

Keeping Pigeons in Parish Churches

by

FRANK PEXTON *and* JOHN McCANN

In 1888 J. T. Micklethwaite introduced the study of pigeon lofts in churches, and he collected several examples from published sources. In 1903 George Marshall continued the study, and he found two surviving examples in Herefordshire. Frank Pexton drew on his manuscript notes and he examined some of the surviving columbaria, but he died in September 2006 before completing his reports. In this paper John McCann has brought his work to completion. Some of the physical evidence has been destroyed since it was observed, some has been misreported, but nine examples are described and illustrated. Enquiries have been made about all the other columbaria in England and Wales which have been mentioned in the literature. This paper is dedicated to the memory of Frank Pexton.

Note: in this paper dimensions are stated in feet and inches, because the buildings were built in them. Quite often they work out to be in exact units or half-units (1 inch = 25.4 mm., 1 foot = 12 inches = 0.305 metre).

The distinguished architect J. T. Micklethwaite first published information about pigeon-keeping in churches in a short article in *The Archaeological Journal* in 1888, intended as a postscript to R. S. Ferguson's introductory study of dovecotes in the previous volume.¹ About twenty years earlier Micklethwaite had noted in a chamber in the north-west tower of Selby Abbey 'a number of holes an inch or so in diameter and arranged in rows. In some of the holes there remain ... the ends of wooden pegs which had been broken off short at the surface of the wall'. He suggested that 'the pegs appeared to have been intended to carry some rough shelving which could easily be divided by upright partitions to form pigeon holes', and that 'the chamber had been fitted up for a pigeon house at some date unknown but perhaps as far back as the thirteenth century'. At the time his suggestion was doubted, but since then it has been confirmed by similar evidence found in secular dovecotes.² He cited documentary evidence from 1484-5 at Great Yarmouth of 'about three dozen pigeons from the pigeon house above the chapel vault used in the household'.³ He looked into the evidence of a pigeon loft above the fifteenth-century

Dr Frank Pexton was an industrial chemist. He was brought up in Naunton, Gloucestershire, close to a famous dovecote, and upon retiring to Herefordshire became fascinated by the numerous dovecotes there. He was an active member of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club, becoming President in 1990, and for his presidential address chose George Marshall as his subject.

John McCann was a professional architectural photographer, which he gave up in 1980 to study vernacular architecture. He became an Inspector of Historic Buildings for Essex County Council and English Heritage. Since his retirement he has made a particular study of historic dovecotes, and has published about them in this and other journals. From 2000 he collaborated with Frank Pexton in studying *columbaria* in parish churches.

chancel of the church of St Peter and St Paul at Marlborough, where an engraving of 1824 showed in the east gable a 'narrow open slit through which the pigeons entered, and which was fitted with alighting boards or flat louvres' (Fig. 1).⁴ He found that 'amongst other mischief' the gable had been rebuilt in 1863, but a local informant remembered that 'pigeon boxes were arranged round the whole of the walls near to the slates'. To Micklethwaite the significant evidence was the stair rising from the north-east corner of the chancel which provided convenient access to the unfloored space over the vault; he pointed out that it had no other function than as access to the pigeon loft. Where he found a comparable stair to a roof space he looked for, and sometimes found, confirmation that it was to a pigeon loft. He suspected that there had been one over the twelfth-century chancel at Crondall, Surrey, but this evidence too had been destroyed by restorers. At Elkstone, Gloucestershire, he said the space above the chancel vault was reached by a winding stair at the north-west corner, and mentioned a tradition that pigeons had been kept there, but he did not visit the building.

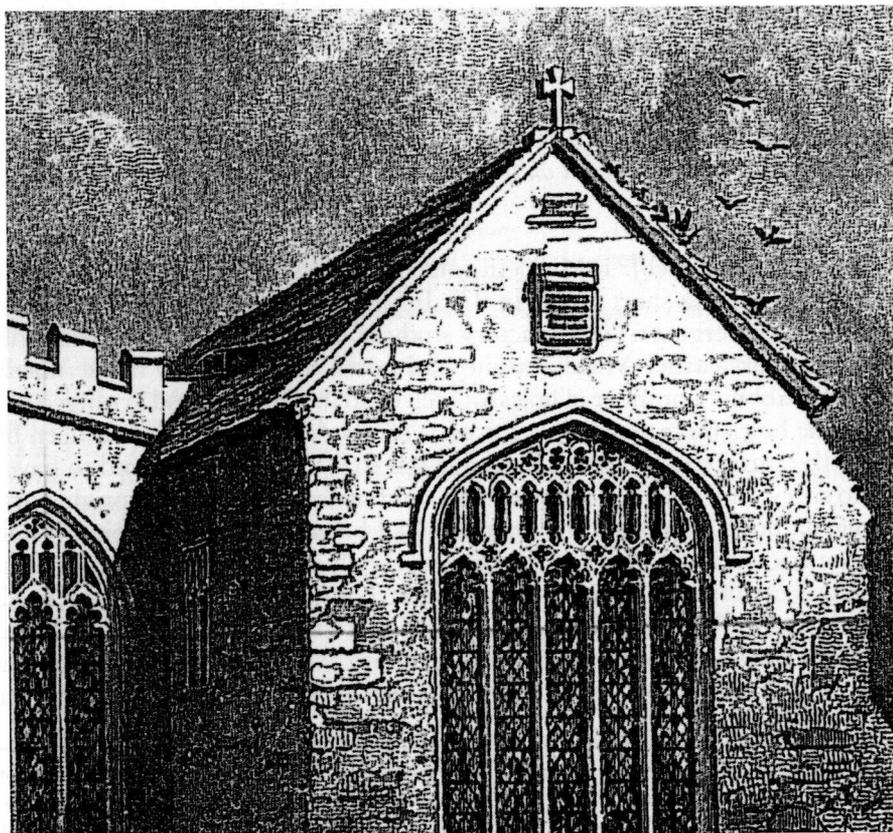


Fig. 1

Marlborough, Wiltshire. The east gable before 'restoration'. An enlarged section of plate 1, from J. P. Kneale and J. Le Keux, *The most interesting Views of Collegiate and Parochial Churches*, 2, London, 1824.

By courtesy of the British Library



Fig. 2

Birlingham, Worcestershire. An enlarged part of the parish church tower, c.1818, from J. T. Micklethwaite, 'On pigeon houses in churches', *Archaeological Journal*, 45, 1888, 377.

By courtesy of the Editor

He quoted a description of Overbury church, Worcestershire, in 1865 which reported that 'some twenty years ago the space above the vaulting of the chancel was used as a pigeon house'.⁵ He quoted from an account of the church at Leonard Stanley, Gloucestershire, where above the north transept 'there is a boarded floor, and the space above in the roof has been used as a *columbarium*. The walls are full of pigeon holes all round, and these have evidently been built with the walls and are not additions', although again Micklethwaite did not see the evidence himself.⁶

Of the church at Birlingham, Worcestershire, he quoted a description of the middle stage of the west tower: 'Internally the walls are chequered with square recesses for the birds to nest in, such as are found in any old dovecote'. He reproduced an illustration of c.1818 which showed that 'on the south and west sides are arched loops with projecting shelves or sills below them for the birds to alight on' (Fig. 2).⁷ He quoted a description of a similar pigeon loft in the west tower of Collingham [*sic*] Ducis church in Wiltshire: 'A window or rather opening with a sill on which the birds might alight is still preserved'.⁸

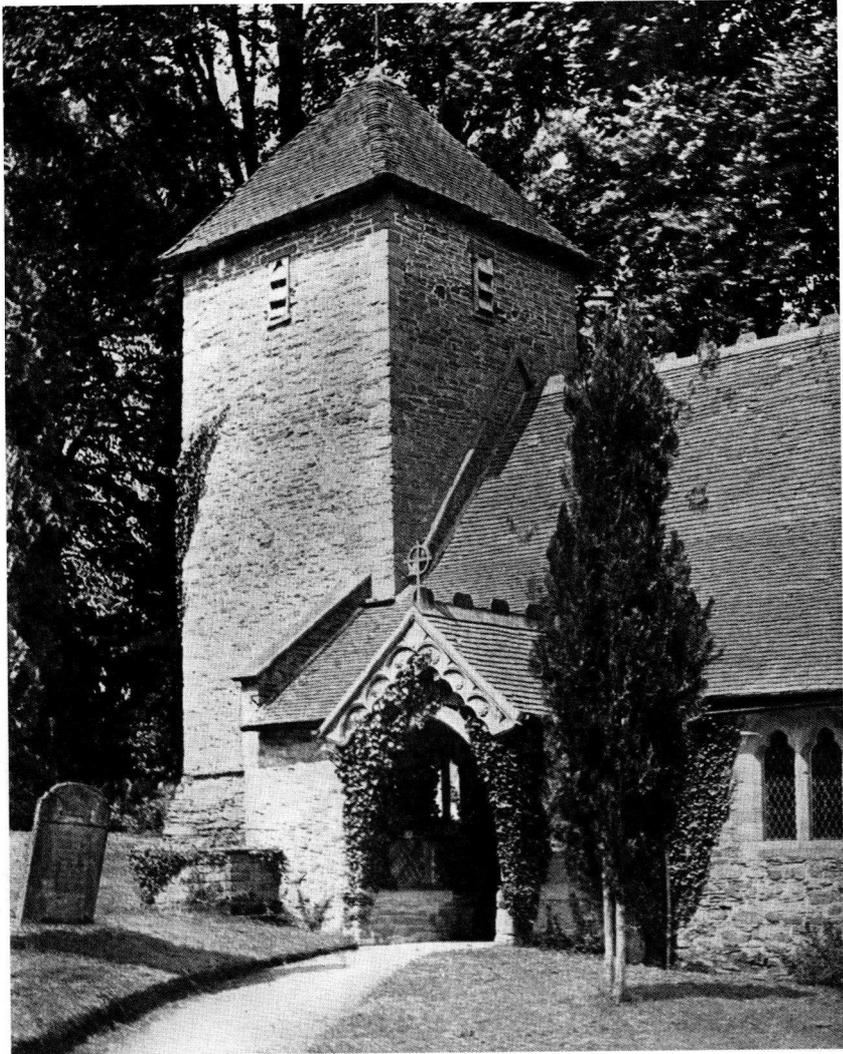


Fig. 3

Sarnesfield, Herefordshire. The west tower from the south-west. Photograph by Alfred Watkins. From *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club*, 1904, 263.

