/view/74984070).

<sup>18</sup> *Falkirk Herald*, 27 August 1955, p.5 (<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>).

features and woodlands were much-admired in 19th-century descriptions of the area, and largely survive into the modern housing layout. The doocot and parts of the walled garden are the last remaining structures of the old country house estate.

There is no evidence that the doocot ever had a particular visual relationship with the house or the broader landscape. It does not appear to have been designed as an eye-catcher or terminating feature to an avenue. The steading is thought to have been a near contemporary of the doocot, and although single storey, it partially blocked views from the house to the doocot.<sup>19</sup>

The retention of the doocot appears to have been part of the original design for the model village layout in 1934.<sup>20</sup> An informal pocket garden formed a green setting for the doocot from the outset. The housing layout bends discreetly to provide an ellipse of greenery around the doocot and a gap in the building line of Redding Road allows view to the top of the doocot.

## 2.6 Natural heritage values

The property could potentially be a bat roost, but this has to be confirmed. At the time of writing<sup>21</sup> there were no special natural heritage designations for the doocot.

## 2.7 Contemporary/use values

While the doocot's appeal is generally easily appreciated today, debate over its possible demolition sparked controversy in 1948. It had been under threat since the purchase of the estate for housing development in 1934.<sup>22</sup> Stirling County Councillors Forgie and Rhind argued that the doocot was 'merely a reminder of evil times which they wish to forget' and pushed for it to be demolished.<sup>23</sup> With counter-pressure from the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments the doocot's future was secured by scheduling in 1948 and by being taken into State care in 1950.<sup>24</sup>

### Social values

The doocot has become a distinctive and unusual feature in the streetscape of an otherwise suburban street, which bears its name. Associated designed landscape elements of the historic Westquarter Estate were designed into the new local authority housing scheme of the 1930s, and they also continue to be valued communal assets.

### Spiritual values

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<sup>19</sup> Falkirk Community Trust Museum & Archive Collections, ref. P05470 (Westquarter Stables and dovecot viewed from the house)

[\[http://collections.falkirk.gov.uk/search.do?id=746618&db=object&page=1&view=detail\]](http://collections.falkirk.gov.uk/search.do?id=746618&db=object&page=1&view=detail)

<sup>20</sup> Falkirk Community Trust Museum & Archive Collections, ref. P34547 (Plan of Westquarter Model Village layout)

[\[http://collections.falkirk.gov.uk/search.do?id=751549&db=object&page=1&view=detail\]](http://collections.falkirk.gov.uk/search.do?id=751549&db=object&page=1&view=detail)

<sup>21</sup> March 2019

<sup>22</sup> *Falkirk Herald*, 22 December 1934, p.11 (<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>).

<sup>23</sup> *Falkirk Herald*, 24 January 1948, p.2 (<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>).

<sup>24</sup> *Falkirk Herald*, 17 April 1948, p.3 (<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>).

Westquarter Dovecot has no known spiritual qualities.

### 3 Major gaps in understanding

There are major gaps in understanding the circumstances and date of construction of the doocot and the addition of the armorial panel. It is not known when the doocot fell out of use for pigeon farming and when/why it was converted to an aviary. Further detailed research into Westquarter House and Estate, the Livingstone of Westquarter family and the Nimmo family ownership may provide more information.

### 4 Associated properties

There is a similar, but less ornamental, (private) doocot at Drumquhassle, Drymen, dated 1711.<sup>25</sup>

*Some other notable 'lectern' doocots:*

- Athelstaneford (E. Lothian);
- Cadboll (Hilton of Cadboll);
- Eglinton Mains (Ayr);
- Finavon (Angus);
- Sauchie;
- **Tantallon Castle**;
- **Tealing**;
- Woodwick House (Orkney)

*Other free-standing doocots in Historic Environment Scotland's care:*

- **Aberdour Castle** (circular);
- **Blackness Castle** (lectern);
- **Corstorphine** (circular);
- **Dirleton Castle** (circular)

### 5 Keywords

Westquarter Dovecot; doocot; pigeon house; Westquarter House; nesting boxes; Livingstone of Westquarter; agricultural building; armorial panel; dovecote.

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<sup>25</sup> See Plate 208A and p.396 of RCAHMS 1963, vol.II.

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## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix 1 – Timeline**

1580s	A house is depicted at Westquarter on Sheet 32 of Timothy Pont's map of the East Central Lowlands.
1620s	The house is remodeled or rebuilt on the estate, probably by the Westquarter heiress, Dame Helenore Livingstone and her husband, Sir William Livingstone of Culter. Westquarter House is depicted on Blaeu's Atlas (1654).
1650s	Sir William serves with his cousin and neighbour, James Livingstone of Callendar, in the Royalist cause of Charles II against Oliver Cromwell.
1701	Westquarter passes to the Livingstones of Bedlormie (a village in West Lothian). James Livingstone probably builds the doocot.
1883	Thomas Fenton Livingstone demolishes Westquarter House (but not the doocot) and replaces it with a new baronial-style mansion.
1909	The estate of Westquarter with its house is sold to James Nimmo, a Glasgow coal master, who works the local coal measures.
1932	The great Falkirk Historical Pageant is held on the Westquarter Estate.
1935	Stirling County Council purchases the Westquarter Estate, demolishes Westquarter House and builds a model Arts and Crafts village, designed by John A.W. Grant, to house around 450 mining families. A scale model of the village is exhibited at the Empire Exhibition in Bellahouston Park, Glasgow, in 1936.
1948	The doocot is threatened with demolition, but is saved by being scheduled as an Ancient Monument.
1950	The doocot is entrusted into State care.

## **Appendix 2 - GENERAL HISTORY OF DOOCOTS**

### **Spelling and definition**

The Scottish National Dictionary states that 'doo cot', 'dooket and 'dookit' are current Scots forms of the English term 'dovecot'.<sup>26</sup> Obsolete Scots forms, found in various historical documents, include 'dow-cot', 'dow-cat(e),

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<sup>26</sup> "Doo cot n.". *Dictionary of the Scots Language*. 2004. Scottish Language Dictionaries Ltd. [<http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/doo cot>; accessed 29 Dec 2018].

'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>27</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>28</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>29</sup> By 100 BC the Ancient Egyptians were imposing substantial taxes on pigeon houses.<sup>30</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>31</sup> Pliny described the Roman craze for pigeons, 'building turrets for them on house roofs and tracing the pedigrees of single birds'.<sup>32</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.

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<sup>27</sup> "dovecot | dovecote, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, [<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/57150>]; accessed 29 December 2018].

<sup>28</sup> Blasco et al. 2014, p1.

<sup>29</sup> Kakish 21012, pp.175-193.

<sup>30</sup> Pomeroy 1984, p.115.

<sup>31</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 Agriculture*, vol.II, (Book VIII) (circa 50CE; trans. 1954), pp.361-69.

[<https://archive.org/details/L407ColumellaOnAgricultureII59/page/n375>].

<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</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 'sleps' 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 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.

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<sup>33</sup> Brown 2000, pp.324-5.

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.<sup>34</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 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

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<sup>34</sup> Pigeon Control Resource Centre website:  
<https://www.pigeoncontrolresourcecentre.org/html/about-pigeons.html> [accessed 28 January 2019].

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 Gordons University in 2000.<sup>35</sup> 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***

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<sup>35</sup> Brown 2000, p.217-20.

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>36</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.

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<sup>36</sup> Brown 2000, p.330.