

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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The Country House  
Revealed

Dan Cruickshank

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*Lord Dufferin, who enriched Clondeboye House, County Down, NI when Viceroy of India in the mid-1880s.*



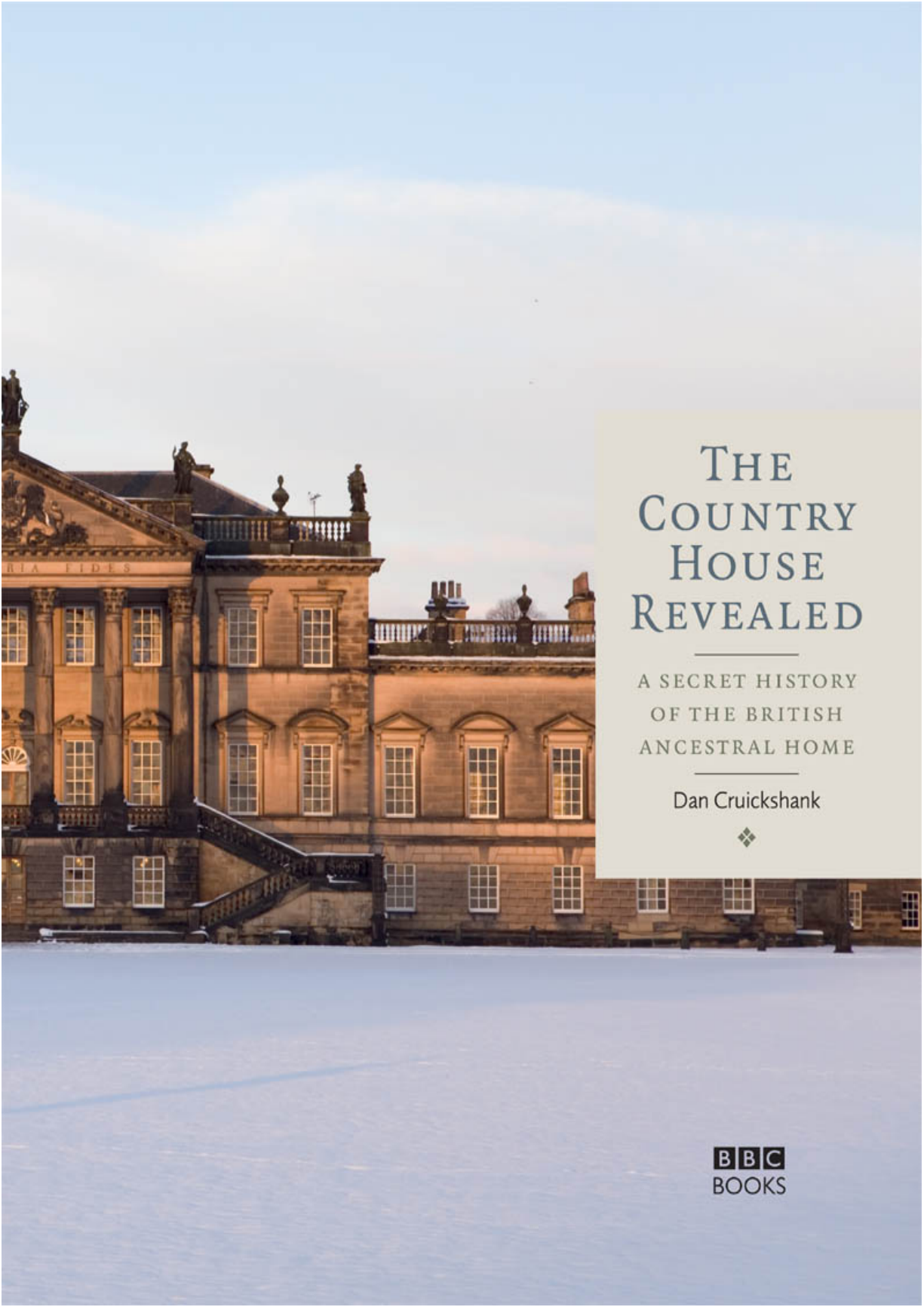
*The early fifteenth-century Great Hall roof at South Wraxall, Wiltshire, a marvellous Medieval construction with a hidden meaning.*