By courtesy of the Editor

The study of pigeon lofts in churches, or *columbaria*, as they are better called, was extended by George Marshall in 1903. He found nest-holes for pigeons high in the thirteenth-century west tower of Sarnesfield parish church, Herefordshire (Fig. 3), and concluded that they were part of the original fabric. There were 106 nest-holes 6 in. square and 15-18 in. deep in regular tiers, which entered the walls at an angle, widening out at the rear, with an alighting ledge below each tier (Fig. 4). The nest-holes are in the middle stage of a three-stage tower, 8 ft square internally, with a window of two lights

to the west. His short article about them was published in 1904 in *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club*.⁹ He continued to collect information about columbaria from published sources, and at the age of seventy he discovered nest-holes in the late-fourteenth-century west tower of the ruined church of Llanwarne, Herefordshire (Fig. 5), which he reported briefly in 1939: 'There were six nesting holes in one wall and four in each of the other walls. The holes inside were very rough and enlarged considerably at the back, but had not the usual sharp bend to one side or the other'.¹⁰ His manuscript notebook and other papers are retained in the Woolhope Library, Hereford, and have been drawn upon extensively by Frank Pexton.

The physical evidence of a columbarium may be in the form of *nest-holes* incorporated in the solid fabric, *nest-boxes* made of wood, wattle-and-daub or other materials constructed separately, *alighting ledges* in front of the nests, *flight holes* by which the pigeons entered the columbarium, or a *perching ledge* outside the building. These terms are often used loosely, but were defined in this journal in 1991.¹¹ References to pigeons in churches in early documentary sources may be

about accommodation intended for domestic pigeons, or may be about nuisance caused by feral pigeons. Both Micklethwaite and Marshall have been misled over the latter. For instance, Micklethwaite quoted an item in the accounts of the keeper of the fabric of York Minster for 1497, recording that he bought a net to catch pigeons for three shillings and eightpence.¹² Nets are not normally required to catch domestic pigeons, because the only birds taken for eating are the unfledged young birds, unable to leave their nests. A net may have been used to catch the old birds during the annual cull, but would the keeper of the fabric carry out this operation? It seems more likely that it would be done by the priest who benefited from the pigeons, or by his servant, and that the keeper of the fabric was responsible for removing feral pigeons which were causing a nuisance. Other instances of this misinterpretation will be cited later.

The pigeons concerned were domesticated from Blue Rock Doves, *Columba livia*, which in nature inhabit high cliffs and make their nests in niches in caves. They are well

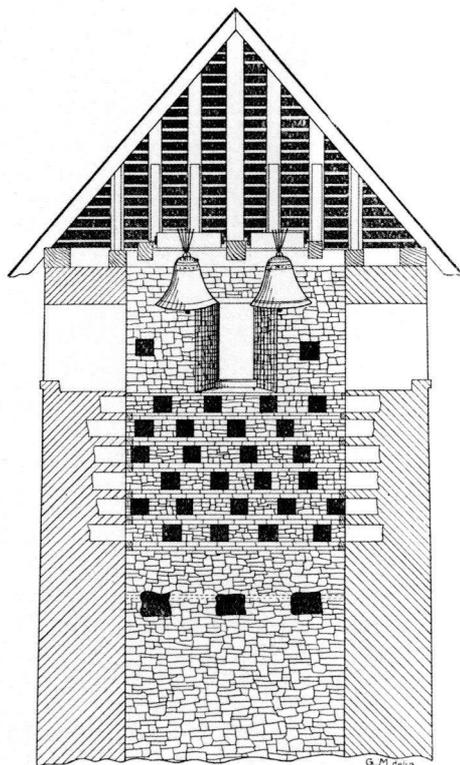


Fig. 4

Sarnesfield, Herefordshire. George Marshall's measured drawing of the nest-holes in the west tower. From *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club*, 1904, 264.
By courtesy of the Editor



Fig. 5

Llanwarne, Herefordshire. The west tower of the ruined church, from the south.

Photograph by Frank Pexton

adapted to perch on narrow ledges and steeply sloping hard surfaces, and should not be confused with wood pigeons, *Columba palumbus*, which nest in trees. They take readily to the artificial nesting places provided in tall buildings, which in effect reproduce the places they seek instinctively. They breed several times a year, from March to October, each time producing two eggs. Both parents incubate the eggs for seventeen days, and both feed the young with regurgitated liquid food known as 'pigeons' milk'. The young birds grow rapidly, and by the age of four weeks they are almost as large as the parents, and are ready to fledge. In nature the parent birds would then drive the *squabs* (as they are called at this stage) from the nests. In domestication the pigeon-keeper searched the nests for squabs just before they were ready to fledge, wrung their necks and delivered them to the kitchen or the market. Because the flying muscles had never been used the meat was exceptionally tender, and was highly valued as a luxury food. Only the young birds were considered sufficiently tender to eat. (Una Robertson has quoted evidence

that in the eighteenth century the mature birds were given away to servants.)¹³ The feral pigeons which are familiar in cities today are descended from these domestic pigeons and they interbreed freely with wild rock doves.

Nine reports of columbaria follow, some of which were begun or photographed by Frank Pexton shortly before his death.

COLLINGBOURNE DUCIS, WILTSHIRE

This is the most complete and datable columbarium found. At the church of St Andrew it occupies the middle stage of the west tower (Fig. 6), which C. E. Ponting dated to c.1480.¹⁴ It is entered by a doorway with a four-centred arch from a winding stair in a turret against the south elevation (Fig. 7). Also in the south elevation is an aperture 3 ft square at knee height which served both as the flight hole through which the pigeons entered, and as the chute through which accumulations of droppings could be shovelled out, to be collected on the ground for use as fertilizer. In use it would have been protected by a removable wooden frame with parallel slats at six-inch intervals, as at



Fig. 6

Collingbourne Ducis, Wiltshire. The second stage of the west tower, showing at right the stair turret to the columbarium, and in the middle the flight hole for the pigeons, with a broken ledge on which they could alight. The same aperture served for removing accumulations of pigeon dung.

Photograph by John McCann

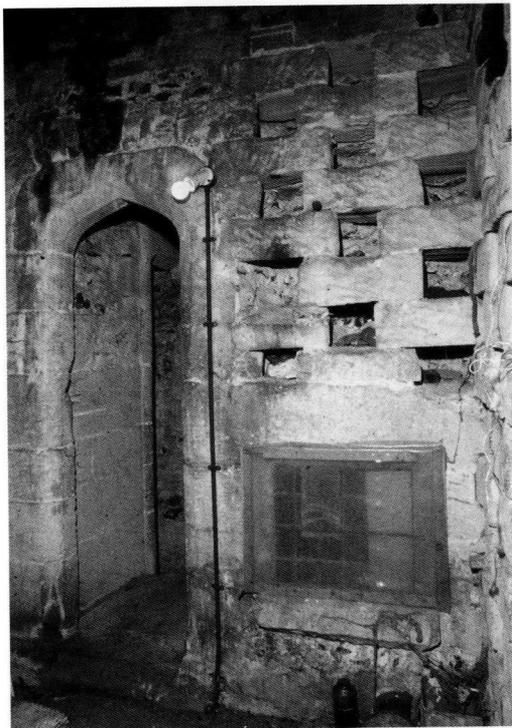


Fig. 7

Collingbourne Ducis, Wiltshire. The south side of the columbarium. The flight hole at lower right is angled so that it emerges clear of the stair turret.

Since it passed out of use it has been glazed in twenty-four lights, and is additionally protected by heavy gauge polythene. Note the broach stops on the jambs of the doorway.

Photograph by John McCann

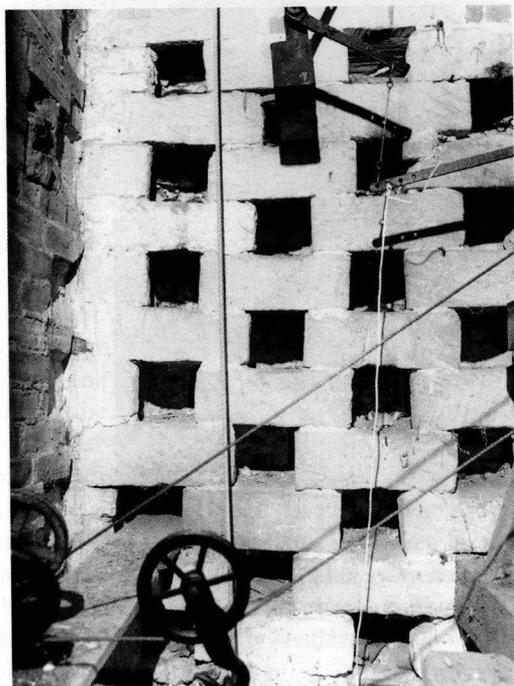


Fig. 8

Collingbourne Ducis, Wiltshire. The south-west corner of the columbarium, with the late Frank Pexton. The timber at the bottom supports the clock installed in 1871. Some nest-holes at the top have been blocked to support a steel bell-frame.

