

Foxton Dovecot and Meadow



Early 20th century photograph

*Cambridge Antiquarian Society,
County Records Office, Cambridge*

By the Friends of the Dovecot Meadow
with support from the Local Heritage Initiative,
Foxton Parish Council and
South Cambridgeshire District Council
2006

Why was this leaflet produced?

The dovecot has stood in its central position in Foxton since the 18th century; but over the years its use has changed and it gradually became more dilapidated. In the late 1990's the Parish Council decided that the continued decline needed to be halted and that this piece of the village heritage should be conserved. The actual ownership was, and still is, with Cambridgeshire County Council. The village was therefore canvassed to determine whether people would be interested in pursuing its conservation. Sufficient interest was generated to result in the formation of a 'Friends' group, closely associated with the Parish Council. This group established management plans on the basis of the biological interest in the site, secured funding for the restoration of the building and negotiated a 25 year lease from the County Council. It also took over organising the meadow cutting and carried out carefully selected planting on the site in line with chalk grassland management. The Friends also addressed fencing and access issues, bramble clearance and a host of other tasks to turn the site into a green space of which the village could be proud.

Community involvement and interpretation of a site's assets are important elements in obtaining funding for restoration and conservation projects. This leaflet, together with a display panel and an educational pack, provide the interpretation. Those who have helped with planting, hedge trimming, grass cutting or any of the other practical tasks needed to maintain the site, and the committee work of the Friends, reflect the community involvement. Volunteers will always be welcomed to help with these ongoing tasks.

What is a Dovecot?

A dovecot was, and still is, a place to keep doves or pigeons. In times gone by, the birds were kept as a source of both eggs and meat, and building one was initially restricted to the upper classes. The interior would have been lined with nesting boxes, often with rotating ladders to make collection easier. The roof was structured so that the birds could easily fly in and out.

Geology and soils

The geology of the area is predominantly Upper Cretaceous Middle Chalk with superficial areas of River Terrace Deposits of sand and gravel. Alluvial Fan Deposits lie close to the water courses. The meadow is about 17m above sea level.

The northern part of the meadow has a superficial geology called Holocene (Flandrian) River Terrace Deposits of sand and gravel. The bedrock underlying the meadow, and most of the village, is Upper Cretaceous, Cenomanian Zig Zag Chalk. A band of Totternhoe Stone, a Lower Chalk formation, passes under the buildings on the opposite side of the High Street. The nearby hills to the south of the meadow are Holywell Nodular Chalk formations, part of the White Chalk subgroup, with Melbourn Rock around the sides. There is also an outcropping of Melbourn Rock on the eastern side.

The soil on the site has not been studied in detail, but the raised platform area abutting the road is a fine loam, becoming more clay loam towards the hill to the south.

Chalk Hill immediately to the south of the site, had a number of chalk pits at the top. The chalk was dug for use in road repairs and probably for building blocks of



‘clunch’. In 1830, one of the pits was specifically dedicated for the Surveyor of Highways, and the inhabitants of the village, for chalk supplies. The site of a kiln is given on a map of 1903, suggesting the local use of prepared chalk for agriculture and building. It has been suggested that the track that crosses the meadow, Jenkins’s Lane, was an earlier route used to access the chalk pits until the more recent path from Fowlmere road was established.

