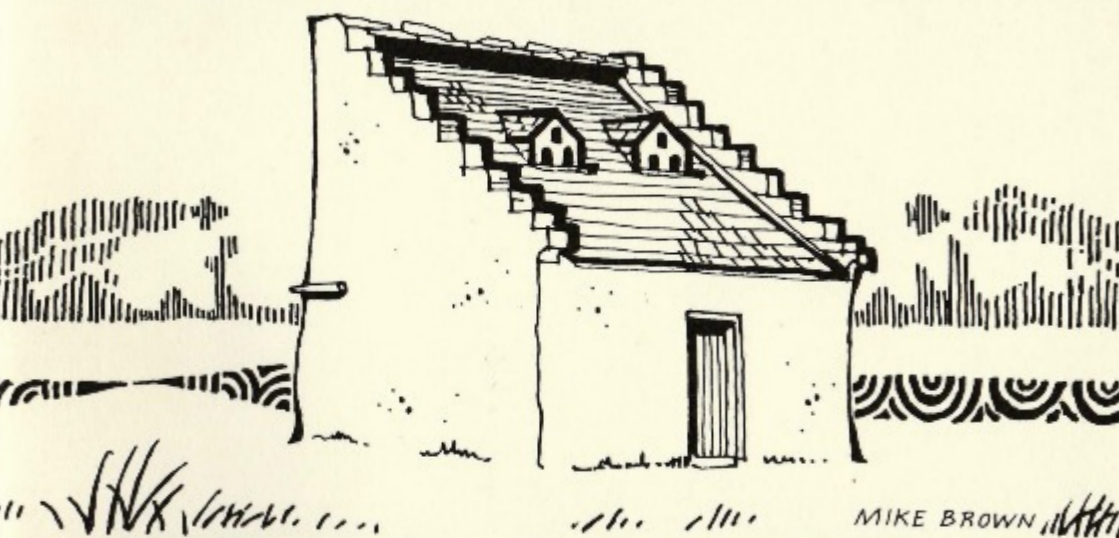


THE DOOCOTS OF MORAY

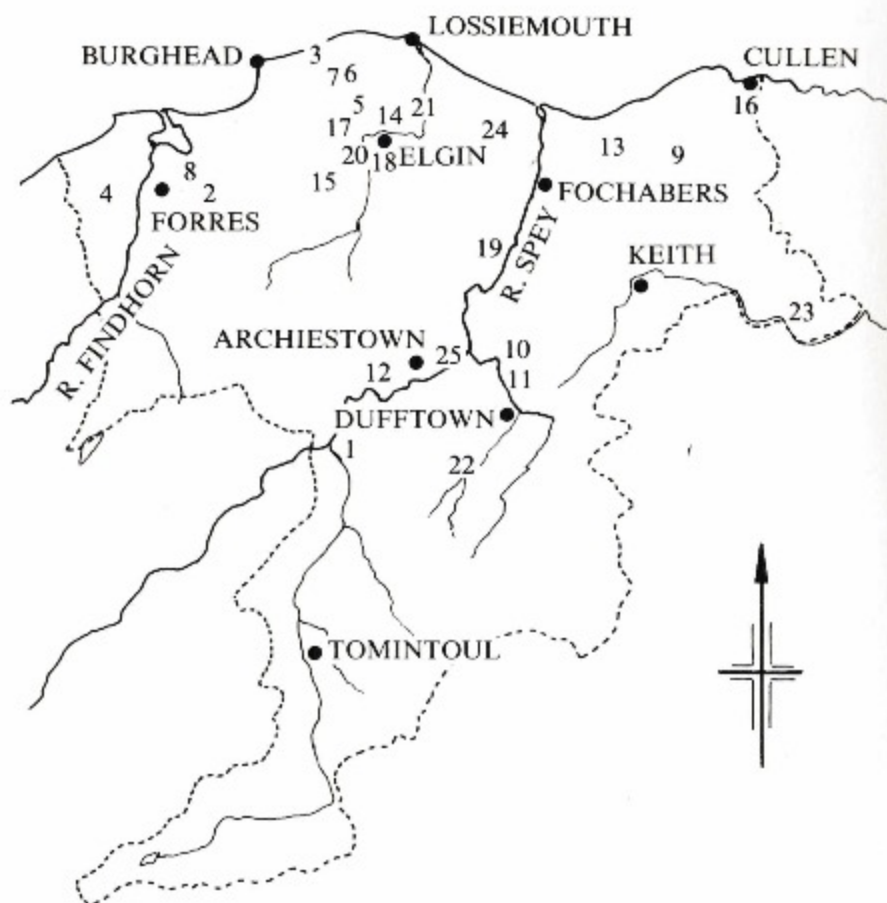


ELIZABETH BEATON



Moray Field Club

DISTRICT OF MORAY



----- District Boundary

DOOCOTS NUMBERED AS PER GAZETEER

THE DOOCOTS OF MORAY

ELIZABETH BEATON

Illustrations
Mike Brown

MORAY FIELD CLUB

THE DOOCOTS OF MORAY

The freestanding doocots of Moray span a period of three hundred years and are the only local secular buildings that do so. They form the largest northerly group of cotes in the United Kingdom, there being just half a dozen in Caithness (the northernmost District within the mainland of Scotland) as opposed to the twenty-five remaining in Moray. Though some of these may be similar in type, each is a very individual building, having architectural characteristics of its own, while conforming to the requirements of pigeon farming for which it was erected.

These doocots were prestigious farm buildings. Pigeons were farmed for their flesh and for their dung. Before agriculture provided sufficient feeding stuffs to over-winter much livestock, the pigeon provided a valuable source of fresh meat. The older birds were eaten in the early winter while the young birds, *squabs* (in England) and *peesers* (in Scotland) were a delicacy and were available earlier than spring lamb. An added convenience, at least to their owners, was that they fed themselves off the surrounding countryside, returning each evening to their cote, where they also nested and raised their numerous clutches of young. The birds, of course, recognised no boundaries . . . which angered neighbouring farmers and land owners, who were ill-disposed to fatten other men's stock from their own hard-won grain harvests!

It is not therefore surprising to find that the right to farm doos was restricted, as elsewhere, by both law and custom. An act of Scots Parliament of 1503 'ordains ilk lord and laird to make them dowecots', while another of 1617 limits their building to those with land of an annual value of 10 chalders of grain lying within two miles of the cote. No person was supposed to build more than one within these boundaries, but an interesting case arose in 1751 between Sir Robert Gordon of Gordonstoun and Alexander Brodie of Brodie, Lord Lyon, whose land at Kinneddar marched with that of Gordonstoun at Smithfield, where Sir Robert built a large double chambered *lectern* cote with some two thousand nesting boxes. As Sir Robert already had three other cotes, it would seem that the Brodie had good cause for complaint and litigation. Sadly, however, he lost the case, on the grounds that Gordon's land was worth 60 chalders per annum—six times the requisite value for one cote! This cote, the largest in Morayshire, was demolished in 1932.

Pigeon farming was known to the ancient Romans and the Egyptians, and was practised throughout the Middle East. One can still see cotes of dried earth construction along the banks of the Nile. The earliest ones were of earthenware jars stacked one on top of each other.

While pigeon holes were found in the Roman colony of Caerwent in Wales, the practice of farming pigeons is thought to have been introduced to Great Britain by the Normans. The earliest reference in Scotland is to a cote at Ballencrief, East Lothian, in the thirteenth century, and the earliest dated cote is at Mertoun in Berwickshire, date 1576.

