

3:

Plan and construction

3.1 Introduction: Stanwardine Hall and its contemporaries

STANWARDINE Hall is one of a number of fine houses built by the Shropshire gentry in the second half of the 16th century.

These houses were products of a period of regeneration which saw the homes of this class either completely rebuilt or extensively refurbished to meet new requirements for greater comfort, privacy and spaciousness. These houses began the transition from a medieval to a modern way of life and Stanwardine Hall is therefore a significant example in a cycle of building that lasted from approximately 1570 to 1630. This cycle saw key developments in the way houses were planned and constructed.

In terms of plan, these houses effectively modernised what was an established layout inherited from medieval times, termed the *hall-house* plan. This produced long, linear houses which comprised three elements often in an H-shape: a central range, containing the great hall – the most important room of the house – flanked by wings at its upper and lower ends. The upper wings contained the private rooms of the family – including the solar, the lord's own room, sited on the first floor – while the lower housed service rooms for preparation and storage of food. These typically included a buttery, a pantry and a kitchen. The hall was divided from the service wing by a screens passage which extended back from the entrance. This layout remained the established template for gentry houses of the second half of the 16th century. Thus, Stanwardine Hall and contemporaries such as Plaish Hall, near Longville, of 1570-1580, Wilderhope Manor, near Easthope, of around 1590, Condoover Hall, Condoover, of the late 1590s, and Steventon Manor, near Ludlow, of the early 17th century, were built along these lines.

However, a crucial modification was made to the great hall. During medieval times this room was open to the roof and heated by an open hearth, resulting in a room that was lofty, smoky and draughty. The Tudor gentry however required greater comfort and privacy, and consequently from the middle of the 16th century halls began to be fitted with fireplaces and ceilings. In Shropshire, gentry houses were built with ceiled-in halls by the middle of the 16th century, and probably the last to be built with an open hall was Plaish Hall. Thereafter, in the late 16th and early 17th century, the trend was for this room to gradually lose its dominance and instead fade away to merely an entrance area.

Further innovation came in the area of building materials. In the medieval period, most houses in Shropshire – as in much of lowland England – were made of timber. However, the gentry rebuilding saw its rapid decline and replacement by stone and brick, which gave the new air of permanence their owners required. By 1600, timber-framed building was obsolete for gentry houses of the countryside, though still it clung to favour in the towns.

In the remainder of this section, we will examine how the plan and construction of Stanwardine Hall has been influenced by these developments.

3.2 Elements of the plan

Stanwardine Hall is approximately T-shaped. Two principal elements that make up this formation: a main *hall range* - where the principal residential rooms were located - with a massive *service wing* at right angles.

The *hall range* is approximately 70 feet in length and 50 in depth at its widest part, and is of two storeys plus an attic. It runs from southwest to northeast with the principal front facing southeast.

The range has several projections both front and rear. Approximately in the centre of the façade is a tall, two-and-a-half storey porch. At the western end of the range is a narrow projection, which, for identification purposes, we will call the *west wing*.

The rear wall has a further projection at the rear, corresponding to the west wing, which we will call the *north wing*. Further east, close to the junction with the service wing, is a projecting *stair turret*. Between this and the north wing is a modern glazed porch.

The *service wing* is a long, narrow structure, measuring up to approximately 95 feet in length and 35 in width. It is of two storeys plus attic and has a basement towards the front, where the ground slopes to the south. The combination of length and height lends to the wing - especially seen from the east - an appearance of gigantic bulk.

Built on are two smaller projecting wings. At the front, on its eastern side, is a lower, narrow gabled projection of two storeys plus basement. This we will call the *east wing*. At the side, towards the rear of the eastern elevation, is a wide projection we will call the *bell tower* because of the bell housed there to summon workers in from the fields. It is the same height as the wing, but with no basement.

There are also minor additions. On the rear gable of the service wing is a small single-storey *outshut*, containing a store, with a single storey *rear porch* added on the western return wall in the angle with the stair turret.

3.3 Anomalies of the plan

The house that remains today is essentially two-thirds of what was the standard plan for gentry houses of the late 16th and early 17th century. The hall range and service wing are there, but there is no upper wing. Consequently, the private rooms which ought to be sited at the upper end rub shoulders with service rooms, and the usually clear-cut hierarchy along the length of the building is blurred.

This eccentric configuration can only result from the fact that the upper end has been removed, and that the rooms formerly sited there were redistributed throughout the remaining structure. The upper wing must have been there originally: it would be inconceivable to have built the house without it as private rooms were increasingly important to the Tudor and Stuart gentry. Indeed the architectural evidence shows a wing did exist at the west end.

Another odd deviation is the position of the stairs. Normally these were sited close to the upper end of the building, for first floor rooms were strictly the domain of the master and thus access was to be restricted. A possible explanation is that there was another stair at the upper end.

3.4 Significance of the great hall

Examination of the great hall at Stanwardine sheds important light on the Corbet household's attitude to the room that was the focus of the medieval house but was waning in status by the second half of the 16th century. That attitude was somewhat ambivalent, showing both progressive and conservative traits.

In fitting a ceiling in the hall, they were, symbolically signalling their abandonment of medieval life. In doing so they joined the forward-looking majority of the Shropshire gentry, but fact that Plaish Hall was still being provided with a single-storey hall in the 1570s shows society was still divided on the issue. Stanwardine therefore was a trendsetter, joined by contemporaries such as Condoover and Wilderhope, who also had halls fitted with a ceiling. Similarly, there are signs the hall at Stanwardine played a somewhat diminished role. The fact the hall window is the smallest of all the principal rooms - the only one not to be transomed - indicates how it was regarded. The inventory of Thomas Corbet I also shows it was a sparsely-furnished room, and so probably little-used.

