

# AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY DOVECOTE AT STEWKLEY

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*An octagonal brick dovecote of high quality dated 1704 survives at Stewkley in unusually good order; its features are described and interpreted.*

(In this account distances are given in metres, but the construction is described in the English units in which the dovecote was built. 1 foot = 12 inches, 1 inch = 25.4 mm.)

## *The site (SP 851 256)*

The dovecote is in a concrete yard associated with an egg-packing business, regularly negotiated by heavy lorries. It is situated 55 metres south-south-west of The Manor House, a late sixteenth-century timber-framed house facing east on to High Street South (which in nineteenth century OS maps was called Manor Farm). The site inclines gently down to the west. The house and dovecote are listed as Grade II.

## *The exterior*

The dovecote is octagonal in plan, with a weathered plinth standing seven to eleven courses above the sloping concrete. A full-height pilaster at each angle has a simple capital integrated with a moulded eaves cornice, and a moulded string course encloses the pilasters (Figure 7). The pyramidal roof is clad with hand-made plain tiles and hipped with lead with a hipped dormer facing east. The former louver where the pigeons entered has not survived; its leaded roof is now mounted directly on the main roof, and bears a wrought iron weathervane.

The red bricks are  $8\frac{1}{2} \times 4 \times 2\frac{1}{4}$  inches, laid in Flemish bond with lime mortar, four courses rising 11 inches. The flat panels of brickwork are embellished with diaper patterns of flared blue bricks (Figure 6 and 7), omitted on the north face where the space is limited by a doorway and datestone. The patterns are interrupted by an inserted doorway in the south face and inserted windows in the west and south-west faces, all characteristic of the nineteenth century. The north doorway is original and



**Figure 1.** The Dovecote at the manor house, Stewkley, from the north-north-west.

complete, with a segmental arch of gauged bricks and an oak door-frame fully jointed and pegged; the door itself is modern. Above the door is a recessed datestone inscribed

H  
G        A  
1704

set within a border of moulded bricks (Figure 1). These initials are considered in an appendix by J. Chenevix Trench.

The weathervane has an elaborately profiled stem, with scrolled supporters and curved arms of wrought iron from which three of the cardinal letters have rusted away, and an arrow pointer with a scrolled tail. It is not dated, but there is no reason to doubt that it is original.

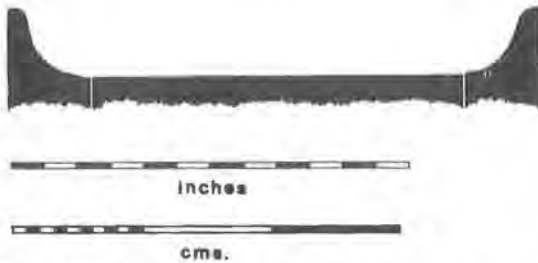
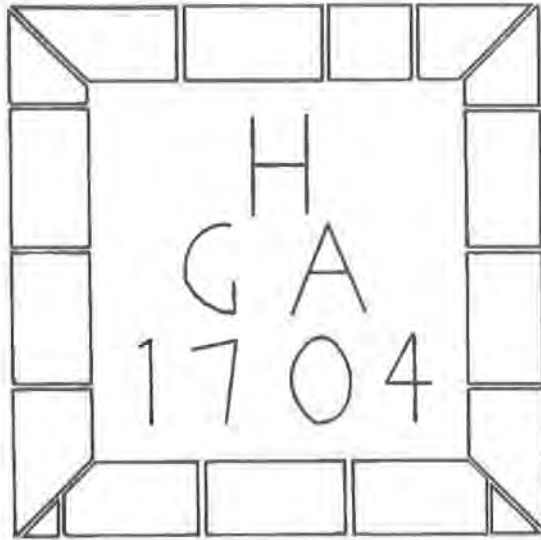


Figure 2. The recessed datestone over the north door and its border of moulded bricks.