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# THE COUNTRY HOUSE REVEALED

A SECRET HISTORY  
OF THE BRITISH  
ANCESTRAL HOME

Dan Cruickshank



**BBC**  
BOOKS

# INTRODUCTION

THE COUNTRY HOUSE, as it evolved in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, is one of the great cultural glories and achievements of the British Isles. Together with their parks, gardens and related buildings, country houses represent an artistic achievement of unquestioned international significance and offer fascinating insights into the society within which they were forged. At its best, the British country house and estate was a subtle organism of architectural distinction that played a key role in the local economy and in national politics. They were microcosms of the larger world and now, where they survive in reasonably complete manner, offer a window into a lost age - indeed offer, in most vivid terms, a particular and often very personal history of the nation.

By tradition the country house was a place in which the family displayed its taste, wealth and pedigree, a powerhouse in which matters of state were debated and decided, and from which its immediate region was governed. But the country house was also home and workplace to a full spectrum of society. The ancestral family presided in the grand rooms or comfortable quarters, but generations of servants also bustled below stairs, in the kitchens, pantries and laundries, in the gardens and in the surrounding estate that - in most cases - provided the economic base to keep the 'big house' and its family going in style.

The country house emerged in England in the sixteenth century as the tradition of fortified dwellings and castles, once the badges of honour, ancient lineage and prestige, gave way to the ever-increasing desire for accommodation that was fashionable, grand, comfortable and convenient.

In a nation where the wealthy or ruling elite rooted themselves in the country rather than in cities the country

house became the emblem of national and artistic identity and destiny, of wealth and pride. But the forces that fuelled the creation of country houses for 400 years – that sustained the creative cycle of country-house construction and rejuvenation – dissipated in the twentieth century. What had become the soul of the nation became, rapidly, dramatically and tragically, seemingly surplus to requirements. The reasons were many and varied, but essentially the times and the world changed. The slaughter of the First World War destroyed spirits, families and fortunes, and the national economy foundered. The political complexion of the nation changed and systems of taxation – Death Duty in particular – undermined the families that had built and continued to attempt to occupy great houses. It's been calculated that in the hundred or so years after 1900, around 1200 country houses were demolished in England alone, while in Scotland, one country house in six disappeared.<sup>1</sup> Demolition escalated dramatically in the years immediately following the Second World War, where, in a world saturated by socialist idealism, the country house was seen increasingly as a thing of the past, perhaps beautiful, but doomed and ultimately a product of elitism and privilege that seemed no longer relevant or admirable.



*The author inside the staircase hall at Easton Neston, Northamptonshire.*



*The Marble Hall at Wentworth Woodhouse.*



*The British country house emerges from under a cloud: Kinross, Perthshire.*

In Ireland things were no better, and country houses fell victim in vast numbers to taxation and political prejudice. The country house was seen as commemorating years of oppression by English and Anglo-Irish landowners, and, although often designed by outstanding Irish architects, distinctly Irish in character and ornaments in the land, were consigned to oblivion with ruthless abandon.

The massacre of the country house is now seen as one the greatest cultural and artistic tragedies ever to overtake the British Isles. But this makes the survivors more precious, and the depleted numbers that endure are once again recognized as key hallmarks of national identity and high points of architectural endeavour.

“The massacre of the country house is now seen as one the greatest cultural and artistic tragedies ever to overtake the British Isles ...

This book, and the BBC2 series it accompanies, offers a history of Britain through the stories of six country houses – stories that are intimate, but that also relate to, and throw light on, the larger history of the nation. Each house is of architectural and artistic significance, and collectively they range in date from the early fifteenth century to the early twentieth. They cover a wide geographic spread, stretching from Perthshire in Scotland to County Down in Northern Ireland and Hampshire in southern England, and each house tells the story of a particular family – its aspirations, achievements and tragedies. They also reveal the different activities that paid for the construction and maintenance of the country house through the centuries, from farming and wool, to coal-mining, imperial administration and stockjobbing. In several cases the houses possess collections of historic objects and archives that are of great national importance and highly relevant to its story and to that of the family who built it. In addition, in several cases the family remains closely connected with the house created for or occupied by generations of its ancestors.