Conversely however, Stanwardine - like Wilderhope Manor - still pays homage to the open-hall tradition as its great hall, at 13 feet, is taller than any other room in the building, with the exception of the kitchen. This, before the ceiling was inserted to create the cheese room, would have been of similar height.

On the other hand, Stanwardine's hall range is innovative in that it incorporated other rooms as well, between the screens passage and the service wing. This is also found at Steventon Manor and Wilderhope. In retaining the screens passage, Stanwardine was not necessarily being conservative: this arrangement was still the gentry norm, and a tradition that lasted into the 17th century. Thus, screens passages are found at Plaish Hall, Wilderhope Manor, Condoover Hall, and Steventon Manor.

The treatment of the hall presents important dating clues. The emphasised height, along with provision of additional service rooms beyond the screens passage, indicates a later 16th century date, perhaps around 1590.

3.5 Building materials and their significance

Outwardly, Stanwardine Hall is built of handmade brown brick with stone dressings. Internally however, the evidence shows the building began life as a timber-framed structure.

Timber-frame, in both cruck and post-and-truss forms, had been the principal building material for Shropshire houses since the middle ages. By the mid-16th century, crucks had become a poor man's building material, but post-and-truss was then at its zenith in gentry circles, and at that time the fashion was for highly-exuberant decorative framing. Shropshire's most outspoken example of this is Pitchford Hall, Pitchford, probably of the 1550s, with a riotous façade of lozenge-shaped decoration.

At Stanwardine Hall, the remains of roof trusses in the external gables indicate this too was originally a post-and-truss structure. A solitary timber-framed gable above the north tower, with its cusped lozenges, also shows the building was decoratively treated. If so richly-embellished a feature was placed on a rear wall, then the façade must surely have been spectacular.

In the third quarter of the 16th century, the timber-frame tradition was challenged by the growing popularity of brick and stone. Plaish Hall of 1570-1580 is probably the earliest Shropshire example of a gentry house fully built in brick. Moreton Corbet, of around 1579, combined brick and stone on monumental scale. These were powerful trendsetters and their effect was such that by 1600, timber-frame was yesteryear's fashion for country houses, and brick and stone unquestionably *de rigour*.

This explains why at around this time, Stanwardine Hall's timber-framing was replaced by brick. Moreton Corbet was probably a direct influence upon it, and so the rebuilding may have been begun by Robert Corbet I: in his will of 1593, brick is first among the list of building materials left to his son Thomas to finish the house.

The evidence suggests the framing of the outer walls was completely removed, yet the trusses were allowed to remain in the gables, probably to avoid compromising the roof structure.

3.6 The use of brick

The bricks used are of typical thin handmade form, an approximate general measurement for the stretchers being nine inches in length and two-and-a-half in depth. The headers are typically four-and-a-half inches wide and two-and-a-half deep.

The walls on both ground and upper floors are approximately two feet thick. The bond used is English, which was more or less standard from the 16th to the early 18th century, with courses of headers and stretchers alternating. However, from the first floor upwards of the rear gable of the service wing the pattern is more irregular, suggesting further rebuilding. The brick is generally dark brown in colour, but on the façade of the hall range the brick is more of an orangey shade.

Like most of the Shropshire gentry houses of this period, Stanwardine Hall shies away from the highly decorative treatments found in other counties, and instead presents a restrained appearance. Some vitrified brick is used – with the exception of the hall range façade – but in a haphazard manner and not the decorative lozenge patterns found at Belwardine Hall, Cressage, perhaps of the 1540s, Plaish Hall, and Upton Hall, Upton Cressett, dated 1580. Otherwise, the main effect of the brick is one of contrast – combined with stone dressings, it creates the ‘red-and-white’ effect intended to give these type of houses a striking appearance, one also demonstrated by Plaish Hall.

The only decorative brickwork used is for the flues of the great hall chimney, which are star-shaped. Decorative flues were highly fashionable at the time, and ones of star-shaped form occur also at Upton Hall. The flues of the other chimneys at Stanwardine Hall are plainer and diamond-shaped.

3.7 The use of stone

The stone used at Stanwardine Hall is largely Grinshill, the finest of Shropshire’s building stones, and with a long pedigree stretching back to its use in prestigious medieval buildings such as the abbeys of Buildwas and Shrewsbury. It is generally buff in colour, but some red sandstone also appears.

The most striking use is on the porch, which is, unlike any other part of the building, completely faced in stone of fine ashlar. This makes it the focus of attention on the façade, and immediately evokes Morton Corbett. Surely there was a deliberate intention to do so.

Stone is also used for the windows, which are mostly buff-coloured, but some of the less-important windows also use red sandstone, sometimes in conjunction with buff stone to produce a bizarre medley.

A stone plinth supports most of the building. On the façade of the hall range, it is approximately 16 inches high and of two courses, the topmost bevelled: this is of buff stone while the lower is of red. It is possible this red stone represents the footprint of an earlier hall range. The porch plinth has a moulded top course instead. The service wing has a deeper plinth, at around 27 inches, but this is absent on much of its northeastern wall. This is mostly of red sandstone.