

TWO MORE DOVECOTES IN SUFFOLK

by JOHN MCCANN

SINCE *The Dovecotes of Suffolk* was published by this Institute in 1998 three more dovecotes have been reported. A 15th-century dovecote turret at Hadleigh Deanery was described and illustrated in Volume XL Part 1 of this journal. More recently Mark Barnard has reported two more, at Stoke Ash and Little Bealings, both of the early 19th century.

Dimensions are expressed in the traditional English units in which these buildings were built. 1in = 25.4mm, 1ft = 12in = 0.305m.

GREAT HALLOWS, STOKE ASH (TM 114 704)

Stoke Ash is 8km south of Diss. 'Great Hallows' is the present name of the former Rectory, standing about 100m west of the parish church, approached from the main Diss-Ipswich Road. It is a house of early 19th-century appearance, though inside it proves to be a timber-framed house of medieval plan, altered and extended at various periods and clad with brickwork. The dovecote is 10m west of the service end, now hemmed in by ancient box hedges (Fig. 126).

It is a rectangular two-storey brick building facing east, 10 ft by 9ft, and 12ft high to the eaves. The lower storey was originally partitioned into two rooms for a privy and store, and is not very different now. The pigeon-loft occupies the upper storey, accessible only by external ladder. A later shed abuts to the north.

The Brickwork

The bricks are red, $9\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{2}$ in, laid with lime mortar in Flemish bond, pointed with modern cement mortar. There is a string of three courses at first-floor level, and another below the eaves, with headers projecting to form a dentilled cornice.

The Doors and Windows

In the lower storey there are two doors facing east and a window facing south, all mainly original. Both doors are six-panelled, 5ft 10in high by 2ft 1in wide. The window is 3ft high by 2ft 1in wide, with an elliptical arch formed of alternate bricks and dressed flints, with a couple of tiles included (Fig.127). The joinery with Y-tracery is all original, as is the wrought iron casement and fastening; only the hinges and leaded glass have been renewed. It is quite rare to find doors and windows of that period so unaltered. In the upper storey there is a ledged and boarded door 4ft high by $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft wide.

In each of the other three walls a blind recess has been formed similar in size and shape to the ground-floor window, but closed with a single thickness of brickwork. On the outside and inside it is recessed by $4\frac{1}{2}$ in. There are no windows. They are not essential in dovecotes; many have no illumination inside other than that which filters down through the louver.

The Interior

The inside of the pigeon-loft is plastered. Nothing remains of the former nest-boxes; probably they were made of wood or clay bats. The walls provide enough space for about 200 nest-boxes of average size.



FIG. 126 – The dovecote at Stoke Ash from the east-south-east.



FIG. 127 – The ground-floor window at Stoke Ash.



FIG. 128 – Looking up at the roof at Stoke Ash. The original hip rafters project into the square frame to prevent large birds of prey from penetrating to the interior. The octagonal louver itself has been renewed.

