

The Burford School of Masons

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SUMMARY

Three dynasties of stonemasons emerging from quarries in the Burford area, the Strongs, Kempsters and Beauchamps, rose to national stature as Wren's mason-contractors in post-Fire London. The activity of these Burford masons can also be traced in buildings and sculpture in the Oxfordshire area over a period of some hundred years from the 1630s onwards. Unusually, they not only operated individually but frequently joined forces, enjoyed ready access to important markets for their stone, and acted as transmitters of new styles, all of which suggests that they can be regarded as a school of masons. This paper confirms their credentials as a school on the basis of eight criteria, and examines the built evidence of their works with particular regard to Oxfordshire.

The Strong, Kempster and Beauchamp families were connected with three quarries close to Burford, located at Upton, Taynton and Little Barrington. This paper groups these dynasties of stonemasons together as the 'Burford masons'. At the time of the Great Fire of London in 1666 the Strongs were already established masons of regional importance, but it was the response of Thomas Strong and Christopher Kempster to the urgent need for rebuilding the City which boosted both families' fortunes in an unprecedented way. Ephraim Beauchamp joined them as soon as he had served his apprenticeship. Over the hundred years of their known activity, the Burford masons were closely involved in creating many seminal buildings, including St Paul's Cathedral, twenty-four of the fifty-one City churches rebuilt, Charles II's new palace at Winchester, Greenwich Hospital, and over half of the 'Queen Anne' churches constructed. In Oxfordshire, they were engaged on the county's largest mansions, Cornbury Park and Blenheim Palace, and on Oxford college buildings, including Canterbury Quadrangle at St John's, Garden Quadrangle at Trinity and Tom Tower, Christ Church. They operated closely with the foremost architects of their time including Nicholas Stone, Hugh May, Nicholas Hawksmoor, John Vanbrugh and, most particularly, Christopher Wren. Involvement with such major work and prominent architects placed them at the forefront of new architectural ideas and challenging standards.

CRITERIA FOR SCHOOL OF MASONS

Howard Colvin noticed that in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the mason's craft in England was still closely connected with quarries, from which many prominent masons originated.¹ He identified a number of quarrying villages which served as nurseries of masons, for example Painswick in Gloucestershire and Ketton in Rutland. He went on to mention Raunds in Northamptonshire (which produced the Grumbolds), Chipping Campden in Gloucestershire (the Woodwards), and in Oxfordshire the Headington quarries and those at Taynton operated by the Strongs. To his list, two more quarry villages close to Burford can be added, Upton, home to the Kempsters, and Little Barrington (Glos.), another quarry worked by the Strongs.

¹ H. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600–1840* (2008), p. 16.

Colvin further drew attention to the importance of proximity of quarries to ready markets, identifying the Headington quarries as providing Oxford with a school of masons, a criterion similarly applicable to Raunds, some 30 miles from Cambridge. A similar linkage existed between the Burford quarrying villages and their markets along the River Thames in Oxford, Windsor and London. Turning to another characteristic shared by many important masons, Colvin observed, ‘The most successful firms were generally those whose capital and experience was handed on from one generation to another.’ Families passing down their craft formed dynasties, a criterion applying not only to the Townesends and Peisleys of Headington, but to the Burford masons as well.

The characteristics Colvin recognised lend themselves as a research approach into schools of masons emerging from quarries. This paper applies his observations to the Strongs, Kempsters and Beauchamps, looking at the quarry villages from which these masons emerged, the role of their quarries as nurseries for craft, accessibility to ready markets, and at the importance of individual dynastic strength. The paper goes beyond Colvin in seeking to identify further common characteristics of the Burford masons which could constitute a school, examining their operation as a group, their close and long association with leading architects exposing them to new ideas, and finally their role as transmitters of craftsmanship and style through education and the example of their own buildings and sculpture. While some of these criteria are met more fully in the main body of their recorded work in London, considered elsewhere,² this paper focuses on the Burford masons’ activity in Oxfordshire.

Despite the Burford masons’ outstanding profile, the literature has paid scant attention to these three dynasties. The fullest account of the Strongs is still to be found in Colvin’s *Dictionary*, which also contains an entry on Christopher Kempster.³ The *Dictionary of Sculptors* also provides an entry on Ephraim Beauchamp.⁴ Both draw on Douglas Knoop and Gwilym P. Jones’s *The London Mason*, which briefly summarises the careers of leading masons in seventeenth-century London, taking in some members of the three Burford dynasties.⁵ Both *Dictionary* entries for Christopher Kempster build on the work of W. Douglas Carøe, the first to explore his career, although not entirely reliably owing to his confusion over major craftsmen of the family.⁶ This paper goes beyond the sparse literature, drawing on documents such as the Kempster deposits held in the National Archives, comprising a motley collection of accounts, estimates, receipts, almanacks and personal papers belonging to Christopher Kempster and his son William, hitherto untapped.⁷ Christopher Kempster’s day book, which resurfaced at auction only in 2003 after many decades of obscurity, has proved to be a valuable source shedding new light on the family’s activity after 1666, as have legal documents recently discovered at the Tolsey Museum, Burford.⁸ In respect of the Strongs’ careers, this article has incorporated new evidence found in Edward Strong junior’s letter book held at the Sir John Soane Museum, containing file copies of his business transactions 1730–40, and, most particularly, the ‘Strong memorandums’, Edward Strong senior’s recollection of his family’s works which he set down in 1716. It is Robert Clutterbuck’s transcription of the memorandums, not entirely accurate, upon which both *Dictionaries* rely.⁹ Examination of parish records of several counties, and of London parishes, has helped produce the most

² M. Mobus, ‘The Burford Masons and the Changing World of Building Practice in England 1630–1730’, Open University PhD thesis (2012).

