

Keeping Fancy Pigeons



Text and photos: Mick Bassett

INTRODUCTION

The Original Role of the Pigeon in Human Society

There is little doubt that the first 'captive' Pigeons would have been taken from the nest and hand reared, much as the Amerindians in South America still do with birds and animals.

Early on, in the Middle and Far-East, and later in Europe by the Middle Ages, this had progressed to sometimes, very elaborate and sturdily built 'Dove-Cotes', many of these were so well built they still stand today. One reason, at least in colder climates, (and in hot climates for protection from the heat!) for such constructions would have been that, with such thick walls and the inevitable build-up over the year of Pigeon droppings, by Winter

the temperature within the House would have been such that all year round breeding would have been possible, thereby giving probably the only fresh meat supply during the Winter months.

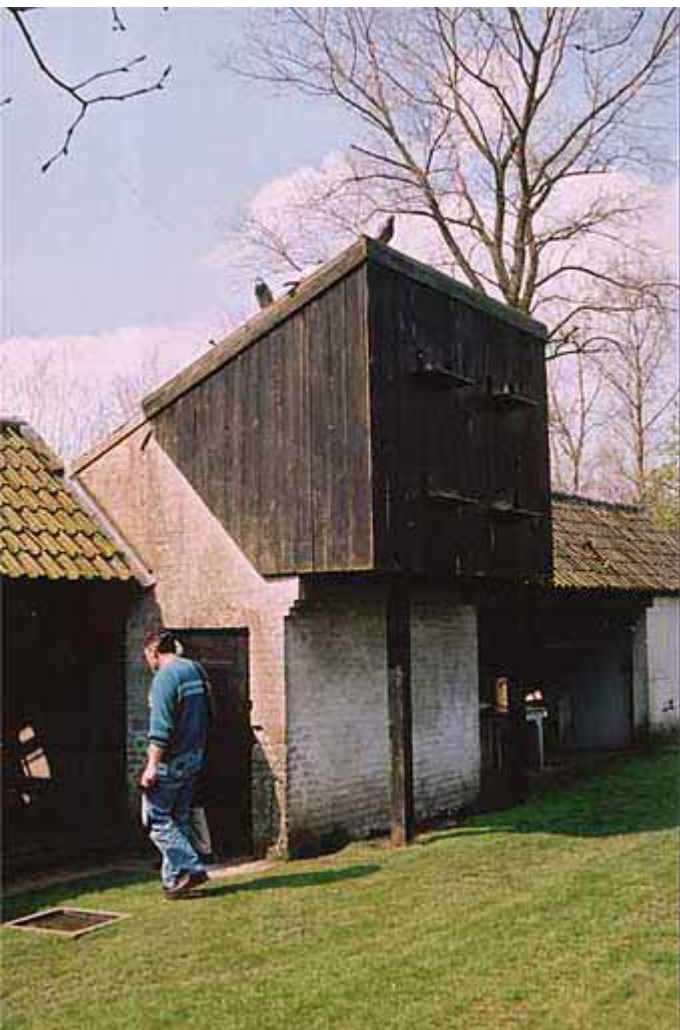
The same would also be true of the practice of 'Lofting' pigeons in the roof space above the house, stable or barn; the heat generated by the humans, animals and stored hay/straw for the few over-wintered animals, would also give a temperature conducive to breeding.

Above: Dove cote in France.

Left: Loft in the roof space above the barn.

Photos: Archives Aviculture Europe.

I have practical knowledge of my own birds rearing successfully, 7 from 8 young hatched and reared during a period here in Germany where the temperatures were never above minus-5° C and often minus-15° C at night,



no extra heat or light. I had not long moved in and had not intended my birds to breed anyway, but they insisted! A good indication of just why, the Pigeon was and in some places still is, valued so highly!

From my Father, I heard that in India, one Village practice was to build a hut over a pit. (Obviously protected from water entering the pit!). The pigeons would nest in racks on the walls, in earthenware pots, so shaped as to make them difficult for Snakes to enter! When the pit was full of excrement, the hut was just moved to another Pit! Result a ready made, well fertilized plot of land! The variations as to just 'how' pigeons have been kept must be as numerous as the peoples keeping them, but all have resulted from the pigeons adaptability and beauty.

Right: Modena flying from the roof.