Besides their culinary value, and early cook books contain many recipes, doos were thought to have medicinal properties. Warm pigeon hearts were applied to the feet in a fever—rather it would seem as a last resort. Pepys writes, 'Come news from Kate, that if I would see her husband alive, I must come quickly. I to him, and find his breath rattled and they did lay pigeons at his feet'.

And a cure for baldness—doo dung mixed with other ingredients!

A Roman writer, Varro, in his *Rerum Rusticanum*, gives five architectural requisites for doocots. These have held good throughout the history of pigeon farming. They are:

1. Shelter
2. Nesting facilities
3. Access (for bird and man)
4. Ventilation
5. Defence against vermin.

The doocots of Moray all provide for these five needs, and yet show infinite variety, a variety that stems in part from the building materials available and in part from the date of the structure. Doocots in the district date from the late sixteenth century to the early nineteenth and vary in size from those with nearly nine hundred nesting boxes down to thirty-two. The earlier period, up to about 1700, is particularly well represented. The tradition of farming the birds died hard, and accommodation continued to be provided in steadings and stables up to the end of the nineteenth century, though towards the end of that century the birds may have been primarily for sport. The doos were released from traps to be fired at. After this was made illegal at the end of the nineteenth century 'clay pigeons' and the catapult 'traps' developed the sport as we know it today.

Beehive doocots are usually considered the oldest type of cote and date from the late sixteenth century. Those at Gordonstoun and at New Elgin represent this type. These *beehive* cotes are so called because they resemble circular straw bee skeps. Inside, ever diminishing rows of stone nesting boxes line the tapering, dome-like structure, culminating with a round aperture in the apex for the entrance of the birds.

There are some *lectern* cotes in Moray dating from the late sixteenth

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These nesting boxes are frequently of excellent quality, displaying skill and workmanship in the regular rows of well dressed stone. They vary in size, being about 12 inches (30 cm) wide and 10 inches (25 cm) high and 12–21 inches (30–53 cm) deep. Some cotes have wooden boxes. Early doorways tend to be low and walls to be thick.

Access to nesting boxes, many being nearly 20 feet (6 m) above floor level, was by ladder. The best of these were of a revolving type, called a potence (French—potence—gallows). Survivals are rare. In Moray one remains sealed up in the Windmill cote at Gordonstoun and there is one at Orton.

With their variety of form and building materials, these buildings contribute to and enhance the landscape. Sad that some deteriorate—but for the most part those that remain in the District are in good shape. Long may they so remain!

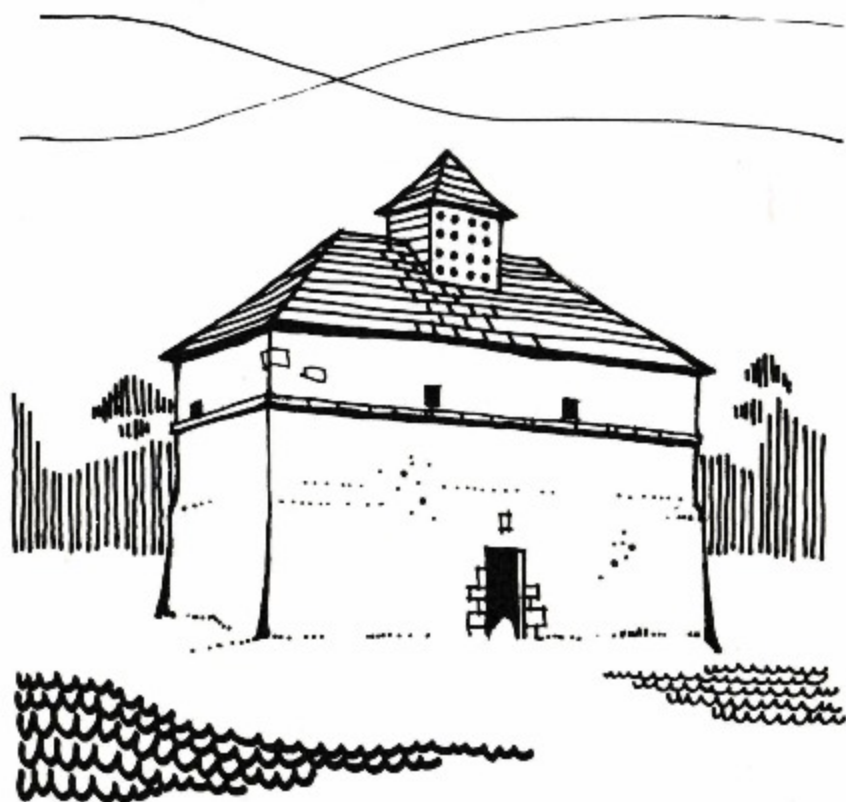
For the most part, these doocots are private property, and anyone wishing to visit them should request permission so to do from their owners. The Knockando cote lies within a private garden, and may be seen only with prior written permission.

I am grateful to all those who have allowed me to visit their doocots and for much hospitality that has added a special flavour to 'dooocoting'. Thanks, too, to Mr Sinclair Ross for help with plans and map, to Mr Alistair Scott for editorial assistance and advice, and to Mr J. R. Robinson, Director of Planning, Moray District, and his staff

The Moray Field Club are indebted to the Moray and Nairn Educational Trust for a grant towards the cost of this publication.

Keam Schoolhouse,
Hopeman, by Elgin

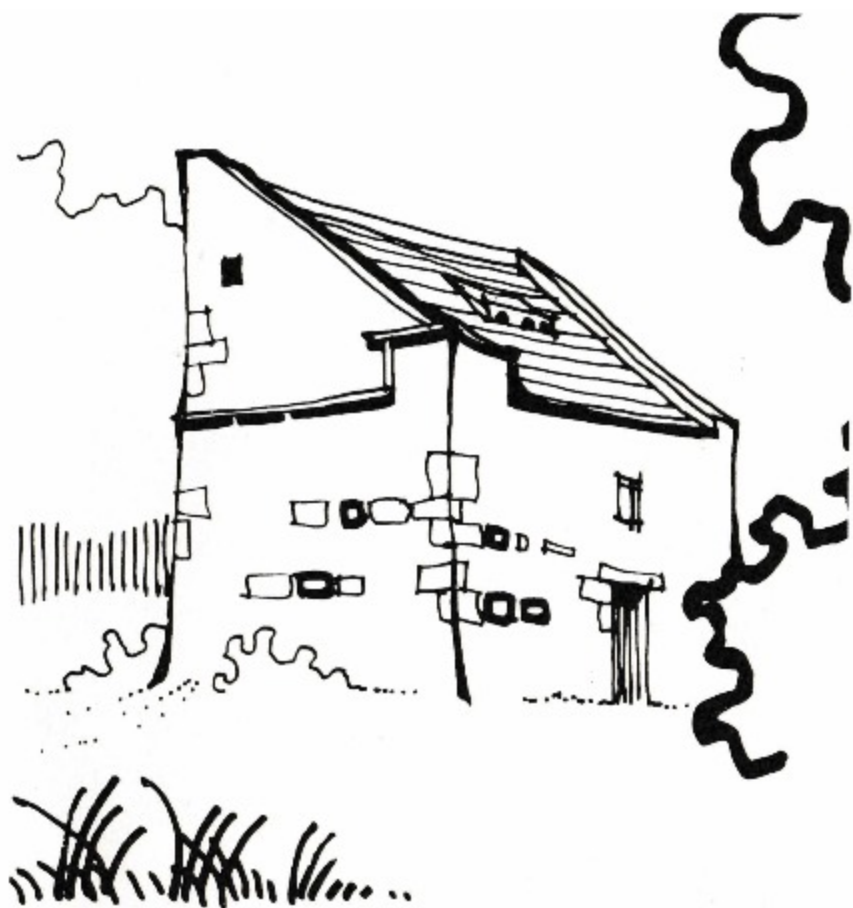
E. B.
1978



Ballindalloch NJ178367

end map 1

Large cote divided internally into two chambers served by one external door. Hipped roof of Tomintoul slates with central *glover* of wood and slate. Stone *rat ledge* encircles the building and serves as alighting ledge. Two small pigeon entrances placed symmetrically above doorway and *rat ledge*, and one in west gable. Date stone with rolled moulded edge inscribed with a large B and the date 1696 over the doorway. 844 stone nesting boxes line the walls of both chambers commencing 3 ft 6 in (1.07 m) from floor level. External measurements: 29 ft \times 14 ft 6 in (8.85 \times 4.42 m). Good condition.