Photograph by Désirée Pexton

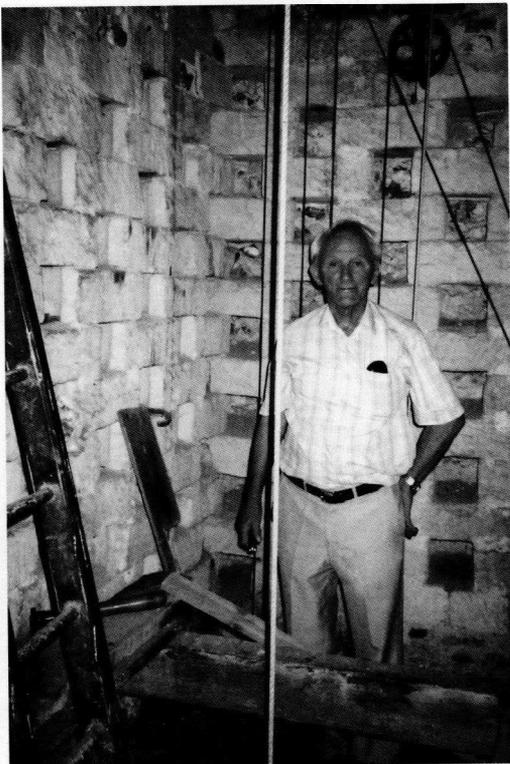


Fig. 9

Collingbourne Ducis, Wiltshire. The north-east corner of the columbarium, to north of the clock, of which the pulleys and rope are part. The brick stitch can be seen at left.

Photograph by John McCann

Marlborough (Fig. 1), designed to admit the pigeons while keeping out the larger birds of prey, but no evidence of it remains. The remainder of this wall and the whole of the other three walls are occupied by nest-holes in chequer pattern without alighting ledges (Fig. 7, 8 and 9). Some nest-holes have been destroyed or blocked by a brick stitch executed to repair a crack in the north wall, others for the insertion of a steel bell-frame above. Some are obstructed by a large clock mechanism installed in 1871, but 181 of the original 258 nest-holes are still present and in good order. A more detailed report was published in *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* in 2009.¹⁵

COMPTON MARTIN, SOMERSET

The existence of a columbarium above the chancel of the church of St Michael and All Angels was noted briefly by F. Bligh Bond in 1909 and by Ethelbert Horne in 1936, but it was not described or illustrated.¹⁶ In the fifteenth century the walls of the Norman chancel were extended upwards to incorporate nest-holes, and covered by an almost flat roof. In the north elevation the low doorway with a four-centred arch is still present, 14 ft above ground, accessible only by ladder (Fig. 10). There were identical rectangular



Fig. 10

Compton Martin, Somerset. The upper north wall above the chancel. At right, the door to the columbarium, accessible only by ladder. To the left of the rainwater head is an original flight hole, also used for removing accumulations of pigeon dung, now blocked. There is a similar blocked aperture in the south wall, now inside a later roof.

Photograph by Mark McDermott



Fig. 11

Compton Martin, Somerset. The south wall of the columbarium.

Photograph by Mark McDermott

apertures in the north and south walls, serving as flight holes for the pigeons and for the removal of their droppings. They are now blocked on the inside, but are still visible outside; the southern one is now enclosed by a later roof. Eighty nest-holes 6 in. square without alighting ledges are still present in the north and south walls (Fig. 11). The east and west walls were rebuilt in the nineteenth century, but if they formerly contained nest-holes the total would have been about 130-40. There is no floor other than the upper surface of the chancel vault, with barely 6 ft of headroom to the roof.

A 'pigeon house over the chauncell' was recorded in a glebe terrier of 1606 but was not mentioned in the next one of 1639, so it may have passed out of use between those dates.¹⁷ In the seventeenth century it became more common for a parson to have a purpose-built dovecote near the parsonage than to keep pigeons in the church. In Somerset, glebe terriers from 1606 to 1640 record dovecotes at eighty-three parsonages of the 363 parishes.¹⁸ A more detailed report on this columbarium with more illustrations was published in *Somerset Archaeology and Natural History* in 2001,¹⁹ and is reproduced in full on the internet as: <http://www.sanhhs.org/Proc%20Compton%20Martin.htm>.

OVERBURY, WORCESTERSHIRE

At the parish church of St Faith there is a fifteenth-century tower between the twelfth-century nave and the thirteenth-century chancel, which is vaulted in two bays. Over the eastern vault a columbarium has been formed of lath-and-plaster, 9 ft between the side walls, 10½ ft from east to west (Fig. 12). The distant end is formed by the east gable. It is approached by a small door 18½ ft above ground at the north-west corner of the chancel, which requires an unusually long ladder (Fig. 13). From there one must scramble over the western vault to reach the columbarium. It is lit by a window of two small lancets rebated for shutters in the east gable, placed well off-centre to avoid a vertical timber of the roof (Fig. 14). High in the peak of the gable there were formerly two flight holes where the pigeons entered, each 6 in. square, but they have been blocked with stone. As at Compton Martin, there is no floor other than the chancel vault. Banks of wooden nest-boxes have been built against the north and south sides from vault to roof; they are suspended from the purlins, unsupported below. The nest-boxes are 7 in. high, 12 in. wide, and 10 in. deep from front to back. Strips of wood are nailed across the front to form alighting ledges 2 in. wide to alternate tiers. Most of the nest-boxes are complete and still in usable condition, although on the north side a decayed board has allowed a

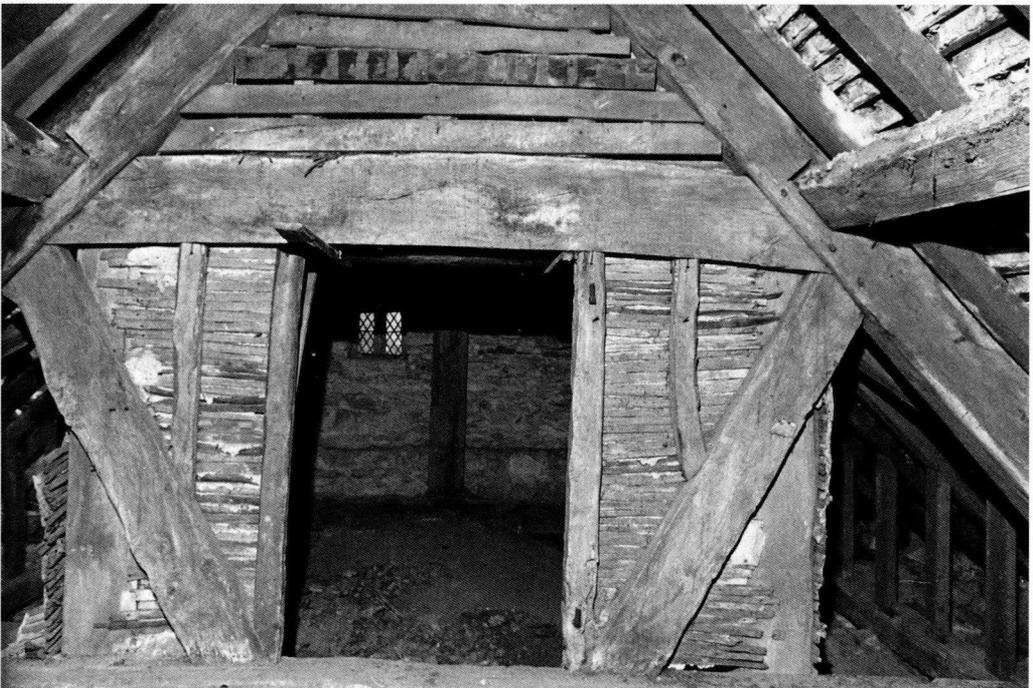


Fig. 12

Overbury, Worcestershire. The entrance to the columbarium constructed of laths and plaster, from above the west vault of the chancel. It is 4 ft 3 ins high by 3 ft 2 ins wide, with pintle hinges in the right jamb for a door opening outwards, now missing.

Photograph by Elizabeth Stirling Lee, F.R.P.S.

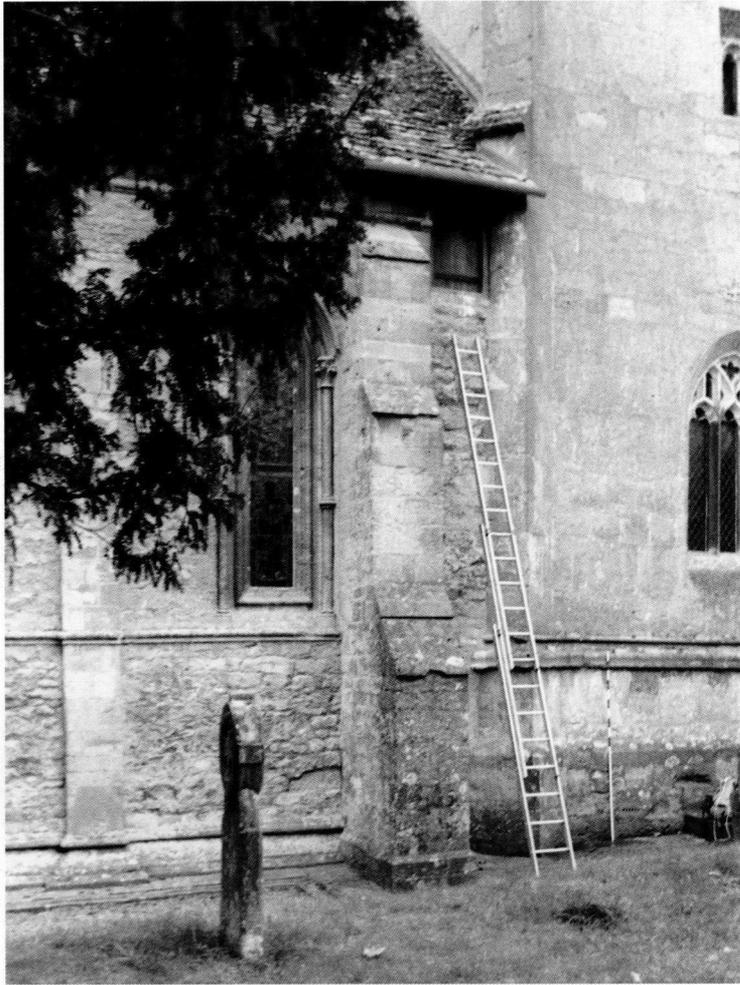


Fig. 13

Overbury, Worcestershire. The doorway high in the north wall of the chancel, the only access to the columbarium. Two-metre scale at bottom right.

