

# STANWARDINE HALL

Stanwardine-in-the-Wood, Shropshire



## HISTORIC BUILDING REPORT

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## 1.1 Introduction

STANWARDINE Hall is the ancient manor house of Stanwardine-in-the-Wood, near Ellesmere, Shropshire: a large gentry residence built and rebuilt over a lengthy period from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Its builders at this time were a new branch of the Corbet family whose principal seat was Moreton Corbet Castle near Shawbury. To celebrate the founding of this line – or perhaps to gloss over its newness – the mansion was conceived on a grand scale. However, the building we see today is only a fraction of what once stood there and what remains of it – and indeed what doesn't – has experienced a particularly complex history.

Its first 150 years are punctuated by restless change and adaptation. The hall was initially built in timber-frame. Then in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was rebuilt in brick and stone with a number of additions. After a quieter interlude, it experienced a considerable trauma in the first decade or so of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when approximately a third of the structure, in the form of a wing, was pulled down. The Corbets had gone and the hall had plummeted in status to a tenanted farm, and so for profitability it was ruthlessly downsized. The result is what Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, in his Shropshire volume of the *Buildings of England* series, described as '...an odd building'.

Stanwardine Hall is therefore a building of considerable historical and architectural significance. This report aims to record, interpret and analyse its features and provide a greater understanding of its development.

