

## TWO KENT PIGEON HOUSES

By JOHN E. L. CAIGER

### HAWLEY MANOR PIGEON HOUSE

IN the garden at the rear of Hawley Manor, Dartford, stands a fine brick-built pigeon house. (N.G.R. TQ 54887205.)

It is a listed building and protected by the terms of Schedule B, Town and Country Planning. The site on which the present dwelling stands is an ancient one. It has been recorded that John Poulter was in possession of the house in 1485; later, from 1509 until 1603, it was owned by the Mayo family<sup>1</sup> and the pigeon house was probably built sometime towards the end of this period of ownership. The three successive houses built on this site have been destroyed or damaged by fire one in 1650, the last one in 1919.

Sir Francis Leigh obtained possession of the house in 1695 and the family occupied the property until about the middle of the nineteenth century.

The embanked course of the A2 motorway now passes within 200 ft. (60·90 m.) of the pigeon house and, unfortunately, makes the building most conspicuous to travellers on that route. Its proximity to the motorway has made it a target for vandalism. In October 1970, an unaccountable fire damaged part of the pigeon-house roof and, in 1974, the weather-vane was stolen and the windows were broken. The last time that pigeons were kept in the cote was in 1939 when the Manor was owned by Mrs. Mabel Temple-Johnson. Sir William Quiller Orchardson, R.A., portrait and subject painter, lived there at the end of the nineteenth century and built a large studio adjoining the main house.<sup>2</sup>

Permission was most readily granted by the present owner, and the pigeon house was visited for the purpose of making scale drawings and studying its constructional details.

The building is square and measures 18 ft. 10 in. × 18 ft. 10 in. (5·74 m.) internally, with walls 2 ft. 3 in. (0·69 m.) thick. The brickwork is laid in English Bond and is of a mellow red colour. The pigeon house is entered through a doorway set centrally in the north-east elevation a little above ground level. An ancient door, made from oak planks of 2 in. (0·05 m.) thickness and strengthened with iron studs over its entire surface is still in use and could be original. Fitted on the inside is

<sup>1</sup> E. Hasted, *History of the County of Kent*, 2nd edn. ii, 365.

<sup>2</sup> *Trans. of the Dartford District Antiquarian Society*, iii (1933), 5.

a large iron lock; externally, the door is secured by means of a heavy iron bar, which rests in clips across the door and is fixed by hasp and padlock to the left-hand door-post. A piece of carved stone, perhaps a pedestal from an early garden ornament, has been used as a makeshift doorstep. On the right-hand side of the pigeon house, there is a red-brick garden wall, built in Flemish Bond. The construction of this wall, although somewhat later in date, carefully follows the courses and projecting brickwork of the pigeon house to which it is joined.

Abutting to the left-hand side of the building is a pillar supporting one of a pair of ornamental wrought-iron gates. The brickwork pillars have been embellished with knapped flint panels, which suggest a late eighteenth-century date for their construction. The carriage-way, which these gates span, is now a few yards westward, unusable, as it is buried beneath the embankment of the nearby motorway.

The most prominent feature of the Hawley pigeon house is its large canopy or cupola-turret mounted above the lantern or 'glover'. Its four ogee-shaped faces are tile-hung and decorative round-ended tiles have been used on the two lower courses of each face. On the base of the canopy, at each corner, there are ornamental wooden pendants.

The timber framework of the massive canopy is not original. It was renewed in 1922, when the pigeon house was carefully restored under the direction of Mr. Gerald E. Burgess, F.R.I.B.A. It was found that the oak timbers of the canopy were badly infested with the death-watch beetle to such an extent that the woodwork had been weakened too much for partial repair work to remedy. An early photograph of the pigeon house taken c. 1890 shows it very much as it is at present, complete with a canopy of identical form, indicating that the original proportions were faithfully preserved in the architect's replacement (Plate I).<sup>3</sup> The roof of the pigeon house is steeply pitched and its timber work is original. Sprocket pieces are fitted to the rafter ends at wall-plate level, which impart a pleasing out-turned appearance to the roof at the eaves. Beneath the canopy is the lantern. It has three leaded lights on each of its four faces, which together with the dormer windows provide the illumination for the interior. The lantern does not extend down to rooftop level; flight openings 6 in. (0·15 m.) high have been left on all four sides for the ingress and egress of the pigeons. These openings were once known as the 'glover' supposed to be a corruption of the French 'ouvert' or 'louvre'. On three faces of the roof, there are dormer windows fitted with leaded lights set in Dutch-style gable ends. There is no dormer window or gable on the north-west elevation. In a rectangular recess above the window on the north-east gable end, the date 1556 is inscribed on a mortared face. There is some doubt as to its authenticity,

<sup>3</sup> Original negative kindly loaned by our member Dr. P. H. G. Draper, B.Sc., Ph.D.

