Many of the old Cape farms were known for their ornate Cape-Dutch gables. Not so the house on Die Bos which had a simple leg-of-mutton gable and which was modernised into a triangular one in 1897. The main Cape-Dutch feature on the farm is the Dovecote which, over the years, has become a recognisable icon for the family. Dovecotes were common in the Middle-East and Europe for centuries (2) but only a few exist at the Cape. The one at Die Bos was declared a National monument and has been photographed and painted many times. Many thanks to Cathy Morkel for the photo.

The central gable is in the neoclassical style, which dates the structure around the early 1800s, the time of third generation Daniel Johannes MORKEL. To quote De Bosdari (1, p14): "... the end of the 18th century forms a clear-cut dividing line between two gable-styles, and how an older style, the florid, perhaps Dutch in its origin but certainly a product of the Cape alone in its development, then reaches its zenith and abruptly, without any lengthy period of decadence intervening, is supplanted by a newer style, the neo-classical, whose hallmarks are European but no wise specifically Dutch". The change coincided with similar changes in Europe and the British occupation of the Cape in 1795 and again in 1806.
The side enclosures or courts flanking the central structure have older baroque style gables, showing styles in transition. The builders, probably Malay slaves, had not forgotten earlier traditions.

I know of only three Cape Dutch dovecotes. One was in Cape Town, while a very similar one was on Meerlust (3), the farm of Daniel Johannes Morkel’s cousin, P.A. Myburgh. The Meerlust dovecote likely inspired the one at Die Bos. Apart from the decorative gables, the two structures are alike – a central dovecote and two side courts. Some would view ornate dovecotes like this one as a kind of folly, popular in British estates at the time. However, they also were practical. Pigeons look after themselves and are easy to catch after dark when they roost in the dovecote. I remember having pigeon pie at Die Bos as a youngster.

Why build a dovecote? Apart from Meerlust, they were unknown on the old Cape farms. The family had no shortage of meat – chickens, geese, sheep, cattle and an abundance of fish in False Bay.

Perhaps the real reason was not to house pigeons, but for cock-fighting in the side courts. In recent times, my uncle, Johannes Albertus MORKEL (oom Johnnie Bos) kept pigs in the side courts. However, according to Victor de Kock (5) they were used for cock-fighting. This pass-time was very popular amongst Malays, many of them slaves.

Malays were always devoted to cocking. In the 18th century they carried their love for the game to so great a degree that it became quite a common sight to see a number of them, each with a gamecock under his arm, taking up a position at some corner or other, where they would patiently await the appearance of a rival.... Small wonder that one or two of the early visitors remarked that the most picturesque spectacles they beheld at the Cape were the battles fought by Indian game-cocks. “

The most ardent supporters of cocking were those men who came from the Island of Java, and they carried their enthusiasm into even the country places. Professor Pearce in describing Meerlust, the magnificent estate on the Eerste River granted to Henning Huisin in 1701, draws attention to the fact that a short distance from the homestead is an interesting relic in the form of a dovecot with enclosed courts on either side which, it is said, were used for cock-fighting. It does not need much imagination to picture the scene at such a cock-fight: the heroic little birds sparring with heads stretched forward and feathers ruffled, avoiding the many fatal blows with lightning-like movements, pecking, ripping, fighting... One can visualise, too, the eager faces of the spectators, the greedy look in the eyes of the gamblers, the hushed, tense, excited expectancy of the group who watched while the battle of death was being fought....

The side courts would have been ideal arenas for cock fighting. Walled off for privacy, a side court had space for the two rival groups at either end, with the cocks fighting in the middle. It is unlikely that they were built for the pleasure of slaves – they probably made use of it afterwards. Was Daniel Johannes a cocking enthusiast himself? Possibly. He had close connections with his cousin P.A. Myburgh at Meerlust. P.A. was his commanding officer in the Krysgsraad, had influenced him to resist signing the second oath of allegiance to the British Monarch (for which 22 dragoons were stationed at Meerlust and 10 at Onverwacht), and his sister and daughter were married to two of P.A.’s sons. If P.A. were into cock fighting, he might have introduced Daniel Johannes to the “sport”. I was reluctant to think of my ancestor in this way, but it is the most plausible explanation for building the dovecote I could find.
Part of the farmyard at Onverwacht, later Die Bos with the dovecote, threshing floor, part of the ringmuur and barn and kraal in the distance.

Photo by author late mid-1970s.

The Dovecote at historic Meerlust. It is older and likely served as a model for the one at Die Bos – the owners of Meerlust and Die Bos were cousins. The dovecote has been nicely restored since this historic photo was taken.

Source: Phillida Brooke Simons (3, p94)
Notes and Sources:


    Dovecotes: Commonly known as Pigeon houses, columbaria, culver houses, pigeon cotes, dove houses

    Dovecotes were a common sight throughout Britain and across mainland Europe between the 16th and 19th centuries, but today few remain and of those that do, many are now in ruins. Dovecotes are specially constructed pigeon houses where pigeons were kept for a variety of purposes, but in the main as a source of food. Other uses for the domesticated pigeon were as quarry for falconry and as a target for shooting matches that were common in the 19th century and in which as many as 120 birds were shot for sport in each match. Dovecotes can be constructed of virtually any material (although early dovecotes were constructed exclusively of stone) and can be free-standing structures or provided as part of an existing structure or as a 'lean-to' addition.