³ Colvin, *Dictionary*, pp. 995–8, 608.

⁴ I. Roscoe et al. (eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Sculptors in Britain, 1660–1851* (2009), p. 87.

⁵ G. Knoop and G.P. Jones, *The London Mason in the Seventeenth Century* (1935).

⁶ W.D. Carøe et al. (eds.), ‘Tom Tower’, *Christ Church, Oxford: Some Letters of Sir Christopher Wren to John Fell, Bishop of Oxford, hitherto Unpublished* (1923).

⁷ TNA: PRO, C106/145, Master Richards’ Exhibits, Kempster v. Wrigglesworth.

⁸ Burford Tolsey Museum (BT), day book and MSS D660–670.

⁹ Sir John Soane Museum (SM), letter book of Edward Strong junior, 1730–40; R. Clutterbuck, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Hertford*, vol. 1 (1818), pp. 167–9.

comprehensive dynastic trees yet for the Strongs and the Kempsters, and the first one for the Beauchamps (Figs. 1, 2, and 3, at the end of this paper).

The Burford Masons' Quarries

The three quarries worked by the Burford masons all yielded high-quality freestone from the Great Oolite geological group, classified together within the Taynton Limestone Formation. Taynton stone possessed the greatest resistance to weathering due to its iron content, resulting in an ochre hue. As Robert Plot observed in 1677, 'it endures the Weather.'¹⁰ Little Barrington produced stone of a slightly lighter colour, its thinner beds unable to yield large stones like Taynton.¹¹ By contrast, stone from the Kempsters' quarry at Upton was pale and finer in texture, producing a good cutting edge, 'much a finer *Arris* [sharp edge]', according to Plot, and was more suitable for internal work and sculpture.¹² Stone from these and other freestone quarries in the Burford area was commonly referred to in contemporary documents as 'Burford stone', without distinction.¹³

It appears to have been the Strongs' quarries at Taynton and Little Barrington which were pivotal to the Burford masons' success, laying the foundations of what was to evolve into a school. As early as 1617, Timothy Strong, from Wiltshire, took a lease of one acre of land at Little Barrington, probably part of the now disused quarries north of the Barrington filling station on the A40.¹⁴ He also took on quarries at Taynton, which the family retained into the eighteenth century.¹⁵ The Kempsters, by contrast, although having leased their quarry in Upton since the late sixteenth century, were yeoman farmers and do not appear to have exploited it significantly until 1667, when the demand for stone to rebuild London opened up. Whereas the Strongs continued to hold their quarries on lease, Christopher Kempster purchased his freehold in 1694.¹⁶ The Beauchamps, also yeoman farmers from Upton, held no quarry of their own but came to be involved in the Strong operation through Martha Beauchamp's marriage to Edward Strong senior in 1675.¹⁷

The excellent quality of stone from these quarries made it highly marketable. Income from its sale built up capital, a reserve which could be tapped when work was slack or payment dilatory, as happened with many of their London contracts. Quarry ownership was also an asset in obtaining building commissions, as clients preferred to employ masons who could provide their own stone and a complete masonry service including construction and sculpture, like the Burford masons.¹⁸

Quarries as Nurseries of Masons

The apprenticeships of the early Burford masons remain untraced. Despite Burford being an incorporated town which would have had control over its trades, no guilds had survived by the seventeenth century to document apprenticeships.¹⁹ By contrast, in Oxford, some 20 miles away,

¹⁰ R. Plot, *The Natural History of Oxford-Shire: Being an Essay toward the Natural History of England*, 2nd edn (1705), p. 77.

¹¹ W.J. Arkell, *Oxford Stone* (1947), pp. 72, 75.

¹² Plot, *Natural History*, p. 76.

¹³ Arkell, *Oxford Stone*, p. 67.

¹⁴ Gloucestershire Archives, MI 2/4.

¹⁵ SM, letter book.

¹⁶ BT, D660-2.

¹⁷ G. Armytage, *Allegations for Marriage Licences issued by the Vicar-General of the Archbishop of Canterbury* (1892), p. 137.

¹⁸ R.T. Gunther, *The Architecture of Sir Roger Pratt* (1928), p. 84; J.W.P. Campbell, 'Building a Fortune: The Finances of the Stonemasons Working on the Rebuilding of St Paul's Cathedral 1675–1720', *Proceedings of the Third International Congress on Construction History* (2000), p. 300.