## TWO KENT PIGEON HOUSES

for on the photograph of 1890 it will be noted that this recess is devoid of both date and mortar. Neither does it appear on a later photograph taken after the restoration work of 1922 was completed. The north-east and south-west walls of this building still bear on their external faces wrought-iron X-shaped fitments, so often used in the past on old buildings, to restrain their walls from outward movement. Today, neither of these two walls shows any sign of bulging. It would appear that they have been left in position only for their ornamental effect as the vital iron tie-rod normally connecting the two iron X's has been removed. Around all four walls of the building, at 9 ft. 6 in. (2·90 m.) above ground level, is a conspicuous band of projecting brickwork, three courses deep. A projecting course of brick or stone work was usually placed around a pigeon house to prevent rats and other vermin from gaining access to the birds and eggs within. Rising from the apex of the canopy was a bronze weather-vane resting on an orb, below which was some decorative iron scroll-work and the customary four points of the compass. The top of the weather-vane was 45 ft. (13·71 m.) above ground level. It is the internal constructional details of this building which possibly provide its main interest. Around the four walls are disposed no less than 549 nesting-holes. They are arranged in rows from 2 ft. 6 in. (0·76 m.) above the floor to wall-top level. Beneath each row of holes is a ledge of brickwork, which provided an alighting platform for the birds. About one-third of the total number of nesting-holes have a piece of roofing-tile mortared across their lower part, presumably to prevent the young birds from falling out of the opening. All the holes are made within the thickness of the walls; they are 13 in. (0·33 m.) deep and turn at right angles, either to the left or to the right. At the centre of the brick-paved floor there is a square recess that may have once held a tank for drinking water. This recess is now filled with sand almost to floor-level.

