

DOVES, CULVERS AND PIGEONS: A MANORIAL STATUS SYMBOL

INTRODUCTION

The dovecote was one of the most obvious status symbols of medieval and later manors. Along with the fishpond and the hunting park, the dovecote provided the lord with a valuable source of food. Of course, pigeons and doves could damage crops and, while any damage to his tenants' crops was of little concern to the lord, it is difficult to see how he ensured that the birds did not consume crops growing on the demesne.

This paper examines the evidence of field-names for what should in theory have been a ubiquitous feature of the landscape, together with the data contained in the Buckinghamshire Historic Environment Record (HER) for extant and former dovecotes. It begins with a discussion of the terminology employed to describe birds of the *Columbidae* family, which in characteristic English fashion is complex, changes over time and can be ambiguous.

VOCABULARY

In modern English two or more words often carry the same basic meaning, but have subtle differences between them – for example, swine and pig, hound and dog – perhaps because they derive from different linguistic roots. This is true of the three words used to describe the kinds of birds that were kept in dovecotes.

Both *dove* and *culver* have Old English (OE) roots. It seems, however, that the OE **dūfe* only occurs in the compound *dūfedoppa*, applied to various small diving birds.¹ This word has cognates in most Germanic languages, producing the modern Dutch *duif* and German *Taube*. The root is the German **dūbjan*, 'to sink, to dip'² and is analogous with Latin *columba* and Greek *κολυμβίς*, the latter meaning 'diver [bird]'.³ It is not clear how this attribute came to be attached to land birds of the dove family, although it may owe something to the fact that some doves use cliff faces as roosting sites, from which they "dive" to the ground. The

serried ranks of nesting holes in dovecotes represent a home from home for such birds.

The use of the word *dove* on its own came in the thirteenth century, after the transition from Old to Middle English (ME). The corpus of Buckinghamshire field-names containing the element *Dove* collected so far, indicates that it does not appear regularly until the early sixteenth century.

The normal OE word for the dove is *culfre/culufre*, ME and Modern English *culver*, now restricted to southern and eastern dialects.⁴ This word seems to have no cognates in Germanic languages and cannot formally be derived from Latin *columba*, or its Celtic derivatives Welsh *colomen* and Gaelic *calman*. *Culver* is on record from the ninth century and survived in Buckinghamshire field-names until the mid-nineteenth century. It does not appear to have been restricted to any specific kind of dove.

The third of our trio of words is of course *pigeon*. This derives by way of ME *pyjon/pejon* from Old French *pijon*, meaning a young bird, especially a young dove. Its ultimate origin is the Latin verb *pipire*, 'to chirp or cheep'.⁵ *Pigeon* field-names are the latest to appear in the county, and they are much less common than *Culver-* or *Dove-*names. The earliest example on record is from 1616.

The common noun for the building specifically created to house breeding doves in the medieval period is *dovecote*, but this is hardly ever used in field-names, the usual words being *Dovehouse*, *Culverhouse* or *Pigeon House*. The Latin word *columbarium* shows that such structures existed in classical times, and were probably part of the infrastructure on villa estates in Britain and elsewhere. It is debateable whether they reappeared during the Anglo-Saxon period at royal or noble estate centres.⁶ The HER suggests that foundations of a possible dovecote at Berton date from the tenth-twelfth century.⁷ All the other evidence from Buckinghamshire, however, suggests that dovecotes were a product of the post-conquest manorial system, which at its peak around 1300–1350

TABLE 1

REFERENCES TO DOVECOTES FROM BUCKINGHAMSHIRE HER

<i>1. Documentary</i>			<i>2. Extant Dovecotes</i>	
<i>Location</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Reference</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Comment</i>
Bierton	20th	Dovehouse Close	Amersham	
Brill	16/17th	1 or more dovecotes	Aylesbury	foundations
Buckingham	1642	dovecote [Bourton]	Beaconsfield	barn with pigeon loft
Chearsley	pre1915	pigeon house	Burnham	
Chilton	1626	dovecote	Chartridge	
Chilton	1739	2 dove houses	Chartridge	barn with pigeon loft
High Wycombe	1324	200 doves	Dinton Hall	
High Wycombe	1252–3	repairs to dovecote	Edlesborough	
Hogshaw	1338	dovecote	Ellesborough	
Iver	1621	pigeon house	Haddenham	
Leckhampstead	1280	dovecote [Nast End]	Hambleden	
Lillingstone Dayrell	1628	dovecote	Ibstone	
Medmenham	1593	3 dovecotes	Iver	x2
Stoke Hammond	1323	dove house	Langley Park	
Thornborough	1378	dovecote	Little Marlow	
Tingewick	1340	dovecote	Long Crendon	
Upper Winchendon	1645	dovecote	Maids Moreton	
Waddesdon	14th	dovecote [Eythrope]	Newton Longville	
Water Stratford	1650	dovehouse	Princes Risborough	
Weedon	1347	dovecote	Quainton	
Whaddon	1541	dovehouse	Radclive	
Wing	15th	dovecote	Stewkley	
Woodham	1587	dovecote	Whitchurch	
Wotton Underwood	1618	dovecote		

numbered several hundred manors and sub-manors across the county.

