

6:

Roof structure and attic

6.1 Introduction

It is the roof structure of Stanwardine Hall that puts the building into context. It discloses both that the building began its life as a timber-frame structure of post and truss construction, and that the hall and wing are of different dates. The wing was built first, and the hall range - and presumably the now vanished upper wing - came later.

The hall was re-roofed during the 1960s and the present covering of slate dates from then.

6.2 The wing

The roofspace is divided into nine narrow bays by roof trusses relatively closely spaced at distances varying from 9 ft 3 ins to 10 ft 6 ins apart: the northernmost bay however is only 7 ft in width. The junction with the main range occurs between bays four and six. The bell tower branches off bays seven and eight.

The trusses are of the principal rafter type with angle struts, and support two side purlins and a ridge. The lowermost purlin on the west side of bay five has been omitted to allow access to the roof over the range. The purlins have straight windbraces. The timbers are of very heavy scantling, with the principals typically measuring 16 inches in width and six in depth at lowermost purlin height.

The trusses are open with the exception of those between bays three and four and bays six and seven, which are closed and form partitions dividing the attic into three rooms. The infill is of wattle and daub, and both trusses have centrally placed doorways, without doors, which have nicked triangular lintels.

Each of the outer gables have embedded roof trusses within them. These prove without question the wing was originally timber-framed and has been rebuilt in brick a later date.

Many of the timbers show taper burns, which indicates the attic was inhabited by living-in servants. They are most frequent over the kitchen end.

The bell tower also has the remains of a truss partly embedded in its gable wall, indicating this too was timber-framed. However, unlike the main body of the wing, it has no ridge, which suggests a different construction date.

6.3 The hall range

The floor is 18 inches higher than that of the wing and accordingly there are two steps upward in the attic floor at the junction.

There are six bays, spaced just over nine feet apart. All the trusses are open and are significantly different to those of the wing. They have instead of angle struts, queens struts and a collar, in other words they are of more prestigious form; but the timbers themselves are thinner, measuring around 13 inches in width and 6 in depth at first purlin height. There are again two side purlins and a ridge, and straight windbraces.

The west gable too has remains of a truss embedded in it, with just the northern principal and the collar remaining. This indicates the range was also formerly timber framed: something corroborated by the north tower gable, which, in addition to its external decorative framing, has close studding exposed inside the attic on its eastern wall.

The roofs of the west wing and the porch break out of the first and third bays respectively. Both appear to have been added later, for they do not have trusses embedded in the gables but instead, unusually, have trusses some four inches inside of the outer walls. The outer face of these trusses is unweathered, which indicates they were never exposed to the elements. In other words, the porch and wing were added when the house was encased in brick.

The range also shows signs of habitation, with taper burns and graffiti. However, more unusual is a painted panel, in light brown wash, on the left inner jamb of the porch window, which has the inscription *Mediocra fecit* and the initials RC presumably those of Robert Corbet II, who died in 1674. Beneath is a mason's mark like a flower in a circle.

7:
The Evolution of
Stanwardine Hall

7.1 Introduction

STANWARDINE Hall in the 16th and early 17th centuries was a house that never stood still. Like the Forth Bridge, no sooner had one lot of work ended than another began, in a restless epicycle of building and rebuilding as generations and fashions changed. The Shropshire gentry at that time were evolving an entirely new lifestyle, with each new building a link in the chain of progress. The Corbets ensured Stanwardine Hall did not fall out of step with the rest.

Less than a century later, the Corbets had gone and with them the need for a house on such a grand scale. So the mansion was ruthlessly hacked back: there was no need for fine private apartments in a working farm and so its upper wing was cut off as if it was dead wood.

The result of all this upheaval is a building of quite remarkable complexity. What follows is an attempt to unravel the key stages of its evolution.

7.2 Phase 1: The timber-framed building, c.1551-1580

Stanwardine Hall was, as Gough reports, built by Robert Corbet I (d.1594) and his wife Jane. Functionally, it was intended to replace the earlier moated building that stood to the west; but it was also a building of political significance, as Robert Corbet I had established a new branch of the family here and intended the house to be a symbol of their emergence.

The house therefore made a powerful statement through its sheer bulk and height; compared to the single-storey cottages that dominated the countryside, the emerging Stanwardine Hall was a skyscraper. It was a huge structure measuring around 100 feet in length, making it one of the largest gentry houses in the area.

The house must originally have been of H-shape, following the standard medieval hall-house plan of a central hall range with upper and lower wings at either end. Building began with the service wing at the east end, which reached more than 80 feet in length, and towered up to four storeys in height. It was built of post-and-truss construction with roof trusses composed of massive timbers. What is now the bell tower was built on afterwards, perhaps as a brewhouse with chambers above.

However there appears to have been an interruption between the completion of the wing and the construction of the hall range. This is suggested by the thinner timbers used in the latter, and the fact they are of different style. Possibly there was a shortage of funds or of materials. Robert I in his will of 1593 refers to timber being obtained from Kenwick Park, owned by the Earl of Derby, for use in the house. This suggests his own supply, perhaps in Stanwardine Park, had run out.

The gable above the north tower indicates that the hall range too was timber-framed and that it carried decorative framing of elaborate form and also close studding. The height of the hall range also indicates it was always of two storeys, ie with a chamber above the hall.