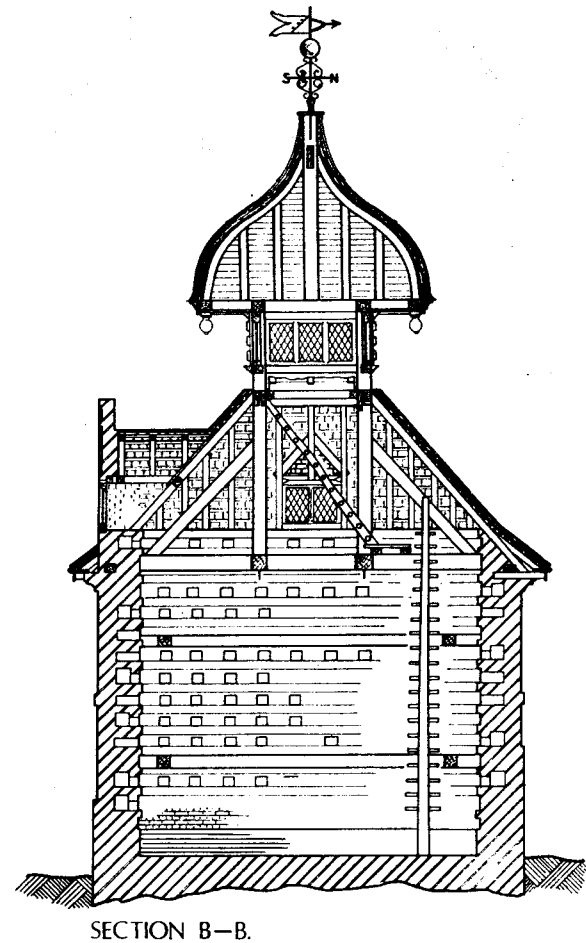
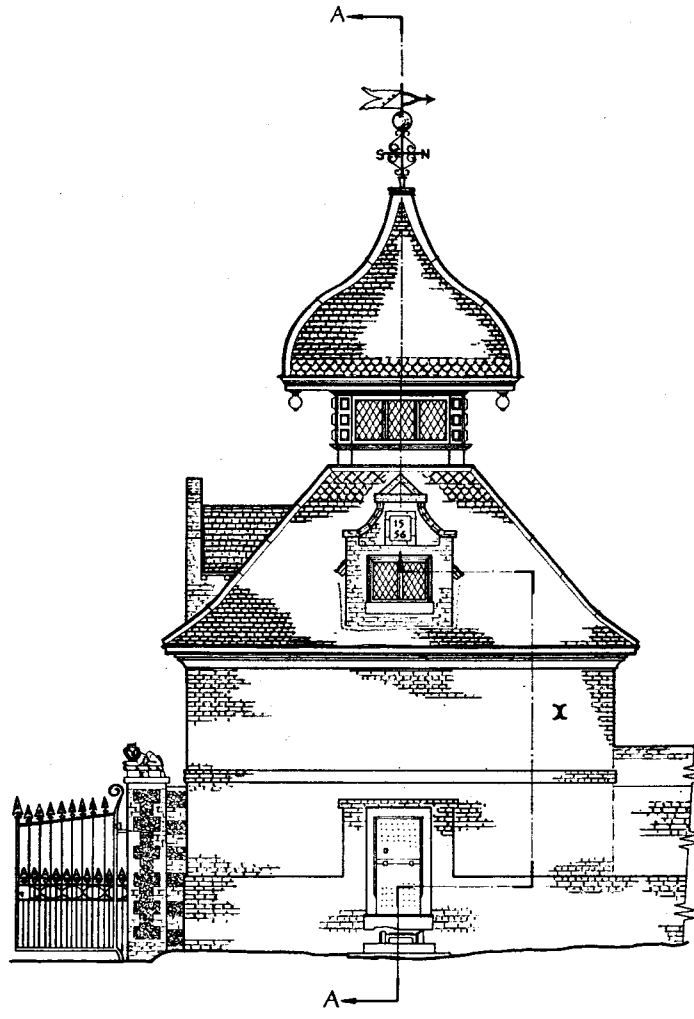
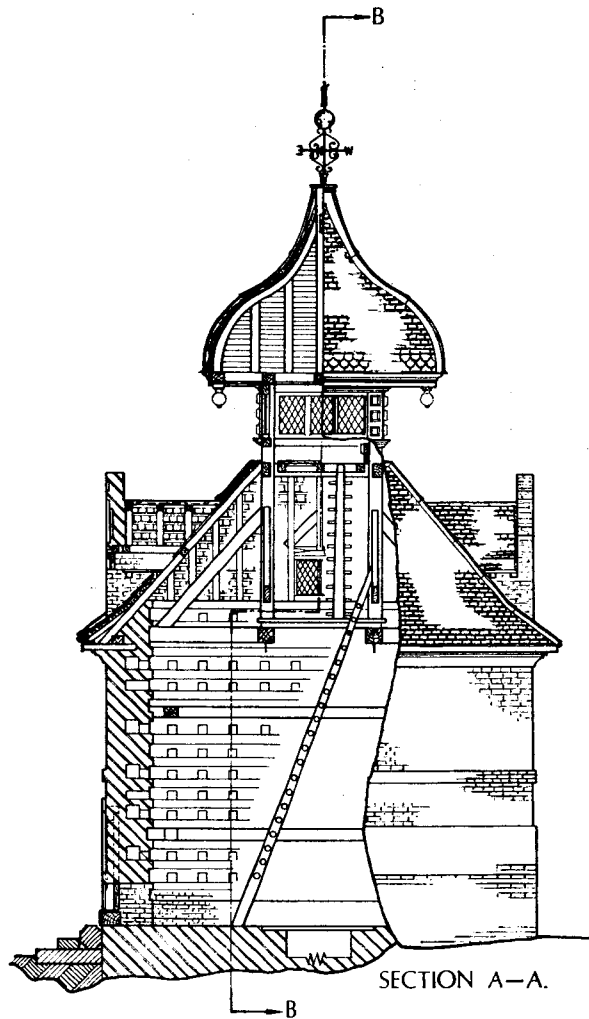
Cylindrical-shaped pigeon houses were usually equipped with a potence which was a ladder fixed to a vertical pivoted, revolving frame, used for the purpose of gaining access to all the nesting-boxes within the house. The Hawley pigeon house is square in form, and a device such as a conventional potence would not be feasible, as the boxes near the angles of the building would be inaccessible from a rotary arrangement. This difficulty was overcome by using two sets of wooden beams fixed into the four walls at 5 ft. 6 in. (1·68 m.) and 12 ft. (3·65 m.) above floor level. By walking along either the lower or upper set of beams, the pigeon-house keeper could comfortably reach any nesting-box he wished. Access to both sets of beams was gained by climbing the long archaic peg-ladder and stepping off on to the requisite beam beside the ladder. From the drawing, Fig. 1, Section B—B, it will be seen that another smaller peg-ladder was provided at a high level