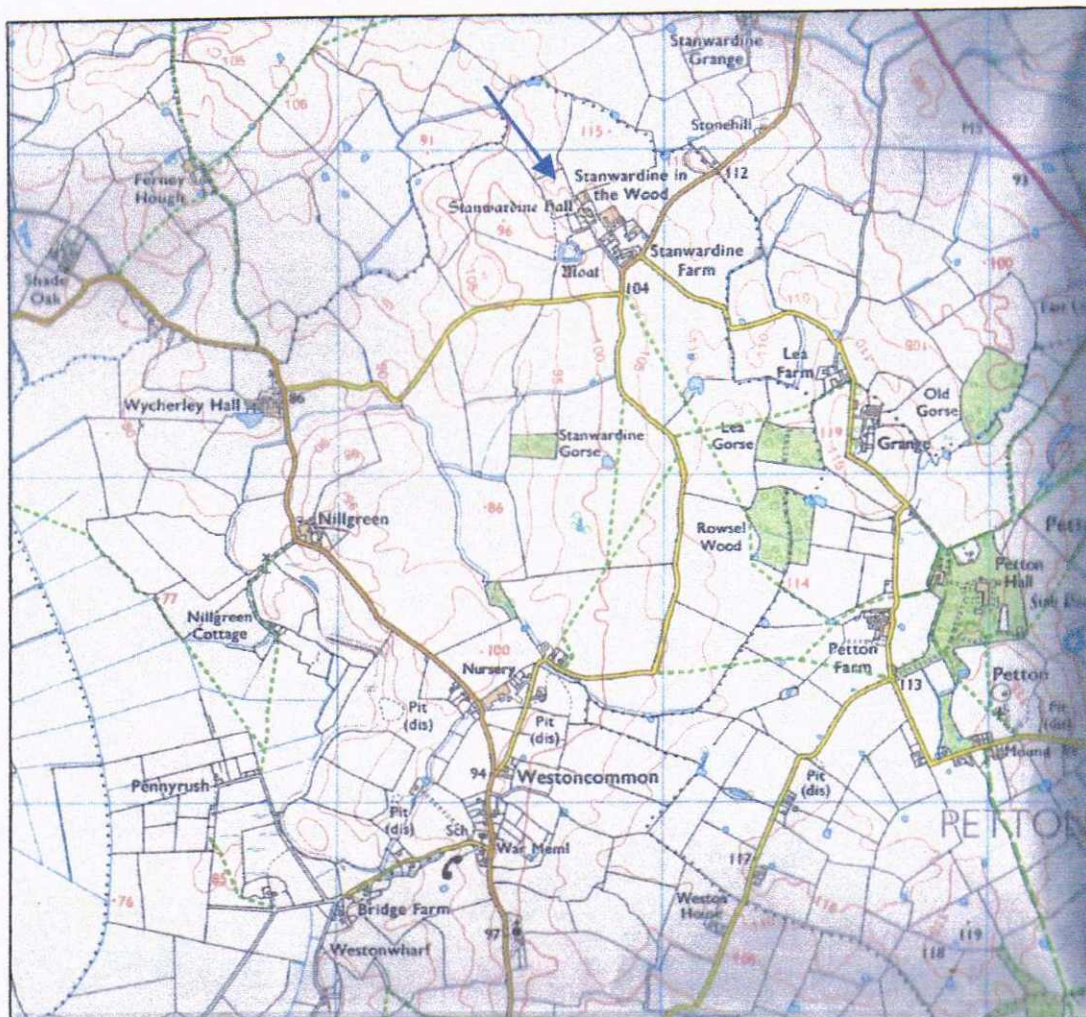
## 1.2 Location of Stanwardine Hall

The hall is located at NGR SJ 4274627806 in the rural township of Stanwardine-in-the Wood, sited some 10 miles northwest of Shrewsbury in the district of North Shropshire. It stands at the end of a track leading northwest from a lane running from Cockshutt to Baschurch off the main A528 Shrewsbury road. Together with its buildings and the neighbouring house and barns originally called Stanwardine Farm, it forms a hamlet that is the only nucleated settlement of any substance within Stanwardine-in-the-Wood.

The hall stands approximately 350 ft above sea level on the eastern slope of the shallow valley of the river Perry, upon a low plateau whose maximum height of 368 ft is achieved immediately north of the house. The location offers excellent visibility of the surrounding area, which would have been an important defensive consideration in ancient times, as discussed later.

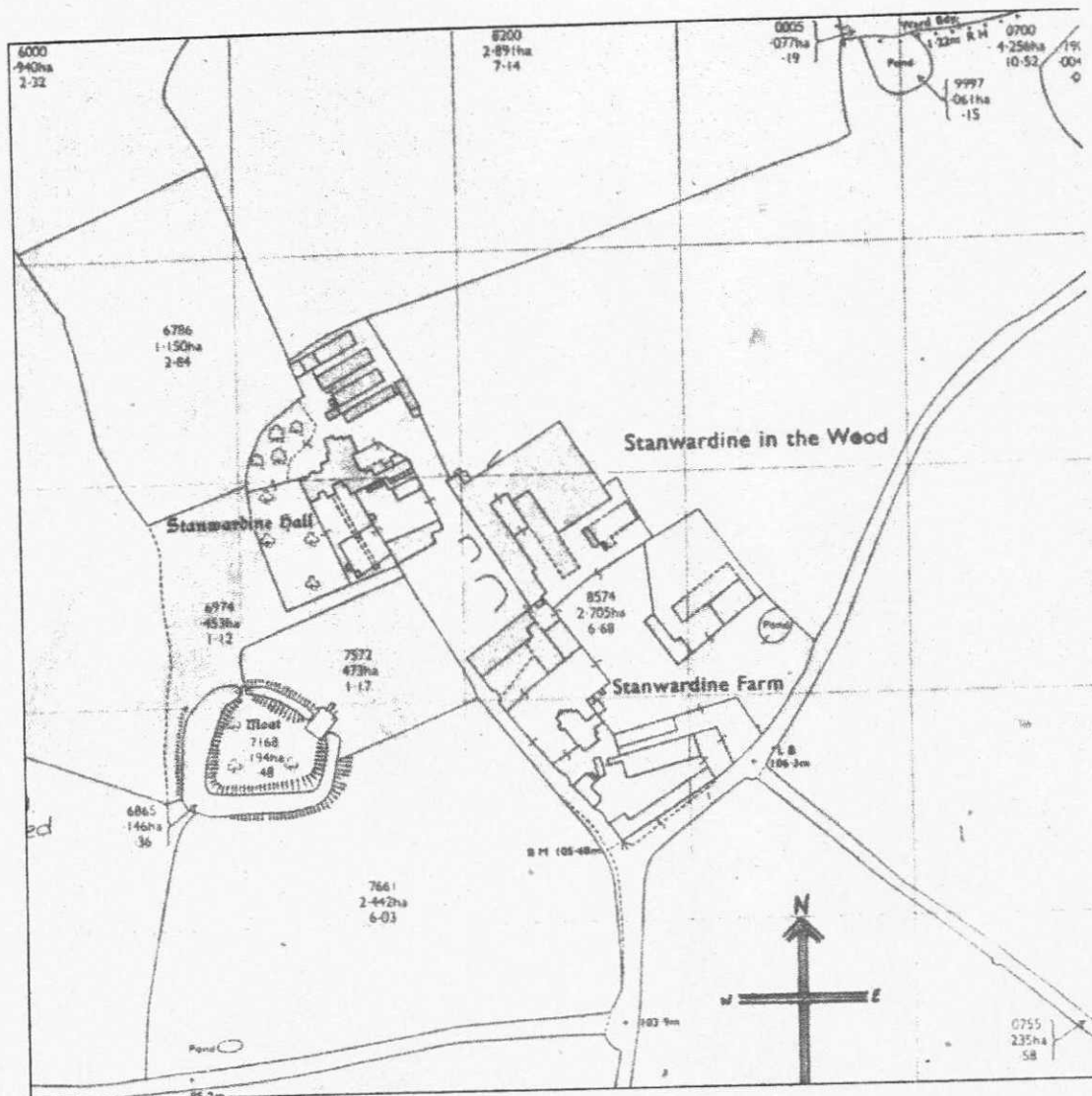
Map 1 illustrates the location of Stanwardine Hall.