None of the six country houses featured in this book will be greatly familiar to the general reader. This is not because they are relatively insignificant – indeed, they include some of the most important country houses ever built in Britain. There is Easton Neston, the only country house on which Nicholas Hawksmoor, one of the most brilliant architects of eighteenth-century Britain, worked as the lead designer; Wentworth Woodhouse, one of the largest and most perfect Georgian country houses ever built; and Marshcourt, arguably the best country house designed by Edwin Lutyens, now recognized as one of Britain's greatest ever architects.

Of the other three houses, South Wraxall marks, in splendid style, the transition from the fifteenth-century manor, consciously if symbolically fortified, to Tudor

country house; Kinross House heralds the arrival of the pure Renaissance-inspired country house in Scotland, while Clandeboye House in Ulster is perhaps the greatest and most eloquent monument in Britain to the nineteenth-century ideal of empire.

By any standards, these buildings are of outstanding national significance. But these six houses are not well known because none of them is currently open to the public, nor, in most cases, have ever been on any general or regular basis. Indeed, the relative obscurity of these buildings, combined with their major interest and artistic quality, confirms the richness of the repository of history that is still, and despite a hundred years of remorseless demolition, represented by the British country house. So this book and the television series it accompanies offer a privileged view of six of the nation's most fascinating, important and *private* country houses.

What the six country houses featured in this book have in common – besides their historic merit and secret natures – is that they all have, in various ways and to various degrees, faced the threats that destroyed so many of their fellows. The threats have not in most cases come directly from outright demolition, but from those forces that lead to the sale of contents, to dispersal of archives and to the separation of the house from the estate that, by tradition, has generated the money to support the family in the 'big house'. In several instances the houses discussed in this book have, in part, succumbed. In at least three cases, supporting estates have been sold, and in the case of Kinross House, such a detachment is currently proposed, with the house retaining just its immediate garden. This need not be a disaster, but it does limit the house's future options. When the estate, with its potential for offering at least partial financial support, has been detached, the very nature of the country house changes. It can no longer even attempt to be self-supporting or play a significant role in

the community by functioning as the hub of a large and local economy. Instead it becomes an isolated if palatial dwelling, whose future is forever destined to be dependent on money made elsewhere or through such business activities – often volatile – that the house itself can accommodate.

Although the future of the British country house now seems relatively secure – its great virtues lauded at home and abroad – major threats remain. Buildings, no matter how artistically, historically or socially important, cannot survive if they do not have a productive use or purpose. It will be interesting, perhaps salutary, to revisit each of these six houses in ten years' time to see which endure, which retain the magic with which all are now bathed in abundance ❖



*The south-facing front of South Wraxall, dating from the early fifteenth century to the early twentieth, possesses a powerful, cohesive and almost disarmingly modest charm.*

THE MANOR HOUSE at South Wraxall, Wiltshire, lies hidden down a narrow lane that once, years ago, was a main road, and the first impression it offers is charming and disarming, for it looks like little more than a terrace of ancient cottages. But there is more – far more – to this extraordinary house that is, in its layers of history, well-worn comfort and gentle beauty, perhaps the perfect English home. The manor is built of a mellow and handsome limestone that is improved rather than withered by age. It's a spellbinding complex of almost-separate structures arranged around a court, and includes an early fifteenth-century Great Hall, a stupendous late Elizabethan barrel-vaulted Great Chamber or drawing room that is flooded with light through vast mullioned and transomed windows, and a delicate gatehouse with the prettiest of late fifteenth-century oriel windows overlooking a large and placid pond. It is, to all who see it for the first time, an astonishing thing – not just an idyllic ancient English home, but a precious architectural jewel and wonderful survivor seemingly untouched since the early seventeenth century. South Wraxall Manor is indeed all these things, but is also something else. It's a parable, an allegory wrought in masonry and mortar. Surprising as it might now seem, the manor was, as its history reveals, once a world of striking, if not bizarre, contrasts, a place of light and shade, of public virtue contrasted with private vices, where ostentatious displays of architectural beauty were created by men whose deeds were ruthless, greedy, even bloodthirsty.



