

# Dovecotes: an Addendum

I am obliged to the Editor for this opportunity to add some corrections and further material to my paper 'An Historical Enquiry into the Design and Use of Dovecotes' in *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, 35 (1991).

First, I must apologise for a mistake in the caption of Fig. 18: '2,500' should read '1,000'. Mr. D.F. Shaw points out that almost all Arthur Cooke's information about French dovecotes in *A Book of Dovecotes* (1920) is taken without acknowledgement from Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire Raisonné de l'Architecture*. This includes the illustrations which were reproduced in my paper as Figs 2 and 3, and his observation that the design of these roofs was intended to provide sheltered perching space for use in strong wind. Of the former he wrote: 'Glazed tiles bedded in the plaster . . . prevent weasels from getting up to the pigeon entry-holes. Other dovecotes are built on four free-standing pillars in order to remove the pigeons from the approaches of their ruthless enemies'.<sup>1</sup> He did not mention rats at all. Viollet-le-Duc was writing at a time when the tradition of keeping pigeons for food had not died out.

My statement, on pages 109 and 110, that the height of the lowest tier of nest-holes can be used as a dating criterion has attracted some criticism. Mr Shaw reports that stone and brick dovecotes in Oxfordshire, including some which are certainly later than the introduction of the 'brown' rat, *Rattus norvegicus*, have nest-holes almost from ground level—for example, Garsington Manor (1762) and Benson (1767). I am glad to acknowledge that the argument should be amended. Where a dovecote was strongly built of hard materials it was proof against penetration by this predatory species, and there was no real need to sacrifice capacity by raising the lowest tier of nest-holes four feet above the ground, as was recommended in *The Sportsman's Dictionary* of 1735.<sup>2</sup> The owners of some dovecotes built shortly after this date may have been influenced by his advice, but as more experience of the new hazard became available other owners would have realised that the only protection required was a foundation deep enough to resist undermining. Modern research indicates that a depth of 1½ feet is sufficient.<sup>3</sup> Where the construction was of more vulnerable materials, such as timber framing or clay bats, there was no reliable way of preventing brown rats from gnawing through the walls. Many existing timber-framed dovecotes, formerly infilled with wattle and daub, were infilled with brick in the middle of the eighteenth century to keep out the rats, but new dovecotes were built with brick walls to a height of four feet, with timber framing or clay bats above, or the whole structure was raised on brick piers. This is confirmed by Mrs E.M. Davis's observations in south Cambridgeshire, where most dovecotes are of timber framing or clay bats.<sup>4</sup> Therefore the dating criterion I proposed should be used with caution, and applied principally to dovecotes of soft materials. Readers are asked to look out particularly for stone dovecotes in which the lower tiers of nest-holes have been blocked after the original construction, as was reported by Elizabeth Beaton at Freswick in Caithness.<sup>5</sup> In this case the *alteration* can be dated to the arrival of the new species. In many early timber-framed dovecotes there is good evidence that originally the nest-boxes began only just above ground level, but at a later date they have been altered or reconstructed

so that now the lowest tier is four feet or more above ground. There are examples at Clare, Pakenham and Stoke-by-Nayland, in Suffolk.

On pages 106-7 I accepted too readily the view of most historians that the Black Death was bubonic plague, carried by rats. At the time of writing I was not aware of Graham Twigg's book *The Black Death—a Biological Reappraisal*, in which he argues persuasively on biological grounds that it could not have been bubonic plague.<sup>6</sup> However, this does not affect my arguments about the species of rats which were present in Britain before and since the early eighteenth century, or their effects upon dovecotes. Dr Twigg has been most helpful since publication, and kindly states that he does not disagree with my other observations about rats; he confirms that the 'black' rat, *Rattus rattus*, is not a predator. His book *The Brown Rat* remains the standard work on its subject.<sup>7</sup>

Since publication the octagonal brick dovecote at Downham Hall Farm, Essex, whose construction was illustrated in Fig. 21, has been dismantled and rebuilt at a more accessible site immediately north of Downham parish church (TQ 730 954). This operation provided more information about the brickwork, showing that there was even less bonding between the nest-box structure and the outer wall than is illustrated. Effectively the nest-box structure provides the structural stability, and the outer wall is just a casing of stretchers and snap headers 4½ inches thick, almost independent of it. No doubt this accounts for the fact that it has had to be strapped in with an iron band to prevent it collapsing outwards, as illustrated by Donald Smith in 1931.<sup>8</sup>

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NOTES:

1. (Paris 1858-68), volume 3, pp. 484-93. Translation by Mr D.F. Shaw.
2. Anon (1735), unpaginated, arranged alphabetically.
3. L.S.V. Venables and P.H. Leslie, 'The Rat and Mouse Populations of Corn Ricks', *Journal of Animal Ecology*, 2 (1942), 44-68, p. 67.
4. 'Dovecotes of South Cambridgeshire', *Proc. Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 75 (1986), 67-89, p. 70.
5. *The Doocots of Caithness*, Dundee (1980), 5 and 8.
6. London, 1984.
7. London, 1975.
8. *Pigeon Cotes and Dove Houses of Essex* (1931), 168-9.