Photograph by John McCann

few to collapse outwards. The structure is made from hand-sawn hardwood boards $\frac{3}{4}$ in. thick halved at the crossings, with a minimal use of handmade nails. The carpentry is skilfully executed but is undatable.

In addition, two tiers of wooden nest-boxes of a different type with entrances of inverted-U shape are supported over the doorway at the west end, re-used from another dovecote (Fig. 15). There were 220 of the original nest-boxes, and this addition increased the total to 234. This is 'the space above the vaulting of the chancel [which] was used as a pigeon house' which Micklethwaite reported as still in use about 1845. A more detailed report will be published in *Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society*.²⁰

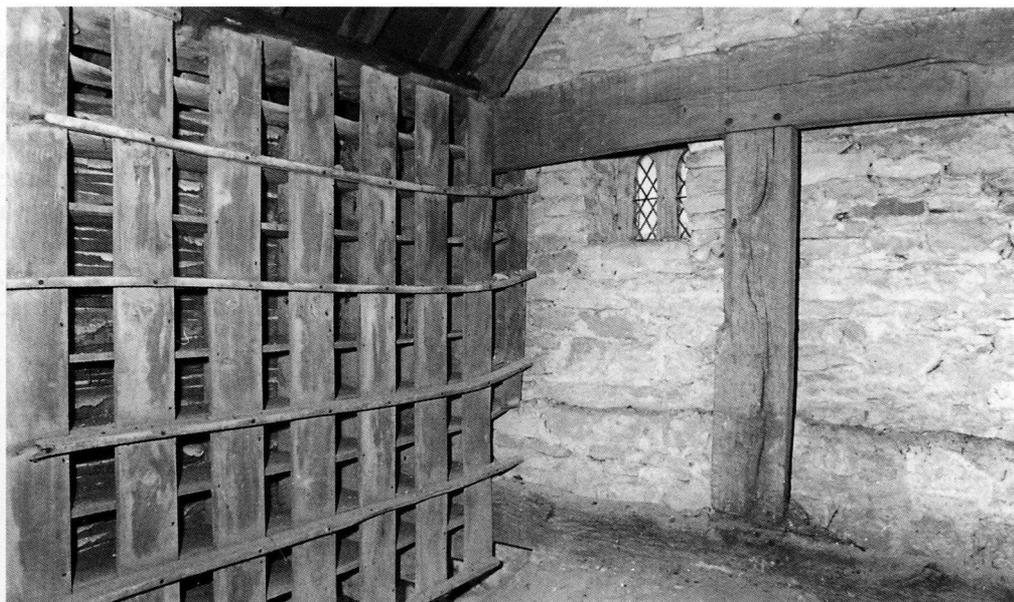


Fig. 14

Overbury, Worcestershire. The north-east corner of the columbarium. The wooden nest-boxes against the north wall are hung from the purlin, unsupported below. The east window is placed asymmetrically to avoid the vertical timber of the roof structure.

Photograph by Elizabeth Stirling Lee, F.R.P.S.

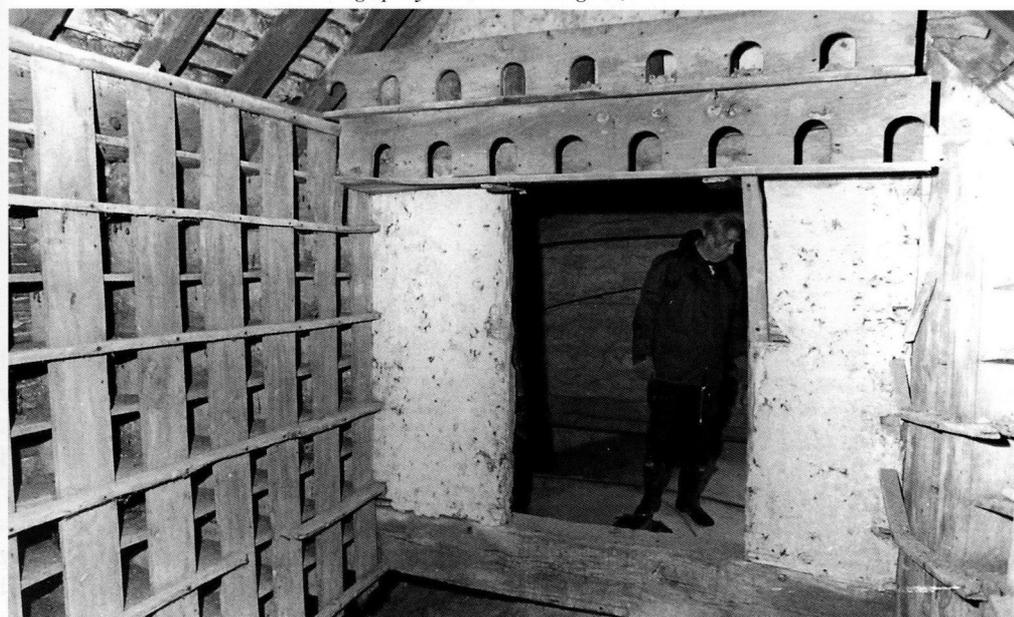


Fig. 15

Overbury, Worcestershire. The west end of the columbarium. The nest-boxes over the entrance are re-used from a dovecote elsewhere.

Photograph by Elizabeth Stirling Lee, F.R.P.S.

UPTON, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

The fifteenth-century west tower of the church of St Peter and St Paul is in three stages (Fig. 16). The columbarium in the second stage was described by Harry Gill in 1913 and by J. Whitaker in 1927, and a photograph of it was printed in *Country Life* in 1943.²¹ It comprises a chamber 24 ft above ground which was built originally for a priest, with a fireplace in the north wall and an aperture to the east which provided a view into the nave, but at some later date it has been fitted out as a columbarium. It is reached by a winding stair within the south-west angle, and a doorway with a four-centred arch 6 ft 1 in. high by 1 ft 10 in. wide, chamfered outside, rebated for a door opening inwards (Fig. 17). The stair continues to the third stage containing the bells. The chamber is 12 ft 3 in.

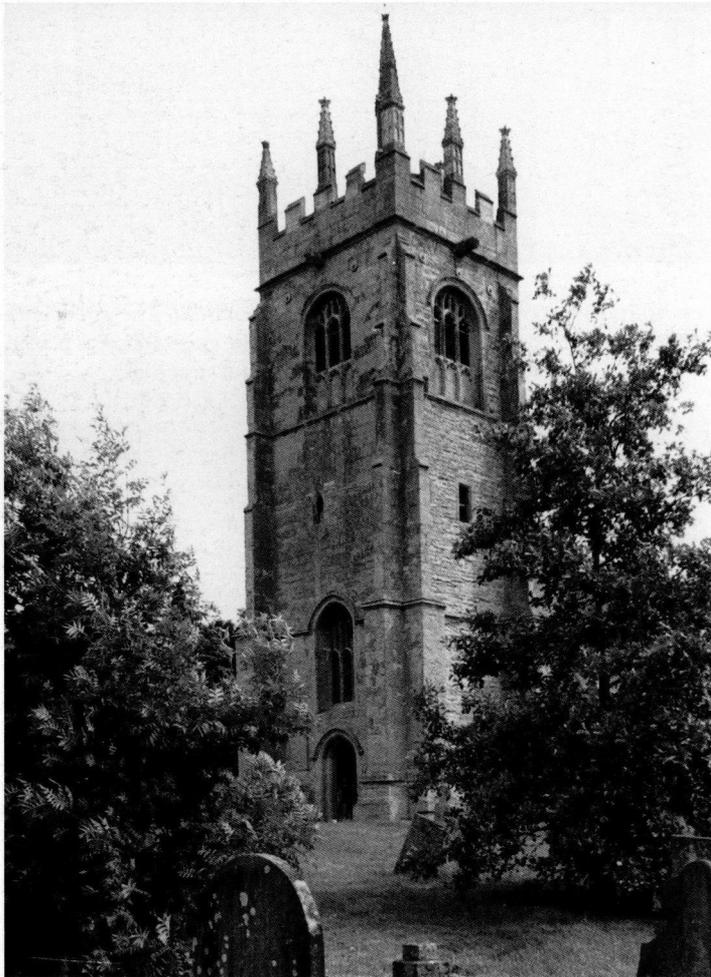


Fig. 16

Upton, Nottinghamshire. The west tower of the church of St Peter and St Paul from the south-west. The columbarium is in the middle stage.