¹⁹ M. Girouard, *Elizabethan Architecture: Its Rise and Fall, 1540–1640* (2009), p. 26; R. and J. Moody, *A Thousand Years of Burford* (2006), p. 8.

the freemen kept meticulous records of all apprenticeships in their hanaster books, but none of the Burford masons' names are found there.²⁰ However, the Strong memorandums reveal that at Little Barrington and Taynton, Timothy Strong 'had several apprentices and kept several Masons & Labourers employed in those Quarries.'²¹ The Strongs can be expected to have trained in the family firm, and it is likely that Christopher Kempster and Ephraim Beauchamp, having no family background in masonry, also learned their craft in the Strong operation. Although other master masons in Burford could have offered apprenticeships, such as the Daniells, who worked a small town quarry, or the Osmans, the Strongs operated by far the largest and most experienced quarrying and masonry business in the area.²² The village of Taynton was easily accessible from Upton, a mile over the footbridge and ford which then existed across the River Windrush.²³ The early Burford masons' likely common training made not only for a similarity of approach to their craft, but also helped forge associations which continued into their later careers. The Strong quarries spawned other masons whose names remain unknown, forming a reservoir of skills of great consistency in the area.

Proximity to Markets

In associating the Headington quarries with an Oxford school of masons, Colvin highlighted the importance of the proximity of quarries to a ready market in enabling schools of masons to flourish. Proximity was, however, relative to the cost of stone haulage. Carting stone overland was appreciably more expensive than transporting by river, the overland journey from Oxford to London, for instance, cost around three pounds a ton, triple that for water carriage.²⁴ It is noteworthy that in the late seventeenth century, a sloping weir was constructed in the Windrush just downstream of the Strong family's quarry at Little Barrington, to enable stone to be floated to Burford.²⁵ Burford's location on the Windrush and its access to the Thames at the Radcot wharves only 8 miles south enabled the Burford masons to take advantage of a well-established route for transporting stone to the markets downriver.

The local historian Ernest A. Pocock argued that already in the eleventh century, when Taynton was in the ownership of the abbey of St Denis near Paris, Taynton stone was shipped on rafts down the Thames for use in extending its building.²⁶ Burford stone had been shipped along the Thames to Oxford, Windsor, Eton, and London over many centuries; for instance, Taynton stone can be traced in Oxford already in the eleventh-century tower of St Michael in the Northgate, and in Oxford college building from 1299, at Windsor Castle from the fourteenth century, and at Eton College in the fifteenth.²⁷ In the mid sixteenth century, stone from Upton quarry was used for the ground floor of the Market House at Abingdon, precursor of the existing County Hall, also constructed of Burford stone.²⁸

This long-established route along the Thames was instrumental to the Burford masons' success in selling a great amount of stone in London shortly after the Great Fire, and in entering the competitive field of mason-contractors constructing the new City. The Strong memorandums note that Thomas 'provided stone at the Quarries which he had the command of, & sent the same to London, & sold great Quantities to other Masons'.²⁹ Scrutiny of Christopher Kempster's day book reveals him first supplying stone for the London rebuilding

²⁰ OHC, L.5.1-3.

²¹ SM, letter book.

²² BT, day book.

²³ R. Moody, *The Landscape of Burford* (1980), p. 38.

²⁴ D.G. Wilson, *The Making of the Middle Thames* (1977), p. 103.

²⁵ S. Longhurst et al., *Sherborne: A Cotswold Village* (1992), p. 9.

²⁶ E.A. Pocock, *Radcot and its Bridge* (1966), p. 5.

²⁷ J. Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (1994), p. 122; E.M. Jope, 'Reviews', *Oxoniensia*, 14 (1949), pp. 91, 96.

²⁸ R. Gilyard-Beer, *The County Hall, Abingdon* (1956), p. 3.

²⁹ SM, letter book.

already before August 1667, recording ‘received of mr Knight for the first parsell of stone delivered at London £15-0-0’.³⁰ Although the entries are rarely dated, the author has pinpointed this transaction by reference to paydays, religious feasts, and seasonal agricultural activities. The same entry goes on to mention payments from ‘mr marshall’ and ‘mr cartwright’, most likely referring to Thomas Knight, the City mason, Edward Marshall, the King’s Master Mason or his son Joshua, who succeeded him, and Thomas Cartwright, the London mason-contractor. Christopher recorded loading stone on to barges at ‘Ratcat’ operated by Oxford boatmasters William Howse (whose family had leased land at Castle Mill Stream), Humphrey Duffin, Walter Chapman (boatmaster at Folly Bridge) and boatman Richard Pemerton.³¹ Stone was transferred at Oxford to larger craft for onward shipping to London.

Occasionally, however, the day book shows Kempster carting stone as far as ‘Colum’ (Culham), probably in times of low water. In the seventeenth century the Thames, particularly south of Oxford, was not reliably navigable throughout the year. Plot observed that ‘in dry times, Barges do sometimes lie aground [in the Thames] three Weeks, or a Month, or more, as we have had Experience in past summers’.³² Anthony Wood reported that after a notably dry February and March 1685, ‘boatmen can not goe from Oxon to London but take boats at Bircot’.³³ The effects of drought were exacerbated by millers who controlled the flashlocks, extracting water from the Thames for their own purposes.³⁴ Such problems were probably exceptions, however, as the architect J.M.W. Halley, after inspecting the building accounts for St Paul’s, observed that the supply of Burford stone was generally reliable over the winter months.³⁵