Another story, (how true it is I don't know?) was that the Last Mogul Emperor died from a broken Neck due to falling through the Floor of his pigeon loft! Apparently he was not greatly missed by his People, as he spent so much time with his pigeons he was a terrible ruler! Shame he didn't repair his loft floor!



SOME NOTES ON BASIC DOMESTIC PIGEON KEEPING

There has been a fair bit written about the do's and don'ts of how to keep Pigeons. This is just some practical advice from what I have learnt over the last 50 years. It's not scientific, it's not 'by the book' but it works!

Firstly, the Pigeon, Domestic Type



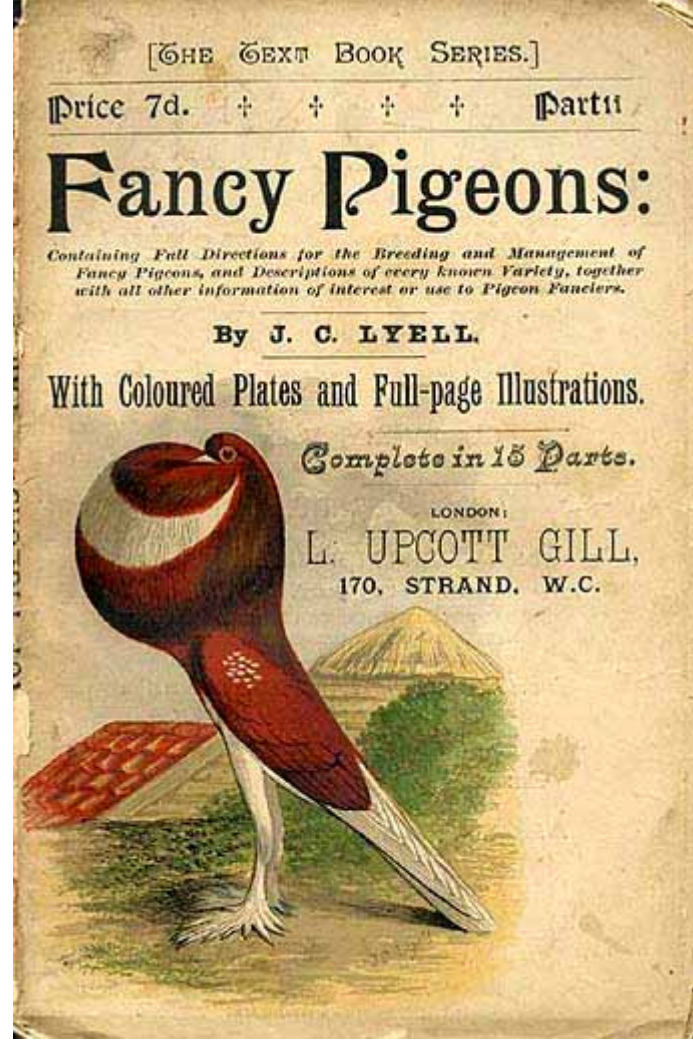
There are over 400 recognised breeds in Europe alone (with written Standards) and many more World-wide, some dating back to before the time of the Pharaohs. Indeed the Pigeon was probably one of the first animals man domesticated when he took up a 'settled' existence. Several Breeds vie for the title 'Oldest Breed' but certainly the Damascene, in 'Ice' with Black Wing Bars, must rank as one of the first reliably depicted over 3,000 years ago by the Egyptians on both Wall Paintings and Papyrus Scrolls.

Left: Damascene from Lebanon.

Right: Ancient book on Fancy Pigeons.

The First Pigeons kept were undoubtedly a 'Food' source, as a Species very fertile, producing normally two young every 28 days or so, as long as the food supply and surrounding conditions are suitable, often starting a repeat nest before the young from the previous one are fully feathered.

Later it was found they could 'home' for considerable distances and at great speed and were used as messengers, even up-to the end of the 20th Century in some parts of the World. Some Rural parts of India and Pakistan as of 2004 have only recently dis-banded their Pigeon Post, only really 'modern' technology being able eventually, to replace the centuries old 'Wing Power' over the almost impassable terrain in parts of those countries.