Photograph by John McCann

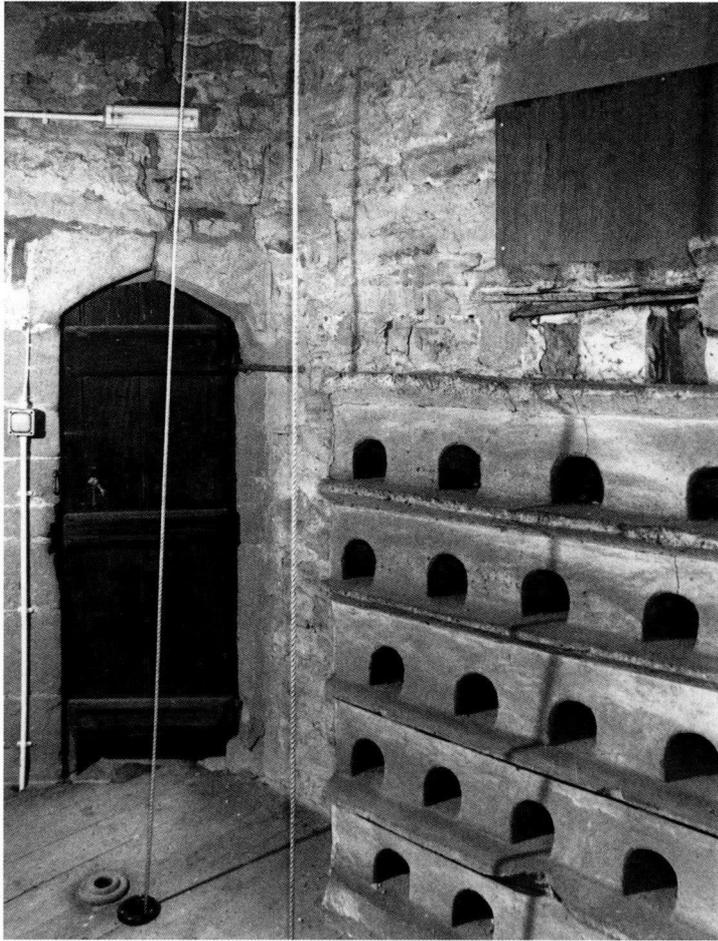


Fig. 17

Upton, Nottinghamshire. The south-west corner of the columbarium with the doorway, the blocked south window at upper right, and nest-boxes erected against the south wall.

Photograph by John McCann

from east to west and 13 ft 9 in. from north to south, and is 10½ ft high. There is a small window with a two-centred head in the west wall, now covered inside by plywood, and a rectangular window 3 ft 3 in. high by 1 ft 8 in. wide in the south wall which evidently became the flight hole for the pigeons, and through which the pigeon dung was removed. The fireplace has splayed jambs and is hollow-moulded all round. It is now blocked by a pier of brickwork supporting the cracked lintel (Fig. 18). (The flue vented through the wall.) A hardwood shelf 1 ft 5 in. wide by 3 in. thick spanning the chamber above the fireplace appears to be an original feature. Banks of nest-boxes 8 ft 10 in. high by 6½ ft wide have been formed of laths, tiles and hard lime plaster against the east and west walls, with entrances of horse-shoe shape 4½ in. high by 4½ in. wide (Fig. 17, 18, 19 and 20).

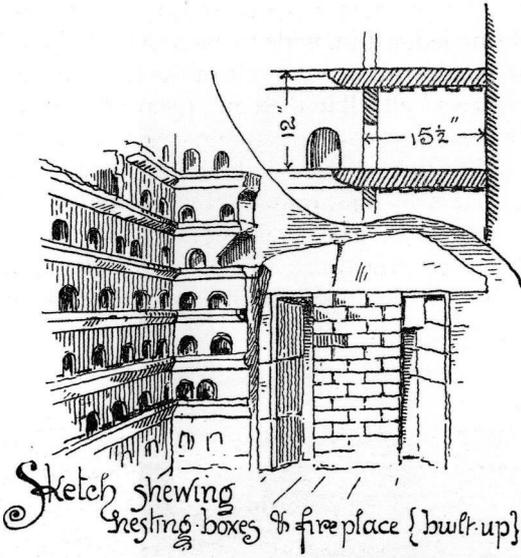


Fig. 18
Upton, Nottinghamshire. The north-west corner of the columbarium in the second stage of the west tower, with a detail of the nest-boxes. From H. Gill, 'Upton', *Transactions of the Thoroton Society*, 17, 1913, 44.
By courtesy of the Editor



Fig. 19
Upton, Nottinghamshire. Nest-boxes against the west and north walls of the columbarium. The edge of the fireplace is visible at right.
Photograph by John McCann

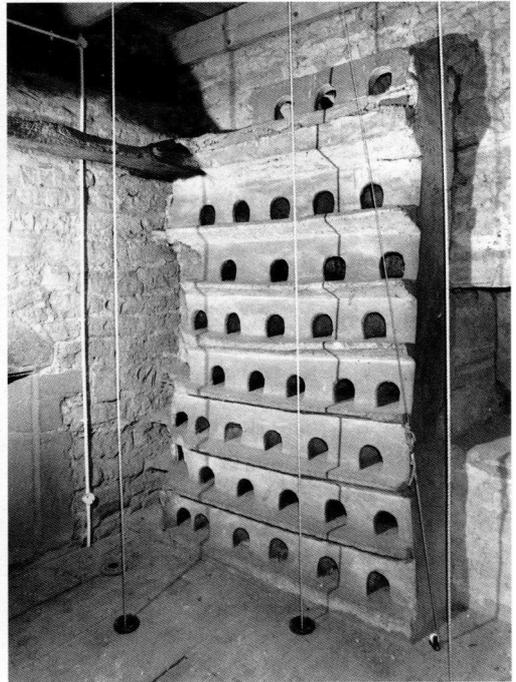


Fig. 20
Upton, Nottinghamshire. Nest-boxes against the east wall of the columbarium. The aperture into the nave is visible at right.
Photograph by John McCann

Inside, each nest-box is 11 in. high, 9½ in. wide (or more, because some are irregular), and 14 in. from front to back, with an alighting ledge 4 in. wide to each tier. Originally they continued round the corners on to the north wall to each side of the fireplace and above it, but most of these were destroyed when a bell fell in the early twentieth century (Fig. 19).²² Where nest-boxes are missing the marking-out lines made in the wet plaster for the vertical divisions of those above are still as clear as the day they were made. When first built there were 126 nest-boxes, of which eighty-eight remain. They are undatable but evidently post-Dissolution; their size is more typical of the eighteenth century than the sixteenth. The Chantry Certificate of 1546 records that ‘a preist there of the age of lxxxii yeres without lerning or other promocion [living]’ was still alive, although by then he was permitted to live in the mansion house.²³

BIRLINGHAM, WORCESTERSHIRE

The fifteenth-century west tower of the church of St James was re-built in 1871-2.²⁴ It formerly contained a columbarium 13½ ft square in the second stage, which is reached by a stair turret to the north which continues to the roof. There are two flight holes with perching ledges for the pigeons, as described by Micklethwaite (Fig. 21). It is now without a floor. All the mortar joints inside are obscured by ribbon pointing, and it is impossible to determine whether any of the stones are in their original positions. About a dozen imitation nest-holes have been formed in each wall, simple rectangular recesses, but the vertical and horizontal spaces between them are too wide to be historically convincing. Medieval dovescotes always had as many nest-holes as could be fitted into the space available, but at Birlingham there is sufficient wall space for three or four times the present number. Elsewhere, nest-holes of simple rectangular plan were not built in England in the Middle Ages, or apparently before the eighteenth century. Effectively the medieval evidence no longer exists. The interior is not illustrated because it is obscured by scaffolding.

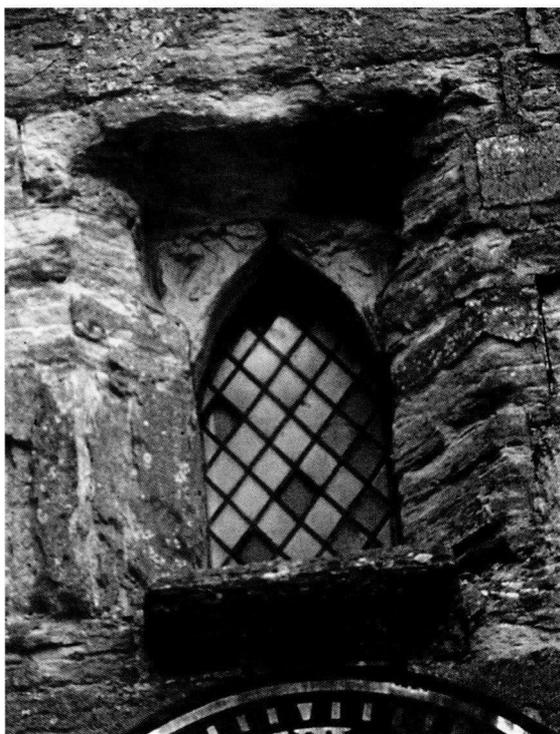


Fig. 21

Birlingham, Worcestershire. The south window in the middle of the west tower, retaining a ledge on which pigeons could perch.

Photograph by Frank Pexton

ELKSTONE, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

The church of St John the Evangelist was built *c.*1160-70, with a tower between the nave and the very short chancel, as were several others in nearby villages (Fig. 22).²⁵ In the thirteenth century the upper part of the tower collapsed or was taken down, and evidently the heads of the chancel walls were damaged – although the handsome groined and carved vault survives. The damaged walls were built up again, a roof was built over the chancel and the surviving part of the tower, and the space thus enclosed became a columbarium (Fig. 23). Originally it was entered by a doorway high in the north wall, accessible only by ladder.

ELKSTONE CHURCH. GLOS.