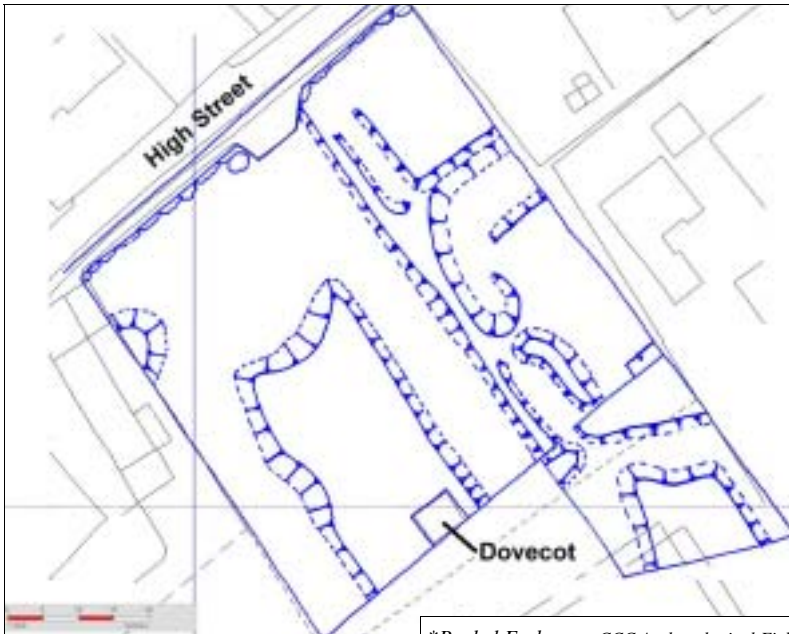
Archaeology

The archaeology of this site is essentially unknown because nobody has had any reason to explore it in the past, and the current archaeological philosophy is not to disturb the ground if you don't have to. In 2005 four very small holes, about 30cm square, were dug to determine the depth of topsoil. These produced pieces of c15th-16th century pottery, suggesting that the site has been occupied for at least 600 years.

The lumps and bumps on the site were mapped out* as shown below, and various geophysical surveys have been conducted which suggest at least three house platforms. These indicate that the site has probably had a variety of buildings and possibly ponds and gravel extraction on it, all of which have contributed to what we now see. The only way to unravel the story would be by digging it up, and thereby destroying it.



Shards of pottery found on the site



*Rachel Fosberry, CCC Archaeological Field Unit



The plan above shows a resistance survey of the site where black is high resistance and white is low resistance, the former probably representing building rubble or foundations. The lumps and bumps on the site are also shown. There is a large semi circular area (red) adjacent to the fence and to the west of the gate which might indicate that this has been dug out in the past, perhaps as a watering hole as the stream through the village ran along the boundary. The accounts of the Surveyor of Highways in 1786 does note a payment of £1-2s-0d to 'Jas. Impey for digging in Jankins land'. The low areas may therefore occur where gravel for road maintenance has been extracted. There are indications of structures still existing under the ground elsewhere, but no clear pattern, suggesting it has been used and reused at different times.

Maps

The earliest known map of the site is from the Ordnance Survey of 1810. The records before then are all imprecise as to particular locations. There may be a document that states



Sketch from the Ordnance Survey Draft Drawing 1810

where someone lived, but without a very good description of their property boundaries you are left with a large element of conjecture unless there is a map.

The 1810 map was about 2" (5cm) to a mile and was prepared as a draft for later maps, which means it can only be considered as a rough

indication. The earliest detailed map was the Inclosure map of 1830. This is significant to historians because it was important to the big landowners of the time that it be accurate. It showed a host of other detail such as footpaths, and was accompanied by a textual description of every plot.

It is from the Inclosure Award text that we first find exactly where 'Dovehouse Close', 'Jenkins's Close' and 'Jenkins's Lane' were located.



Inclosure Map of 1830

County Records Office, Cambridge

There is a 'Tithe' map of 1839 which was probably based on the Inclosure survey, but the next map of any real use is the Ordnance Survey map of 1886 at 25" (64cm) to the mile.

More recent maps do improve on this, but tend to lack the elegance of the earlier ones.



*Tithe Apportionment Map
1839*

County Records Office, Cambridge



Ordnance Survey Map of 1886

All of the maps have Station Road (or Stocks Lane as it used to be called) going off near the centre at the top, High Street running from bottom left to top right, with, apart from the 1810 map, Maltings Lane at the bottom left. The site has been outlined in red.

History

Rowland Parker carried out extensive studies of the Manor Court Rolls and Wills relating to Foxton which culminated in the publishing of the 'Common Stream' in 1975. Some parts of this section wouldn't be known without his work.

The earliest known mention of part of the site is a terrier of 1579 which mentions a Dovehouse. It is unlikely to be the one in the Dovehouse Close, but it also states:

“Item. There is one other close or pasture called Jenkins contyninge 1 acre. A tenmt of Robert Ayler lyinge on the Easte, and the common lane leadinge from Foxton to Fulmayer on the Weste. The no(rth) heade abutteth Northe on the common streate, the other Southe on the Donne Field”

Not only does this strongly suggest that this is indeed the eastern side of the present meadow, but that the hollow way up the middle once extended much further than defined in the later records.

In 1594 a further terrier gives

“One close called Jankens being by the Laine on the west and

Robert Aylin on the east abutting uppon the comon streete 1-0-0” (the numbers giving the area of the plot as 1 acre 0 roods 0 perches). The area at Inclosure was given as 0-3-11 or about 0.8 of an acre. This suggests that the southern boundary had been reduced in the intervening years, possibly by the creation of Back Lane.