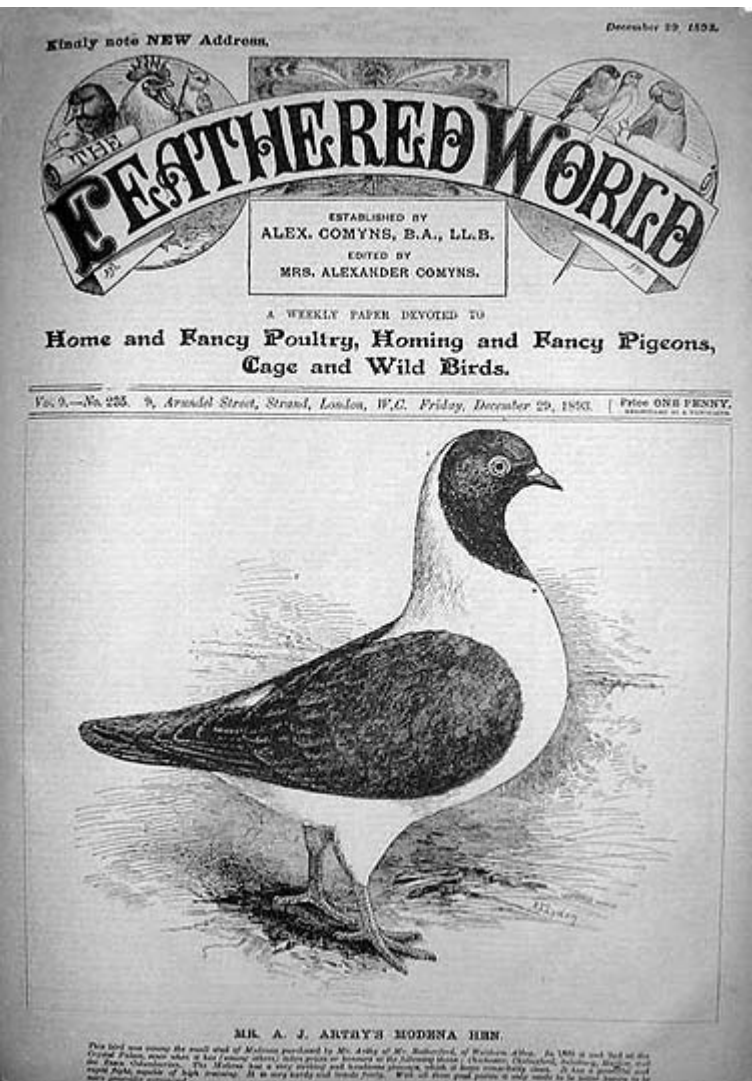
Apart from being 'free-breeders' Pigeons are also very hardy, long-lived (20 years and more have been recorded) and adaptable. Given a 'food' supply, they can live in desert conditions, as long as they have a water supply and stand cold down to minus-30C or lower. Again with a supply of water, or snow to eat! (Snow lacks most essential Minerals, so not good over long periods!)

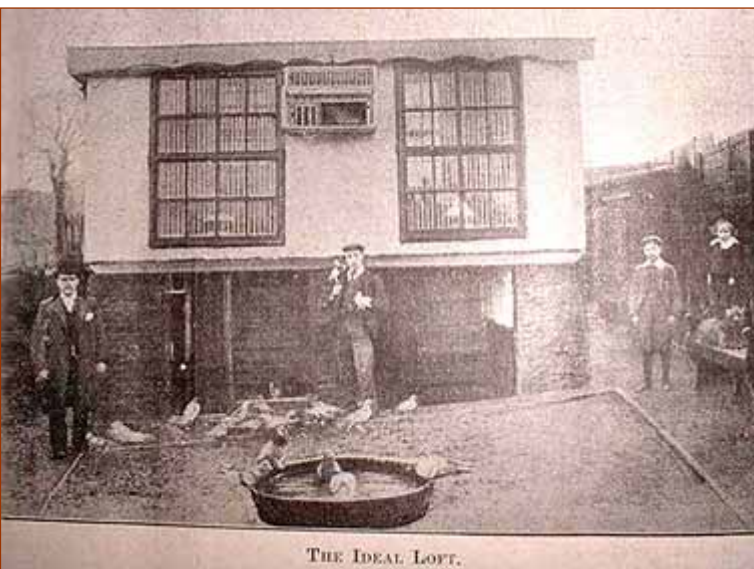
Left: A cover of one of the oldest UK magazines on poultry and pigeons; this one is from 1893.

What else does a 'Domestic' Pigeon need?