inside the roof. This ladder, with its butt end resting on a small platform near the top of the longer ladder gives access to a pair of trap-doors, normally left open, just below the four external flight openings at the base of the lantern. At certain times of the year, however, it was necessary to prevent some of the birds from leaving the house; at these periods the two trap-doors would be shut. The structural arrangements for supporting the heavy canopy and roof-lantern are sturdy and straightforward; the entire load imposed by both the roof and canopy is taken by four stout vertical posts on to two 10 in. (0·25 m.) square-section horizontal beams, which span the north-west and south-east walls. The lower ends of these posts are tenoned and pegged into the two beams. To add further stability, two additional half sets of horizontal beams are tenoned and pegged to the full pair at right angles. Their ends rest on the north-east and south-west walls. Two side struts are fitted to each of the vertical members at right angles, their lower ends being set into the horizontal beams to resist any side movement. Whilst the principal members supporting the roof and canopy loading were being examined, it was noted that their respective mortice and tenon joints all bore carpenters' marks. These were in the usual form of shallow cuts made in the timber close to each joint. Single and multiple strokes, up to four in number, had been used, the numeral 5 being indicated by an inverted Roman V. Larger numerals were made up of ligatured forms of X and inverted V with oblique strokes through them.

#### LEEDS ABBEY PIGEON HOUSE

Set amongst the present outbuildings of Leeds Abbey Farm, Leeds, near Maidstone, are the standing remains of a small pigeon house which is separated by an alley 4 ft. (1·22 m.) wide from another longer building. This too, had once served as a pigeon house. (N.G.R. TQ 82225290.) The larger building is known locally as *The Chapel* or *The Mill*; both of these buildings are now roofless and in a ruinous condition and, by some curious oversight, neither building appears to have any protection order on it. An examination by the writer clearly showed that during the past three centuries structural modifications have been made to them from time to time, and the purpose of this paper is an attempt to trace these alterations in a chronological order.

The land on which the two buildings stand once belonged to the Augustinian Priory of Leeds, founded c. 1119 A.D., the site of which lies 460 ft. (140 m.) north-eastwards. The priory was suppressed in 1539 and afterwards passed into the possession of Warham St. Leger, of Ulcombe, and then to Francis Colepepper. By 1598, or a little later, the property had passed to William Covert, who may have added the north front. In 1610, the building was sold to William Meredith and it continued in his family until 1765, when the house and estate were again



HAWLEY MANOR  
PIGEON HOUSE.