The Three Dynasties

The Strongs, Kempsters and Beauchamps all produced dynasties, of greatly varying duration, passing down experience and building up capital. The Strong dynasty was the earliest active in the Oxfordshire area. It spanned at least six generations, twice the duration of the Kempsters, and three times that of the Beauchamps. Despite extracting stone in Little Barrington already in 1617, the earliest evidence of the Strongs working on any building has not been found until 1631, when they embarked on the south front of the earl of Danby’s mansion at Cornbury Park to Stone’s design.³⁶ Such a prestigious commission shows the Strong firm already well-established in the area. Further recognition of their high repute is found only three years later, when they were ‘fetch’d out’ of Cornbury by John Lufton, fellow of St John’s College, Oxford, to help complete Canterbury Quadrangle. Here the Strongs were able to demand ‘extraordinary rates’, over a third more than other masons on site.³⁷

Valentine took the firm successfully through the lean times of the Interregnum, building country houses in Gloucestershire. In 1651 he ‘built an House’ for John Dutton, who was later described as one of the richest men in England.³⁸ This was probably part of Sherborne House, demolished 1829. He went on to build the manor house at Lower Slaughter in 1656 for Richard Whitmore, who became sheriff of Gloucestershire.³⁹ The Strong memorandums mention

³⁰ BT, day book.

³¹ M. Prior, *Fisher Row: Fishermen, Bargemen, and Canal Boatmen in Oxford 1500–1900* (1982), pp. 125, 138.

³² Plot, *Natural History*, p. 239.

³³ A. Clark, *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, Antiquary, of Oxford, 1632–1695, Described by Himself*, 5 vols., OHS (1891–1900), vol. 3, p. 136.

³⁴ Prior, *Fisher Row*, p. 133.

³⁵ ‘The Rebuilding and the Workmen of St Paul’s Cathedral from the “Accounts”’, *Royal Institute of British Architects Journal*, 22:3 (1914), p. 56.

³⁶ SM, letter book.

³⁷ St John’s College Archive, MUN LXXX1.2, ff. 18, 26.

³⁸ SM, letter book; J. Burke, *A General and Heraldic Dictionary of the Peerage and Baronetage of the British Empire*, 4th edn, vol. 2 (1833), p. 432.

³⁹ Gloucestershire Archives, D45 E17; Burke, *Heraldic Dictionary*, p. 67.

Valentine building for other 'gentlemen' in the county, the works unidentified except for Fairford House (demolished 1957), which Thomas completed after his father's death in 1662.⁴⁰

With Thomas heading the firm, the Strongs returned to Cornbury Park in 1663 to build the stable block for the earl of Clarendon and the east front of the house three years later, both to Hugh May's designs.⁴¹ Between these contracts, Thomas embarked upon Wren's north block of Garden Quadrangle, Trinity College, Oxford (1665).⁴² In 1667, the year legislation was passed permitting provincial building craftsmen ('foreigners') to practise in the City, Thomas 'took up Masons with him to London'.⁴³ By this time, several generations of the Strong dynasty had honed their skills in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire in the vanguard of emerging styles, and had also worked with major architects.

The Strongs focus on London was such that few works in the Oxfordshire area are attributable to them after 1667. In 1675, however, Thomas Strong built the frontage between existing wings at Lord Craven's house at Hamstead Marshall, Berkshire (demolished 1718).⁴⁴ His brothers Timothy and John set up in Stanford-in-the-Vale, starting their own branch of the dynasty in what was then Berkshire, where one of the Strongs was responsible for the tower of St Mary, Longcot, in 1722.⁴⁵ A later Thomas Strong designed and built Ardington House (also formerly Berkshire) around 1720.⁴⁶

By contrast, the Kempsters, exploiting their quarries and coming to the fore as masons significantly later than the Strongs, had less opportunity to capitalise their firm and build up a reservoir of skilled masons before venturing to London. The first identifiable mason of the dynasty, Christopher, was born in 1627, yet his earliest activity is only traceable in 1652, when he supplied stone to repair Burford bridge and carried out repairs to the parish church, the need for which probably arose from the Levellers' imprisonment there three years earlier.⁴⁷ In view of such modest work, it is surprising to find Christopher's first known contract in London in 1672 (jointly with Thomas Strong) to be for Wren's most prestigious City church, St Stephen Walbrook, the first domed church in England. The obscurity of Christopher's early years prompted the late Andor Gomme to describe him as the 'mystery man among Wren's associates'.⁴⁸

Christopher and his son William became the outstanding masons of the Kempster dynasty. Examination of Christopher's day book reveals his presence in London already in 1667, William being found in London accounts in 1671.⁴⁹ Christopher's home, however, remained Burford, where he frequently served as churchwarden and surveyor of the highways, upgraded his church pew, and gave generously to the church's collection for the dispossessed Huguenots.⁵⁰

Whilst running major contracts in London, Christopher took on several important commissions in the Oxfordshire area, building County Hall, Abingdon (1678), Tom Tower, Christ Church, to Wren's designs (1681), and the Perrott aisle at St Mary's, North Leigh, to his own design (1687). In 1698 he extended his farmhouse at Kitts Quarry, Burford. Christopher's youngest son John designed the tower of St Peter and St Paul, Blockley (formerly Worcestershire, now Gloucestershire), in 1725.

The Beauchamp family can be traced in Upton already in the mid sixteenth century. They

⁴⁰ SM, letter book.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Trinity College Archive, III E/1, receipts and disbursements of bursars from 1665.