Apart from a suitable supply of food and ideally clean, fresh water, they need a safe and dry roosting/nesting place that is also 'airy'. Two of the greatest dangers to the health of pigeons are the lack of fresh air (no matter how cold) or damp

living conditions and foul water. More diseases are passed by drinking water than any other medium. Pigeon drink with a 'sucking' action not used by most bird species, which means that, some of the water when a pigeon drinks, is regurgitated back into the water container. The next bird that drinks has then a convenient 'soup' of bacteria with which to start of a whole range of problems.





Don't get me wrong, pigeons 'normally' are very tough and have fewer diseases to contend with than either poultry, turkeys or waterfowl.

Much is written about so many cubic Meters/Feet of space per bird, all very well and ideal, but I have known pigeons perfectly happy, healthy and breed well, when kept in an 'old fashioned' tea chest! (and given exercise!) It's not how much you spend on the quarters or loft but its suitability and how much CARE you give the birds. If the roosting place is dry and with plenty of fresh air, big enough for the birds not to fight over

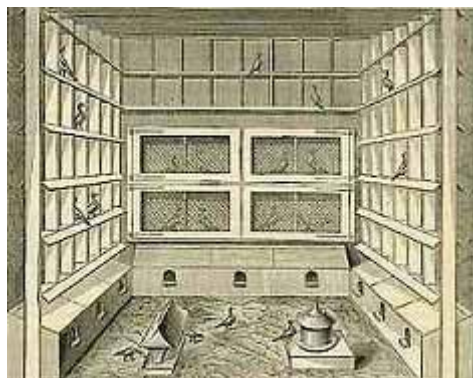
either perching places or nesting places and they have access to either free-flying or a roomy flight, the 'caring' does the rest! (That includes 'reading-up' on pigeons!).

Above left: Pigeon loft in the old times.

Right: modern aviary.

To give you some idea, depending on where you live? If you cannot free-fly - difficult nowadays with neighbours, cats, hawks and unruly children with no respect for living animals - then you could house 3 pair of a small to medium Breed, with good temperament (some Breed ARE better than others!)

A 2 meter X 2 meter X 2 meter flight is a minimum, with suitable roosting attached. That can be in the form of a loft that you can enter, or a series of sectioned, dry nest boxes that can be serviced from either outside or from within the flight.



Above: 'Old' loft, but very practical. Right: 'Modern' loft.

If you live in a Region with really inclement weather, then a Loft, as big as possible but a minimum of 2 meters X 2 meters X 1:1/2 meters, with possibly a 'Veranda' type aviary attached. This should be a minimum of 1 Meter wide and high and at least the length of the loft. This aviary can be all wire, with or

without a 'roof'. Pigeons enjoy a 'rain-bath'! Also a wire floor allows a bath to be put in the veranda flight without risk of causing a damp and un-healthy environment within the loft.

With proper attention too care, the above could easily house up to 6 pair of 'compatible' pigeons, but if bred from, you would need other quarters for all their youngsters!

I have read and been told of several people keeping pigeons totally in cages? especially the large Breeds. This is nothing short of 'factory farming' regardless of how much you win at the Shows, and has little to do with a 'hobby'. Even the big breeds that fly little need fresh air, sunlight and exercise. In-fact without sunlight pigeons are at risk of severe mineral deficiency and it's very easy to 'over-do' the minerals when trying to replace unsuitable living accommodation!

Right: Wire (Metal grid) floors and wide walking boards

Also the practice of keeping completely on wire floors, in some cases this is the only way that person may be able to continue to keep pigeons due to dust allergies etc. If the birds are given wide walking boards, where they can relax and walk on, this is one way of keeping cleaning down to a minimum, as the droppings, just fall through and can be raked-up; just the boards and perches needing scrapping. So when absolutely necessary for the owner to continue with the hobby, and allowing more time to care for his birds without risking health, then OK, and with the aforementioned 'walk' boards practical. But other than that, as an exercise in 'How to keep Pigeons'? Would you like to live on 'bare boards without carpets?

I think that covered most of the essentials of housing.