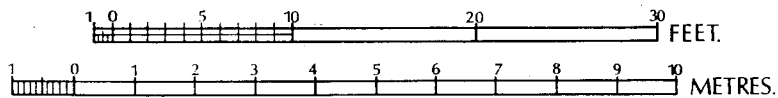
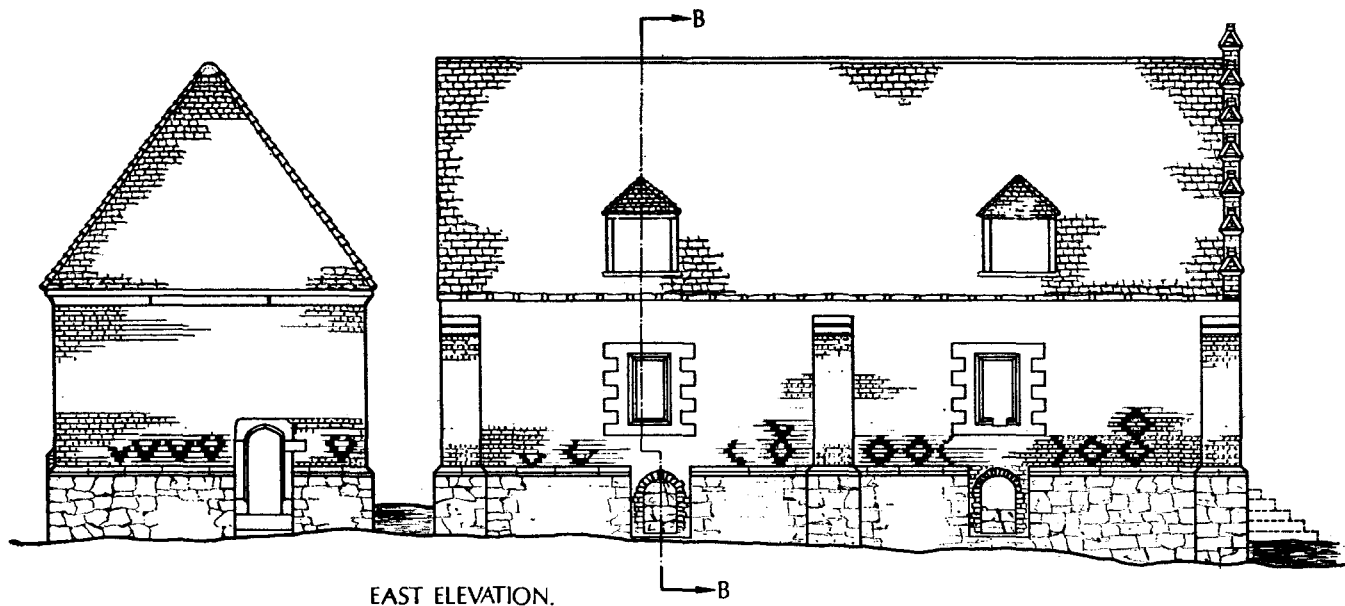
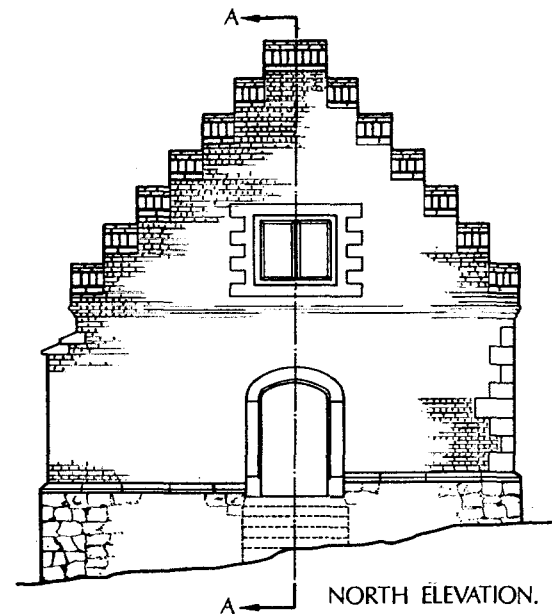


FIG. 1

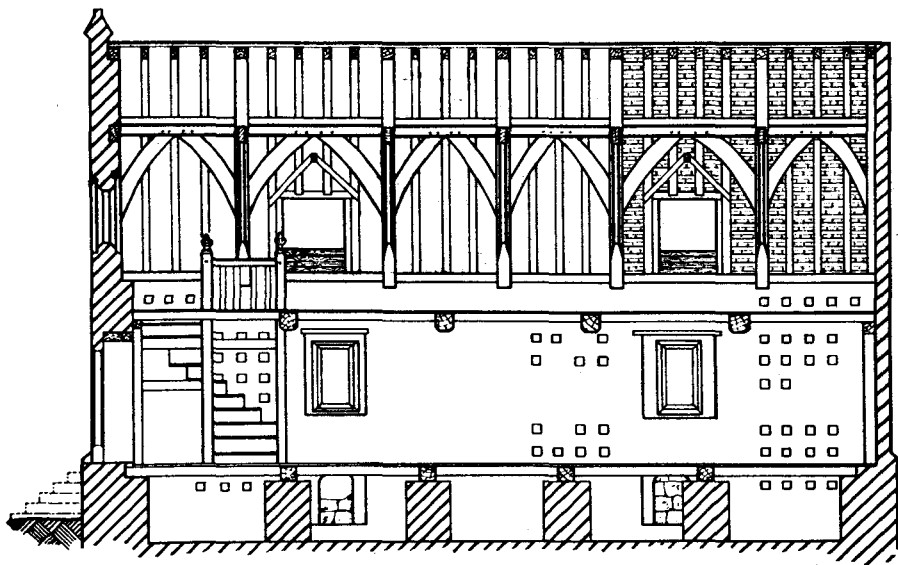
SURVEYED AND DRAWN: J. L. CAIGER, MAY 1922.