⁴³ SM, letter book.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ B.F.L. Clarke and H.M. Colvin, 'The Rebuilding and Repairs of Berkshire Churches during the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and early Nineteenth Centuries', *Berkshire Archaeological Journal*, 53 (1953), p. 97.

⁴⁶ G. Jackson-Stoppes, 'Ardington House', *Country Life*, 15 October 1981, p. 1283.

⁴⁷ OHC, MS dd Par. Burford c 16.

⁴⁸ Personal communication, July 2006.

⁴⁹ BT, day book; GL, MS 25,539.

⁵⁰ OHC, MS dd Par. Burford e 9 and e 12.

were probably distant kinsmen of Henry Beauchamp to whom the manor of Burford passed in 1439.⁵¹ The strength of Ephraim, the chief mason of the Beauchamp dynasty, lay in his absorption into the Strong firm through his sister's marriage, and in wealth inherited through his own family. Born 1661, Ephraim was significantly younger than the Strong and Kempster pioneers who broke into the London market. His name as a mason is first found in London, receiving payment in 1683 at St Paul's on behalf of his brother-in-law Edward Strong senior, in whose team he was presumably working.⁵² Ephraim is best known as joint mason-contractor with Christopher Kempster at St Paul's. There are, however, no known works to his name in the Oxfordshire area. His nephew Edward became apprenticed in the City in 1705 to Edward Strong junior.⁵³

The Strong dynasty had opportunity to build up capital over several generations, enabling them to withstand the frequent tardy payments in London, and most especially, at Blenheim, where by 1712 they were carrying some eleven thousand pounds in arrears.⁵⁴ Christopher Kempster had built up sufficient capital by 1700 to foot William's weekly payroll for his twenty-five men at St Paul's for the first fourteen months of his contract, as William's day books reveal, at a time when the coal levy funding St Paul's had severely fallen back.⁵⁵

Creating partnerships within a dynasty was a way of shouldering risk to secure income over generations, enabling a family to capitalise their business. Edward Strong senior and junior contracted jointly for highly prestigious projects at Greenwich Hospital (from 1699) and Blenheim Palace in 1705. Including Edward junior in these contracts, which were likely to run over many years, helped ensure the continuity of the firm.

Some indication of the capital passing down the generations can be detected in the fortunes of the dynasties. Neither Edward Strong senior nor junior returned to Burford, retiring as gentlemen to St Albans and Greenwich respectively, having acquired several landed estates. Edward junior, upon his death, also owned some £21,000 in Bank of England stock.⁵⁶ Ephraim Beauchamp was already assessed in 1695 as wealthy enough to be subject to surtax, retiring after only twenty-four years' work to his estates in Middlesex and Hertfordshire.⁵⁷ Edward Beauchamp, however, was too young to reap the rewards of the London rebuilding. Christopher Kempster retired a gentleman at the age of eighty to his home at Kitts Quarry, Upton. His descendents continued to practise as jobbing masons in the Burford area for several generations.⁵⁸ William died in harness, still working on St Paul's, having recently been awarded a contract to build the controversial balustrade on top.⁵⁹

Strength as a Group

Colvin, identifying dynastic strength as a factor for achieving success, pointed to individual families only. The close, ongoing, inter-relationship of the three dynasties of Burford masons, however, made for a group of exceptional strength.

The commonality of the Burford masons' formative years was noted above, including Ephraim Beauchamp forming family ties with the Strongs. Their inter-relationship continued long into their careers, as they repeatedly joined forces on business ventures. The first instance of this type of collaboration was Christopher Kempster and Thomas Strong's joint contract for

⁵¹ Indicated by the arms of Beauchamp of Powick on Ephraim Beauchamp's memorial in All Hallows Church, Tottenham, Middlesex.

⁵² GL, MS 25,481/2.

⁵³ C. Webb, *London Livery Company Apprentice Registers, 27 Masons' Company* (1999), p. 3.

⁵⁴ TNA: PRO, C106/145.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; J.W.P. Campbell, *Building St Paul's* (2007), p. 68.

⁵⁶ SM, letter book; TNA: PROB11/596 and 713; Bank of England Archives, M1/97.

⁵⁷ D.V. Glass, *London Inhabitants within the Walls 1695*, London Record Society (1966) p. 22; TNA: PRO, PROB11/624.

⁵⁸ BT, D660-70.

⁵⁹ GL, MS 25,473/42.

St Stephen Walbrook. This was the first City church contract to be let to a partnership, and the first taken by provincial masons, the previous twenty having been awarded to London practitioners. Already by 1672 it was apparent that payment for work on City churches was heavily in arrears, making partnerships one way of shouldering late payments. Such arrangements also freed the partners to run other contracts concurrently.

In 1683, Edward Strong senior and Christopher Kempster joined as contractors to lay the complex foundations of Winchester Palace in Hampshire. Christopher Kempster's almanack reveals that he and Strong ran a joint account for this work.⁶⁰ In 1699, Edward Strong senior and junior took a joint contract with Ephraim Beauchamp for work at Greenwich Hospital. The most enduring inter-dynastic partnership, however, occurred between Christopher Kempster and Ephraim Beauchamp at St Paul's Cathedral, where they remained joint mason-contractors for seventeen years. Working in partnerships also made for consistent standards of skills and enhanced their ability to rise to the challenges of new styles.