Water

Why water first? A healthy, fit pigeon can survive a week without food but only 3 or 4 days without water. For our pigeon keeping this should be clean and fresh daily. If you need to go away for up to 5 days, then a variety of water hoppers and systems are available. Also if a person is handicapped in some way and it helps them participate with the hobby, then these are an alternative. But the water will need some form of 'water preservative' in it. Water can, and in hot weather, does, 'go-off'! Many fanciers have their own 'Special Favourite'; Cider vinegar, Red wine!, even bleach. (Anything 'Acidic' will reduce 'germs' etc., that's why peat-bogs 'preserve' bodies!) Some of these are an attempt to 'cut-corners' and save expense! Some may work? But even on my small income, I would tend to rely on one of the proven 'products' produced by reliable Pigeon Firms.



I don't normally advertise, but one I have tested and it works exceptionally well and is probably available in most Countries, is 'Keimfrei' (Aqua Clean). At 100ml to 500 litres it is very cost effective and it REALLY works! It contains a complex of sodium-silver-chloride, as a test I put 5 drops in a plastic bottle of my 'well water', which normally noticeably, 'goes-off' after 24 hours, and 6 months later when I opened the bottle it still smelt fresh! That was good enough for me!



Left: Drinkers and feeders. These are the only 3 types I use: The 10 ltr Water Drinker, the Food Hopper and the small Hopper (Cup). In cold freezing weather, the Food Hopper needs to be used instead, as obviously the Dome Drinker would Freeze! The small Hopper (Cup) (as used at our Shows here) is excellent for the Breeding compartment or anywhere you want more individual feeding, as with young birds. It hooks or clips onto most size mesh. If you wish to put against the wooden sides of nest compartments it is easy to fix a single bar to the side to hook onto.

You can get electric water heaters but personally I won't use them; warm water = Bugs = Germs! unless a water disinfectant is used with every filling. Of-course that may be essential if you are

working all the daylight hours in the Northern Hemisphere in winter! But otherwise I look on it as laziness and off-course extra cost if your Hobby is on a tight budget!

The Food Hopper holds a decent amount of water and is not likely to fracture due to the water freezing. Both types are robust and easy to clean and both readily available and keep the water and feed covered.

Another 'tip' if you live in the Freeze Zone: have two sets of drinkers, one in use, one thawing out, with such rapid drinker/water changes at that temperature, actual cleaning out should be minimal to nil!

If the water drinker is stood on an upturned drinks crate the water is almost guaranteed to stay clean even if shavings is used on the floor!

These types of hoppers would not be ideal for Breeds with head feather 'Furnishings'. Although I must say I have not noticed any 'damage' to the hoods on my pair of Schmalkaldener's, small breeds may have some breast feather damage due to the height of the entrance holes (they are made for Racing Pigeons) but with the Feeder these can be cut lower, or with both a circular 'step' made to fit them in thereby lowering the holes, even a simply made square of wood will work as a Step.

Below: How many birds can get in a bath at one time?

Bathing

So fresh, clean water and ideally a bath at least once per week. Also spraying with a spray bottle is appreciated! With the bath water, don't leave down longer than 1 hour. All the birds will have taken advantage of it by then and there is nothing worse than them drinking from the rather 'mucky' water!

There are various products that not



only make it safer to leave it down longer but also help with feather condition, but these are not cheap. The good old Cider Vinegar at a rate of 1 dessertspoonful to a Gallon, or 1 teaspoonful to a Litre is effective at retarding bacteria growth in the bath water.

Grit

Grit is needed in the crop PRIOR to the bird eating grain for that food to be efficiently digested, so when birds have travelled long distance, or been without food or water for a period, then water and grit are more important first, than food. (Croppers and Pouters, when hungry or thirsty should NEVER be allowed to gorge themselves on either food or water; they can then get 'Sour Crop'. (More on that later!))



Left: Picture of the Grit 'Paloma' Brand (Belgium) with Camera cap to show size. This would be the smallest size recommended for Fancy Pigeons, smaller and it passes through the Gizzard too quickly. Easy to see it is a mix of red Stone (a natural Mineral Stone) Oyster Shell Grit, Fuller Earth (excellent for digestion) a small amount of Charcoal, sharp Grits, Calcified Sea Weed (as used to improve Bio Grazing Land) etc. Not cheap but worth the extra.

Food

Pigeon eat grain, yes, OK! But also they will eat and enjoy quite a wide variety of foodstuffs, from grated root vegetables and greenstuff, to soaked grains and wild berries. In-fact dry grain would only have been a 'natural' food during the late summer and autumn months.