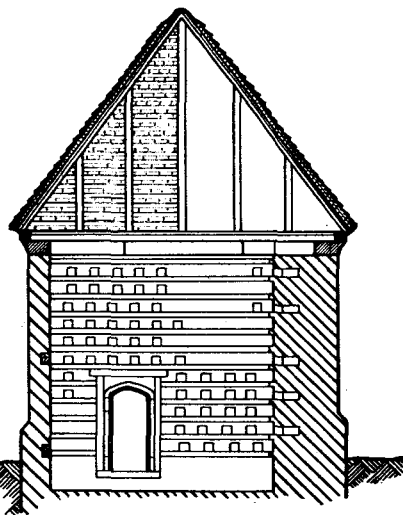
EAST ELEVATION.



NORTH ELEVATION.

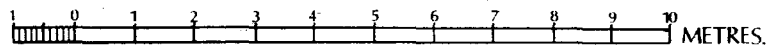
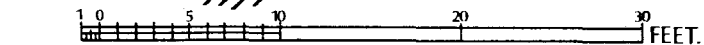


SECTION A-A.



SECTION B-B.

LEEDS ABBEY  
PIGEON HOUSE.



SURVEYED & DRAWN. J. L. CARR, 1874.

FIG. 2

## TWO KENT PIGEON HOUSES

sold, this time to John Calcraft, a wealthy native of Dorset. Finally, in 1790, the house was pulled down and the present farmhouse, known as Leeds Abbey Farm, was built on the hill to the west of the site of the house.

### *Description of the two existing Pigeon Houses*

The smaller building measures 17 ft. × 12 ft. (5·18 × 3·65 m.) internally, with three of its walls 3 ft. 6 in. (1·07 m.) thick; the building is constructed of red brickwork laid in English Bond. The footings are of stone rubble and the lower level of the building is stone-faced. Approximately 105 nesting-boxes are arranged in eleven rows on the east wall whilst the south and west walls contain 143 and 110 boxes, respectively. Alighting ledges, formed by a projecting brickwork course are provided for the pigeons below the box openings. The north wall is not original and has been inserted at a much later date. It is only 1 ft. 3 in. (0·38 m.) thick and does not contain nesting-boxes. The stile of a wooden ladder and its wood anchorages are still visible on this wall. The entrance to the building is through a narrow four-centred stone doorway, the mouldings and stops of which indicate an early sixteenth-century date. Four flight openings were formerly provided at eaves' level for the pigeons. The roof timbering and tiling have disappeared but, fortunately, its form, of a simple tile-hipped roof is preserved in photographs taken in 1942.<sup>4</sup> The adjacent and larger building is in alignment with the small pigeon house and was once joined to it. This building shows evidence of several structural changes over the last two centuries. Its present-day appearance, however, both externally and internally, bears little resemblance to the conventional pigeon house, though this is what it undoubtedly was. Its northern end is gabled in a distinctive form known as *Corbie Steps* or *Crowsteps*. The building is constructed in red brickwork to match the smaller building, and is also laid in English Bond. A moulded four-centred stone doorway, the step of which is 3 ft. (0·91 m.) above ground level, provides the only access to this building. A flight of five stone-steps was once set below this entrance. Above the doorway there is a double-light window formed in rubbed brickwork. At a later date, this window was embellished by plastering a thin mortar-coating on top of the brickwork simulating the ashlar *Gibbs Surround* much favoured in buildings of the eighteenth century. The eastern elevation of this building is most striking. Two hipped dormer windows were set at a low level on the roof; they were of plain construction and nothing remains today to indicate if they were once glazed. Two single-light windows are set into the east wall and, in common with the double-light on the northern face, have also

<sup>4</sup> National Monuments Records (R.C.H.M.) Photographs B42/852 and B42/853.