Within their workforces in London, the Burford masons both trained and employed members of each other's families. Employing younger family members sustained consistency of craft standards. In 1705 for instance, Edward Strong junior took on Ephraim Beauchamp's nephew Edward as apprentice in the City, going on to employ him between 1717 and 1719.⁶¹ Thomas Strong worked in William Kempster's team on St Paul's in 1707, and later for Edward Strong junior.⁶²

The Burford masons also collaborated with different trades across family boundaries. Ephraim Beauchamp's brother Benjamin, a master carpenter, similarly sought opportunities in the London rebuilding. He entered the speculative building market with the help of his brother-in-law Edward Strong senior, who put up the necessary finance in the form of mortgages to enable Benjamin to develop several streets in Soho in 1693.⁶³ The debts noted in the inventory taken after Benjamin's death in 1697 reveal further outstanding loans to Edward Strong.⁶⁴ Inter-dynastic financing also served to consolidate the Burford masons' operation as a group.

Working with Architects

Working to the innovative designs of architects developed masons' stylistic skills and demanded particular standards, a further factor making for homogeneity. At the time of the Burford masons' activity the role of the architect was still emerging, usually performed by gentlemen with knowledge of new architectural styles gained on the continent and from architectural literature. Whereas master craftsmen continued to construct by far the majority of buildings without the involvement of an independent designer, elite clients increasingly turned to architects as conduits of new ideas to design buildings displaying erudition.

In Oxfordshire, the Stronges had already worked to the designs of Stone and May at Cornbury. It is possible that Thomas Strong was working to Wren's ideas already in the early 1660s on the doorway and great staircase at Longleat, Wiltshire, for Sir John Thynne.⁶⁵ By 1665 Thomas was certainly working to Wren's ideas at Garden Quadrangle at Trinity College, Oxford.⁶⁶ There is evidence of Wren's appreciation of the Burford masons' exceptionally high level of craftsmanship. Already in 1681, Wren had commended Christopher Kempster to his client Bishop Fell of Oxford as being 'a very able Man, modest, honest & Treatable' who was 'very carefull to worke trow to his designe ... I can rely upon him'.⁶⁷ In 1705 Wren awarded William Kempster a bonus of twenty

⁶⁰ TNA: PRO, C106/145.

⁶¹ Bank of England Archives, C98/2553-7.

⁶² TNA: PRO, C106/145; Bank of England Archives, C98/2553-7.

⁶³ London Metropolitan Archives, 0/383/3.

⁶⁴ TNA: PRO, C8/608/3.

⁶⁵ SM, letter book; Colvin, *Dictionary*, p. 995.

⁶⁶ Trinity College Archive, III E/1.

⁶⁷ CCA, MS 376, letter 26 May 1681.

pounds for 'his Extraordinary dilligence and care used' in the carving around the Dean's Door of St Paul's, and for 'his good performance' in constructing the Geometric Staircase in its south-west tower.⁶⁸ The substantial and prestigious buildings which Burford masons constructed to Wren's designs over a period of some fifty years, and to Hawksmoor's for over thirty years, all demanded high and cohesive standards of execution. They also took on major commissions involving other leading architects such as Vanbrugh and John James.⁶⁹

With many of these projects, the architect relied on his mason-contractor to interpret and execute designs with very little or even no supervision. Stone, for instance, admitted to only rarely inspecting building progress at Cornbury during the two years when the Strongs were building the south front.⁷⁰ May is not known to have ever visited while Thomas Strong was building its stables and the important east, Clarendon, front.⁷¹ There is no record of Wren's presence at Garden Quadrangle during Thomas Strong's construction of it, indeed for much of that period Wren was in Paris. At Tom Tower, Wren's letters to Fell make it clear that, despite the prestigious and sensitive nature of the contract, he never visited the site himself but relied entirely on Christopher Kempster supervising the work and reporting progress to him in London.⁷² At Blenheim Palace, which, like St Paul's, had been allocated to several teams, Edward Strong senior appears to have been *primus inter pares*. 'Apply yourself to old Mr Strong' wrote Hawksmoor to the Clerk of Works Henry Joynes in 1705, 'he will assist you'.⁷³ Hawksmoor also urged that other mason-contractors should seek Strong's advice, when in doubt.⁷⁴ Architects' delegation to the Strongs and Christopher Kempster reflect unquestioned trust in their skills.

Training and Education

Although the Strong's operation in Taynton and Little Barrington took on apprentices, neither their names nor numbers are known. By contrast, the position of the Burford masons as apprentice masters in London is relatively well-documented by the London Masons' Company.⁷⁵ Almost half of the forty-six known apprentices whom the Burford masons took on in London originated in the provinces, indicating that the Burford masons were highly sought-after, some apprentices coming from as far afield as Staffordshire, Dorset and Essex. The Burford area itself produced almost half of the provincial apprentices, some of them family. At least thirteen members of the Strong, Kempster and Beauchamp dynasties were apprenticed in the City, several to other masters. Some of the Strongs returned to the provinces, like John, Thomas's brother and first apprentice in 1672, who set up in Stanford-in-the-Vale.⁷⁶ Few can be traced in London after their apprenticeships, suggesting some at least returned to their home area with newly acquired and marketable skills. What was true of apprentices may also be said of master masons, Edward Strong senior noting that Thomas 'took up Masons with him to London, to work for him and serve the City in what was wanted in his way of Trade'.⁷⁷

Transmitters of Expertise and Style

Finally this paper turns to buildings and sculpture in the Oxfordshire area, considering the Burford masons as transmitters of expertise and style. A selection of works which can be unequivocally substantiated as being by their hand is looked at, omitting most of their many

⁶⁸ GL, MS 25,473/39, f. 134.

