

## A COLUMBARIUM AT COMPTON MARTIN CHURCH, Vol 143 - 1999

John McCann, Mark McDermott and Frank Pexton



It has long been known that some priests kept pigeons in parish churches. Hitherto the physical evidence of this practice has come from other parts of the country. This paper is concerned with the physical and documentary evidence of a columbarium at the parish church of St Michael the Archangel, Compton Martin, Somerset (11km north of Wells). In the middle ages the right to keep pigeons was a manorial prerogative, protected by the courts leet. If a priest were permitted to keep pigeons in the upper part of a church it can only have been a deliberate provision for his maintenance. The subject was first explored by George Marshall in 1904. He published a drawing and description of nest-holes high in the church tower of Sarnesfield, Herefordshire, in the original fabric. He

wrote that 'it can only be reached with the help of a fairly long ladder. This has made entry too difficult to enable any description of the inside to be made'.<sup>4</sup> Evidence that this columbarium formerly belonged to the rector of Compton Martin is provided by a glebe terrier of 1606, which describes it as 'a pigeon house over the chauncell'.<sup>5</sup>

By courtesy of the rector, the Revd Heather Matthews, the columbarium was examined in September 1999 by Mark McDermott and Frank Pexton, taking advantage of a quinquennial inspection by architect Alan Thomas. John McCann was unable to be present. Pevsner described this church as 'Perhaps the best Norman church in Somerset'.<sup>6</sup> The chancel is Norman, of two rib-vaulted bays, with a 15th-century chancel arch. Above the vault the outer walls have been built up to form a columbarium or pigeon-loft; this is confirmed by a change in the character of the quoin-stones at the east end. Inside it measures 6.64m from east to west and 4.92m from north to south. The floor is irregular, composed of the vaulting below and some more modern materials; the height to the almost flat roof is a little under 2m.

## THE NEST-HOLES

The nest-holes are integral in the north and south walls, arranged in tiers in irregular chequer pattern (Figs 1-3). The fabric consists mainly of rubble, with free-stones between nest-holes in the same tier. The lowest tier is approximately at the same level as the centre of the vault. The holes vary in size and shape, but most of the entrances are 0.17-0.2m high by 0.15- 0.17m wide. Inside them the same height is maintained, but in plan most of them open out to form a symmetrical bulb-shape up to 0.25m wide; from front to back they are about 0.33m deep (although in many the depth has been reduced by repairs to the outside of the wall). The stones at each side are very well cut, having a well-formed concave curve on the inside. In the south wall there are four tiers with (numbering from the bottom) 8, 11, 10 and 10 nest-holes respectively. In the north wall there are five tiers with 7, 8, 6, 6 and 4 nest-holes respectively. The pattern is confused by later repairs and some modern mortar, but altogether there were probably 80 nest-holes or more in the two walls originally. It is possible that earlier there were nest-holes in the east and west walls too, but if so they have been lost in later repairs and alterations. The east wall was disturbed in 1903 when the present east window was inserted. The west wall has been much disturbed by alterations to the chancel arch, which is now seriously distorted, and the insertion of a replacement east window to the nave. Many of the nest-holes contain a loose accumulation of crumbly brown material which has trickled down through the masonry above, deriving from the original mortar (Fig. 4).



Fig. 1 Interior view of north wall of columbarium; photo Frank Pexton



Fig. 2 Interior view of south wall and south-west corner of columbarium; photo Mark McDermott



Fig. 3 Interior view of south wall and south-east corner of columbarium; photo Mark McDermott



Fig. 4 Close-up view of nest-holes in south wall of columbarium; photo Frank Pexton

THE DOORWAY

The north doorway is over the west end of the chancel. It is 4.27m above ground, accessible only by ladder (Fig. 5). It is 1.42m high by 0.66m wide, with a four-centred arch, the head and jambs plain-chamfered outside; on the inside it is deeply rebated for a door hinged on the right. The door itself consists of three hand-sawn boards of irregular shape with strap hinges of wrought iron; the boards appear to be of the 18th or 19th centuries, the hinges original. At that point the wall is 0.62m thick.