been decorated with a mortared surround, giving them a distinctly ecclesiastical appearance. These windows are a later insertion and have been made to match the original northern window. The lower level of the brickwork is decorated with diaper work of simple lozenge form. It will be noted from the north elevation on the drawing, Fig. 2, that the ground slopes away considerably towards the east and, accordingly, this eastern wall has been strengthened with buttresses to resist any building movement. Today, there only remains the upper part of one of the buttresses, the others having collapsed; scars in the brickwork, however, remain to indicate their former position. The lower portion of the building is faced with uncoursed random rubble, set in mortar, the junction between brickwork and stone rubble being finished with moulded plinth-stones. Beneath the windows and near ground level two brick arched openings in the wall are to be noted. These, too, are late insertions and serve to ventilate the space beneath the ground floor (to be noted later) inside the building. One of the ventilation openings has been sealed off with stone blocks and the other one is now partly sealed. The inside of this building presents a surprising appearance and, as has been previously remarked, does not on first examination appear to have ever been used as a pigeon house. This impression is entirely due to the insertion of two floors which have transformed its internal appearance. At threshold level, a wooden floor has been inserted, which is partly supported on four centrally-disposed brickwork piers. At 8 ft. 6 in. (2.59 m.) above this floor, an upper floor has been constructed on four massive oak-beams set transversely across the eastern and western walls. A wooden stairway on the left-hand side of the entrance gives access to this upper floor. The balustrade posts at the top of this stairway are surmounted by three carved wood finials of seventeenth-century date. They are much worn and give the appearance of having been in use elsewhere. The oak-timbering of the roof is unusual and not the type of construction associated with a pigeon house. It is a replacement, and the timbers used may have been recovered from the old mansion after its demolition at the end of the eighteenth century. The roof-timbering consists of six bays of unequal width. It is of the butt-purlin, arch-brace collar truss type. Each principal rafter and its arch-brace are supported by a wooden jack-corbels, the rafter ends resting on wall-plates at their extremities. The principal rafters are toothed into the purlins, after which point their section is reduced to that of the common rafters up to the ridge. The collars are in turn notched to the purlins. Curved wind-braces are fitted to the principals and secured in position with oak-pegs. Details of the roof construction are shown on the drawing in Sections A—A and B—B, Fig. 2.

From the available historical evidence, together with a close inspection of the two buildings, the following possible chronology is suggested.



## TWO KENT PIGEON HOUSES

At the dissolution of the monastery, in 1539, the number of monks and lay brothers living there were very few, so the small pigeon house, at that time measuring about 24 ft. (7·31 m.) square and probably dating from the early part of the sixteenth century, was adequate for the community. As has been noted earlier, the monastic house known as Leeds Abbey had been partly rebuilt by William Covert at the end of the sixteenth century<sup>5</sup> and, presumably, had a large number of people in residence. By the time the estate had become the property of the Meredith family the produce from this small pigeon house was totally inadequate for the needs of this new household. Therefore, it was greatly extended lengthwise. The large pigeon house was built with its southern end butted on to the northern wall of the smaller house, making one long continuous building. This assumption is completely justified in a view of Leeds Abbey drawn by J. Badslade, c. 1720,<sup>6</sup> which depicts the long pigeon house in its correct position and complete with buttresses, dormer windows and the northern doorway. This old engraving also shows a louvre or Glover over the pigeon house at its southern end. Significantly, no windows or floor-ventilation openings are shown on the eastern wall. At this period the mansion and estate were owned by Roger Meredith. John Calcraft purchased the property in 1765 and soon began enlarging the residence and making improvements to the grounds, which at that time were laid out in the conventional formal style of the seventeenth century. Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, the landscape gardener, was commissioned by Calcraft to transform the existing gardens and he began the work early in 1771.<sup>7</sup> It is believed that amongst Brown's improvements were the making of the large lake, still to be seen today, and what is more pertinent to this paper, the alterations to the exterior of the pigeon house to convey the impression, when viewed from a distance, that it was a chapel. It was quite common practice for landscape gardeners of the eighteenth century to disguise utilitarian buildings with a sham façade. Capability Brown was fond of providing his patrons with a skyline view of a church or chapel, such as the one he created at Danson Park, Bexley, still known as the Chapel House. It is likely that Brown was responsible for inserting the two windows in the eastern wall of the pigeon house and framing these and the existing northern window with a mortar coating to simulate stone quoins. There is no doubt that the two eastern wall windows are a later insertion; this can be clearly seen inside the house by the mutilated brickwork courses and the destruction of the nesting-boxes near the windows. A small recess, about 3 ft. × 4 ft. (0·91 × 1·22 m.) wide was made 18 ft. (5·48 m.) from the southern end

<sup>5</sup> Rev. C. H. Fielding, *Invicta Magazine*, ii (1911), Dartford, 251.

<sup>6</sup> J. Harris, *The History of Kent*, i, London, 176.