*An early fifteenth-century gargoyle of the Great Hall, showing a frightful beast devouring a naked man head first.*

The manor was at one time the centre of an almost lawless land, run and controlled by an ambitious dynasty that in its pride and power felt answerable to none but the king - they were petty princes who, to all intents and purposes, were both judge and jury in their own domain. There are some details of the building that, to the observant and thoughtful, act as a warning of the manor's disquieting past, are reminders that it was once the lair of an almost predatory band of brothers. Outside the entrance to the Great Hall is a group of gargoyles that is most alarming in its imagery once you remember that few architectural objects were created in the fifteenth century just for fun, with no meaning or purpose. Gargoyles can be interpreted in many ways: those that are monstrous and leering can be seen as evocations of spirits that were old long before the Christian age and that evidently lived on in

folk memory – that were called upon to protect the house and its inhabitants; then there are grimacing images of Sheela-na-gig that gaily expose their private parts, and smiling images of the Green Man that seem to celebrate the abundant fecundity of creation and commemorate the power of nature and the deep mysteries of the Wild Wood.

But strange as these stone creatures hanging from the eaves and towers of medieval churches and houses may be, few in my experience are so ominous and peculiar as those that congregate on the Great Hall at South Wraxall Manor. Here we see a monstrous and ferocious creation – a lion perhaps, a wolf or a great dog – devouring a man head first, with only his buttocks and well-delineated genitalia yet to be swallowed. And next to this extraordinary apparition is another, equally troubling, but this time showing the head of a man either emerging from the maw of the beast or being eaten legs and buttocks first. What can these mean? Who would choose to decorate their home with such images? What message do they carry? That man eats man? That the weaker go to the wall? That the strong and savage triumph? Are they a warning or are they a proclamation of intent?



*A glimpse of the house across the entrance court, showing the double-height porch leading to the Great Hall. South Wraxall is a mellow, idyllic - and somewhat mysterious - ancient English home.*



*A detail of the early fifteenth-century Great Hall, showing the mighty fireplace and classically detailed timber screen added in 1598-1600.*



*The early fifteenth-century roof timbers of the Great Hall are ornate and intended to be seen and admired. Particularly striking are the arch-braced collars and cusped wind braces.*

After contemplating these images, digesting them, I move inside and inspect the gloomy heights of the Great Hall, where a series of corbels support the superb roof timbers. Most of these corbels are carved as representations of what, at first glance, appear to be weird humanoid lions - lions with no real manes, but almost human faces. Look again, though, and they appear to be more like grinning apes or imps, or perhaps monkeys. Are they mocking mankind below, taunting those summoned to the Great Hall to receive summary judgement from the Lord of the Manor, sitting in feudal splendour on his lofty dais? All who raised their supplicating eyes to heaven, in astonishment of terror, would have seen these grinning and almost diabolical creatures, conceived perhaps as parodies of the corps of angels that were often carved within the

roofs of fifteenth-century churches. At the very south end of the hall is a pair of quite different corbels. Facing each other are the figures of men – one holding a shield that looks like a page, while the other, clutching an open book, appears to be a tonsured monk. Are they shepherding or exorcizing their impish fellows? And is the monk blessing and condoning the activities taking place in the hall below and thus confirming that the lord of the manor rules – like the king – by divine right and is omnipotent? Or perhaps all these corbels are a wonderful window into the nooks and byways of the medieval mind, which was, we know, mightily amused by all manner of puns and visual jokes and metaphor. The rebus, the visual representation of a name, was a popular jest, so these images may be puns on the word ‘monkey’ – of unknown origin, but in use from the late fourteenth century – which seems to have been derived from the diminutive for ‘monk’. So the roof could be an anti-clerical joke aimed at local monastic orders, showing monkeys as monks and monks as monkeys.

If these are indeed the messages enshrined in this collection of ancient images, then they truly did proclaim – indeed, foretell with uncanny accuracy – the events that were to unfold within this beautiful building.