#### THE PIGEON ENTRANCES(?)

On the outside of the north wall, about 3.5m east of the doorway, is the plain-chamfered freestone frame of a rectangular aperture (Fig. 6) estimated to be 0.6m tall by 0.27m wide; it was splayed internally, but is blocked with later masonry. An exactly similar blocked aperture is exposed in the south wall, now enclosed by the lean-to roof of the south chapel. The chapel was added in the 15th century; the present roof is modern, apparently part of the major alterations of 1858. These apertures may be where the pigeons flew in and out. The north aperture is shown in a drawing by Buckler of 1835, then penetrated by a length of rainwater spouting (see frontispiece of this volume).

#### THE QUATREFOIL APERTURE

Centrally placed in the east wall of the pigeon-loft is a pierced quatrefoil which with its surround is 0.6m square, now closed against birds by wire netting. It is not shown in Buckler's drawing of 1835, which suggests that it has been introduced or repositioned later.



Fig. 5 North-east view of chancel of church; photo Frank Pexton

#### THE ROOF

The roof has been rebuilt early in the 20th century to much the same external shape as the roof it replaced, as drawn by Buckler. Some nest-holes were blocked with masonry to strengthen the walls below the new tie-beams.

## DISCUSSION

The total number of nest-holes is small. Even if originally there were nest-holes in all four walls there would have been only about 130-140 in all, whereas most manorial dovecotes of the period had been 300 and 1000 nest-holes. However, a celibate priest, who would have lived alone or with one colleague, could not consume as many squabs as a manorial household. The symmetrical bulb-shaped nest-holes at Compton Martin are typically medieval in shape, similar in shape and size to those in early dovecotes at Home Farm, Kingweston, Ivythorn Manor, Street, Blackford House Farm, Selworthy (all in Somerset), and in medieval dovecotes elsewhere in the country.

The door need not have been as difficult to reach originally as it is now. If a wooden platform were provided outside it could have been approached from the roof of the north aisle. This may have had its own access stair earlier, or would have been more easily accessible by ladder.

Most dovecotes of the medieval and later periods were provided with a roofed wooden louver which stood on the ridge of the roof, through which the pigeons entered and left. However, in the 15th century louvers were always associated with manor houses and manorial dovecotes; a less pretentious pair of pigeon entrances in the walls may have been thought more fitting for a parish priest. A columbarium in the 15th-century tower of Collingbourne Ducis church,



Fig. 6 Doorway and blocked aperture in north wall of chancel; photo Mark McDermott

Wiltshire, has a large rectangular flight hole in the south wall which may be compared with the aperture in the north wall here. When in use every pigeon entrance had to be protected against the entry of birds of prey (Shakespeare used the phrase 'like an eagle in a dovecoat' to express the havoc which a bird of prey could cause).<sup>7</sup> The commonest protective device was a set of parallel inclined boards about 152mm apart, which pigeons could pass through freely, but which birds of prey could not.<sup>8</sup> Before the early 17th century the right to keep pigeons was restricted to lords of the manor and parish priests. This restriction in common law was not challenged in the royal courts until 1587, when an infringement at Thorpe, Surrey, came before the Court of

Exchequer. The Court sounded various opinions, including that of Lord Burghley, the High Treasurer, and concluded unanimously that 'No one could erect a dove-house de novo but the lord of the manor, and the parson of the church, and by ancient law this was inquirable at the leet'. (This manorial prerogative lasted until 1619.<sup>9</sup>) How long priests continued to keep pigeons in churches is unknown, but there is documentary evidence of the practice in Worcestershire in the late 16th century.<sup>10</sup> The columbarium at Compton Martin was mentioned in a glebe terrier of 1606, but another terrier of 1639 makes no reference to it, which may imply that it fell out of use between those dates.<sup>11</sup> It seems likely that after the early 17th century it became more common for a parson to have a purpose-built dovecote near the parsonage than to keep pigeons in the church. In Norfolk Dr Robin Lucas has found evidence from 17th-century glebe terriers of ten dovecotes associated with parsonages.<sup>12</sup> A search of glebe terriers in Somerset might find equivalent evidence.