### The interior

The walls are lined with eighteen tiers of brick nest-boxes, starting 8 inches above the present brick floor. Most of them are 10 × 10 inches in plan by 8¾ inches high, with an entrance passage 5½ inches wide; less regular shapes are formed in the angles of the octagon and beside the door (Figure 3). A course of headers projects 2 inches to form an alighting ledge below each tier (Figure 8). The nest-boxes are carried over the door by a hardwood lintel 16 × 3 inches which continues the adjacent alight-

ing ledge. The four lowest tiers of nest-boxes have plain heads, but those above all have ornamental heads, mostly formed by bringing together the convex ends of two purpose-moulded bricks (Figure 8). The top tier is exceptional in that the heads are formed with cyma reversa bricks. Originally there were 56 nest-boxes in each complete tier; allowing for those omitted at the door there were 987 in all. Examination of the construction shows that the pilasters and external 8½-inch walls were built first, and rendered inside. The inner brick structure comprising the nest-boxes is mounted on the same plinth but was built independently, apparently not keyed to the outer wall. In accordance with traditional practice the interior has been limewashed,

The insertion of the west window has destroyed or blocked 24 nest-boxes. Part of the interior was partitioned off in the nineteenth century to form a privy. 24 more nest-boxes were destroyed by the insertion of its south door, and another 16 by the insertion of its south-west window. Within the privy the nest-boxes and alighting ledges are blocked and plastered over to form flat wall surfaces, but they are still present within the plaster. Above the privy ceiling, 9 feet high, most of the

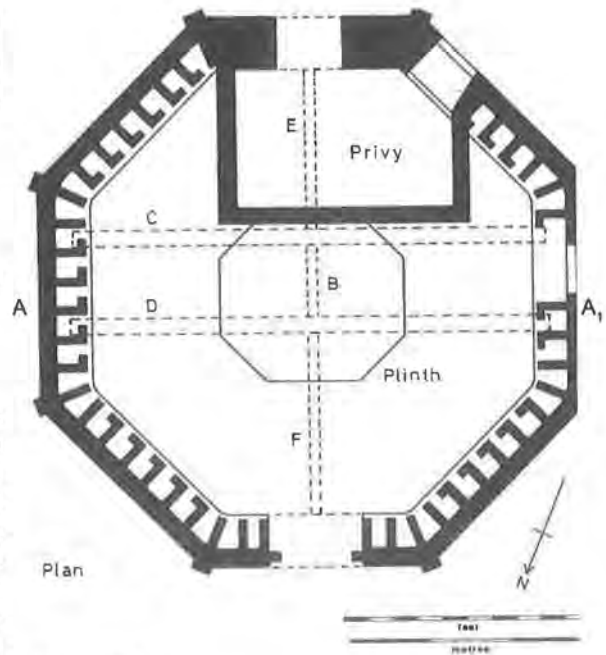


Figure 3. Plan.

nest-boxes remain unaltered. Effectively some 80% of the original complement of nest-boxes remain unaffected by later alterations.

When examined the interior was obstructed by stacks of boxes and other lumber. Partly concealed in a corner against the inserted privy was the axis of a former *potence*, the revolving structure which carried a ladder on bracketed arms (Figure 4 and 9). Its purpose was to enable the pigeon-keeper to search the nest-boxes continuously, without having to descend to move his ladder. It is of oak, octagonal in section, bound at the end by a wrought iron ring, with an iron pivot. The upper bearing is still present, an iron plate spiked to a beam in the roof structure (B in Figures 3 and 4). The octagonal brick plinth which formerly supported the lower bearing has been demolished down to floor level, but it is still perceptible in the brick floor laid round it (Figures 3 and 4).

#### *The roof structure*

The present roof is original, of typical eighteenth-century carpentry, but it was augmented by a lower supporting structure at an early date (Figure 9). Principal rafters of 5 x 3 inch vertical section rise from the corners of the octagonal wallplate to an octagonal frame which formed the base of the louver. Purlins which vary in size are nailed below them a little below half-height. In each facet of the pyramid seven common rafters about 3 x 3 inches (some of re-used timber), are butted and nailed to the principals and upper frame. The later supporting structure comprises two oak beams C and D aligned east-west, to which two subsidiary beams E and F are butt-cogged, with wrought iron plates spiked across the joints (Fig. 4). Raking struts mounted on these timbers support the principals and purlins of the original structure.