Burgie NJ093593

end map 2

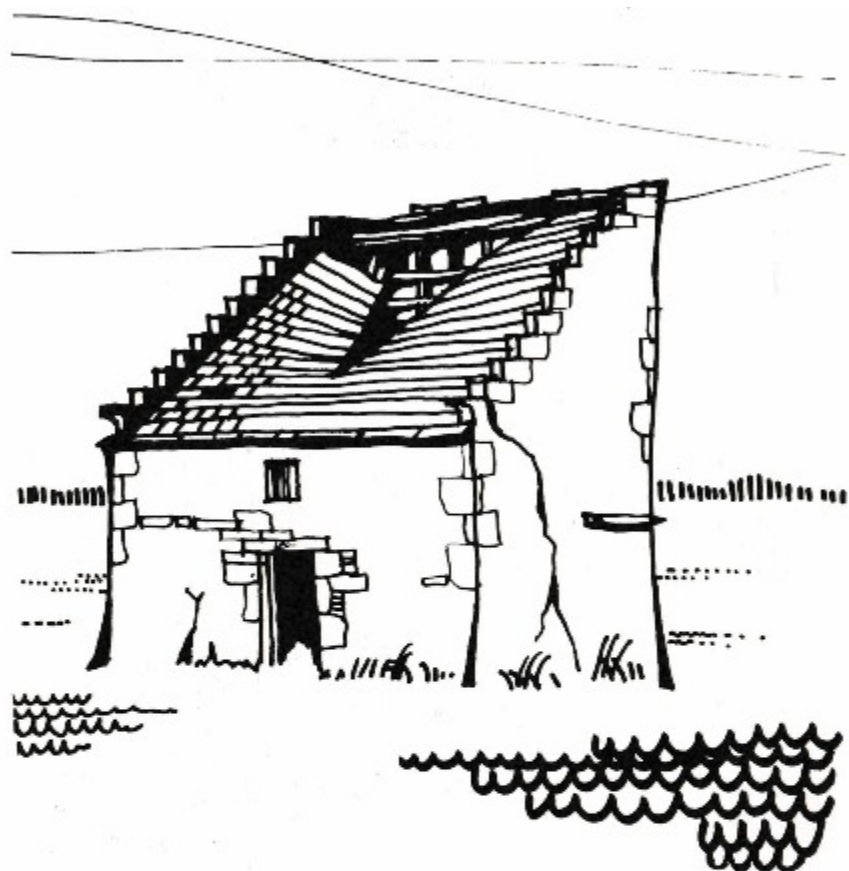
Probably late sixteenth century with interesting features. Rubble built with traces of harling; heavy local slate roof; *skews* (copings) that are notched together; unusual buttress on south-west corner. Stone *rat ledge* on three sides, rising in height on south-west and north-east corners—a feature in early *lecterns*. Traces of second *rat ledge* at lower level. Ventilation aperture with stone grid in western gable. Swept dormer entrance for doos, doorway with small window above, all on south side. 500 regular stone nesting boxes of excellent quality. External measurements: 18 ft × 16 ft (5.50 × 4.88 m). Good condition.



Dalvey NJ004586

end map 4

Formerly known as Grangehill, the seventeenth century square cote with gable ends and *crow-steps* stands in woods near the mansion. Rubble masonry; roof in poor state. Sandstone ridge; two swept dormers for pigeon entrances. Two stone *rat ledges*—one running right round the building and one across each gable at roof height. The arms of Robert Dunbar of Grangehill, who owned the property in the seventeenth century, were placed on the west wall during the 1920s. Entrance door in centre of south wall. 889 nesting boxes of stone—the largest number in Moray. Externally 16 ft (4.88 m) square. Poor condition.



Findrassie NJ194654

end map 5

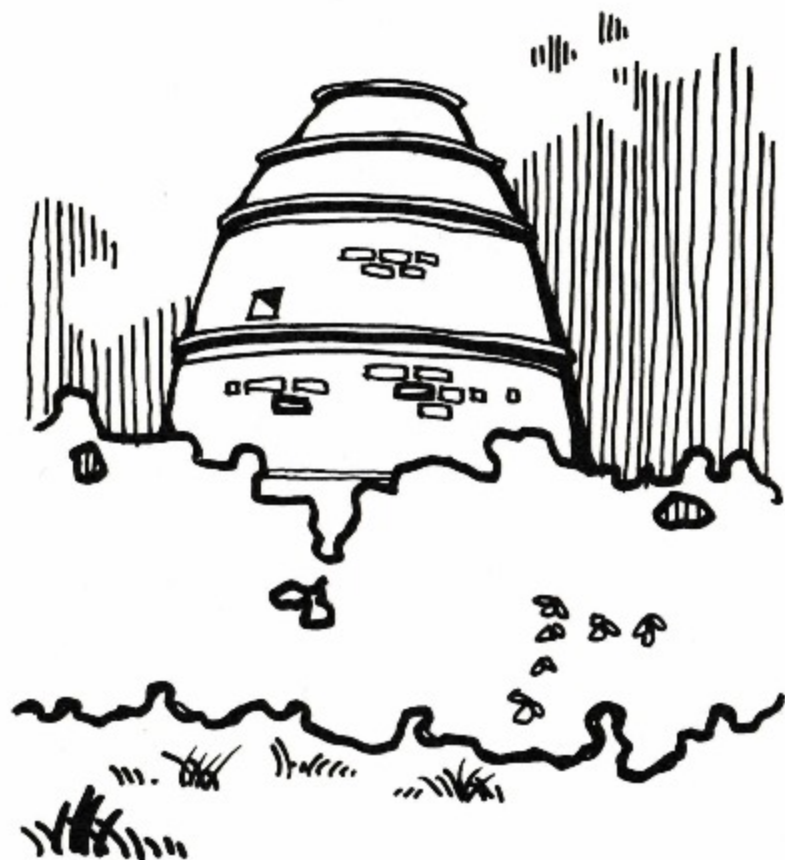
South facing *lectern*, rubble built with traces of harling: dressed stone door jambs, *quoins* and *crow-steps*. Door lintel bears date 1631; small barred window above; remains of *rat ledge* with hollow moulding on underside. This has been a building of excellent quality and is now in poor condition. Roof holed and structure cracked. Approximately 470 stone boxes. External measurements: 18 ft × 16 ft (5.50 × 4.88 m).