**MAP 1: Section of Ordnance Survey 1:25000 Explorer series map showing location of Stanwardine Hall along with surrounding area**

**(OS licence number 100045053)**



**MAP 2: Location plan of Stanwardine Hall at 1:2500 scale**

### 1.3 Listed building status

The significance of the house has been acknowledged by its being awarded Grade II\* status in the list of buildings of special architectural and historical interest produced for the North Shropshire District Council area. Listed also as Grade II are the terraces, garden walls and gatepiers immediately south of the hall, and the sundial in its front garden.

The listed building descriptions of all these structures forms Appendix 2 of this report.

### 1.4 Background to this report

Stanwardine Hall has been the subject of comment and discussion by historians for several centuries, ever since Richard Gough wrote his *History of Myddle* in 1700-1701, in which is recorded some of the history of the Corbets of Stanwardine.

However, the building itself has attracted relatively little detailed published analysis compared to other gentry mansions of the county. Some historical information was included in a restoration report produced by architects Leach Rhodes and Walker in 1962. A brief interpretative report by Professor Andor Gomme was featured in the 1988 Summer Conference programme of the Society of Architectural Historians. The hall is also touched upon briefly in *English Architecture to 1900: The Shropshire Experience* by Eric Mercer (2004) and *Vernacular Buildings of Shropshire* by Madge Moran (2003).

It was felt by the hall's present owners, the Bridge family, that a detailed account of its history and development was necessary to fully evaluate and report upon the building's historical significance. This was seen also as being particularly significant in the light of recent proposals to abolish the Grade II\* listing category (as reported in the *Daily Telegraph*, January 19, 2006).

Consequently, architectural historian Garry Miller was commissioned by Mr Peter Bridge to produce this report.

### 1.5 The author

Garry Miller is a buildings historian with 30 years' experience of studying traditional architecture of the countryside. He is the author of a major new reference work, *Historic Houses of Lancashire: the Douglas Valley, 1300-1770*, which was published in November 2002 by the Heritage Trust for the North West,



a buildings preservation trust based at Barrowford, near Nelson, Lancashire. A further book with HTNW, on the buildings of Georgian and Regency Liverpool, is now in preparation for publication in 1998.

Garry Miller has his own practise specialising in interpretative reports on historic buildings, either for the interest of their owners or for planning/restoration purposes. His field of operation includes North West England, North Wales and the North Midlands. He also is a speaker to schools and groups on historic buildings, and has also contributed to English Heritage listed buildings surveys: much of his research material was used as background information during re-listing of buildings in parts of West Lancashire District in the early 1990s.

Garry Miller is also compiling for Mr Bridge a detailed history of Stanwardine Hall and the people who have lived there, which will be a narrative account using material from documentary sources.

## 1.6 Method

This report involved a fabric survey of the building itself as well as documentary research.

The fabric survey was conducted on several days over a period from August 2004 to January 2006. This was necessary because of the scale of the building and the need to compare physical evidence with that obtained from documents.

For photography, a Canon EOS 20D 35mm digital camera was used, with 28-70mm zoom lens, along with a Canon EOS 300 35mm camera, with similar lens, using print film. Certain subjects (such as datestones) required the use of a Canon EF 75-300mm zoom lens. Interior photography required use of the camera's built-in flashgun.

Reference was made in the survey to plans and elevations drawn by Chartered Architects Leach Rhodes and Walker for their 1962 renovation report, along with the floor plan accompanying the 1988 report by Professor A Gomme. These were annotated on site and subsequently modified to include historical features not otherwise shown. The plans and drawings included in this report are based upon them. Reference was also made to black-and-white copies of English Heritage photographs taken in 1989, prior to conversion of the first-floor room above the hall and billiard room to a separate apartment for Mr and Mrs David Bridge.

