

THE DOOCOTS OF EAST LoTHIAN

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Before feeding stuffs made it possible for all livestock to be kept alive in the winter months, the main source of fresh meat was pigeons. Pigeons had the advantages that they required no feeding or looking after as they found their own water and lived off the fields and they also provided good manure. In early winter the older birds were eaten first and the young birds were considered a great delicacy. In England they were known as “squabs” and in Scotland as “peesers”. The Counties of East Lothian, Fife and Angus were known as the Corn Counties on account of the large amount of corn grown there and for this reason these counties are rich in dovecotes “doocots”.

There are three types of doocots – beehives on account of their shape; lecterns also because of their shape, being either single or double-chambered; and square, octagonal and cylindrical doocots. All three types have small doors, usually roughly 4 feet 6 inches X 2 feet 9 inches. The doors were small to prevent the pigeons from escaping when the door was opened. The state of repair of the doocots in East Lothian varies considerably, from Spott Doocot which has been restored to some which are near derelict.

Beehive doocots are believed to be the earliest type, dating from the sixteenth century or earlier and the beehive doocot in the wall of Dirleton Castle is thought to be the oldest and contains 1,100 nesting boxes. The flight holes for pigeons in beehive doocots are generally found in the roof which is usually constructed of flagstones. Other beehive doocots are those at Congalton, Dolphinstone, Luffness, Northfield Prestonpans, Nunraw, Phantassie, Waughton and West Meikle Pinkerton.

Beehive and lectern doocots normally have at least one row of projecting stones round their exterior known as string-courses which were designed to prevent rats from climbing up the doocots walls to gain access to the doocot and the pigeons.

Lectern doocots date from the late 16th Century and 17th Century and are easily identified because of their shape and were built with the sloping roof facing south to provide heat for the pigeons, Lectern doocots were either single chambered or double-chambered, being two adjoining single chambers and the gable walls had crow stepped gables. Sometimes in double lecterns each chamber had its own door but in some there is one door in the exterior wall and then separate doors to each chamber internally. The flight holes in lectern doocots are usually in a row across the roof which is in two levels. The doocot at Johnstonburn House is probably the largest of its type with about 2,000 nesting boxes. Other lectern doocots can be found at Athelstaneford, now converted into the Heritage Flag Centre, (the lintel above the door being engraved with the initials “GH” and the date “1583” the initials being those of George Hepburn, the father of Sir John Hepburn the founder and first Colonel of the Royal Scots), Belton, Biel, Bourhouse, East Fortune, Eskgrove Inveresk, Fountainhall, Crocegate (The Butts) Haddington,

Herdmanston, Humbie (converted into a house), The Abbey North Berwick, The Lodge North Berwick, Pencaitland, Pilmuir, Pinkie House, Preston Tower, Redhouse, Ruchlaw, St Clement Wells, Saltcoats Castle , Spott House, Tantallon Castle, and Tranent.

Most of the square, octagonal and cylindrical doocots date from the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Examples of square doocots can be found at Bankton, Castle Mains Gifford, Gifford Vale, Huntington, Newtonhall, Saltoun Hall, and Thurston. Cylindrical doocots can be found at Bolton, Colstoun, Elvingston, Lady Kitty's Garden Haddington, The Heugh North Berwick, Ormiston Hall, Rockville and St Germain's and there are octagonal doocots at Keith Marischal and Winton House.

Dooocots can also be found in other buildings the Churches at Aberlady, Pencaitland, Stenton Old Church and Whitekirk all had doocots in their towers and doocots can be found in Hailes Castle, Friars Croft Dunbar, Stoneypath Tower and Tranent Tower.

In addition to these doocots there are also doocots in at least 20 farm steadings in East Lothian.



Dirleton Castle Doocot



Johnstounburn House Doocot



Lady Kitty's Garden Doocot