The visual beauty of South Wraxall Manor’s early buildings is a reflection of the quest for, and exercise of, material wealth and power. Nothing or little here seems to do with those lofty spiritual beliefs of the Middle Ages that were expressed through church building. Churches of the fifteenth century possess a Gothic beauty that is transcendental, while the Gothic beauties of fifteenth-century South Wraxall Manor seem a little sinister – as sinister as the smirking simian monks – rather than angels that turn the roof of its Great Hall from a celestial domain into what one can imagine to be an infernal region. I stand in the Great Hall and stare up at the quizzically grimacing faces and they stare back, as they have done for nearly 600

years or so. As we exchange glances, I ponder this place of veiled meanings and realize that here is a hidden world, created over centuries, and now almost lost in time and through a changing and forgetful world. How much can I rediscover? Many messages, enigmatic or implied, are of course enshrined within the fabric of the building. These I can try to interpret, but, of course, the obvious starting place for my quest is the history of the family that built South Wraxall Manor and occupied it for over 550 years.

“The visual beauty of South Wraxall Manor’s early buildings is a reflection of the quest for, and exercise of, material wealth and power...



*The roof timbers rise from a series of corbels carved in a most strange manner. Are they intended to represent humanoid lions or impish monkeys to make a wicked visual pun that monkeys are monks and monks are monkeys?*

THE ORIGIN OF SOUTH WRAXALL MANOR

The manor of South Wraxall was owned by the Abbess and Convent of Shaftesbury from the reign of King Aethelred in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries as part of the manor of Bradford. In the thirteenth century part of the manor of Bradford was granted to the priory of Mary Magdalene of Monkton Farleigh, near South Wraxall,<sup>1</sup> and in the twenty-fifth year of the reign of Edward III (1352) the Convent of Shaftesbury granted to 'Thomas Scathelok their villain of the Manor of Bradford ... and Editha his wife ... one messuage [and] two virgates, and nine acres of land, and four acres of meadow with ... appurtances in Lyghe and Wrokeshale, within the Manor of Bradford.'<sup>2</sup> What happened to Thomas we do not know, nor do we know if his 'messuage' was erected on the site of the existing manor, but at some point before the reign of Henry VI, who came to the throne in 1422, the Longe or le Long family were in possession of the manor of South Wraxall.<sup>3</sup> 'By what means,' observed antiquarian Thomas Larkins Walker in 1838, 'is not recorded.'<sup>4</sup> The head of the family was then Robert Long, and it would seem that he built the earliest surviving portions of the manor, between 1410 and 1420. Exactly what he constructed, and what survives of his building, is contested. He certainly built the Great Hall, and probably most of the wing to its south that contains the remains of an early kitchen. The kitchen wing, off the low end of the Great Hall, would usually also contain a buttery (for the storage of liquids, bottles or butts) and a pantry (for the storage of bread and other foods). Above these rooms, tainted by smoke and the smell of cooking, would usually be inferior lodgings.



*Plan of the second-floor level of South Wraxall Manor in 1838. North is to the top. In the centre is the upper portion of the Great Hall, with kitchen range to its south, the Great Chamber (converted into a splendid barrel-vaulted room in about 1600) to its north, and to the northwest a wing, making the fifteenth-century manor L-shaped in plan. The gatehouse was added to the southwest in about 1495 to define the south edge of the entrance court.*

But things seem to have been unconventional at South Wraxall Manor. The buttery is supposed to have been in the low, semi-basement room beyond the north or dais and high-table end of the Great Hall. This may be a memory of Thomas Scathelok's mid-fourteenth-century house incorporated into the early fifteenth-century manor. The large room above the buttery, in the location usually occupied by the family's comfortable, convenient Great Chamber or Solar, may have been the Guest Chamber. Whatever the original use of this room, it was clearly high status because rising above it, and now hidden by later additions, are the timbers of a very fine early fifteenth-

century roof, presumably the same date as the surviving roof of the Great Hall. Like the roof of the Great Hall, it has an arch-braced collar construction, and its wind braces are ornamented with cusps and chamfers confirming that – as in the Great Hall – this roof structure was not to be concealed, but to be seen and admired from ground level. The other portion of the existing manor that is generally thought to date from the early fifteenth century is the central portion of the north wing, suggesting that the early fifteenth-century manor was, in general form, L-shaped.