⁶⁹ Mobus, 'Burford Masons', pp. 350–65.

⁷⁰ W.L. Spiers, 'The Note-Book and Account-Book of Nicholas Stone', *Walpole Society*, 7 (1919), p. 70.

⁷¹ J. Newman, 'Hugh May, Clarendon and Cornbury', in J. Bold and E. Chaney (eds.), *English Architecture Public and Private* (1993), pp. 81–7.

⁷² CCA, MS 376.

⁷³ BL, Add MS 19,607: Nicholas Hawksmoor letters, 1705–15.

⁷⁴ D. Green, *Blenheim Palace* (1951), p. 237.

⁷⁵ GL, MS 5304/1 & 2.

⁷⁶ Clarke and Colvin, 'Rebuilding and Repairs', p. 97.

⁷⁷ SM, letter book.

putative works. Country and domestic houses are dealt with first, followed by institutional and church commissions, and garden buildings. The last section explores their contribution to sculpture.

Country and domestic houses. The Strongs worked in the vanguard of new styles on much of their house building in the Oxfordshire area. Most of their known houses were built largely to the designs of others, including Cornbury, Hamstead Marshall and Blenheim, betraying little of the masons' individual stylistic input apart from their high standards of craftsmanship. However, in the case of Lower Slaughter, which introduced the double-pile house into Gloucestershire, and at Fairford, developing this plan with classical detail, with no evidence of an architect's involvement, there is a strong likelihood of design input by Valentine Strong.

Whilst engaged on the main pile of Blenheim between 1705 and 1712, Edward Strong senior lived at the rectory adjoining Blenheim Park (now Bishop's House), then owned by the 'Mayor and Commonality' of Woodstock.⁷⁸ Thomas Sheen, a mason of Long Hanborough engaged at Blenheim, claimed in a witness statement that stone from the Blenheim site was delivered to and used at Edward Strong's house, and that Sheen himself 'worked upon the same at the said Strong's house'.⁷⁹ The two tower-like extensions flanking an earlier gable, producing what Jennifer Sherwood describes as a 'gauche imitation of the Vanbrugh-Hawksmoor style', can be assumed to be the result.⁸⁰

Also in the Baroque idiom is Ardington House, which Thomas Strong was apparently involved in designing and building for Edward Clarke around 1720. This attribution is based on a group of drawings deposited at the Berkshire Record Office in 1963, one of which is signed 'From yr Servt at Command Tho Strong'.⁸¹ Colvin assumed this Thomas Strong to be the younger brother of Edward junior.⁸² No evidence has been found, however, of him being either apprenticed or working as a mason; to the contrary, he was described as 'gentleman' of London already in his early thirties, a financier of mortgages and insurance.⁸³ The only Thomas Strong found to have been active at this time was the son of Valentine junior of Taynton, born 1688, who was apprenticed in London, leaving him the likely candidate.⁸⁴

Gomme links the skilful use of polychrome work at Ardington to the contemporary Marlow Place, Buckinghamshire, suggesting that it too may have been constructed by Thomas Strong, but to Archer's designs.⁸⁵ The stylistic links of Ardington House to nearby Lockinge House (demolished 1947) and Maiden Erlegh House, Reading (demolished 1960), both built ten years later, have also resulted in their attribution to Thomas Strong.⁸⁶

The later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were a period of prosperity in Burford, when many houses were built or refronted in the fashionable style. It is surprising therefore to find only one house in Burford reliably attributable to any Burford mason. The architrave of a ground-floor window beside the door on the east elevation of Kitt's Quarry, the Kempster family home, bears the inscription 'Christopher Kempster built this in 1698'. Whereas this may have been cut with pride at any time by the Kempsters who remained in the house until the late nineteenth century, the window profile does reflect the date inscribed, being similar to others appearing in Burford around this time such as the Old Rectory, built around 1700, and Roche House, refronted 1696 for the innholder and yeoman Robert Aston, Christopher's friend and

⁷⁸ A. Ballard, *Chronicles of the Royal Borough of Woodstock* (1896), p. 97.

⁷⁹ BL, Add MS 19,618, f. 163.

⁸⁰ J. Sherwood and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (1974), p. 858.

⁸¹ Jackson-Stoppis, 'Ardington House', p. 1283.

⁸² Colvin, *Dictionary*, p. 997.

⁸³ Hertfordshire Record Office, 1.0.25 and 80973/4; TNA: PRO, C111/20.

⁸⁴ OHC, MSS dd Par. Taynton d 1; Webb, *London Livery Apprentices*.

⁸⁵ A. Gomme, Letters, *Country Life*, 24 December 1981, p. 2257.

