The Dovecote at *Die Bos*
Die Bos se Duiwehok

Many of the old Cape farms were known for their ornate Cape-Dutch gables. Not so the Morkel family farm, *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 survive 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 Dovecote at *Die Bos.*
Photo: Cathy Morkel. December 2010

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 the older baroque style gables, showing styles in transition. The builders, probably Malay slaves, had not forgotten earlier traditions.

My uncle, Johannes Albertus MORKEL (oom Johnnie Bos) kept pigs in the side courts. According to Victor de Kock (5) they were used for cock-fighting. This pass-time was very popular amongst Malays, mostly slaves (5), but there is no indication that the family were involved. I wonder whether such ornate buildings would have been constructed for slaves to indulge in their sport. Once built however, the enthusiasts would have sought to use such private and secluded venues for their passion. The walls of the courts are high and punters would be cosy inside to watch the contests.

I know of only three Cape Dutch dovecotes. An older one was at *Meerlust* (3), the farm of Daniel Johannes Morkel's brother-in-law, P.A. Mijburgh, and this likely inspired the one at *Die Bos*. 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.

Part of the farmyard at *Die Bos* with the dovecote, threshing floor, part of the *ringmuur* and barn and *kraal* in the distance. On the left is an oak tree, so old that its core has been rotted out.

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 brothers-in-law. The dovecote has been nicely restored since this historic photo was taken.

Source: Phillida Brooke Simons (3, p94)

Frontispiece of P.W. Morkel's Family History and Genealogy (4)

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Notes and Sources:

(1) C.De Bosdari, 1953. *Cape Dutch Houses and Farms.* Balkema. Cape Town.

(2) http://www.pigeoncontrolresourcecentre.org/html/dovecotes-pigeon-houses-columbaria.html

Dovecotes: <u>Commonly known as</u> 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.

(3) Phillida Brooke Simons, 2003. *Meerlust. 300 Years of Hospitality.* Fernwood Press, Cape Town.

(4) Philip William Morkel, 1961. *Morkel Family History and Genealogy.* Published privately.

(5) Victor de Kock , 1963. *Those in Bondage. An account of the life of the slave at the Cape in the days of the Dutch East India Company.* Union Booksellers. Pretoria, p86 -88.

"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 Huising 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…"

No doubt cock-fighting was popular, but I still wonder whether the side courts of the dovecotes at *Meerlust* and *Die Bos* were built for this purpose.