The original pattern of life these fragments suggest is most clear. The house was both a place to display status and power, and a functional machine for living. The Great Hall would, in the early fifteenth century, have been used by the family on a limited basis – perhaps for feasting on high days and holidays – and been heated by a central hearth, with smoke curling up and escaping through a louvre in the centre of the open roof. To escape smoke and noisy company, the family would have generally lived in the comfort, convenience and privacy of their Great Chamber and bedrooms behind the dais or north end of the hall. In addition, the Great Hall would also, of course, have been used by family members for official business – to receive deputations of tenants and to sit in judgement as local magistrates.



*The view across the entrance court towards the huge mullioned and transomed window, added to the Great Chamber in about 1600.*



*A nineteenth-century view of Perkin Warbeck being pilloried in London following the collapse of his armed rebellion for the English throne. Thomas Long aided in the suppression of the revolt.*

Off the opposite - south - end of the Great Hall were the functional service rooms grouped around the kitchen. At South Wraxall the two-storey range to the north, perhaps detached from the Great Hall or connected to it by a timber-built covered way, was most probably used for family bedrooms or lodgings. There must also have been stables and other utilitarian buildings, perhaps built of timber, whose whereabouts are now unknown or obscured by later buildings.



*Following the marriage of the king's son Prince Arthur to the Spanish Infanta, Thomas was knighted.*

The creator of this early fifteenth-century manor, Robert Long, remains a misty character, and we have no idea why he chose to embellish his Great Hall with such strange details. The chronicler John Leland recorded in his *Itinerary* of 1535-43 that Robert was the son of 'Long Thomas' a 'stoute felaw'.<sup>5</sup> We also know that Robert was a Member of Parliament, chosen a 'knight of the shire' and a wealthy lawyer whose fortune and power were largely due to the fact that, as Leland put it, Long had been 'sette up by one of the old Lordes Hungrefordes'.<sup>6</sup> The Hungerford family, powerful local magnates in fifteenth-century Wiltshire, used Long as their lawyer and adviser, and evidently elevated him to a key position in the feudal world that they dominated. Through his connection with the Hungerfords, Robert Long became rich, respected and,

perhaps, even feared. He certainly seems to have acquired a reputation as a man not to cross and who was happy to manipulate the law in his own favour or in the favour of his clients. A chancery case with which Long became involved suggests that he was unscrupulous and cynical in his use, and abuse, of his power and connections. It seems that he 'maintained' or supported one Edmund Ford in a property case heard in a local court, and then took the rent of the property as the fee for his services. Ford tried to recover the money, but could not get redress in common law 'by cause of grete power, consideration, unlawful maytenance and alliance of the sayde Robert Longe in the sayde shyre'.<sup>7</sup> Robert Long's influence was such that in 1442 he managed to get three of his sons elected with him to parliament, and in the same year was appointed a Justice of the Peace.

Robert Long married twice, one of which marriages forged an alliance with the powerful and local Popham family. He had four sons, John and Henry. The latter was born about 1417, became Sheriff of Wiltshire, a Member of Parliament and married three times, but in 1490 died childless. Robert Long died in 1446 and South Wraxall Manor passed to Henry and then, because he was childless, to his nephew Thomas, the son of John Long and Margaret Wayte. Thomas Long played an important role in the rise of the house of Long - and in the growth of South Wraxall Manor - because he operated and prospered not just locally, but also within the larger framework of early Tudor England. Thomas quickly associated himself with the new Tudor dynasty, established when Henry VII seized the throne in August 1485, and in 1497 was among a body of nobles who went with Edward, Duke of Buckingham to Taunton to meet the king. Thomas made himself useful to the king during the extraordinary events that unfolded in 1497, when a long-standing challenge to Henry VII's right to reign was eventually quashed. The challenge came from a mysterious character named Perkin Warbeck, who