What is not clear is whether building during this timber-framed phase had reached the upper wing, for no structural evidence of this remains. However, it seems inconceivable that the hall should have been without this crucial element. We have seen that the service wing held chambers of high status, but these were probably occupied by a younger generation of the Corbet family, living under the same roof.

As to dates: Robert and Jane Corbet were in possession of Stanwardine-in-the-Wood by 1551. A sundial in the garden is said to have had the date 1560. This suggests therefore that building began with the service wing in the 1550s.

The use of decorative framing on the north tower gable infers a date no later than around 1580 for the hall range, for by this time brick had begun to emerge as the required material for the country houses of the Shropshire gentry, following the lead set by Plaish Hall of 1570-1580. Also the ceiled great hall indicates a similar date: Plaish still had an open hall, but one with chamber above was standard by the 1590s, as Wilderhope Manor and Condover Hall demonstrate.

The date of 1588 on the panel within the dining room - probably originally from the upper wing of the house, or the dining chamber - may mark the completion of this timber-framed phase. It was literally a lifetime's work, for Robert Corbet died five years later. But by then, a new process of rebuilding had probably already begun.

7.3 Phase 2: The brick rebuilding, c.1590-1630

By 1600, timber-framing had become yesterday's fashion among the gentry classes, swept aside by a tide of fashion in which brick, enjoying patronage at royal level, became the latest vogue. Stanwardine Hall was therefore modernised by being rebuilt in brick, instantly projecting it into the ranks of the most fashionable houses in the county. The appearance of Moreton Corbet Castle must undoubtedly have spurred the Corbets on.

This probably occurred late in the lifetime of Robert Corbet I, for brick is named first among the building materials left in his will of 1593 to his heir Thomas I. The process may therefore have started around 1590, and again it may have begun with the service wing, for the spartan details of its south gable would fit that period. The timber-framed walls were dismantled, but the trusses in the end gables were merely clad in brick, in order not to jeopardise the roof structure. Robert I's will also indicates the house was as yet unfinished: this may refer to the brick rebuilding to parts of the house not yet completed.

Thomas I (d. 1615) was probably responsible for much of the main façade, with its shaped gables – popular in the first quarter of the 17th century – and in fact, his name appears on the elephant stone over the porch, indicating the rebuilding had reached here by 1615 at the latest. The porch, along with the east wing, were additions to the original structure.

However, the name of his son Robert II (d. 1674) and a date beginning 16—, on the raven stone of the west wing indicates the house was still unfinished at Thomas's death. Robert II therefore appears to have built the west wing – another addition to the hall range – and then presumably carried on to complete the upper wing in brick. The disturbed brickwork on the corner of the west wing indicates something projected forward and this was probably the side of the upper wing.

The rebuilding may have been completed by around 1630, for after this time there was very little building activity by the Shropshire gentry. The passion for rebuilding was by then spent or was extinguished by increasing political unrest culminating in the Civil War.

7.4 Phase 3: The early 18th century

By 1700, the Corbett glory had faded and Stanwardine Hall became part of the huge estate of Sir John Wynn. Therefore, a substantial downsizing seems to have quickly followed.

The hall plummeted in status from a gentry mansion to a tenanted farm – albeit a substantial one – and therefore became strictly a commercial venture. Whether he won it at a game of cards, or paid a price for it, Sir John would have required a return on his investment and the hall at its full extent would have been too big to be viable. It was probably therefore simply cut down to size the major casualty being the loss of the upper wing to the west. What was the crosswall between great hall and the wing became an outer wall and the doorway between the two blocked; windows, re-used from the wing, were inserted at first floor and attic level.

Similar cases of downsizing are known elsewhere in these circumstances: for example, Aughton Old Hall, a medieval manor house near Ormskirk in West Lancashire, was shorn of its upper wing when bought by the Molyneux family from its ancient owners, the Starkies, in the late 17th century. Stanwardine's upper wing may have been suffering from structural fatigue and simply hastened on its way: for the service wing shows signs of sagging, probably as a result of where the timber-frame has failed beneath its cladding.

The truncation resulted in the hall assuming the footprint that exists today. The loss of the upper wing meant the functions of its rooms were redistributed elsewhere and consequently the rigid hierarchy of the hall-house plan was shattered. What were previously service rooms were upgraded and refurbished to form the present breakfast room (a small parlour originally) and dining room. Jacobean

panelling was transferred to the latter, perhaps from the demolished upper wing, along with the date panel of 1588 bearing the initials of Robert I and his wife Jane. Simultaneously, there was a widespread interior makeover, with new doors fitted to most of the rooms.

The date of this was perhaps 1703 to 1713. The former date is on the gatepiers to the terrace, the latter on the kitchen hearth. It is possible brick from the demolished upper wing was reused to form the perimeter walls of the terrace and also those of the garden to the east.

A further modification came with the insertion of a floor in the kitchen to create an intermediate storey where a cheese maturing room was sited, with cheese hoist descending to the basement. This took place after 1713, and perhaps before 1750 as the inserted beams are still chamfered and stopped.

7.5 Phase 4: Mid-to-late 19th century

By this time, the great hall was divided into three rooms. The screens passage was removed and the present front hall created, along with the billiard room. The latter is also understood to have been divided horizontally, creating the third room. This can be seen as a further stage in the erosion of the building's status.

Ironically however, the fact Stanwardine Hall became a tenanted farm probably led to the preservation of much of its interior fittings: for these are more likely to be replaced in a prestigious owner-occupier property as tastes and fashions change.