Gordonstoun (Windmill) NJ187694

end map 6

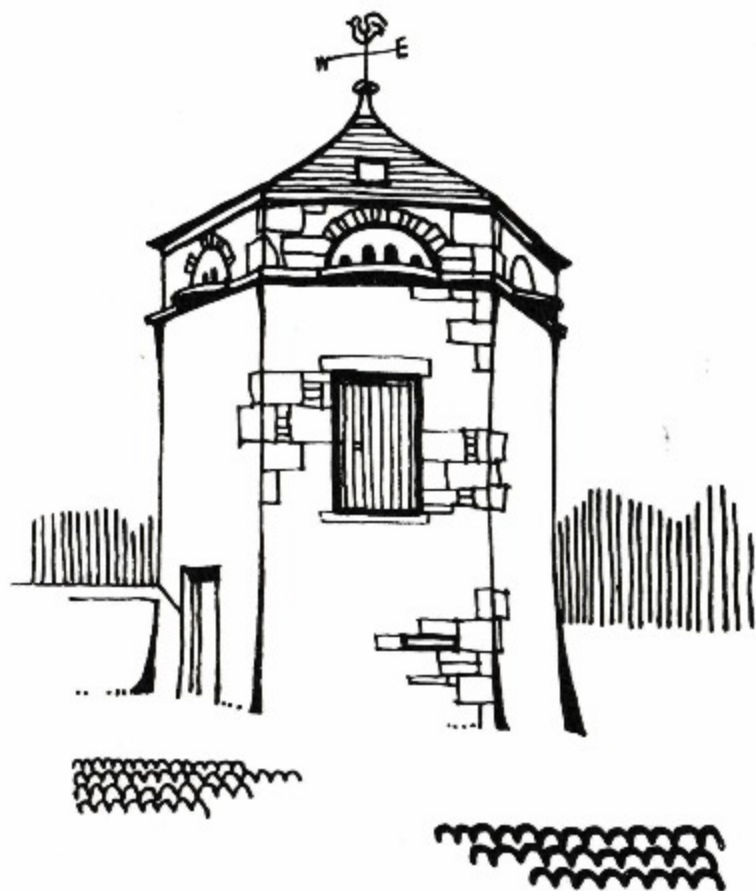
Reputed to be a converted windmill and referred to as such in the Gordon v Brodie case of 1751. Tall cote standing on a mound, rubble stone and harled with two pigeon entrances piercing the sides, and an apex hole. Blocked doorway just visible under worn harling on west side. *Potence* sealed inside. Stone boxes—number unknown. External circumference: 50 ft (15.20 m). Fair condition.



Gordonstoun (Beehive) NJ184690

end map 7

Large cote probably dating from late sixteenth century and the Bog of Plewlands (original name of Gordonstoun). Stands on mound; thick walls and entrance on east. Single bird entrance over first *rat ledge* on south side and large circular hole in apex. Stone built with traces of harling; three *rat ledges* of which the lowest is concave on the underside. About 700 stone boxes. Cote now sealed, but inside visible through 'peep-hole'. External circumference: 63 ft (19.22 m). External condition good; some damage internally.



Grangehall NJ062608

end map 8

Tall hexagonal cote of coursed masonry with galletting and dressed *quoins*, dating from *circa* 1800. Bellcast roof of small Ballachulish slates, two skylights and stone mushroom-like finial supporting weather-cock. Pigeon loft at first floor level. Iron rings in sill for holding ladder to loft doorway on south. Wooden nesting boxes, incomplete. Continuous *rat ledge* 3 ft (91 cm) below eaves broadening into three semi-circular alighting platforms in front of three pigeon entrances, groups of four graded openings piercing half-moon shaped *ashlar* stone slabs. Externally each wall measures 9 ft 6 in (2.90 m).



Greenbank of Letterfourie NJ442613

end map 9

Small cylindrical cote, stone built with pigeon accommodation in upper half. Boxes scooped out of thickness of wall. Large aperture on south wall which must have had wooden door and gave access to pigeon loft. Continuous row of pigeon entrances around the building above the *rat ledge* which served also for alighting. Late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. External circumference: 39 ft 9 in (12.13 m). Reasonable condition.



Hazelwood NJ318446

end map 10

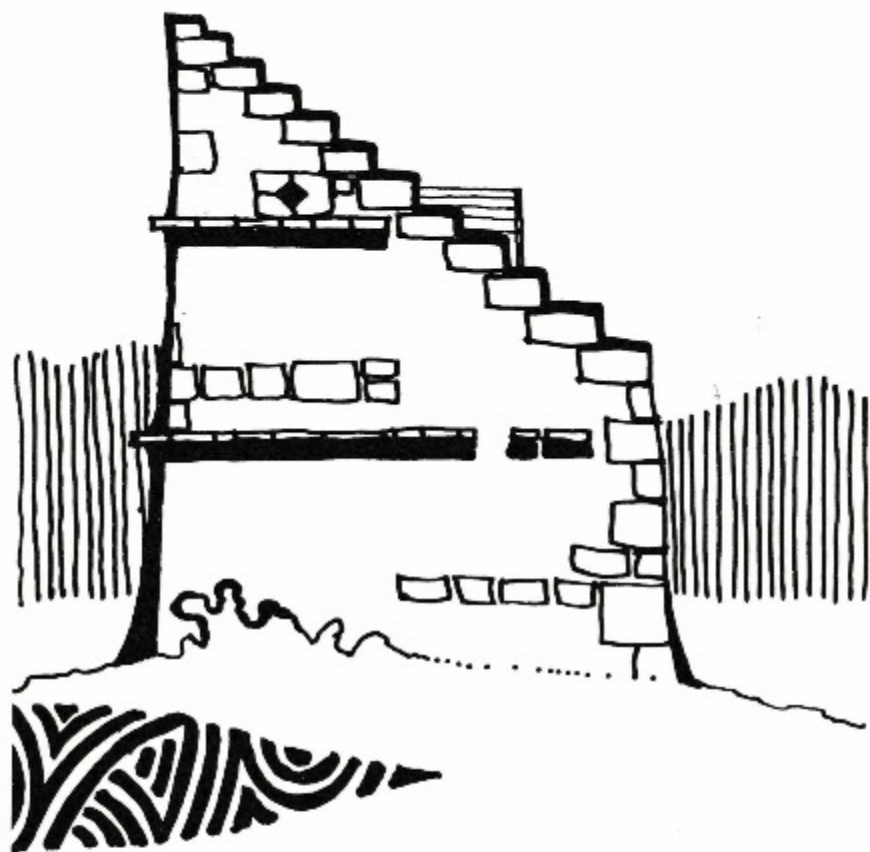
Tall early nineteenth century cote with little pigeon loft above and hen boxes in room below, complete with chicken entrances. Fairly usual combination for this date, but few examples in Moray. Also the only brick built cote in Moray, bricks perhaps from the old brickworks at Craigelachie. Harled, with pigeon entrances on west side. Slate roof, slates probably from Dufftown. There is arched access to space under the cote—perhaps for hens to lie in during day—they enjoy such a siesta! External measurements: 6 ft 9 in \times 5 ft 6 in (2.06 \times 1.68 m). Excellent condition.