The dormer is glazed with leaded rectangular panes. The glazing itself has been renewed, but there would have been glazing or a protective grill here from the outset. The pigeons entered by the louver at the highest point of the roof, passing through narrow entrance slots which kept out the larger birds of prey. From the base of the louver the pigeons descended into the interior through a framed aperture 2 feet 2 inches square. Where a dovecote has retained all its original features - a

rare situation - one finds at this point a wooden 'pipe' (the contemporary name), like a box open at both ends, through which the birds had to descend and ascend. This was an ingenious device to defend the entrance against sparrow-hawks, which might penetrate the slots of the louver but which could not fly vertically through the pipe.<sup>1</sup> Here nothing remains of it except a few projecting nails and scraps of iron. The roof of the louver is inaccessible, but from below one can see that its carpentry is original and unaltered, with short rafters converging on a mast of octagonal section.

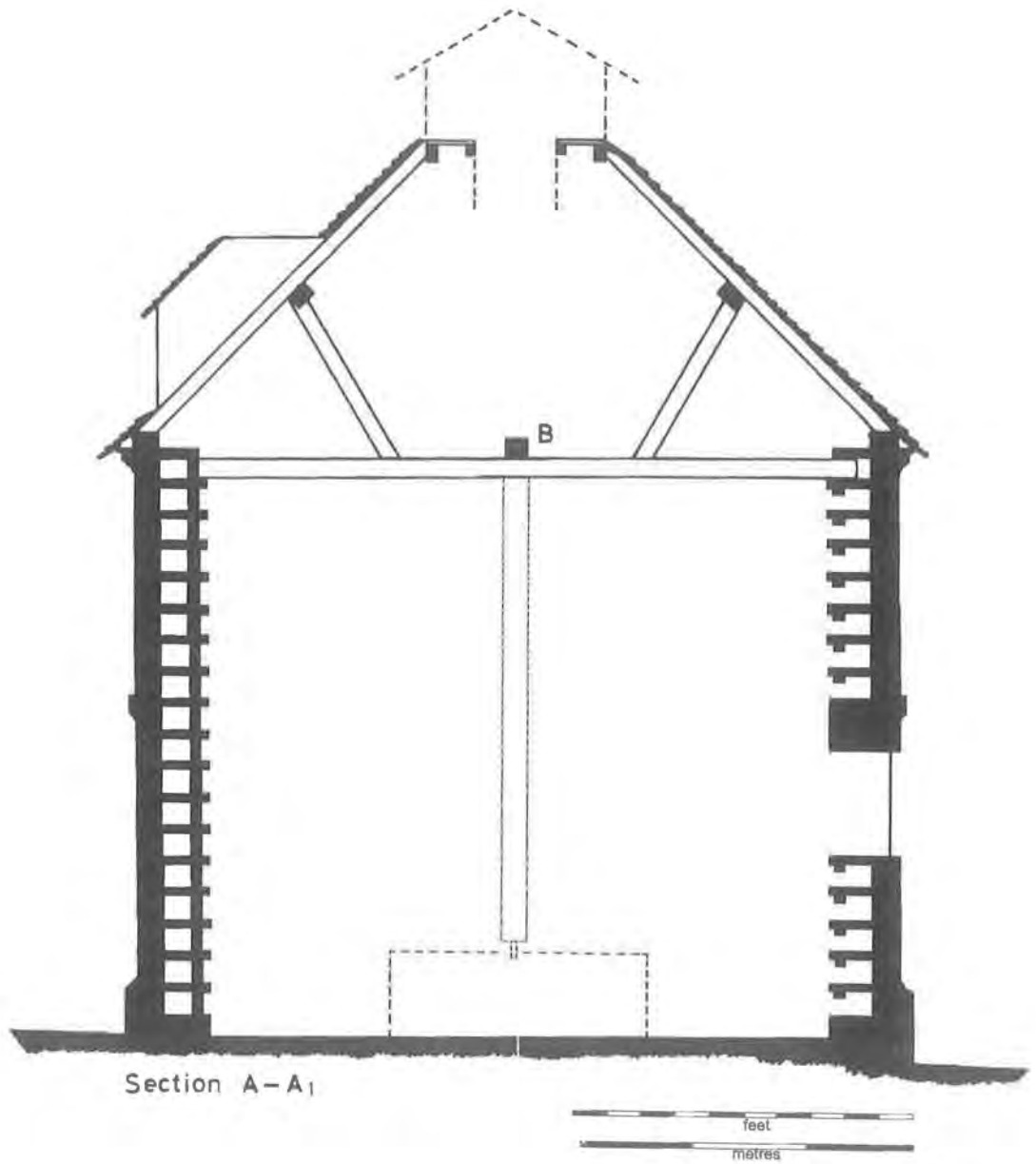
#### *The historical background*

Until late in the eighteenth century the ownership of a dovecote was a privilege restricted to lords of the manor (whether personal or corporate) and to some rectors. Its economic function was to produce squabs, young pigeons which were almost fully grown, taken from the nest-boxes just before they were due to fledge. Each squab provided about a pound of meat, comprising muscle which had never been used for flying and which therefore was of very tender quality. It is often stated that dovecotes produced a supply of meat in winter when other fresh meat was in short supply, but this is not so. Dovecote pigeons bred continuously from March to September, but only very rarely in winter. The meat from squabs was a luxurious supplement to the diet of the wealthy, available only during the season when other fresh meat was easily obtainable. Household accounts of all periods confirm that dovecotes supplied meat only from the end of March to the beginning of November.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to appreciate the social significance of a dovecote unless its association with a luxurious diet is understood.