Left: Paloma, again from Belgium, a General Mix, often used for Racing Pigeons, 25 % Maize (normal size, not Pearl or Red Maize) so only useful for some breed when not being exhibited, but is less expensive at 10 euro 90 cents per 25kl.

Pellets, personally, no, alright mixed in with grains, but a pigeon has a crop, in which grit/sand etc. is held and used to 'process' the ingested grain and other food. Various manufactures state that 'grit is not needed when feeding pellets, as they contain all that is needed'. That is all very well and good, BUT totally contrary to the birds 'natural' digestion process. It has been proven with several species of Domestic Animals, that 'Easy to Digest' and 'Complete' foods can eventually lead to an actual 'alteration' of the animal's biological digestive system, making it totally dependent on artificial 'foodstuffs', and over generations, this can be hereditary, as 'Stock' is not selected for food 'type' conversion. So where possible, give variety, again, like the carpet, would you like to live on bread and water alone?

TIP: If small grains are used, the pictured Drinker can be used as a feeder; large grain could block the outlets. I have experimented with Wheat size grains and small Peas and no problems with the grain flow, so ideal if you must be away a few days and want to make sure the birds don't go hungry or thirsty, and off-course no one then needs to attend to the birds. This is better than leaving an in-experienced person or stranger (the Birds do NOT like Strangers going in THEIR Loft! Even my tame birds!) in charge of your little darlings.

Of course the Feeders MUST be situated in a Dry Place! Damp grain will clog the openings! The ones pictures I have chosen specially as in use over 10 years, so they last!

Right: 'Betz' sponsored/recommended by the German VDT, is an extremely palatable mix including toasted soy (easier to digest) and COATED Vit/Min grains, but expensive at 15 euro 89 cents per 25kl. I use this one (without Maize) for Breeding and for exhibition with the Mookie's (Pale Eye Ceres a Must!) and the other for 'Resting' and the Lahore which NEED Red Eye-Ceres (Sunlight is also a MUST!) When breeding the Lahores get the Betz Mix.



Cleaning

If you don't 'overcrowd', then this should not be a gross task. Daily is best; one little nasty that affects pigeons, Coccidiosis, matures in roughly 3 days in the floor 'sediment' where it can be ingested by the birds 'picking about' on the floor, (Yes! I know about wire floors!) So a daily, or at least third day cleaning, can break the cycle. This entails scraping as much of the pigeon 'refuse' from the floor and perches as possible. Sterile conditions are not needed or even wanted outside a Laboratory! Like Children, 'a little dirt' does help with 'natural resistance', even in the un-natural surroundings of a loft!

Pigeons do get 'Worms', internal parasites. The ingestion of these are also inhibited by a generally 'clean' loft and flight floor.

Because I have a Breed with feathered feet, I do use shavings but only as a light covering and it is changed completely at least weekly. 'Deep litter' is an option, but always the top layer must be clean and dry, not always easy and the ideal breeding place for insects.

After scrapping, I generally, at least twice per week spread and brush-in 'Loft-white' powder around the floor and perches. This is produced by several Pigeon Product Firms, is inexpensive, if used properly does not get in the water/food or affect the birds adversely, it inhibits insects, smells nice and looks good!

I personally dislike chemical insecticides, I do use them but very sparingly, 'Ivermectin' one drop on the bare skin of the bird's neck, will control external insects (ones that feed on blood anyway!) and internal parasites.

Diatomaceous Earth, either dusted on the birds themselves, around the loft, in any crack and crevice, nest bowls etc. I have found it to be an excellent and non-toxic insect control. I mix it 1/3 D'Earth to 2/3 Loft White and its still effective around the Loft. This Product (used to Filter Beer if you can't find a source!) would also answer some of the problems posed by the 'deep litter' system for insect control.

One last thing! Keep out mice and other 'wild' animals; that ideally includes sparrows etc. at least away from the food, water and nesting areas. These animals do carry disease, most especially some strains of Salmonella, and the bigger 'wild' animals will eat the pigeons!

Tip: The normal cheap, non-medicated/non-coloured, Fuller Earth cat litter is actually ideal for the floor. It is relatively dust free and (being Fullers Earth) causes no problems if eaten! It is very absorbent and doesn't blow about.

(Being suspiciously reminiscent of some of the 'Pick-stone' materials sold for Pigeons? which I think if I am right, are 'Fuller Earth based!')