Kininvie NJ319441

end map 11

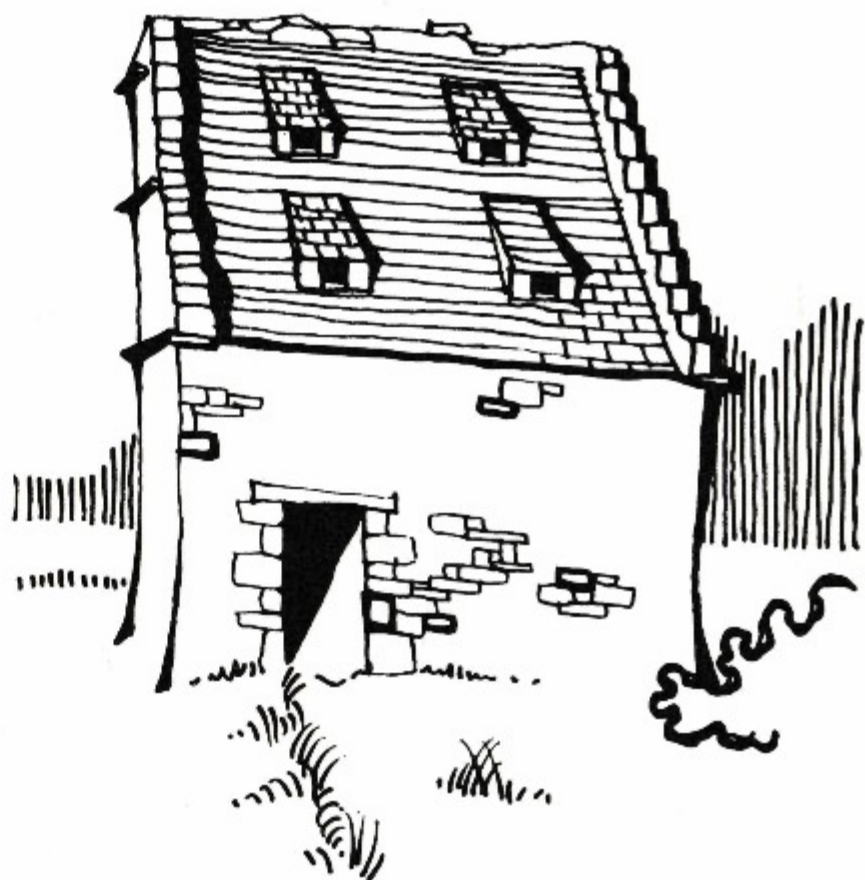
Eighteenth century cylindrical cote of rubble masonry and with conical roof. Two *rat ledges* with random rectangular pigeon entrances above. Harled and white washed. Weather vane. Some wooden nesting boxes remain. Somewhat overgrown with trees. External circumference: 38 ft (11.59 m). Good condition.



Knockando NJ204424

end map 12

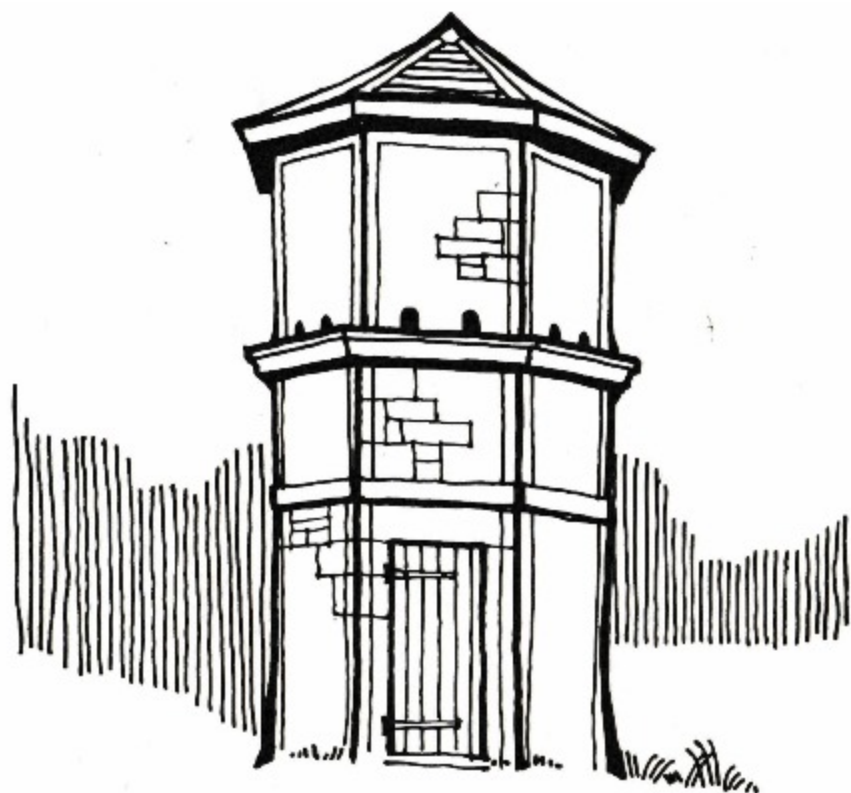
Probably seventeenth century. On hillside overlooking Spey valley and Ben Rinnes. Rubble stone with dressed door facings and *crow-steps*. Single dormer in roof for birds. Tomintoul slates; one diamond shaped ventilation hole in each gable similar to Leitcheston which this cote resembles. 400 stone boxes; two *rat ledges*. External measurements: 16 ft × 13 ft (4.88 × 3.96 m). Good condition.



Leitcheston NJ399626

end map 13

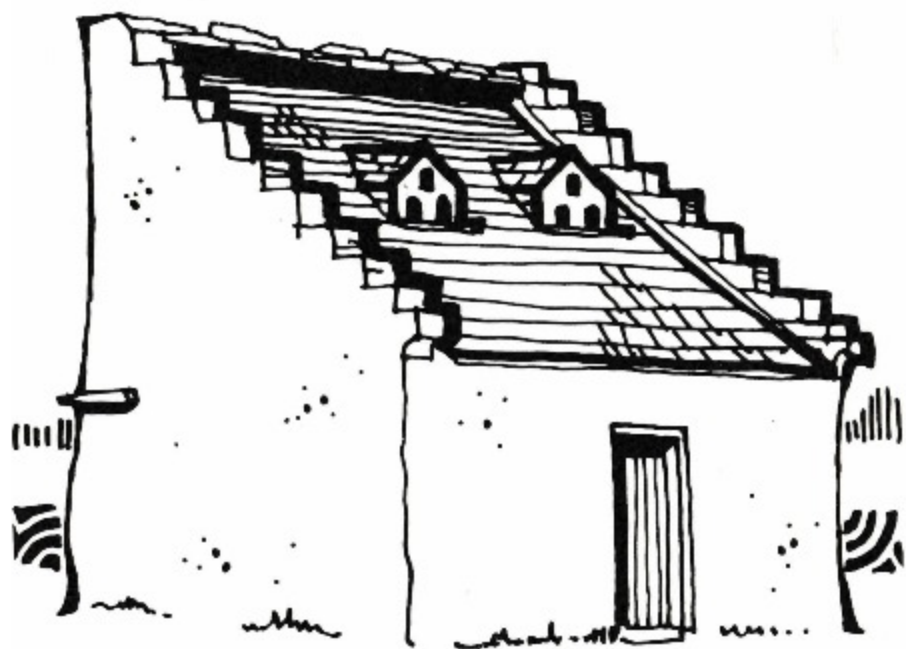
Seventeenth century cote unusual in that it is divided internally into four small compartments each wall of which is lined with boxes and with small inter-connecting doorways (almost tunnels!). Measurements similar to Knockando, but boxes number 660 instead of 400 there because of increased wall space. Each room served by one of four swept dormers. Rubble stone; dressed door jambs (door slightly off centre); three diamond shaped ventilation holes in each gable; three stone *rat ledges*. Local heavy grey slates. External measurements: 15 ft \times 14 ft 6 in (4.57 \times 4.42 m). Recently restored; condition good.