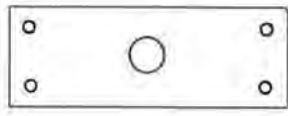
Because dovecotes were visible indications of high social status they were always prominently sited, and they were always treated externally with a degree of architectural ostentation. This one is exceptional in being embellished inside also. Evidently when the original owner took his visitors to inspect his new dovecote he wanted them to be as impressed by the interior as by the exterior.

#### *The ornamental brickwork*

The use of diaper patterns in brickwork was introduced from France in the fifteenth century,



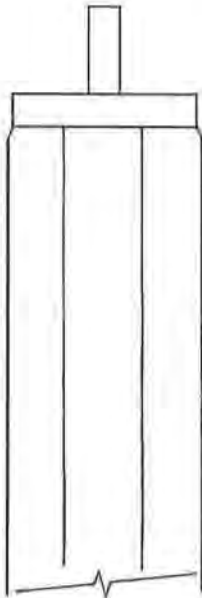
**Figure 4.** Vertical section A - A<sub>1</sub>. The pecked lines indicate the former positions of features now missing or displaced - the louver and its roof, the 'pipe' which protected the entrance against sparrow-hawks, the axis of the former potence, and the plinth on which its lower bearing was mounted.



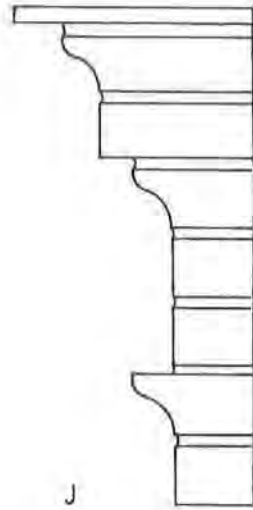
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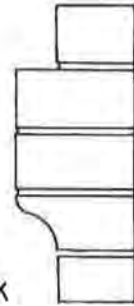
G



H



J



K



L



M



N

**Figure 5.**

- B Upper bearing of the former potence  
 G & H The axis of the former potence in plan and elevation  
 J Profile of a capital

- K Profile of the string course  
 L A cyma reversa moulded brick in elevation  
 M A convex-moulded brick in elevation  
 N A weathered brick in elevation

and can be seen in many prestigious English buildings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>3</sup> At this period English bond was the norm. By the 1580s the use of surface pattern was passing out of fashion at the highest level owing to Renaissance influence from the Continent, but it returned with the Baroque movement. By 1700 Flemish bond had largely superseded English bond. The commonest pattern was formed by picking out the headers of Flemish bond in contrasting colour; it is found here in the plinth. It is rare to find diaper patterns at this period.