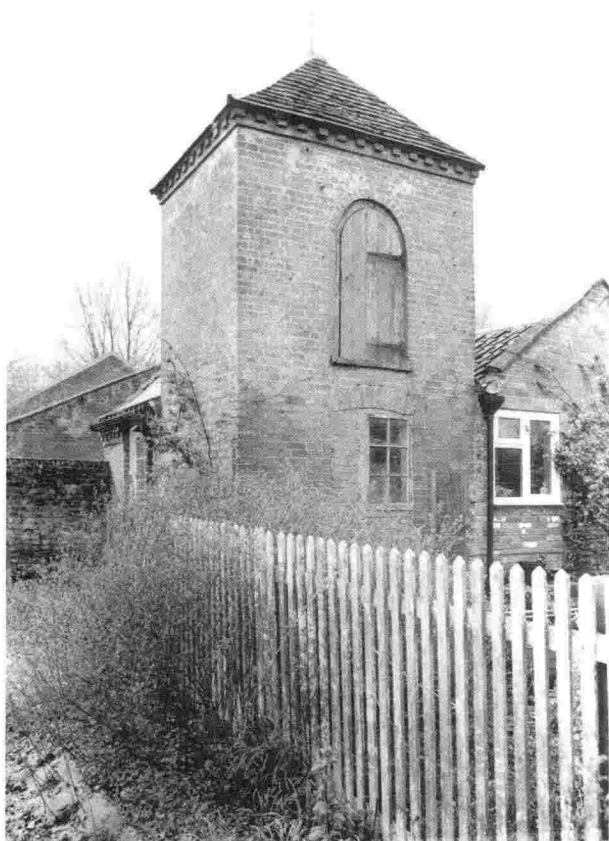


FIG. 129 – The dovecote at Little Bealings from the north-north-east.

The Roof and Louver

The rafters appear to be original, rising to a square frame which supports the louver (Fig. 128). The upper ends of the hip rafters project into the square gap through which the pigeons flew in and out. This may be a device to prevent birds of prey from penetrating to the interior, for the size of the frame is determined by the proportions of the louver. The original louver has not survived. There is no reason to doubt that, like the present one, it was octagonal with a domed lead roof.

GROVE FARM HOUSE, LITTLE BEALINGS (TM 230 474)

Little Bealings is 3km south-west of Woodbridge. Grove Farm House is 0.5km south of the parish church, approached from the east. It is a 16th-century timber-framed building, much altered and clad with brickwork; externally it retains the appearance of its last major re-modelling in 1910. The dovecote is 10m south of the rear part of the house.

It is a rectangular brick building 9ft 8in by 7ft 8in, 16ft high to the eaves, facing north (Fig. 129). It was combined from the outset with a small single-storey building to the south which has been extended later to the west to make a workshop. The original use of the rear part is unknown; the present owner has found what appears to be the remains of a still in the ground.

The Brickwork

The bricks are $9\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{2}$ in laid in lime mortar – in Flemish bond in the more visible north and east elevations, lapsing into irregular bond in the rear elevations. There is no string course. The dentilled cornice is formed of one course of headers above one course of stretchers. Substantial traces remain of an overall coat of pink limewash, and a coat of white limewash over that.

The Doors and Windows

Doorways at both levels face north. The ground-floor doorway is 7ft 3in by 3ft 3in, with a segmental brick arch. A re-used six-light casement has been inserted, and the remainder blocked with brickwork. The first-floor doorway is intact, 5ft 1in by 2ft 6in, with a round brick arch and a simple ledged and boarded door shaped to the same profile. Originally the upper storey was accessible only by ladder. A later aperture 3ft square has been made in the brickwork to the rear (south), closed with a wooden grill, with four flight holes of inverted-U shape below (Fig. 130).

The Interior

The walls are unplastered, and white-washed. Three tiers of roughly-made wooden nest-boxes remain on the west wall (Fig. 131), formerly seven to a tier, each approximately 9in high by 10in wide by 9in front to back. These are not the original nest-boxes. There is enough space on the walls for about 250 nest-boxes of average size. The floor has been rebuilt, with a modern internal stair.

The Roof

The roof is pyramidal, wholly rebuilt with machine-sawn softwood. It is clad with hand-made red clay tiles with galvanized hips. The pigeons would have entered by a louver at the apex, but rebuilding has removed all trace of it.



FIG. 130 – At Little Bealings this inserted aperture dates only from the introduction of the small-scale keeping of ornamental pigeons in the late 19th or early 20th century. Earlier the pigeons would have entered at a louver on the apex of the roof.