Lesmurdie House NJ225636

end map 14

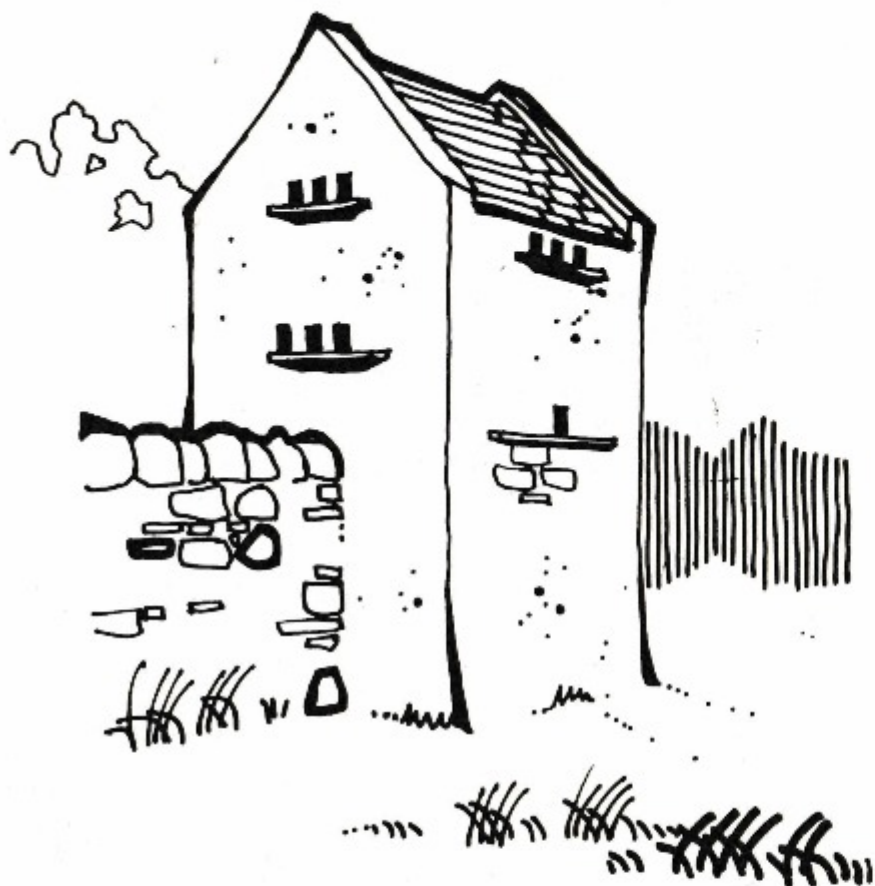
Early nineteenth-century octagonal cote nicely built of *ashlar* stone. Ballachulish slate roof with lead ribs. 174 good stone nesting boxes in upper chamber only, reached by a ladder inside. External walls are 3 ft (91 cm) each. Excellent condition.



Miltonduff NJ182602

end map 15

Small lectern, restored and re-roofed *circa* 1970. Two *rat ledges*; *crow-step*; two dormers pierced with pigeon *ports*. Rubble stone and mud mortar; white washed and with no remaining nesting boxes. Dates from late seventeenth century to eighteenth century. External measurements: 16 ft 6 in \times 10 ft (5.05 \times 3.05 m). Condition good.



Mains of Seafield, Cullen NJ516666

end map 16

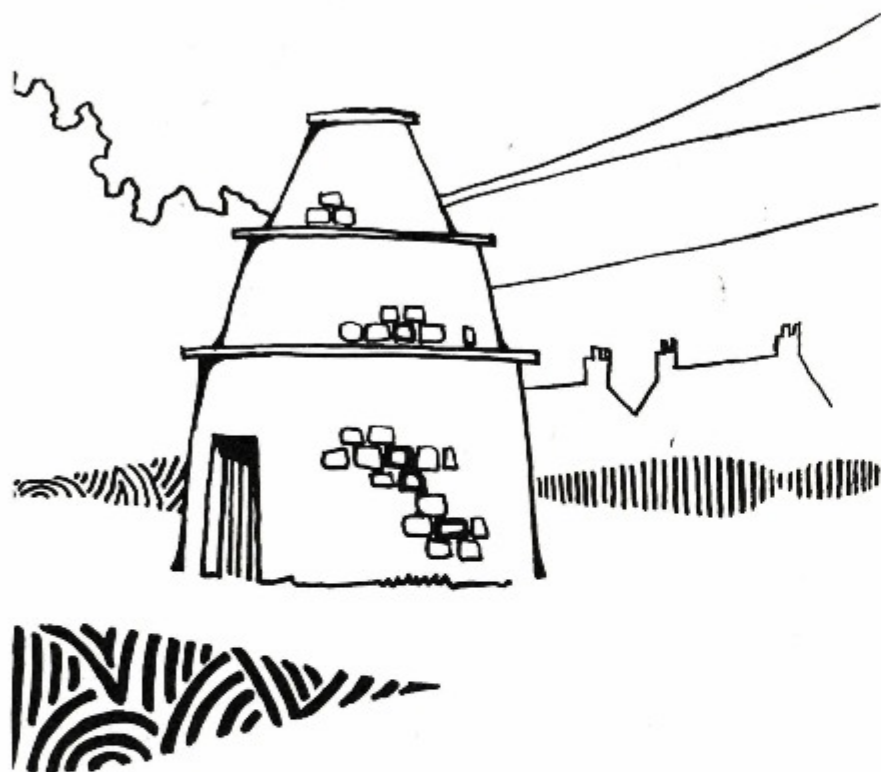
Tall, thin cote, late eighteenth or early nineteenth century with pigeon accommodation in upper half of building and garden store below. Four sets of pigeon entrances with heavy slab alighting ledges. About 50 boxes. Stone building with some harling; brick used in the nesting boxes and the pigeon entrances. External measurements: 9 ft \times 7 ft 6 in (2.74 \times 2.28 m). Good condition.



New Spynie NJ183643

end map 17

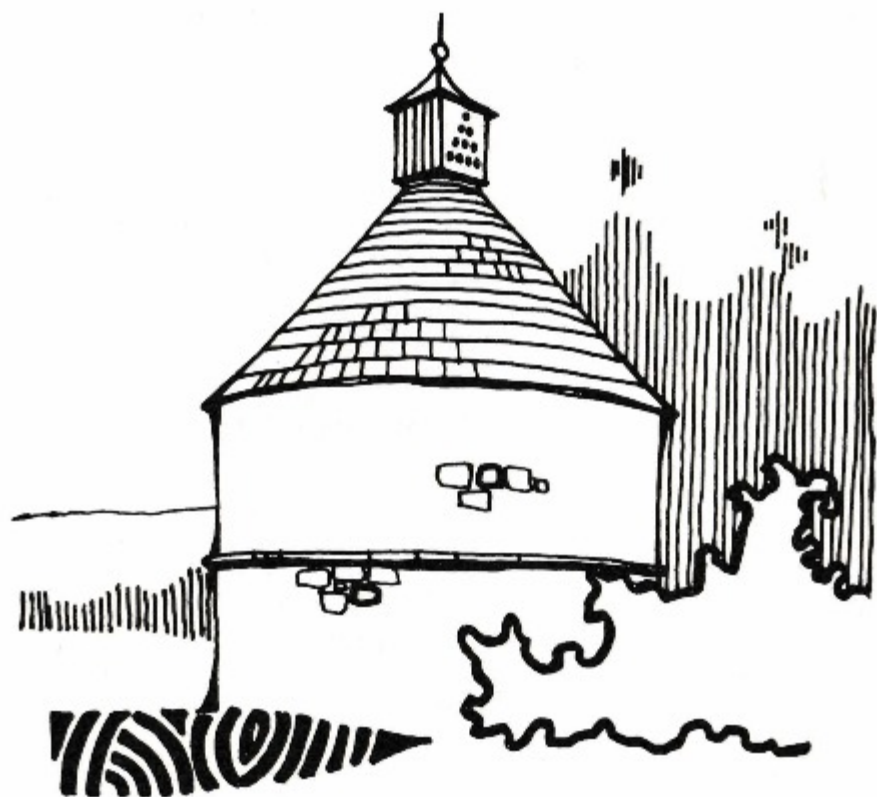
Rubble stone and mud mortar. Rectangular with gable ends pierced with ventilation holes; *crow-steps* and blocked entrance door on west. Slab roof supported, as at Pittendreich, by two stone vaulted arches. Single stone Glover in ridge. No wood in construction. Now used as a water cistern, and the dormer in roof has been inserted in order to gain access. Heavy stone *rat ledge*; second *rat ledge* and nesting boxes removed. Unique cote dating from *circa* 1600. External measurements: 17 ft × 16 ft 3 in (5.18 × 4.95 m). Fair condition.