The blue bricks used were of the same clay, and made by the same process as the normal red bricks, but because the temperature in the kiln or clamp was uneven some bricks would emerge under-fired, others over-fired. The under-fired bricks were discarded or used for inferior purposes. The over-fired bricks could be selected for decorative use. Many of them were so overheated that the surface has literally turned to glass (Figure 6). Both headers and stretchers are used in the diaper patterns here.

All other elaboration of the brickwork is ingeniously contrived from purpose-moulded bricks of three shapes. The cornice, the capitals, the lowest course of the string, and the border round the datestone are formed from bricks moulded to a cyma reversa profile (L in Figure 4). A small surplus of these bricks was used to form the ornamental heads of the top tier of nest-boxes. Where the cornices and string course return round the pilasters the moulded bricks were axed and rubbed to the same profile. Rubbed bricks of plain shapes were used in the pilasters, in the plain courses of the string and cornice, and in the arch of the north doorway. Softer bricks containing more sand were used for rubbing; the material exposed was of a more orange-red colour than the remainder. Bricks of simple convex shape were moulded for the ornamental heads of the nest-boxes (M in Figure 4).

The top-most course of the plinth is made partly from simple weathered bricks (N in Figure 4), and partly from cyma reversa bricks. The latter start at the west side of the original doorway and continue round four of the eight faces; then the plinth is continued with simple weathered bricks as far as the east side of the doorway. It would be tempting

to deduce from this that the westerly elevations were deliberately given a more decorative treatment than the rest, but because there is no other special treatment here it seems more likely that the discrepancy arose from some disturbance in the supply of purpose-moulded bricks.

#### *Interpretation of the roof structure*

The alteration to the roof is a familiar phenomenon. Owners of dovecotes wanted the roof space to be free of tiebeams and other projections, partly to allow the pigeons free circulation space, but primarily to avoid providing perching places for any bird of prey which might penetrate to the interior.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately in this desire they often failed to tie the roof sufficiently against expanding forces. It is quite common in historic dovecotes to find that additional tiebeams have been inserted after the original construction to check the strain on the wall heads. Here the beams C and D are set into the top tier of nest-boxes, blocking four of them. The short member which holds the upper bearing B of the former *potence* is laid over them and spiked down, which proves that this structure was inserted while the dovecote was still in use.

It is not surprising that the original louver has decayed and has not been replaced, for it is the part of a dovecote which is most exposed to weather and least accessible for maintenance. Most of the louvers or cupolas one sees on dovecotes which are open to the public are modern replacements, and those which are original are usually in poor condition.

#### *Interpretation of the site*

In the first edition 1/2500 Ordnance Survey map surveyed in 1880 the dovecote is shown still within a garden south of the house. Numerous nail-holes in the brickwork up to half-height show that fruit has been grown against it. None of the farm buildings now used for the egg-packing business were then present, so the dovecote was over fifty metres from the nearest building. Whenever practicable dovecotes were sited well away from other buildings and large trees so that the pigeons could see birds of prey approaching.<sup>5</sup> In 1880 there was a rectangular pond 65 metres to the west-south-west, still perceptible as a patch of marshy ground. Dovecotes were always sited near water because the adult birds had to carry water to their young in their beaks,



**Figure 6.** A section of the brickwork with the sun glinting on the vitrified blue bricks which form the diaper pattern. The nail-holes near the bottom indicate that fruit has been grown against the wall.

**Figure 7. (below)** The pilasters, capitals, eaves cornice, string course and diaper-patterned brickwork.



**Figure 8. (right)** The nest-boxes, with ornamental heads each formed by two moulded bricks, and an alighting ledge to each tier.



**Figure 9. (below right)** The roof structure and western walls above the inserted privy, showing the square aperture through which the pigeons entered. The axis of the former potence is at bottom right, and its upper bearing is at the Centre.



