

THE DOVECOTE TURRET OF HADLEIGH DEANERY

by JOHN McCANN

LATE IN 1998 my book *The Dovecotes of Suffolk* was published by this Institute. I set out to include all known examples in the county, but I predicted that other dovecotes would turn up after it was finished (McCann 1998, 9). Three years after publication only one other has been reported; it is an important addition. Oliver Rackham has told me of a miniature dovecote in a turret on Hadleigh Deanery.

The exterior of the building is well known, and little need be said about it. It was built in 1495 as the gatehouse of a palace for Bishop Pykenham which was never completed. It is easily seen from St Mary's churchyard in the middle of Hadleigh, but perhaps not many people have been on the roof. It is of red brick, of three storeys. It faces west-south-west, and has four turrets (Fig. 1). The south-west turret is the head of a winding stair, the north-west turret is the dovecote. The two at the rear are smaller ornamental dummies. The dovecote turret has all the features of a full-size dovecote, and has survived five centuries almost unchanged.

Dimensions are expressed in the traditional English units in which it was built: 1in = 25.4mm; 1ft = 12in = 0.305m.

By courtesy of the Dean, the Very Revd Canon David Stranack, it was examined in December 1999 – in late afternoon, in failing daylight, and latterly in rain. A second visit was not practicable for one who lives in Devon; the photographs reproduced here are the best that could be achieved in the conditions. Externally the turret is octagonal, but inside it is 5ft 7in square, with a central doorway to the east, and quatrefoil apertures to north and west (Fig. 2). The floor is level with the flat roof of the tower, 37ft above ground; when seen it was deeply covered in bird droppings. The height to the spring of the arched roof is 8ft 2in.

THE BRICKWORK

The bricks are the same as those used for the rest of the gatehouse – 10 x 4½ x 2½in, finely made, with deep courses of lime mortar. Four courses rise 11½in. A small number have been replaced by modern bricks made to size. The front wall is 1ft 10in thick at the doorway. Above the roof of the turret is a crenellated parapet supported on a jetty of purpose-moulded bricks all round, and over the doorway on trefoiled corbels.

THE DOORWAY

This is 6ft high by 1ft 9in wide, with a repaired four-centred arch; the jambs and head are chamfered on the outside. The rectangular door is modern.

THE QUATREFOIL APERTURES

The two pierced quatrefoils are purpose-moulded, 11in across, each in an aperture in the brickwork 1ft 8in high by 1ft 4in wide, with a shallow V-head formed by pairs of canted bricks. They have been fitted with expanded metal inside to keep out birds.



FIG. 1 – The turrets of Hadleigh Deanery from the north-west: the middle one is the dovecote
(photo: author).



FIG. 2 – The dovecote from the east (*photo: author*).



FIG. 3 – The north-west corner, showing the nest-holes and alighting ledges (*photo: author*).

THE NEST-HOLES

The north, west and south walls are entirely occupied by nest-holes incorporated in the original fabric, and will be described first (Fig. 3). In these walls there are eight tiers of nest-holes in regular grid pattern (except where interrupted by the quatrefoil apertures), with twelve nest-holes in a complete tier. Most of the entrances are 6in high by 5in wide. Internally the height is the same, but in plan they are L-shaped, with a chamber $13\frac{1}{2}$ in wide by $8\frac{1}{2}$ in from front to back, and an entrance passage $4\frac{1}{2}$ in deep. The inside of each nest-hole has been lined with lime mortar, evidently executed from above as the bricks were laid; some of it has been pecked away by the pigeons, but substantial amounts remain. Below each tier of nest-holes is an alighting ledge two courses thick which projects 2in. The brickwork is deeply scored by the pigeons, as is usually found in dovecotes which have been in use over a long period (Fig. 4). Most of the east wall is occupied by the doorway; it has only one tier of five nest-holes above it, similar in size but without an alighting ledge. This makes a total of ninety-three nest-holes, all of which are still in good order.

THE ROOF STRUCTURE

The roof structure is original, well carpentered in oak of high quality (Fig. 5). Two pairs of cambered beams span the turret, sunk into each other where they cross. The lower pair is 8in deep by $3\frac{1}{2}$ in wide, chamfered; the upper pair is 5in deep by 4in wide, unchamfered. The cambered beams enclose an open rectangle 2ft 1in by 1ft 11in through which the pigeons formerly entered; it is now closed by wire netting and deeply covered with bird droppings. Four unchamfered stub beams $3\frac{1}{2}$ in deep by 6in wide are tenoned and pegged to the centres of the camber-beams, and are built into the brickwork. There is some modern timber at the corners. It is assumed that originally the framing of the roof was covered by boards bent and nailed to the gentle spherical curvature, with leading over. The boards have been replaced by strips of plywood, with modern leading which drains into an old lead down-pipe mounted on the east wall (Fig. 2).

THE LOUVER

Inside the crenellated parapet is a louver which is certainly old, and which may be original (Fig. 6). It consists of four oak uprights which support a framed roof 1ft 3in above the rectangular aperture. The uprights exhibit nail-holes which represent the fixings of the parallel inclined boards which were formerly fitted. Their function was to prevent the larger birds of prey from penetrating to the interior, while allowing pigeons to pass through freely. Very few examples have survived. The more vulnerable parts have been covered with modern lead.