Documentary research was undertaken to assist with the dating and evolution of the building. This involved reference to primary source material held at the National Archives, Kew, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury, and the Lichfield Joint Record Office. Principally, these were the will of Robert Corbet I, dated 1594, the will and inventory of Thomas Corbet I, dated 1615, the Hearth Tax returns of 1663, the

tithe map and schedule of Baschurch of 1842, and the 1874 25-inch Ordnance Survey map of the Stanwardine-in-the-Wood area. Useful historical background information was obtained from a history of Stanwardine-in-the-Wood compiled by Mr William Bridge.

Selected use was also made of other material from the more extensive documentary research being undertaken by the author for the forthcoming history of Stanwardine Hall for Mr Peter Bridge.

A list of all sources used is given in Appendix 1.

## 1.7 Aims and structure of this report

The report has the following objectives:

- Record the hall and its accompanying buildings
- Analyse their date and development
- Identify and record their key historical features
- Interpret their function
- Ascertain who may have built what
- Examine the hall's historical and architectural significance

It is divided into six sections subsequent to the present one:

*Section Two* examines the historical background, including the origins of Stanwardine-in-the-Wood, evidence for the antiquity of the site, and the records of the Corbet family;

*Section Three* discusses the historical significance of the hall's plan form and building materials, by drawing comparisons with buildings of similar style and date;

*Section Four* analyses the exterior features of the hall, while *Section Five* describes the interior, examining historical details and the function of the rooms;

*Section Six* compresses all this information into a summary of the evolution cycle of the building;

Finally, *Section Seven* describes and discusses the farm buildings both individually and as a group.

This is followed by the appendices and a photographic record of the hall and its buildings. Sections of historic maps used in the research are also included at relevant places in the text.



## 2: Historical background

## 2.1 Origins of Stanwardine-in-the-Wood

Stanwardine is an ancient place, referred to in Domesday and probably already long-established by that time. The name means in Old English (the language spoken between approximately 450-1100 AD) *an enclosure made of stones or an enclosure on stony ground*. It comprises two hamlets, *Stanwardine-in-the-Wood* and *Stanwardine-in-the-Fields*, the former the northernmost and its name inferring it began as a clearing in the primeval forest and woodland that still covered half of Shropshire in Norman times.

Before 1066, Stanwardine, along with Ruyton and Petton, was held by the Saxon lord Leunot, but after the Conquest it became part of the territories held by the Norman barons of FitzAlan, later Earls of Arundel. By 1175 the manor was held by a family who took the name of *de Stanwardine*, but by the early 14<sup>th</sup> century it was held by the Hord family: on his death in 1326, Richard Hord held the hamlet of Stanwardine-in-the-Wood from Richard of Arundel.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the manor passed by marriage to Griffin Kynaston and remained with his successors until the middle of the following century when his great-great granddaughter Jane married Robert Corbet, a younger son of the family of Moreton Corbet Castle.

Stanwardine-in-the-Wood was then, as now, merely a hamlet. The Hearth Tax returns of 1663 record only seven houses upon which duty was paid, suggesting its population was hardly more than 50 people.

## 2.2 An ancient site

The land immediately surrounding Stanwardine Hall has possibly been occupied for more than a thousand years. As Stanwardine was already in existence by Domesday, the area may have been colonised during the Anglo-Saxon period, when large-scale clearance of the primeval forests began. The site of the hall is therefore that of the ancient manor house of the area and therefore what we see today must be the latest in a succession of buildings.

Defence was a prerequisite of any substantial homestead during these volatile times and the location of the hall, on a low plateau, fulfils that consideration by offering excellent visibility across the surrounding countryside, especially to the west and the Welsh border.

During the medieval period however, the natural defences were reinforced, in the form of the moat that lies immediately southwest of the hall. Moats were introduced by the Normans, and began to be constructed during the political unrest of the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century: before this time, homesteads were defended by ditches and stockades. Then in the period 1200 to 1325, moats achieved great popularity when

- during a period of greater stability - they became a symbol of power and status. Close to Stanwardine, other moats occur at Whittington Castle, licensed in 1221 and once with extensive water defences, and at Petton Hall.

The moat at Stanwardine encircles a raised platform upon which an earlier house of medieval origin - the old hall - would have stood. Its position relative to the hall is shown in Map 2.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, political and economic stability under the Tudors made defensive measures unnecessary, and this, coupled with gentry's growing desire for larger and more comfortable homes, made moats redundant. This explains why the Corbets abandoned the moated old hall and the constructed the present one, a process which has parallels elsewhere - for example, at nearby Petton Hall, to the southeast.