### *Decline and later uses*

Large-scale pigeon-farming declined sharply in the Napoleonic War period owing to agricultural changes which concentrated on wheat production, but pigeons continued to be kept on a smaller farm-yard scale, in much the same way as other poultry.<sup>6</sup> Many dovecotes were demolished early in the nineteenth century, but others were reduced in capacity by the insertion of a floor. The upper storey might continue in use as a pigeon loft, while the lower storey was converted to other uses, of which the most common was as a stable, which entailed enlarging the original doorway. This dovecote is exceptional in not having been altered in either of these ways. Clearly it was used for another purpose when pigeon production ceased, for the octagonal plinth was demolished down to ground level, a brick floor was laid round it, and the west window was inserted, but it is not possible now to determine that secondary use. Later part of the interior was partitioned off to form a privy, which required the insertion of a door, a window, and some blocking of the nest-boxes. We can be grateful that here the successive owners have made so few alterations, and that the present owner practices the William Morris principle of keeping the building weather-proof, while resisting any major change. The dovecote is now used as a store, which is always the most suitable use because it entails least alteration to the historic fabric.

### *Acknowledgements:*

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## APPENDIX

### THE INITIALS ON THE DATE PLAQUE

Although now, and in surviving records, in the parish of Stewkley, the site of the dovecote lies within the territory of the Deserted Medieval Village of Littlecote or Lidcote (The names are used interchangeably)<sup>7</sup>. Strictly speaking it should be designated a Shrunken Village: it survived as a manor until the nineteenth century.

By the eighteenth century the rule that only the Lord of the Manor could have a dovecote had largely lapsed, the right having devolved on the occupant of the manor house. It had lost much of its economic *raison d'être* as arable was replaced by pasture, which much reduced the quantity of the tenants' grain that was available to fatten the birds. Nevertheless it made sense to start our search for the owners of the initials on the date plaque by identifying the lords of the manor at the appropriate time.

The convention about date plaques was that where a husband and wife were recorded, the initial of their surname was put in the middle, the husband's on the left and the wife's on the right. Commonly the initials were arranged in a triangle, with the surname at the apex. We therefore had to find a man with the initials GH, and were encouraged to find a conveyance dated 1721 to Sir Gilbert Heathcote, Knight and Alderman of London, of properties including Lidcote Grounds, Stewkley.<sup>8</sup>

This proved a blind alley, however: Sir Gilbert's wife - his only one - was called Hester;<sup>9</sup> moreover no connection of the Heathcote family with Littlecote has been found earlier than 1713, when William Heathcote, merchant of London, acquired a mortgage of the manor (with other property).<sup>10</sup> William, who was Sir Gilbert's brother, died in 1719,<sup>11</sup> leaving his interest in Littlecote to his brother and a nephew, John. Gilbert died in 1733/4, having been created a baronet eight days previously.<sup>12</sup>

It was therefore necessary to look elsewhere, and no equally obvious lead was to be found. A conveyance of 1721 includes a long list of 'persons now or late in occupation of these premises'. Unfortunately it does not link persons to premises, but it includes the name of George Higgs.<sup>13</sup> There are a number of men whose surname starts with H. including some whose Christian name is left blank. George Higgs, however had a wife called Ann.<sup>14</sup> This throws us back on the negative evidence that no other 'GH' married to an 'A' is known from the Stewkley parish register. A better approach would be to calculate the odds against the combination occurring; but this calls for much more data about the relative frequency of font names in the early eighteenth century than we possess.



Nothing whatever is known of George Higgs, and his will has not survived. We do not know when he married; such negative evidence as there is suggests that it was after 1704. All that can be said is that he and his wife Ann may provisionally, and in the absence of any more convincing candidates, be accepted as possible owners of the names behind

the initials on the date plaque. But there is absolutely no positive evidence to support it.

It is of some interest to note that the dovecot had a predecessor on the same site.<sup>15</sup> It must have been medieval, predating the desertion and enclosure of Littlecote in the late fifteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

#### REFERENCES

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- 12 *Baronetage, Loc cit.*
- 13 BRO, D/PC/102/ 6 May 1741.
- 14 BRO, PR/193/1/3
- 15 BRO, D/X2/12/3
- 16 *Recs. Bucks*, 13, 352.

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