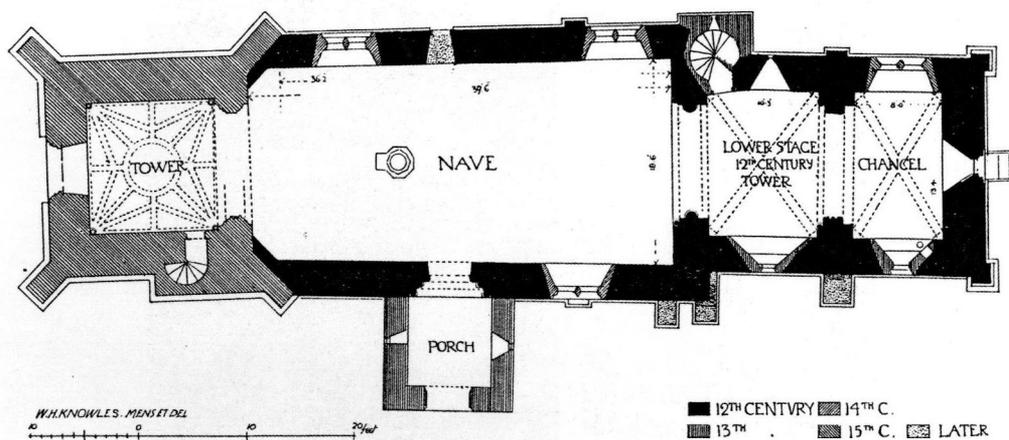


Fig. 22

Elkstone, Gloucestershire. Plan of the church. From W. H. Knowles, 'Elkstone', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 52, 1930, 189.

By courtesy of the Editor

What survives of the columbarium appears to be incomplete. Inside it is 14 ft 9 in. from north to south. East to west it comprises the section over the chancel, only 8 ft long, the thickness of the east wall of the tower, and one stage of the tower, making the overall length 22 ft 9 in., but there are nest-holes only in the eastern part (Fig. 24). They are formed of rubble, irregularly disposed, with twenty-eight in the east wall, fourteen in the north wall, and none in the south wall. All the entrances are rectangular, 6 in. high, varying in width from 5 to 6 in.; most of the nest-holes are 12½ in. deep from front to back, of asymmetrical bulb-shape in plan (Fig. 25). The lowest nest-holes in the east wall have plain alighting ledges. Although there are no nest-holes in the south wall the masonry includes two finely carved Norman stones re-used, which confirms that this wall has been rebuilt, but it is not clear why it was not provided with nest-holes like the east and north walls. When this columbarium was in use it is likely that there were more nesting places, perhaps constructed of wood or wattle-and-daub against the blank walls, but no evidence remains to confirm this suggestion.

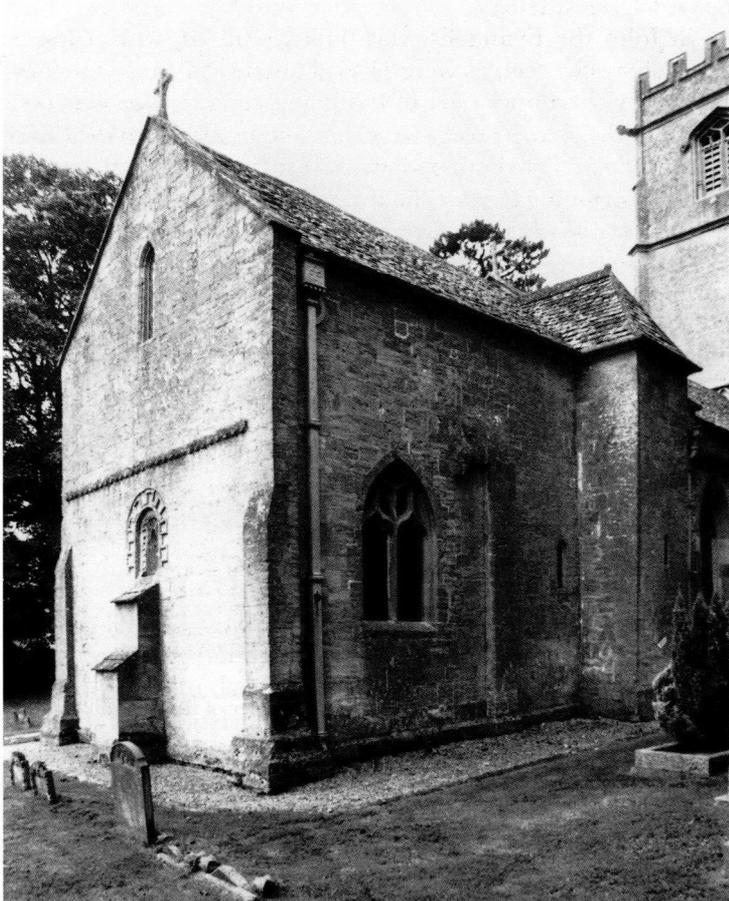


Fig. 23

Elkstone, Gloucestershire. The east and north sides of the chancel and columbarium, and the stair turret to it. The doorway was formerly above the large north window, accessible only by ladder. Note the interrupted corbel-table to west of the window.

Photograph by John McCann

The columbarium is lit by a lancet in the east wall, 4½ ft high by 14 in. wide, now glazed. In the wide splays secondary notches have been made, probably for a structure which once filled the lower part of the window, leaving only a small aperture to serve as a flight hole. The north doorway has been blocked, probably when a large Decorated window was inserted immediately below it in the fourteenth century; a section of the corbel-table is missing also. A winding stair was constructed at the north-west corner of the tower. The lower doorway is plain, 5 ft 4 in. high by 20 in. wide with a shouldered stone lintel. The upper doorway is just a gap in the wall 2 ft 2 in. wide, with 5 ft 4 in. of headroom to the purlin above. The winding stair makes two complete turns, about half of it within the earlier fabric at the junction of the tower and nave; the turret projects



Fig. 24

Elkstone, Gloucestershire. The north-east corner of the columbarium.

Photograph by John McCann



Fig. 25

Elkstone, Gloucestershire. The north wall of the columbarium, showing the blocked doorway.

Photograph by John McCann

3 ft 4 in. beyond the chancel (Figs. 22 and 23). As Micklethwaite perceptively noted, it has no other function than to provide access to the columbarium.

The older doorway in the north wall is 3 ft wide across the splays. The doorway itself is concealed by the filling, but allowing for the thickness of the walls, 3 ft 4 in., it was probably less than 2 ft wide. The rubble infill includes two beautifully finished freestones of yellower limestone than the remainder, each with a *chamfered* nest-hole of inverted-U shape 5 in. high by 5 in. wide; the original threshold forms a plain alighting ledge (Fig. 26). No other chamfered nest-holes have been recorded anywhere in Britain. They lead to interiors of T-plan, 9 in. high, 11 in. wide, and 18 in. from front to back, and bring the total number of nest-holes up to forty-four.

In 1930 W. H. Knowles drew attention to more of these finely-shaped stones re-used under a corbel-table in the south wall of the nave (Fig. 27). He concluded that they had been recovered from an earlier columbarium in the upper part of the tower, which must have been built in the twelfth century.²⁶ Apparently the present columbarium was provided to fulfil an existing obligation, for by then the right to keep pigeons in the church would have been established in common law.

The present roof structure is very plain, in three bays. Each truss comprises a tie-beam and two principal rafters, with a cambered collar half-lapped and dovetailed into the principals. There are two butt-purlins in each pitch; originally there was no ridge-piece. The western truss has large chisel-cut assembly marks I and II at the south and north ends respectively, but there are none on the eastern truss. This cannot be the original roof; it is difficult to date, but is probably a seventeenth-century replacement. The common rafters are modern. The east window is much older than the present roof; its off-centre position suggests that the earlier roof had a vertical timber in the same position. The whole interior has been cleaned and the floor has been screeded; it slopes down gently from the higher floor within the tower to the lower floor over the chancel.

The lowest nest-holes are a few inches above the floor, allowing enough space for pigeon dung to accumulate. In medieval practice the dung was removed in winter to avoid disturbing breeding birds. In the sixteenth century Thomas Tusser advised that it was a task for January:

Feed dove (no more killing), old Dove house repaire,
save dove dong for hopyard, when house ye make faire.²⁷

There is no specific provision for removing it. While the north doorway was still in use it could have been shovelled out there, but after it was blocked the only aperture which remained was the east window. If part of it could be unblocked when required, the dung could have been shovelled out through the narrow aperture. Otherwise it could only have been bagged and carried down the winding stair and out through the body of the church, a difficult (and unseemly) operation.