The medieval Stanwardine Hall was surrounded by its own demesne lands, of which evidence can still be traced. Immediately southeast of the hall is the building today known as Stanwardine House but named on the 1874 OS map (Map 4) as *Stanwardine Farm*. This appears externally to be of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century but again probably occupies a site far earlier: its position close to the hall indicates this originated as its home farm, in other words the farm on the demesne which supported the hall and its household.

In addition, fields southwest of the hall are known as *Stanwardine Park*. Park in this context means hunting grounds, for pursuit of deer and other game. Gough refers to how Stanwardine Park was extended by Thomas Corbet I, who died in 1615. Parkland was generally wooded, and northwest of the hall is Kenwick Park, from which Robert Corbet I, in his will of 1593, states timber was to be used for building the hall. Today, Stanwardine Park is largely an area of cleared, enclosed fields.

### 2.3 The Corbett family: Robert Corbet I

By the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, Stanwardine had become the property of Robert Corbet, a younger son of the family whose seat was at Moreton Corbet near Shawbury. The Corbets originated at the time of the Conquest: they were Norman followers of William I who were given lands for their support. Their base was the marcher lordship of Caus near Westbury, but what became the main Moreton Corbet branch was established when Sir Richard Corbet acquired the Moreton estate by marriage in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The Stanwardine branch was formed when Robert Corbet I acquired the manor, and other lands, by marriage to Jane, the daughter and heiress of Roger Kynaston of Walford and Stanwardine, great-grandson of Griffin Kynaston. Documentary evidence shows they had married by 1551 and therefore implies they were living at



Stanwardine by that time. Gough refers to Robert I holding other lands at Hampton Wood, Sugdon, Burlton, Wykey, Marton and Newton of the Hill.

Gough states that Robert Corbet I was the builder of Stanwardine Hall. A panel inside the dining room indeed has the initials of Robert and Jane Corbet and the date 1588. There is also a record of a sundial dated 1560, no longer existing, which suggests building had already begun by then. However, work seems to have been a drawn-out affair, possibly interrupted by lack of funds or materials, and subject to changing intentions: the house was begun as a timber-framed structure, probably with exuberant decoration, but relatively soon after rebuilt in brick and stone. This was perhaps inspired by the monumental rebuilding of Moreton Corbet Castle taking place at that time. Whatever the reason, the hall was still unfinished at the time Robert made his will, December 6, 1593, for he left to his son and heir Thomas:

*'...all my brick, freestone, tymber, bourdes, Joystes, rayles and waynescott readymade, fallen, sawed, hewed or squared only for the building up and fynishinge of my house of Stanwardyne the which I will and charge hym to see fynished so soon and as farre forthe as his abilitie will permytt according to the forme and plot thereof alreadye layed, begun and intended.'*

However a reference elsewhere to Robert's 'best armour with furnitures' in his house at Stanwardine, left to Thomas I, suggests that although unfinished, the house was occupied by Robert at the time of his death.

## 2.4 Thomas Corbet I

Robert Corbet died in 1594, and was succeeded by his eldest son Thomas, who married Margaret (referred to as Elizabeth by Gough), the younger daughter of Sir Vincent Corbett of Moreton Corbet, a union that would have consolidated the Stanwardine family's position and fortunes. Gough also refers to Thomas Corbett purchasing lands in Wycherley and Bagley.

Thomas Corbet was probably responsible for much of the present appearance of Stanwardine Hall. His name appears on the stone that bears the elephant badge on the porch. This suggests that during his time, the rebuilding in brick and stone had reached at least this point, although it probably began in his father's time. However, as what seems to be the name of his son, Robert II, also appears on the west wing, Thomas may too have died with work still in progress.

Thomas Corbet I was buried at Baschurch on November 18, 1615. His will, proved the following year, is accompanied by a detailed inventory which is a crucial piece

of evidence as it names the individual rooms at the hall, along with their contents at that time.