New Elgin NJ220618

end map 18

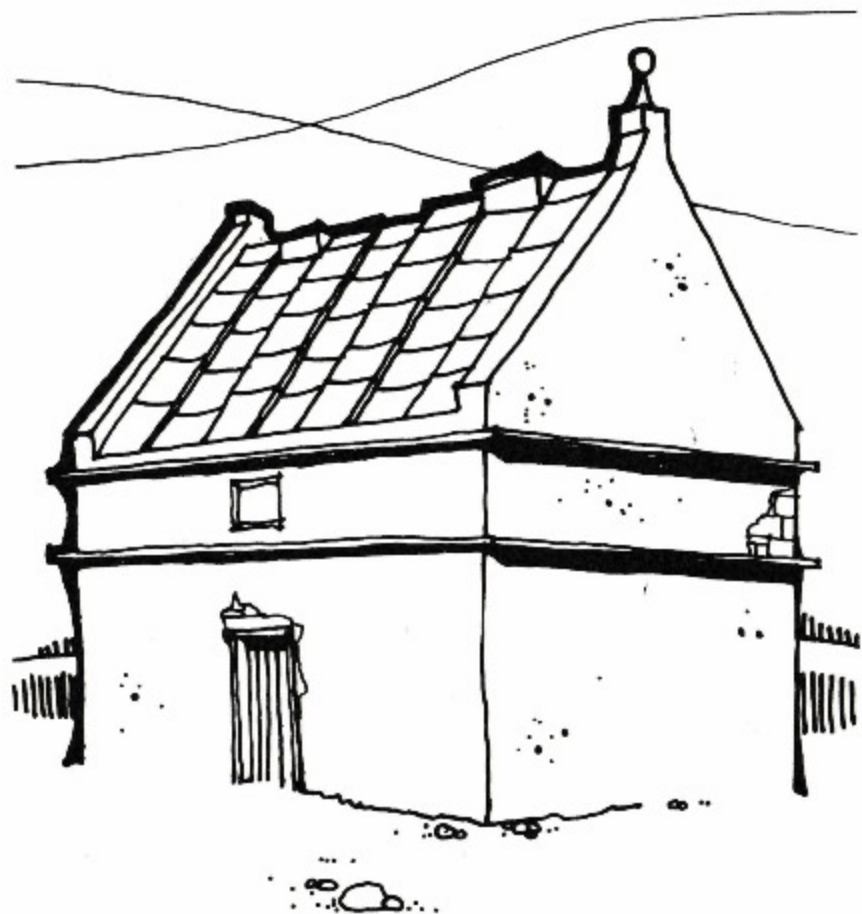
Neat *beehive* cote in part with deep *rat ledges* and circular hole at apex for birds' entrance. Coursed rubble and dressed stone facings. Internally there are 482 stone boxes in ever decreasing rows creating a bottle shaped interior. No *potence* remains but holes in masonry below pigeon entrance suggest seating for crossbeam which would have held the top of the revolving ladder in place. External circumference: 50 ft (15.25 m). Good condition.



Orton NJ314534

end map 19

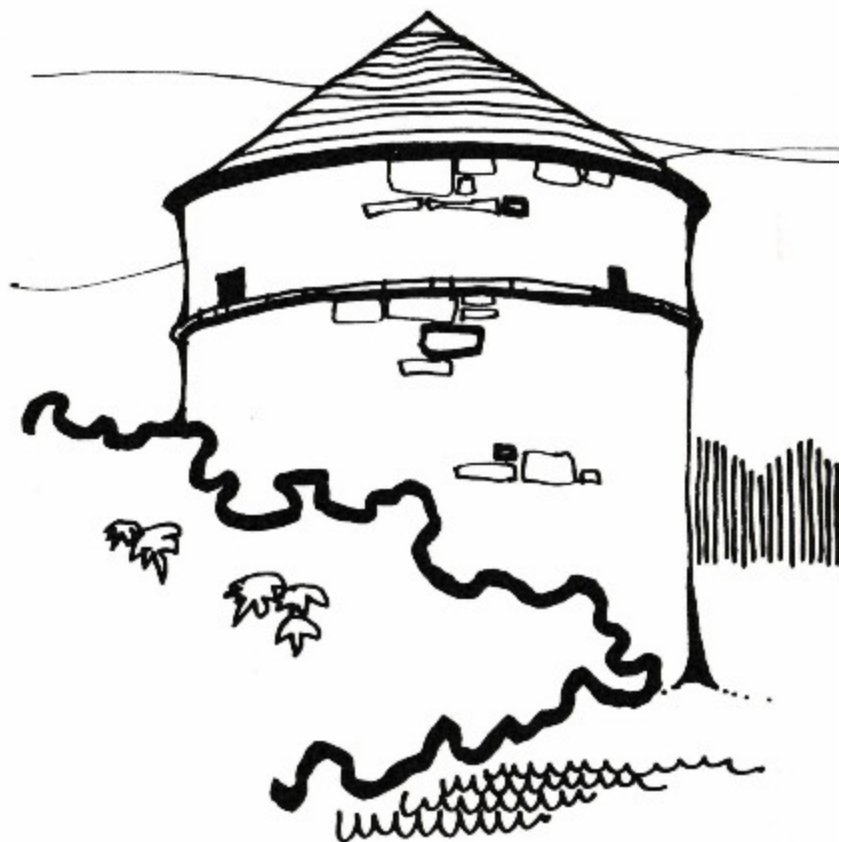
Early eighteenth century cylindrical cote rubble built with harling and one *rat ledge*. Conical roof of Tomintoul slates. The pretty square glover is a later addition fitted over the original apex hole to shield it from birds of prey. Cote re-roofed around 1900 and it is remembered how hard it was to get the *glover* back into position! The glory of this attractive cote, standing in a field near the Spey, is its revolving ladder of nine arms which pivots on a plinth of stone, and is held in position by a cross-beam. Wooden nesting boxes are now mostly ruinous—there would have been about 500. External circumference: 56 ft 6 in (17.23 m). Fair condition.