<sup>7</sup> D. Stroud, *Capability Brown*, London, 1965, 146.

of the building; this, presumably, broke the line of the long building and strengthened the illusion of a church or chapel. Brown received over £2,000 for his share in the work of re-designing the garden.<sup>8</sup> The creation of a large lake was a typical improvement favoured by Brown and the Leeds Abbey lake is a fine example of his work. The drawing by J. Badslade, referred to earlier, shows a complex series of water-basins, fountains and a sunken water-garden on the right-hand side of the mansion, fed by distant springs. Capability Brown's lake covers much of the area formerly occupied by the water-gardens and has obviously been contrived by widening and linking the water-courses back to their source at these springheads. Today, there are still four active springs feeding the lake at its south-western end. Capability Brown might have been commissioned to make further improvements to the grounds of Leeds Abbey had not John Calcraft been seized by an illness in 1772 from which he died at his home at Ingress Abbey, Greenhithe, at the comparatively early age of forty-six.<sup>9</sup> After John Calcraft's death the estate passed to his son John, who appears to have neglected the property. In 1790, the imposing mansion was pulled down and, at about this time or a little later, Leeds Abbey farmhouse was built. The ensuing period between 1790 and 1840 is a difficult one to evaluate with any certainty, as most of the evidence is circumstantial. It may be assumed that the needs of the farmhouse would not require the produce of such a large pigeon house, and it is suggested that it was about this time that the extensive internal structural changes were made to the building.

A close examination of the internal walls revealed that they had been rendered with clay daub containing a large amount of chopped straw. The surface of the walls had been lime-washed, many coats having been applied over the years. Beneath the clay rendering, the earlier pigeon nesting-boxes were found. All the boxes, with the exception of those out of view beneath the ground-floor, had been deliberately sealed off by wedging two bricks into the openings and packing them securely with a piece of broken tile. Beneath the holes were the remains of the alighting ledges. Each of the ledges had been roughly hacked off, leaving rows of jagged brickwork across the wall-faces. Roofing-tiles, laid face downwards on to the walls under the daub, had been used to level out these surface irregularities. Nesting-boxes had been set into the eastern and western walls, arranged in ten rows per wall; a few nesting-boxes were also discovered under the clay rendering on the northern wall. By estimate, the total number of boxes on the three walls would have been about 620, which when added to those in the small pigeon house, would have provided accommodation

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>9</sup> *The Dictionary of National Biography*, iii, London, 1968, 689.

## TWO KENT PIGEON HOUSES

for some 1,120 pairs of birds. The lower and upper floors were inserted and the two arched underfloor ventilation openings cut through the brickwork of the eastern wall. The oak-timbered replacement roof was installed together with the stairway between the two floor-levels.

Reference to the Tithe Award Map revealed several interesting points. From the Apportionments it was noted that certain parcels of land around the farm were exempt from tithes. The surveyor, J. Tootell, has endorsed the map with a note stating that the buildings shown within the exempted parcels, one of which includes the pigeon house, were not the result of his field measurements but were extracted and copied from 'old surveys'. The long pigeon house is shown in its correct position and bears a shallow recess at the exact position where the present alleyway separating the two buildings has been cut. The small pigeon house was detached from the larger building by extending the recess along and out through the western wall. This necessitated removing nearly all of the northern wall of the small early pigeon house, destroying the nesting-boxes and leaving the header brick-courses roughly cut through on the right-hand side of the alleyway. On the left-hand side a new wall, only 1 ft. 3 in. (0.38 m.) in thickness was built to the small pigeon house and fitted with its near pyramidal roof as shown on the drawing. The southern buttress was removed completely and the two corners on the eastern wall repaired to match the existing brickwork.

It has not been possible to ascertain for what purpose the larger pigeon house was converted into a two-storied building, complete with elegant staircase and finely-made roof-structure. In 1910, the building was known as the *Chapel*, and the Rev. C. H. Fielding briefly refers to it in an article on Leeds Abbey.<sup>10</sup> The alternative name, the *Mill*, could be based on a misinterpretation of an old photograph of the building which shows a white flour-like deposit adhering to the external walls in and around the two window-openings.<sup>11</sup> An elderly resident of Leeds village recalls that during this time, the building was used to accommodate families of hop-pickers. Each season before their arrival, it was the practice of the farmer to have the inside walls sprayed with lime wash, some of which escaped through the window-openings and became coated on the external walls, as seen in the photograph.

Kent Archaeological Society is a registered charity number 223382

© Kent Archaeological Society August 2014

<sup>10</sup> Rev. C. H. Fielding, *Invicta Magazine*, ii (1911), Dartford, 250.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.