DOVE/PIGEON FIELD NAMES

In theory, every manorial complex could have possessed a dovecote during the medieval period and later. This would give a minimum countywide total of around 210 – one for every parish – plus many more at secondary manorial or sub-manorial sites. However, an examination of the field-name database and the HER entries for dovecotes reveals a far lower figure. Sixty-six parishes have relevant field names (excluding those that refer to doves/pigeons, but not to specialised structures), while a further thirty have entries in the HER (Appendix 1). The total of ninety-six dovecotes represents about 47% of all Buckinghamshire parishes. The seeming discrepancy may be

explained in several ways. First, dovecotes may have existed but not given rise to field-names or left documentary evidence. This is supported by several examples where dovecotes survive, apparently without field-names. Such dovecotes are often sited within building complexes where such names are unlikely. Secondly, although there are many field-names where no trace of dovecote survives, it is possible that names have changed following the disappearance of the actual structure. For example, there was a large-scale loss of medieval field- and furlong-names at the time of enclosure, which could have removed textual evidence for long-vanished dovecotes. (None of the three medieval manorial centres within Kingsey parish survives in its original location, but all may have had dovecotes.⁸ At Stewkley, one dovecote survives at the manorial centre in South End, but there is no evidence of them at the moated sites in

TABLE 2

FIELD NAMES WITH CULVER/DOVE/PIGEON					
<i>Parish</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Parish</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Name</i>
Hughenden	15th	Colverhouse	Ludgershall	1780	Dove House Close
Oakley	14th	Colverhouslond	Marsh Gibbon	1839	Dovehouse Close
Amersham	1625	Culuerhou Medow	Mentmore	1852	Dove House Close
Pitstone	1838	Culverhouse Furlong	Milton Keynes	1685	Dove House Hop Yard
			Monks Risborough	1839	Dovehouse Close
Amersham	1625	Dove House Meadow	Nether Winchendon	1978	Dovehouse Close
Amersham	1625	Dovehou Medow	Newport Pagnell	1800	Dove House Close
Ashendon	1850	Dovehouse Close	Newton Blossomville	1811	Dovehouse Close
Astwood	1840	Dovehouse Close	North Crawley	1773	Dovehouse Close
Astwood	1840	Dovehouse Pightle	Penn	1838	Dove House Mead
Beaconsfield	1846	Dove House Mead	Shenley Brook End	1698	Dovehouse Close
Biddlesden	1621	Dovehouse Close	Simpson	1777	Dovehouse Close
Bletchley	1718	Dove House Close	Slapton	1930s?	Dovehouse Close
Bradenham	1847	Dovehouse Close	Soulbury	1769	Dovehouse Close
Bradwell	1839	Dovehouse Close	Stoke Goldington	17th	Dove House Close [Eakley]
Bradwell Abbey	1797	Dovehouse Close	Stone	1543	Dovehouse Close
Burnham	1607	Dove House Close	Stone	1599	Dovehouse
Cheddington	1639	Dovehouse Close	Stone	1543	Dowfhouse in Streytleyes
Chenies	1838	Dove House Pightle	Stony Stratford	c1680	Dovehouse Close
Chesham	1985	Dove House Orchard	Thornborough	1797	Dovehouse Close
Clifton Reynes	1841	Dovehouse Close	Warrington	1974	Dove House Close
Dinton	1803	Dove House Close	Wavendon	1640	Dove House Furlong
Dorton	1700	Dovehouse Close	Wendover	1607	Dove Howsse Closse
Edlesborough	1692	Dovehouse Close	Weston Turville	1799	Dove House Close
Great Brickhill	1772	Dove House Lane	Wingrave	1798	Dovehouse Close [Wingrave]
Great Linford	1525	Dovehouse [mess.]	Wingrave	1798	Dovehouse Close [Rousham]
Hanslope	1828	Dovehouse Close	Winslow	c1939	Dove House Furlong
Hardmead	1838	Dovehouse Pightle			
Hartwell	1552	Dove-house Close	Beaconsfield	1616	Piginhousmeed
Hillesden	1846	Dovehouse Close	Chesham Bois	1838	Pigeon Close
Kingsey	1847	Dovehouse Close	Dorney	1808	Pigeon House Close
Langley M	1844	Dove Cote	Fulmer	1843	Pigeon House Meadow
Leckhampstead	1841	Dove House Close	Great Kimble	1839	Pigeon House Close
Little Linford	1639	Dovehouse Hill	Hambleden	1706	Pigeon House Close
Little Linford	1794	Dove House Close	Hitcham	1763	Pigeon House Close
Long Crendon	1545x9	Dovehowse Closse	Little Marlow	1844	Pigeon House Farm
Loughton	1769	Dove House Close			

North End and Stewkley Grange.⁹) Thirdly, not all medieval or later dove-keeping utilised purpose-built free-standing structures. There are surviving examples of nest-holes built into the gables of barns, and, given the large-scale demolition of

barns, many others may once have existed where manorial lords could not afford anything more grandiose.