DISCUSSION

There are close similarities to the dovecote turret on the roof of Oxburgh Castle, Norfolk (1482); but that has been much altered, and may not be instantly recognisable as a former dovecote. Canon Stranack reports another on the roof of Bodiam Castle, Sussex, which I have not seen. It seems likely that other towers of the period formerly had a dovecote turret on the roof. Pigeons are instinctively attracted to any tall building, and the roof is an obvious place to domesticate them. However, most manorial dovecotes of the 15th century

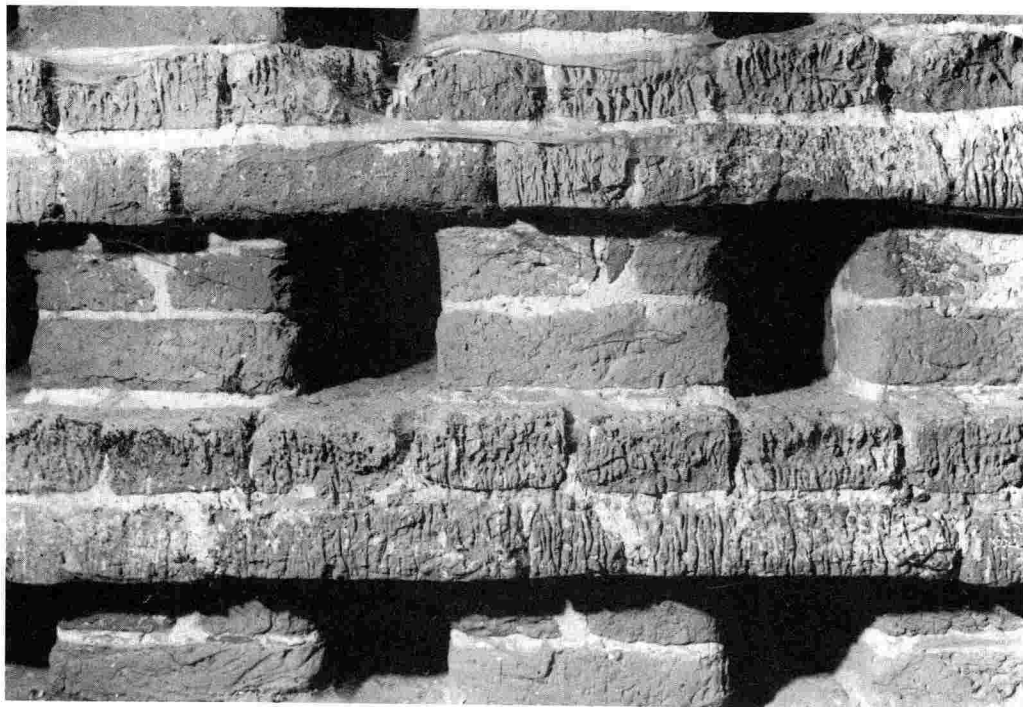


FIG. 4 – The soft red bricks of the alighting ledges have been deeply scored by the pigeons (*photo: author*).



Fig. 5 – The roof structure from below, showing the rectangular aperture through which the pigeons formerly entered (*photo: author*).



FIG. 6 – The louver on the roof of the turret, from the east (*photo: author*).

had between 300 and 1,000 nest-holes; here there are only 93. To supply the large household of a castle or palace with a sufficient number of squabs a much larger dovecote would have been required elsewhere on the estate, to which this turret would have contributed only a small supplement.

The provision of an alighting ledge to each tier of nest-holes (except over the doorway) is interesting, for these ledges were uncommon in the late Middle Ages. Where provided at all they were often only at intervals of two or three tiers. The only other medieval dovecote which has an alighting ledge to each tier of nest-holes (of those which have survived in Suffolk) is at Stoke College, Stoke-by-Clare, built between 1485 and 1493 (McCann 1998, 53–56). Evidently this was the beginning of a change in practice, for increasingly from the 16th century dovecotes of brick were provided with an alighting ledge to each tier of nest-holes. These ledges were deliberately made too narrow to be used by tree-nesting birds of prey. Dovecote pigeons, being a rock-nesting species, have no difficulty in perching on narrow ledges.

It is interesting too that the nest-holes have been lined from the outset with lime mortar. From the 16th century some writers expressed a preference for nests of clay daub or lime, which they perceived as ‘warmer’ for the pigeons; and a minority of pigeon-keepers provided ‘warm’ linings in nest-holes of harder materials (McCann 1997, 57–59). This is the earliest example which has been recorded in Britain.

Large-scale pigeon-farming on the traditional pattern died out in Britain from 1793 owing to the economic changes brought about by the French Revolutionary Wars. Some dovecotes were converted to small-scale pigeon-keeping, and continued in that use until well into the 19th century, but eventually keeping pigeons was perceived as inconsistent

with good farming practice, and dovecotes were generally abandoned (McCann 1998, 23). With few exceptions all surviving dovecotes in Britain have been redundant for 150–200 years. Most of those which still exist have survived only because they have been converted to secondary uses. Dovecotes were not even recognized as worth preserving as historic buildings until the early 20th century (Berkeley 1905, 349). The long period of neglect and dereliction has taken its toll, so that by now we have few left in usable order to study. Some retain decaying and incomplete features, from which – with difficulty – we can sometimes work out how a fully-equipped dovecote was operated. This extraordinary survival on the roof of Hadleigh Deanery is all the more valuable.

This dovecote has been preserved by its height from a development of the 18th century, the introduction of brown rats, *Rattus norvegicus*. This new hazard brought about alterations to most dovecotes, which even today are not widely recognized as such (McCann 1998, 21–22). It seems not even to have suffered from well-meaning ‘restoration’. Minimal repairs to the brickwork, roof and door have retained it in good order. It is an extraordinary survival.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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