The ancient practice of allowing pigeons to range widely over farmland to find their own food was brought to an end by the French Revolutionary Wars from 1793. The price of wheat rose to unprecedented levels; agricultural economists of the time calculated that pigeons consumed more value in corn than they produced in meat and manure. After five years of war John Billingsley, reporting on Somerset to the Board of Agriculture, could write of pigeons: 'These are considered so ravenous and mischievous that few are kept.'<sup>13</sup> Large-scale pigeon farming had been common until a few years earlier. Further changes in land use and the law continued to restrict pigeon-farming, so that by the later 19th century most dovecotes had been demolished or converted to other purposes. By then the traditional knowledge of pigeon-farming which had been part of the rural culture had died out. This may explain why the columbarium at Compton Martin was not mentioned in Collinson's History of Somerset (1791), Sir Stephen Glynne's Notes on Somerset Churches (1845 for Compton Martin), nor in the report of a visit of this Society to this church in the Proceedings of 1873. Nor is it mentioned in an architect's report of 1900, nor in papers of the Incorporated Church Building Society of 1858 and c. 1900.<sup>14</sup> Dovecotes first began to attract the attention of antiquarians from 1887, when R. S. Ferguson published an article collecting some miscellaneous historical information about them in The Archaeological Journal.<sup>15</sup> From 1905 the Hon. Mildred Berkeley campaigned to preserve them as historic buildings.<sup>16</sup> She brought about a widespread recognition of their historical importance, which probably explains why the columbarium at Compton Martin was first noticed by informed observers in 1909.

It is satisfying to find that physical evidence of the medieval practice of keeping pigeons in parish churches survives in Somerset, if at only one church.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful for the assistance of David Bromwich, the Revd Heather Matthews and Alan Thomas.

## Authors

J. D. McCann, Bristol Cottage, Greenhead, Sidbury, Devon, EX10 0RH.

M. B. McDermott, Rowans, Comeytrowe Road, Trull, Taunton, Somerset, TA3 7NF.

F. W. Pexton, Armour Meadow, Burghill, Hereford, HR4 7RW.

## REFERENCES

1 G. Marshall, 'The discovery of a columbarium in the tower of Sarnesfield church, Herefordshire', *Trans of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club*, 18 (1904), 263; *RCHM Inventory: Herefordshire*, vol. 3, 177-8; N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Herefordshire* (1963), 286.

2 George Marshall's notebook, together with Donald Smith's letter, are deposited in the library of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club, Hereford; A. Watkins, 'Additional notes on

- pigeon houses', *Trans. of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club*, 18 (1904), 264-5.
- 3 *SANH*, 55 (1909), Part 1, 62.
- 4 *SANH*, 82 (1936), 49; Horne deposited his notebook with the Society in 1940. It is now in the Society's library.
- 5 SRO, D/D/Rg 32/1.
- 6 N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: North Somerset and Bristol* (1958), 174.
- 7 *Coriolanus* (1607), V, vi, 115.
- 8 J. McCann, 'An historical enquiry into the design and use of dovecotes', *Trans Ancient Monuments Soc*, 35 (1991), 129-33.
- 9 J. McCann, 'Dovecotes and pigeons in English law', *Trans Anc Mon Soc*, 44 (2000), 27-30.
- 10 M. Berkeley, 'The dovecotes of Worcestershire', *Reports and Papers of the Associated Architectural Societies*, 28 (1905-6), 333-62.
- 11 SRO, D/D/Rg 32/2.
- 11 SRO, D/D/Rg 32/2.
- 12 Pers. comm. to J. McCann, 5 October 1994.
- 13 J. Billingsley, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Somerset* (London, 1798), 150.
- 14 SRO, D/D/cf 1903, 54; Lambeth Palace Library, ICBS 5303 and 10237.
- 15 R. S. Ferguson, 'Culverhouses', *Archaeological Journal*, 44 (1887), 105-16.
- 16 As note 10, 349, and unpublished lectures.