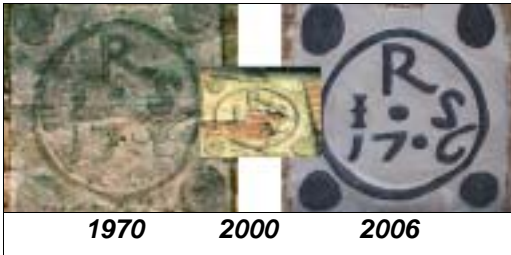
A terrier is a document listing and describing someone's land holdings



A terrier of Michaelhouse Farm belonging to Trinity College Lands by Edward Myllis in 1631 states:

“One inclosure of pasture called Jankins close, a common lane on the west part thereof and the Messuage of the late Wm Welles, now Mistress Permaine on the east, abutting upon ye streete”

The dovecot building has a plaque above the door, the condition of which had deteriorated badly over the years. The plaque has been expertly renovated as part of the restoration. Peter Jeevar in his book ‘Dovecots of Cambridgeshire’ states that it said “R. J&S 1706”. This almost certainly stood for Rayner. James & Susan. It is thought that the house on the Rayner farm which incorporated the dovecot was demolished in 1825, and lay a little to the south in what is now the school playing field.



The fullest description of the site occurs in the text of the Inclosure Award of 1830:

“Also all that ancient inclosure called

Dovehouse Close (No. 19 on the said map or plan) containing one acre and nineteen perches one moiety whereof was heretofore the property of the said John Bendyshe in right of his said purchase of John Ellis and the other moiety thereof was heretofore the property of the said Wortham Hitch and the whole is allotted and hereinafter awarded to the said William Hurrell. Also all that ancient inclosure called Jenkins's

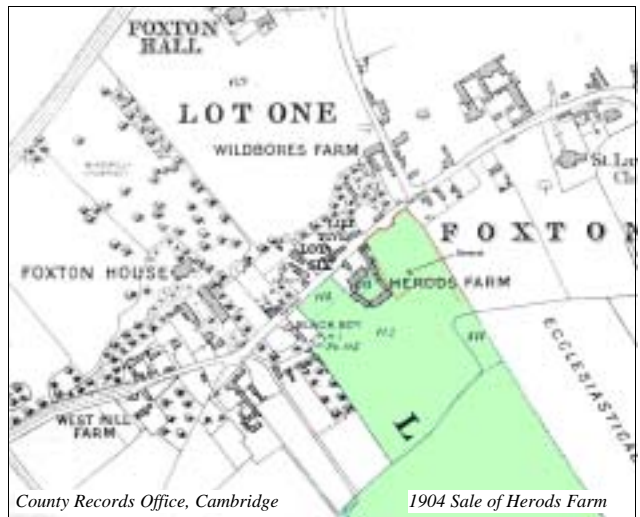
The term **Enclosure** is often used, and is synonymous with, **Inclosure**. The original Act of parliament was for the Inclosure of Foxton.

Close (No. 20 on the said map or plan) containing three roods and eleven perches heretofore the property of the Master Fellows and Scholars of Trinity College Cambridge allotted and hereinafter awarded to the said William Hurrell.”

“ and of two ancient inclosures called Dovehouse Close and Back Close and the Dovehouse thereon (Nos 15 and 19 on the said map or plan) containing one acre three roods and seventeen perches allotted and awarded to the said William Hurrell”

The latter is the first confirmation that there was a dovecot in this field. It also had a footpath; No. 11 Footpath, from Jenkins’s Lane gate to Barrons Lane which was 'stopped up'.

Jenkins’s Lane was officially stopped up in 1832, when it was described as being 148 yards long and 18 feet wide.



In 1904 Herods Farm was sold, and the document gives us another unequivocal location of the dovehouse, with both text and map. It also gives us the latest date where we can say that the building was used for pigeons. The text describes every building on Herods Farm and ends thus;

“Timber and thatched and part Brick and Slated Cart Horse Stable, 2 Chaff Houses and 3-Bay Tiled Horse Shed, also Brick and Thatched Pigeon House, detached near.” - The only detached building shown on the farm exactly matches the present dovecot building.

A photograph taken in 1928 (below) and one taken some years earlier (cover) show the thatched dovecot in an open meadow with fences in the distance, and all the detailed maps from 1886 to the present day show the building.