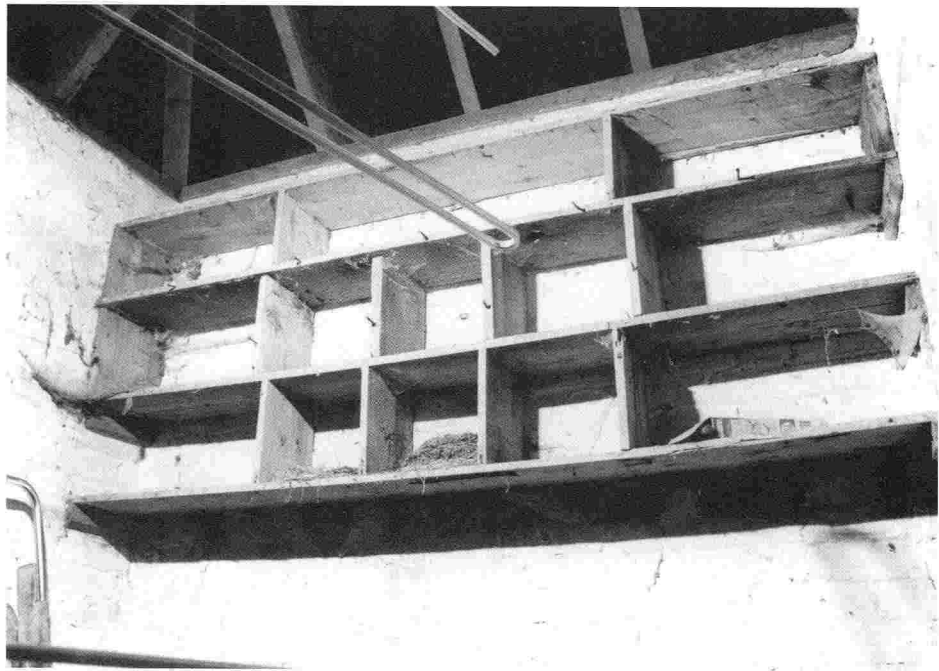


FIG. 131 – Incomplete nest-boxes on the west wall at Little Bealings.

DISCUSSION

These two dovecotes were originally similar in type. In each case they were built to supply a small household with pigeon squabs, and accommodated birds only in the upper storey. In each the pigeon-loft is square or near-square; the pigeons entered and left by a louver at the apex of the roof. The dovecote at Stoke Ash is hardly altered from its original form, except that it no longer has its nest-boxes. The dovecote at Little Bealings is smaller in plan but taller, so could accommodate rather more pigeons. It can be interpreted as originally incorporating a privy to the rear, although this remains unproven. The dovecote at Stoke Ash is more embellished architecturally, with a string course and three ornamental recesses, and was built as the dovecote of a rectory, while the dovecote at Little Bealings was built for a farm, with fewer decorative features, and perhaps somewhat later. They are comparable with two examples illustrated in *The Dovecotes of Suffolk*, at Hitcham House (also built as a rectory) and Scotland Place, Stoke-by-Nayland; they are similar in size and period of construction.

At Little Bealings one sees less evidence of its original form, but clear evidence of a late stage of pigeon-keeping in which a much smaller number of pigeons was kept primarily for ornament and delight, as described in 1870 in *Cassell's Household Guide* (Cassell and Co. 1870, 39–42 and 150–51). By that time the louver had decayed, so the roof was tiled overall and a new aperture was cut in the brickwork to the rear; it provided lighting and a new access for the pigeons (Fig.130). These, and a reduced number of nest-boxes, would have been sufficient for all the pigeons that the owner could keep and feed. To provide any more accommodation was to invite unwanted feral pigeons to move in with the domesticated flock.

From the Middle Ages dovecotes have been associated with manor houses and rectories, but in 1619 a change in the law allowed any freeholder to build one (McCann 2000, 35–36). Those who had social aspirations found that to build a dovecote in fashionable form was to acquire a little of the status of their social superiors, together with a supply of luxurious meat for seven or eight months of the year. To meet the instinctive requirements of pigeons it was necessary to raise the pigeon-loft well above ground (Loudon 1836, 393). At smaller houses a more practical approach to expenditure therefore placed it over ancillary ground-level services.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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