T. S. Tonkinson, a former rector, wrote an excellent guidebook in 1919 in which he described the floor of the columbarium then as 'thick with stone-dust and chippings'. His photograph shows the rough state of the masonry in the north wall. Whoever built the present columbarium evidently made no attempt to match the high quality of the original one in the tower. A letter in *Country Life* in 1943 included a similar photograph

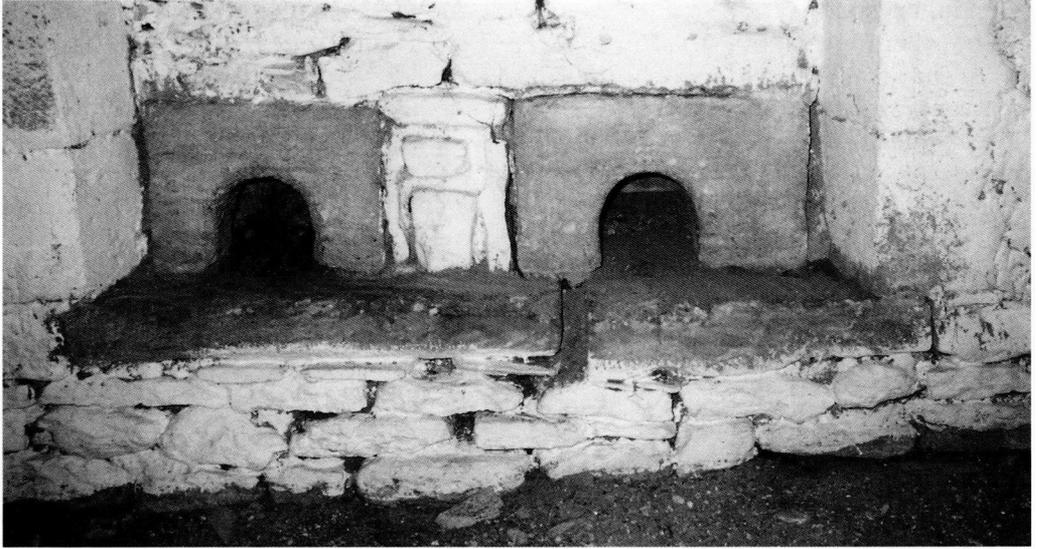


Fig. 26

Elkstone, Gloucestershire. Two nest-holes in the blocked north doorway, the entrance stones recovered from a columbarium in the demolished twelfth-century tower.

Photograph by Frank Pexton



Fig. 27

Elkstone, Gloucestershire. Finely formed stones from the original columbarium in the twelfth-century tower, re-used in the south wall of the nave to west of the porch.

Photograph by John McCann

which showed a pile of stone debris, so the interior had not been cleaned and screeded by then.²⁸ Since then the walls have been painted, but it is just possible to determine two or three blocked nest-holes through the paint, increasing the total to forty-seven at the most – which it is assumed were supplemented by banks of nest-boxes against the south and west walls.

LLANWARNE, HEREFORDSHIRE

The west tower of the church of St John the Baptist is the only part which remains intact; the remainder is roofless and ruinous (Fig. 5). Marshall described it as late fourteenth-century, but the Royal Commission reported that it may be of the fifteenth century. Frank Pexton took photographs of the outside, but was not permitted to enter the stair, which was said to be blocked by accumulations of dung from feral pigeons. Marshall's information about the nest-holes has been quoted earlier.

LEONARD STANLEY, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

What is now the parish church of St Swithun was built as an Augustinian priory founded between 1121 and 1129; by 1138 it had been handed over to the Benedictines of Gloucester.²⁹ The present building is substantially of that period – a cruciform plan consisting of a central tower, chancel, nave and two transepts. In the fourteenth century a stair turret was added at the north-west corner of the tower (Fig. 28). Most of the nest-holes noted by Middleton are in the gable of the *south* transept, now seen – with extreme difficulty – from the second stage of the tower, but they cannot now be approached because since his visit a ring-beam of reinforced concrete has obstructed the doorway. In 1982 it was further obstructed when the bells were re-hung at a lower level.³⁰ Fifty-two nest-holes are arranged round a small window in eight tiers with an alighting ledge to each tier (Fig. 29). Two other nest-holes appear to have been blocked to provide a small pier supporting the upper east purlin. The flight hole by which the pigeons entered in the peak of the gable is too inaccessible to measure, but is estimated to be 10



Fig. 28
Leonard Stanley, Gloucestershire. The church of St Swithun from the north-west.
Photograph by John McCann



Fig. 29

Leonard Stanley, Gloucestershire. Nest-holes in the gable of the south transept.

Photograph by Richard J. Page



Fig. 30

Leonard Stanley, Gloucestershire. Nest-holes in the stair turret, within the north transept.

Photograph by Richard J. Page

in. square. The columbarium was lit by the round-arched loop, which is estimated to be 11 in. high by 6 in. wide, with wide internal splays; when in use this would have been unglazed but protected against birds of prey by a wooden lattice. Above the masonry containing the nest-holes part of another round-arched loop is visible. That is, the stone wall containing the nest-holes was inserted at some date after the original construction in the twelfth century. The present doorway in the tower cannot have been the access to the columbarium because it is 9 ft above the boarded floor.³¹

In addition there are ten nest-holes without alighting ledges in the west wall of the stair turret, effectively within the north transept, accessible from a door adjacent (Fig. 30). The roof of this transept was rebuilt in the fourteenth century; the rafters obstruct some of the nest-holes, so by then this columbarium may have been already disused. Later alterations have made it impossible to determine exactly what space the north columbarium occupied. Therefore there were two columbaria, from which at least sixty-four nest-holes are still identifiable.

GUMFRESTON, PEMBROKESHIRE

The parish church of St Laurence was built in the twelfth century. In the fifteenth century a tower was added to the north of the eastern end of the nave, forming a transept. It is of five storeys, with a stair turret in the north-east corner (Fig. 31). A report of 1849 stated that 'the fourth storey was intended for a pigeon-house, and has its walls regularly fitted up with holes pierced all round the sides'.³² The Royal Commission inventory of 1925 added that the 'dove-cote is said to have been used as such until a comparatively recent date'. The listed building report of 1996 states: 'there are four rows of seven nesting holes'.³³ Because the floor is missing they are too inaccessible to examine. The chamber is lit by a narrow loop in the north wall.

Nine columbaria have been described, from all periods. The number of nesting places varies widely but was nowhere more than 258 originally:

GUMFRESTON CHURCH.

NEAR TENBY, PEMBROKESHIIRE.



Fig. 31

Gumfreston, Pembrokeshire. The parish church of St Lawrence from the north-west.

From *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, I, 1849, part iv, 194.

By courtesy of the Editor

	Nests now	Nests originally
Sarnesfield, Herefordshire	106	?
Collingbourne Ducis, Wiltshire	181	258
Compton Martin, Somerset	80	130-40
Overbury, Worcestershire	234	220
Upton, Nottinghamshire	88	126
Elkstone, Gloucestershire	47	?
Llanwarne, Herefordshire	18	?
Leonard Stanley, Gloucestershire	64	?
Gumfreston, Pembrokeshire	28	?

In the Middle Ages most manorial dovecotes had between 300 and 1,000 nesting places. A smaller number would have been adequate for a celibate priest who lived alone or with one colleague, who did not provide the lavish entertainment required of manorial lords. Allowing the priest to keep pigeons within the parish church enabled him to dine at the same standard as his secular equivalents, or as the family from which he came. He could sell the surplus pigeons to augment his income. Originally this right would have been conferred on the priest by the lord of the manor, in the same way as glebe land was provided for his support. When once established, under common law it tended to be perpetuated. Two of these columbaria were constructed after the Reformation, at Overbury and Upton. Whether they were provided for the benefit of the priest cannot now be determined.

Enquiries have been made about all the other columbaria mentioned in the literature. Some are based on early documentary sources but do not claim that any physical evidence survives. Some prove to be confusing keeping domestic pigeons with nuisance from feral pigeons, and others derive from misinformation. It may help later researchers to know the results of these enquiries.

BRUTON, SOMERSET

The *Victoria County History* states 'In 1604 parts of the church were used as a pigeon house and from 1612 or later as a dwelling'.³⁴

MONKS BRETTON, YORKSHIRE

Some reports mention a columbarium in the parish church.³⁵ These derive ultimately from an article by H. P. Feasey in 1899, but he mentioned only a freestanding round dovecote near the parish church.³⁶ Frank Pexton visited the site in 2002 and reported that there was nothing relevant to see except a remnant of Monks Bretton Priory, which is outside the scope of this article.

PENMON GLANNACH, CARMARTHENSHIRE

This was mentioned in the same article by H. P. Feasey, who described a freestanding dovecote of sixteenth-century date near the parish church. It was mentioned again by Alfred Watkins in 1904.³⁷ Penmon Glannach, Carmarthenshire, is unknown to Cadw, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, and the Representative Body of the Church in Wales.³⁸

WARWICK AND SKELTON, CUMBERLAND, AND MORLAND, WESTMORLAND

In 1887 R. S. Ferguson wrote: 'In Bishop Nicolson's Account of his diocese of Carlisle [of 1703 and 1704] we find pigeons breeding in the very churches of Warwick and Skelton in Cumberland, and Morland in Westmoreland, and no doubt the incumbents of those livings profited thereby'.³⁹

What Nicolson actually wrote of Warwick and Skelton was: 'There seem to have been a great many windows in the east end ... but they are now all walled up; and over the arch on the inside there's a vacant space, wherein pigeons breed, and thence

ding the whole quire under them. The churchwardens ought to have directions to see this filled up to the roof'. Of Morland he wrote: 'The Quire wants rails and glazing; the latter of these defects lets in the pigeons to the great annoyance of the Church'.⁴⁰ Ferguson had edited Bishop William Nicolson's *Account* ten years earlier, but evidently he misunderstood or misremembered it, for at both churches it is clear that Nicolson was describing nuisance caused by feral pigeons.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE

In an unsigned passage headed 'Manorial and other dove-cotes' in *Notes and Queries, or The East Anglian* of 1905 a correspondent wrote: 'In the seventeenth century the upper part of the church tower was in many localities, as at Milton, Cambs., internally fitted as a pigeon-house. At Chattisham, near Ely, the church was literally turned into a dove house, and the church of Long Stow is described as 'a pigeon house'. So too at Meldreth, Toft, Barton and other Cambridgeshire churches. A thatched church, as at Milton, would lend itself conveniently to the housing of pigeons'.⁴¹ An enquiry at Milton found no surviving evidence of pigeon-holes.⁴² On present information there is no secular building at Chattisham which could be a former church 'literally turned into a dove house', but elsewhere redundant churches and chapels have been converted into secular dovecotes; examples are known in Suffolk and Somerset.⁴³ It seems likely that the other churches, particularly where the roofs were thatched, had been occupied by feral pigeons.