Sometime after 1904, and to within the recall of members of the village, the ‘pigeon house’ changed use to be a grain store. Eileen Looker recalls helping her father put on the corrugated iron roof which undoubtedly saved the building for us.

After its time as a grain store the old dovecot became a stable. One particular white horse called Hockey made the field a favourite stopping off point for the children coming home from school. Many people in the village don’t refer to the meadow as anything to do with Jenkins or Dovecots - it’s just Hockey’s field.



Biodiversity

Up until the mid 1980's the meadow was still being used as pasture for cows, with the herd being kept at Bury Farm. Then the meadow was used as grazing for horses.



Cowslip

These past uses have encouraged the growth of vigorous grasses and it is known that fertiliser was spread on the field. Now that the wildlife value of the meadow is of particular interest the vegetation is being managed to maximise the site's value for flowering plants and insects.

It is hoped to create a meadow that is more typical of chalk grassland rather than one that is full of tall grasses with patches of nettles and docks.

The existing clumps of greater knapweed and field scabious are being used as a source of local seed and other species including cowslip, bird's foot trefoil, chicory and horseshoe vetch have been introduced to the meadow.

Establishing the right cutting regime has also been very important. A cut is undertaken in mid May in order to lessen the vigour of the spring grasses and the cow parsley. This then leaves 'space' for the summer flowers to grow through without being over-shaded. Another cut is undertaken in the autumn to remove much of the dead standing vegetation in order to allow fresh re-growth.



Chicory

However, patches of standing vegetation are retained against alternating boundaries to provide cover for small mammals and insects throughout the winter months.



Birds-foot trefoil

In the autumn yellow rattle seed is added to the short grass. This plant is parasitic on the grasses and thus reduces their vigour. This again helps to create space for the flowers to grow through. Only seed of UK origin has been used, where possible locally sourced.

The cutting regime should provide suitable conditions for a range of flowers and insects, thus helping to make the site rich in biodiversity.



Knapweed

There has been careful consideration of the hedging plants. The species chosen mainly consist of blackthorn, hazel, guelder rose and field maple. The hedge at the rear of the site will provide a new wildlife corridor, whilst not being allowed to grow so tall that it obscures the view of the hill beyond.

The hedge on the High Street side of the site will be cut to retain its thick centre. This hedge has currently become too tall for its location and will be 'laid'. This will result in the hedge being reduced in height with the cut material being woven back into the hedge to thicken it. The hedge will then be allowed to grow up again.

A Black mulberry tree has been planted to symbolise the greater number of trees on and around the site in the past, and to replace a mulberry tree that was known to be by the dovecot.

Animals

The most abundant wild mammal on the site is most probably the vole, but the mammal you are most likely to see in the Dovecot Meadow is a domestic cat! The voles and other small mammals are the reason the cat will be there.



Field vole

Your chances of seeing a vole on a casual inspection are remote because they live in the lowest levels of the grass. If you come along to help with the regular grass cutting and raking you stand a much better chance of seeing these small, shy creatures as they are briefly exposed before diving under the grass again.



Hedgehog



Barn owl

A proper survey hasn't taken place yet, but it is almost certain that there will be mice and shrews of various types as they enjoy the same sort of habitat.

All of these species are a significant source of food for barn and other owls, which we hope will be encouraged to take up residence in the newly erected owl nesting box nearby.

The meadow also provides a good habitat for hedgehogs and, near to the decomposing cut grass heaps, possibly for grass snakes.



Grass snake

It is possible, as they are known to be on the edges of the village, that badgers may find their way here too.



Blue tit

Photo: Arie van den Hout

The odd passing fox is almost certain to be attracted to the site.

As the hedging around the site thickens a number of birds can be expected to take up residence. All of the common garden species plus some of those that value a quieter spot such as green woodpeckers, dunnock or bullfinches are hoped for.

The birds will all be encouraged by the diversity of insect species and seeds which will provide food.

The reconstruction of the building has incorporated specialist nest boxes for swifts beneath the eaves. These summer visitors are often seen flying over the meadow. Crevices for bats have also been provided and, with luck, we might attract some pipestrelles or brown long-eared bats as residents.



Common blue

It is almost certain that the number of insect species will increase as a greater diversity of plants establish in the meadow. The more visible of these will be butterflies and moths but beetles,

crickets and bugs of various sorts will thrive and provide a food source for the birds and animals.



Comma

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