## 2.5 Stanwardine Hall in 1615

The inventory of the possessions of Thomas Corbet, compiled on November 21, 1615, implies the hall was a larger building than today. It lists 24 rooms in all, named as follows:

Mr Corbet's Chamber  
Mr Barber's Chamber (*probably a guest*)  
My Ladies' chamber (*that of Mrs Corbet*)  
Maydes Chamber  
Three Malt Chambers  
Parlour  
Hall  
Dining Chamber  
The closet within the dining Chamber  
The closet over the porch  
Gallery  
Closet in the gallery  
Store house in the gallery  
Buttery  
Store house near the Kitchen  
Parlour Chamber  
Outward parlour Chamber  
Cheese Chamber  
Kitchen  
Brewhouse  
Day house (*dairy*)  
Chamber at Milkhouse end

Rooms not named specifically, but whose presence is implied are:

Milkhouse  
Porch

Together, they indicate an extensive mansion with a generous provision of rooms: for the family's own use, for entertaining and accommodating guests, and for food storage, preparation and cooking. There are at least five more rooms named in 1615 than are present in the building today. Counting the hall as one – and excluding landings, the ground floor of the porch and the later additions such as the outshuts – today's total comes to 19. The number of rooms listed in the inventory,

leaving out the gallery and its store and closet, is 24. The implication is that in 1615 an upper wing, now removed, stood at the west end, a theory for which fabric evidence exists in the building itself. It is here where the parlours would have stood.

The best furnished rooms were the chambers, indicating the Corbets followed the gentry fashion for first-floor living. The best-furnished room was *My Ladies Chamber*, which comprised beds, furnishings and furniture totalling £10. Next was *Mr Corbet's Chamber*, with similar contents valued at £5.

The hall itself was sparsely furnished, with 'two greate tables...and two lesser tables', but they must have been of considerable size or value as they too were valued at 50s. The lack of furnishings other than these suggests this was a little-used room used solely for large gatherings and banquets in the medieval tradition.

The inventory also shows a substantial farmstead lay nearby, for the following buildings are also named:

Barn

Stable

Kylne house (*cow house*)

Ox house chamber (*implying an ox house existed and this was a loft above it*)

Furthermore, the existence of a dovehouse - pigeons were considered a great delicacy - is indicated by:

Two duffhouse (dovehouse) Chambers

The total value of the inventory amounted to £420 10s 2d, a surprisingly low figure for someone of this status: one can infer his capital had been absorbed by the building of the hall, which perhaps was still ongoing.

## 2.6 Robert Corbet II

Thomas Corbet was succeeded by his only son, Robert II who became, in the words of Gough, '*...a very eminent person*'. He was Sheriff of Shropshire in 1636, *Custos Rotulorum* of the county (keeper of its official records) a Justice of the Peace and a Master in Chancery (the High Court of Chancery and the highest court of justice after the House of Lords).

The Civil War of 1640-1647 split the Corbet ranks. Robert II supported the Parliamentary cause - while the head of the family, Sir Vincent of Moreton



Corbet, fought for the King. Consequently, Moreton Corbet was besieged and destroyed, while Stanwardine Hall remained unscathed.

Robert II may have been responsible for further work at Stanwardine Hall, perhaps finishing the brick rebuilding of the western end. This is implied by the fact that the stone bearing a raven - the ancient badge of the Corbets - in the gable of the west wing has beneath it the name of Robert Corbet, and an illegible date which seems to begin 16-. This means it cannot be Robert I. The initials RC also appear in a painted inscription in the attic over the porch along with the family motto *Mediocra Firma* (the middle course is best).

In the Hearth Tax returns of 1663, Robert Corbet was taxed on 13 hearths, by far the greatest of the seven houses in Stanwardine-in-the-Wood upon which duty was paid. The second highest number was the house of Mr Richard Rea with six.

## 2.7 Decline of the Corbets and thereafter

Robert II died in 1676 and was succeeded by his eldest son, Thomas II, who by 1700 had sold Stanwardine to Sir John Wynne of Watstay; one story is that the estate had even been gambled away. Thomas II and his wife Mary were then recorded as living in Worcestershire in 1700. Thereafter Stanwardine Hall became a tenanted farm.

The evidence shows Sir John carried out refurbishment of the hall between 1703 and 1713 - the former date is on the gatepiers of the terrace garden, the latter on the hearth of the kitchen. However, this evidence also suggests a considerable upheaval within - involving reshuffling of rooms and functions - which can only be explained by the upper wing being removed at this time.

In 1818, Sir Watkins Williams Wynn sold Stanwardine Hall for £40,000 to William Sparling of Petton. During their ownership came several minor additions and alterations, such as the division of the great hall. It remained with the estate until 1920, when they sold the hall and 252 acres to Fred Hitchen.

In 1957 and 1960, David Bridge acquired the estate in two parts. It has remained with the family since, and Stanwardine Hall is now the centre of their extensive dairy farm with around 400 acres and 400 head of cattle.