Pittendreich NJ195614

end map 20

Cote similar to but larger than that at New Spynie. Same construction but with *skews* instead of *crow-steps* and two *glovers* in the ridge. Rubble stone and mud mortar with some harling. Over 800 fine stone nesting boxes cover the walls from floor to apex of the gables and to wall-head. Door in centre of south wall with blocked window above; two rat ledges; wooden tie beams are not original and were possibly inserted during the 1920 restoration. Further restoration 1977. External measurements: 20 ft x 19 ft 6 in (6.10 x 5.80 m). Outstanding cote in good condition.



Pitgaveny NJ239652

end map 21

Cote dates from late seventeenth or possibly early eighteenth century and is similar in measurements to Orton. Has good stone nesting boxes. Stone slab conical roof with circular apex hole now sealed. Single *rat ledge* which also serves as alighting ledge for square pigeon entrances on south side of building. Stands near Pitgaveny steading. External circumference: 53 ft 6 in (16.32 m). Restored 1977. Excellent condition.



Urquhart Manse NJ283627

end map 24

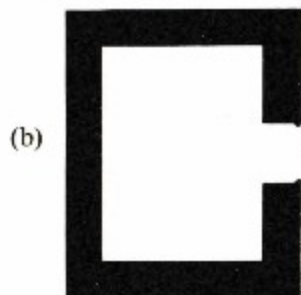
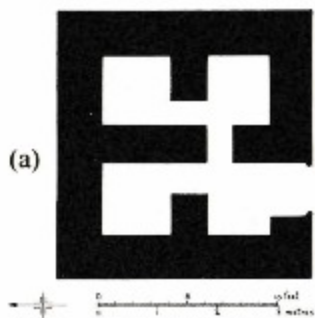
Small cote with nesting boxes in upper half of building, the flooring of which has now gone. Access to loft from upper door, and two pairs of pigeon entrances on south and west sides. Cote is incorporated in the Manse garden wall and is built of a composite of clay, straw and small stones known locally as *clay dab*. The nesting boxes have been modelled from this, having slate or wood as horizontal members. Early nineteenth century and unique because of its building fabric. *Piended Oran* slate roof. External measurements: 9 ft 3 in \times 8 ft 8 in (2.82 \times 2.64 m). Reasonable condition.



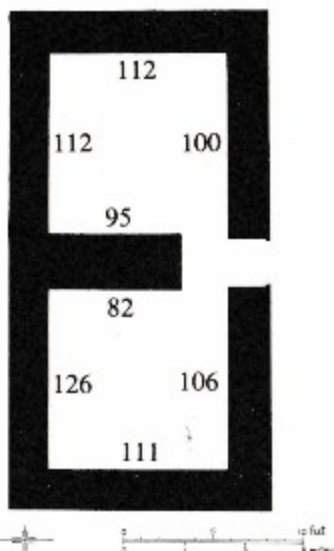
Wester Elchies NJ256430

end map 25

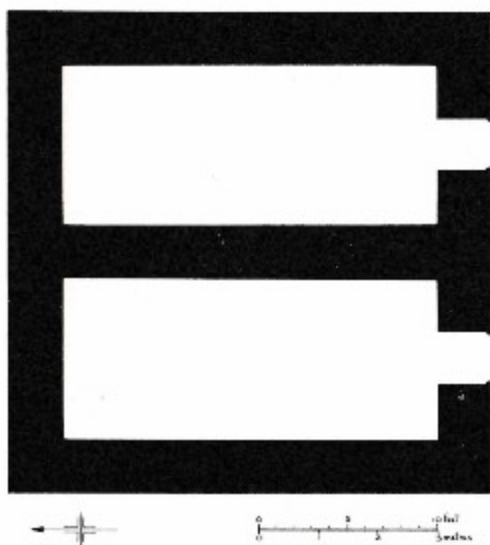
Large rectangular cote with hipped roof similar to Ballindalloch. Present roof is of Welsh slates, and there is evidence where there has been a *glover*. Heavy stone slab *rat ledge*. Contrary to usual custom the cote has its shortest sides facing south and north, and the building runs down hill, with a small window on the south wall. Door on east; single chamber lined with 594 stone nesting boxes starting 4 ft (1.22 m) from floor level. Much overgrown. The seventeenth century mansion of Wester Elchies has been demolished. Cote also of seventeenth century. External measurements: 17 ft × 23 ft 9 in (5.18 × 24 m). Fair condition.



Plan view of doocots—
(a) Leitcheston (b) Knockando

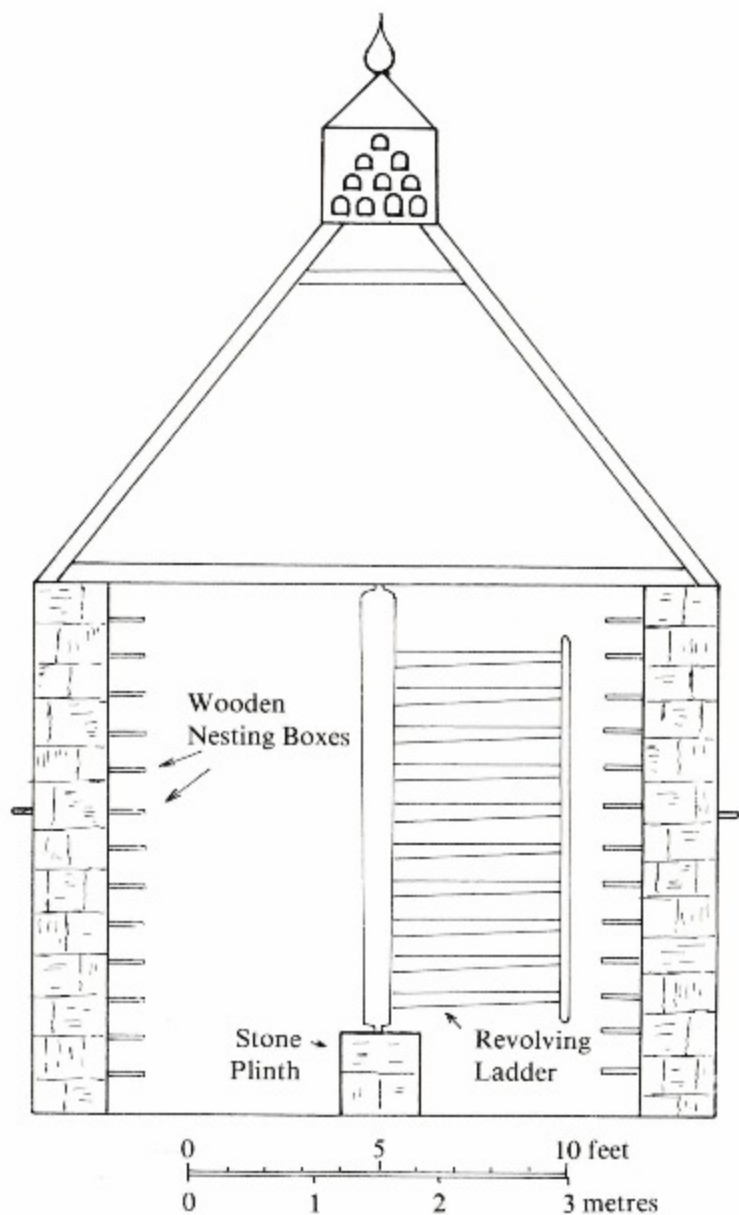


Ballindalloch Doocot showing
numbers of nesting boxes built
in each wall



Rothiemay Doocot

DOOCOT AT ORTON, MORAY



SECTION