

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2006

Dovecotes & Pigeon Lofts of Old Berkshire

"Dovecotes & Pigeon Lofts of Old Berkshire" was the subject of an illustrated talk given by Andrew Hutt to the October meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society.

Andrew explained the relationship between the Berkshire Archaeological Society and the Berkshire Archaeology Research Group - the BAS arranging talks on topics of interest, whilst the BARG carry out field work projects. The study of dovecotes and pigeon lofts was begun by a BAS member, Esme Few in the 1960s, who had toured the county, recording about 50 dovecotes etc, and this was subsequently taken up by members of the BARG.

The names dove and pigeon are used interchangeably to refer to 6 species of wild birds, and over 350 species of domesticated birds. In the wild, they nest in holes in cliffs etc, and also show a liking for living in man made buildings. They mate for life and - starting in March, - a pair will produce 2 squabs (chicks) about 8 - 10 times a year for 7 years. Domestic squabs are culled when 4 weeks old, as the flesh is still tender through lack of exercise before they are fledged.

Many images in 'pre-history' show doves and pigeons, but the earliest mention of them being kept domestically is c 2600BC in Egypt, when King Unas had a menu including 5000 pigeons. More evidence comes from Roman times. Roman columbaria (dovecotes) were circular in plan, made of stone, with nesting boxes inside, and built so as to keep lizards, mice etc away from the birds, and with a flowing water supply for the birds. Records also tell of the duties of a Roman pigeon keeper - even advising anointing them with myrrh or giving cumin seed with old wine, to attract further stock to the columbarium. However, no obvious dovecotes survive on Roman sites in Britain.

The Normans introduced pigeons to the country, and (as in France) there was a strict law that only Lords of the Manor could keep them. The oldest surviving Berkshire pigeon loft is the 13th century one at the Great Coxwell Tithe Barn, whilst the oldest surviving dovecote at Hurley Tythe Barn dates from 1308. It is about 8½ m in diameter, 7m tall, and has 660 nesting boxes, the walls being just over 1m deep - big enough to produce 6600 squabs per year -about 200 meals per week. In the middle of a circular dovecote is a potence - a rotatable wooden frame with a ladder, to enable the keeper to access all of the nest boxes. As they fed on the crops, the birds were a menace to local farmers, and a source of friction between them and the pigeon owners. In 1476, therefore, the court decided that birds in a dovecote were personal property, but those in the field were not, and no felony was committed by a person who killed birds feeding on their fields.

The monasteries owned many of the manors, and so after the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s, many manors changed hands - and the nature of commercial pigeon keeping changed. The rules were slowly relaxed, and in 1619 it was declared that any freeholder who

was not a Lord of the Manor or rectory owner who erected a dovecote was not causing a nuisance. So ended the manorial prerogative on pigeon keeping. Post-dissolution dovecotes were not circular - as at Carswell. From 1619 - 1793, the keeping of pigeons was mainly by commoners - the laws were relaxed, and the sale of the pigeons became taxable in 1694 (evidence that there was a substantial trade). By 1761, the law prohibited the killing of pigeons kept in a dovecote. However, changes came to the agricultural community in the 18th century - the population doubled, there were improved farming methods, and the good harvests came to an end, so England changed from being a net exporter of grain to an importer of it. The average agricultural worker could not earn enough for the family to survive, and so their wages were supplemented from the poor rate - a system started in Berkshire at Speenhamland in 1795.

The legal position continued to change - in 1848, farmers could not wantonly kill domestic pigeons feeding on their land, but by the 1961 Health Act, local authorities were empowered to take action if pigeons were causing a nuisance.

BARG has surveyed 90 or so dovecotes etc sites in old Berkshire - of those, 31 retain the form of a dovecote and seem to be in good repair, 10 former dovecotes have been converted for use by people, 4 have had the pigeon holes removed - to be replaced by paintings of the birds, and 1 ruined dovecote is being preserved in that condition. 12 of the dovecotes that existed in 1966 have been demolished, 1 is held up by scaffolding, and 3 others are in need of repair.