DENHAM, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

In 1920 Arthur O. Cooke reported that 'During the reign of Henry III, a certain John of Hertford ... when he wished to drive out some pigeons from a certain lantern at the church of Denham, outside the same church, let fall a certain stone from that lantern upon the head of Agnes, wife of Robert de Denham, who was sitting in the church, so that on the third day she died'.⁴⁴ This seems to describe John of Hertford dislodging a stone while driving out feral pigeons.

E(Y)NSHAM, OXFORDSHIRE

Cooke reported that in 1388 a man engaged in catching pigeons fell down into the choir and was killed.⁴⁵ Again, this seems to refer to feral pigeons.

KINGSTON-ON-THAMES, SURREY

Cooke reported that in 1375 the vicar was judged to be entitled to all pigeons bred in the church and its chapels.⁴⁶ This is clearly a reference to the keeping of domestic pigeons, but no surviving evidence has been reported there.

LITTLETON, WORCESTERSHIRE

Cooke reported that churchwardens' accounts for 1554 record that Humphrey Acton, the vicar, provided replacements for the church books taken away in the reign of Edward VI in return for the right to the profits 'of the pyggns that use the stepull of owr church for all the tyme that he shall be Vicar here'. (Acton, a former monk of Evesham, was

vicar throughout the reigns of Edward VI, Mary and the first years of Elizabeth I.)⁴⁷ Here the pigeons were evidently domesticated. No surviving evidence has been reported.

WILMSLOW, CHESHIRE

Cooke reported that in 1670 a door was placed at the top of the steeple in order to ‘keepe forth the Piggens from Fowleinge the church’. The door seems to have been ineffective, for five years later a net was bought for the same purpose. This was no better, for in 1688 twopence was expended on ‘shott and powder’ to exterminate the birds.⁴⁸ Here it was clearly a case of nuisance caused by feral pigeons.

BLAKENEY, NORFOLK

Marshall copied in his manuscript notebook a note about the church of St Nicholas at Blakeney in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London*: ‘The chancel is covered in with a thirteenth-century ribbed vault, above which is a chamber, reached by a tall slim turret on the north-east, long used as a pigeon house’, but he did not pursue it further.⁴⁹ In May 2009 Ian Hinton kindly examined the church to investigate the possibility of a columbarium, but he found no evidence of one. The present roof of the chancel stands 6 ft above the thirteenth-century vault and is of shallow pitch, built in the nineteenth



Fig. 32

Blakeney, Norfolk. Above the chancel facing south-west. The arched doorway at the far end leads only to the rood. Note the putlog holes, which may have suggested that this space was used for pigeons.

Photograph by Ian Hinton

century to replace an earlier roof of the same shape. The space enclosed is 33 ft long by 21 ft wide, lit by a two-light window in the east gable, and is now used only for part of the organ (Fig. 32). He found strong evidence of an earlier roof of much steeper pitch, set 5 ft lower in the chancel walls and with a ridge standing 6 ft above the present one, probably built in the fifteenth century. At that stage there would have been insufficient height above the vault for a columbarium. Outside, the walls are cement-rendered. Inside, the north and south walls are exposed, and are of re-used freestone and flint rubble; the east and west walls are concealed by lime render. Access is from a large tapering stair turret at the north-east corner which extends high above the roof (Fig. 33). Richard Butler-Stoney believed that it was erected as a navigational aid to seafarers. The former entrance to Blakeney Harbour was opposite Cley; aligning the tall turret against the west tower would guide them through the channel between sand-banks.⁵¹ A horizontal line of six putlog holes 6 ft apart may have led the unknown writer to assume that the space enclosed by the low-pitched roof had been 'long used as a pigeon house'. (Putlog holes and nest-holes appear so similar that in French the same word, *boulins*, is used for both.) Alternatively he may have been reporting an oral tradition, but if it was true the space above the vault can only have been equipped with inserted nest-boxes which left no evidence when they were removed.

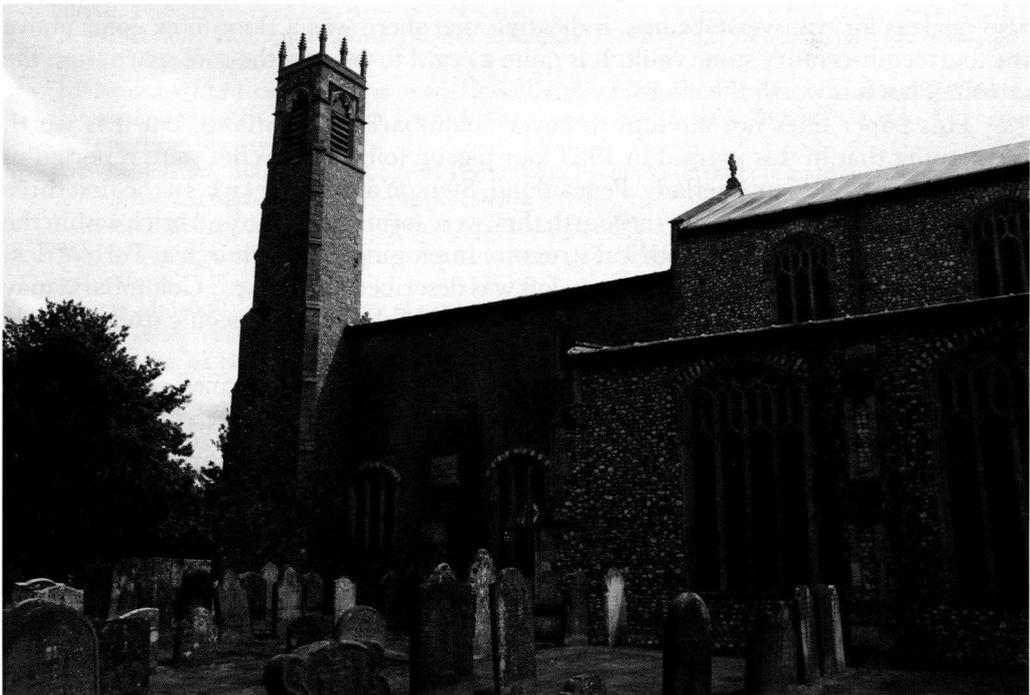


Fig. 33

Blakeney, Norfolk. The chancel and tapered turret from the north-west.

Photograph by Ian Hinton

HELLESDON, NORFOLK

This too was mentioned in a brief manuscript note by George Marshall, but in 1920 Cooke made clear that what was described was 'a wooden pigeon-cote placed on the west gable of the church'.⁵² It is not there now, and there are no other nesting places in the church. (G. W. Copeland has described a similar structure in Devon: 'a small wooden pigeon-cote has been established on the south side of Throwleigh church'. This too has gone.)⁵³

SKENFRITH, CUMBERLAND

A leaflet sold at the church states: 'The Tower [of St Bridget's church] is capped with a 'Dovecote' which in times of scarcity or danger could have housed pigeons as well as bells'.⁵⁴ No evidence is cited for this assertion. An illustration shows that the tower has numerous apertures below the pyramidal roof, apparently louvred.

ST MARY REDCLIFFE, BRISTOL

In April 2005 Professor Warwick Rodwell informed McCann that there are nest-holes in the roof. At this date it has not been possible to obtain permission to examine them. He writes: 'The columbarium at Redcliffe Church is in the roof of the south transept. Three rows of nesting boxes [*sic*] have been formed in the heightened east and west walls. Access to them was presumably via the circular portholes in the same walls. There are also pockets for transverse beams, indicating that there was a floor (now gone) above the fourteenth-century stone vault. It is quite a crawl to get into the roof space from the crossing, but it is worth the effort'.⁵⁵

This paper does not attempt to cover columbaria in Scotland, but it is worth mentioning that in this journal in 1963 four pigeon lofts in churches were reported in East Lothian alone – at Aberlady, Pencaitland, Stenton and Whitekirk. In the first three the nest-boxes were of wood; in the fourth they were formed of stone and brick within the main structure.⁵⁶ A small cylindrical structure impinging on the church at Portpatrick, Wigtownshire, which included a pigeon loft was described by Cooke.⁵⁷ Columbaria may be more common in Scotland than in England and Wales, but no specific study of them has been published.

To conclude, in addition to the parish churches which have retained clear evidence of former columbaria there may be others where a useful space has been provided above the chancel, with a stair turret (as at Elkstone and Blakeney), or without (as at Compton Martin and Overbury), but where no evidence of pigeon-keeping has been reported. In these cases one may ask, if the extra space above the chancel was not built as a columbarium, what was it for? There were other columbaria where the evidence has been destroyed by Victorian 'restoration' or rebuilding, as at Crondall and Marlborough. In addition there may be parish churches where a chamber in the tower has been adapted as a columbarium long after construction (as at Upton), but where surviving evidence has not attracted interest. It seems likely that some zealous churchmen have deliberately swept away remnants of the nest-boxes because they took the view that keeping pigeons was an improper use of a sacred building, or for the sake of neatness.

If George Marshall, who took a particular interest in dovecotes of all kinds, had not noticed nest-holes in the towers of Sarnesfield and Llanwarne churches, they might not have been reported at all. J. T. Micklethwaite began this enquiry by perceptively

interpreting some disused peg-holes in Selby Abbey. Elsewhere, similar peg-holes may have been misinterpreted. In this paper we have attempted to provide some information about every columbarium in parish churches in England and Wales which has been mentioned in the literature. It seems likely that others will be identified later when the evidence is better understood.

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