It is clear that many potential dove-cote sites exist across the county that have not left a legacy in

field-names or remain to be discovered by excavation. Evidence from surviving examples suggests that known manorial centres may once have had dovecotes in the vicinity. Where “dove” field-names can be located in the landscape, they often seem to lie close to such centres, and those which lie at a distance from them may point to the sites of lost manors. Moats may also afford clues about dovecotes, assuming that their builders were of a sufficiently high status to afford the not inconsiderable cost of erecting what were often substantial stone buildings.

Judging from the number of dovecotes which were built, or rebuilt, after 1700, the keeping of hundreds of birds for the table long outlived medieval lordship. Only in the later nineteenth century and after did dovecotes finally cease to perform their original function.

Before examining the evidence for dovecotes (Appendix 2), other names which refer to birds of the dove family need to be considered. In all, there are twenty field-names containing Culver (plus one in Amersham where Dovehouse and Culverhouse are given as alternatives). Of these, only four use it to qualify “house”, although Culver Close in Edlesborough contains a surviving dovecote. Other elements associated with Culver are: croft [3], close [2], field [2], hill [2] and hook, pit, furlong, pightle, leas, wood and grove [1 example each]. These are all likely to be places where doves congregated naturally. Two names which are difficult to interpret on the basis of their sole occurrence are *Culverhamden* and *Culverhamhull*, mentioned in a fine of 1270–1 at Princes Risborough.¹⁰ The former occurs several times between 1199 and 1325 in various forms like *Culverdon*, meaning ‘wood pigeon hill’, identical with *Culverhull*. The addition of *-ham-* implies a settlement of some kind, although it may represent OE *hamm* ‘meadow’.¹¹ Since the name is no longer current, it cannot be located, but may have been in that part of Risborough adjoining the Hampdens (OE *hām+denu*, ‘homestead valley’).¹² Although *culver* remained current throughout medieval times and beyond, it seems unlikely that it was used to coin names much beyond the early modern period, and probably long before that in many areas. This would account for the relative scarcity of names where culver is compounded with house.

Pigeon is much the least frequent in field-

names, and seems to have been used in this way mainly in the eighteenth century. The eight examples so far noted are all located in the Chiltern area, or close to the Thames between Hambleden and Dorney. All are combined with “house”, apart from Pigeon Close in Chesham Bois (1838).

Almost all Dove field-names are also compounded with “house”, the vast majority also with “close”. The only apparent exceptions are: Dove Close in Bradwell Abbey (1532), although in later sources it is always Dovehouse Close, Dove Cote in Langley Marish (1844) and Dovecote Close/Spinney in Little Linford (1925), all obviously referring to dovecotes. Elements qualified by Dovehouse, other than close [40 examples] and pightle [3] are mead [2], furlong [2] and meadow, orchard, lane, leas, hill, ground, hop yard and farm [1 of each]. It is almost as if Dovehouseclose was thought of as a compound noun.

Discounting multiple records of the same field-name, a total of seventy dovecote names based on the elements Culver [4], Dove [58] and Pigeon [8] have been identified so far. Of these, forty-eight are qualified by the elements Close or Pightle (64%), which reflects their association with manorial complexes and their surrounding home closes (Appendix 1). In addition there are around twenty scattered references to the existence of dovecotes from medieval and later sources that appear not to have left any trace in local field-names (Appendix 2). Finally, there are nine extant dovecotes for which there is currently no field-name or documentary evidence.

Together, the various strands of evidence for dovecotes in Buckinghamshire attest to their existence in almost one hundred parishes, just under half of the total. This would almost certainly increase if medieval and early modern records were systematically searched for references to dovecotes and the keeping of doves and pigeons for food. That, of course, is a large task, but one ideally suited to local historians engaged in the study of their local manors.

Keith Bailey

REFERENCES

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- and Middle English, and most of his examples are northern and from Old Norse *dúfa*.
2. Gerhard Koebler, *Germanisches Wörterbuch* (3rd ed., 2007), on-line at www.koeblergerard.de.
 3. OED s.v. dove.
 4. A.H. Smith *op. cit.* pt 1, 118; OED s.v. culver; J. Bosworth & T.N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1898), 173.
 5. OED s.v. pigeon.
 6. Although several Anglo-Saxon royal estate centres are known and some have been partially excavated, there is apparently no evidence of structures related to dove-keeping. If they did exist, they may well have been built of wood, and not necessarily of the circular/polygonal form found in the early modern period.
 7. See entry in HER for Berton.
 8. K.A. Bailey, 'Medieval Kingsey and Tythrop 1086–1335', *Recs. Bucks.* **51** (2011), 169–188.
 9. K.A. Bailey, 'Early Medieval Stewkley: Settlement and Fields', *Recs. Bucks.* **45** (2005), 93–114.
 10. A. Travers (ed.), *A Calendar of the Feet of Fines for Buckinghamshire 1259–1307* (1989) Bucks. Record Soc. **25**, no.149.
 11. For a discussion of *hām* and *hamm*, see Smith, *op. cit.*, pt.1, 226–231.
 12. A. Mawer & F.M. Stenton (eds.), *The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire* (1925), 151.