⁸⁶ A. Placzek, *Macmillan Encyclopaedia of Architects*, vol. 4 (1982), p. 145.

client who most likely commissioned him for this work.⁸⁷ The frontage of Kitt's Quarry is of cut and squared rubble, its fine jointing an example of Christopher's 'strong well banded workes' for which Wren had commended him almost twenty years earlier.⁸⁸ The frontage is modest, restrained, and surprisingly traditional for a mason who had 'shared in the greatest building adventure of the age'.⁸⁹ In his seventy-first year, Christopher apparently chose to retain something of the idiom of his forefathers for his family home, perhaps bearing out Wren's view of him as a 'modest' man.

The design and quality of execution of several other buildings in Burford point to experience beyond provincial standards, outstanding examples being the Great House, the present Methodist church, and frontages in the High Street such as that of Wysdom Hall. It is unlikely that this burst of sophisticated building activity would have taken place without the Strongs' and Kempsters' influence.

Institutional buildings. Despite Oxford having its own masons, the Strongs and Christopher Kempster were sought out for building three innovative projects for Oxford colleges: Canterbury and Garden Quadrangles, and Tom Tower, all to the designs of others.

Just prior to Kempster's engagement on Tom Tower, he had completed County Hall at Abingdon. Its design includes architectural quotations from London buildings, in particular the windows of St James Garlickhythe where Kempster was concurrently engaged, and the arches of the Royal Exchange, located near St Stephen Walbrook. With his London experience, Kempster would have been well capable of designing County Hall. Though traditionally attributed to Wren, there is no reference to, or payments for, an independent designer in the Borough Council's accounts of the period, nor have any drawings for it been found among Wren's collection.⁹⁰

Church construction. The influence of City ideas can also be detected in the Perrott aisle which Christopher Kempster added to St Mary's, North Leigh in 1687. The application for a faculty by James Perrott, lord of the manor of North Leigh, names Kempster as 'undertaker' for his private chapel adjoining the church, identifying him as both designer and builder.⁹¹ Its three large, round-headed windows with eared architraves, and the round window above the door, are reminiscent of Kempster's work at St Mary Abchurch and St James, Garlickhythe, both recently completed.

Ideas gleaned from the City can also be found in the rebuilt church towers at Longcot and Blockley. Church records for St Mary, Longcot note the tower being rebuilt by 'Strong of Stanford' after the old one fell down in 1721.⁹² This might have been Edward senior's brother John who was apprenticed in London and set up in Stanford-in-the-Vale, or his son, also John. The round-headed windows with emphatic keystones and string-courses reflect the Strongs' London experience. The tower of St Peter and St Paul, Blockley was rebuilt in 1725 to the designs of John Kempster, youngest son of Christopher, and executed by Thomas Woodward of Chipping Campden.⁹³ The west doorway and first floor window with their dropped keystones develop themes at the Perrott aisle, but are less muscular than Strong's features at Longcot.

Garden buildings. Two gazebos in Burford can be attributed to the Kempster workshop, one in the garden of Westhall Hill Manor, the other in that behind Wysdom Hall. Both were in the

⁸⁷ BT, day book.

⁸⁸ CCA, MS 376 (letter 26 May 1681).

⁸⁹ C. Hussey, 'Burford, Oxfordshire', *Country Life*, 24 August 1945, p. 335.

⁹⁰ Abingdon Borough Council, Bailiffs' Accounts, Chamberlain's Accounts, Council Minutes.

⁹¹ OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. c 455, f. 103.

⁹² Clarke and Colvin, 'Rebuilding and Repairs', p. 97.

⁹³ J.P. Haggart, *Bells, Brasses, Benefactions, Monuments and Charities* (2007), p. 8, citing Vestry Minutes 7 Sep. 1725 (not located); Worcestershire Record Office, Rushout Papers 705:66 BA 4221/26.

ownership of the Bartholomew family, formerly mercers who rose to gentry status in the late seventeenth century. Their link with the Kempsters stems from Christopher Kempster junior's marriage to Margreat Bartholomew in 1673.⁹⁴ The gazebo at Westhall Hill can be attributed to the Kempsters on biographical and stylistic grounds, its architraves reflecting the profiles at Kitts Quarry and Roche House.

The garden pavilion at Wysdom Hall has a thermal window and string course, rather grand for such a modest building and probably borrowed from the Kempsters' City church experience. Other elements, such as the hexagonal window and triangular-headed doorway and label, are of artisan origin. Its importance, however, lies in the treads of its cantilevered staircase being triangular in cross-section, almost halving their weight. This is possibly the first known example in this country, which went on to be almost universally adopted in the late eighteenth century particularly in town houses.⁹⁵ William Kempster's cantilevered Geometric Staircase at St Paul's was not constructed on this principle, however. Instead it used treads of rectangular section also found in Wren and Robert Hooke's Monument of 1671. On the underside of the gazebo staircase, the letters 'CK' are still visible, their size and prominence suggesting a dedication of this structure to the Bartholomews from the Kempster workshop.

Christopher Kempster's almanack of 1685 details a specification for a summerhouse in the garden of Burford Priory.⁹⁶ The gable end of a summerhouse still standing retains both Jacobean decoration and classical detail, in keeping with the playful disregard for strict architectural grammar found in the gazebo at Wysdom Hall.

Sculpture. Examples in the Oxfordshire area of the Burford masons' craft in decorative carving are to be found among funerary monuments. St John the Baptist, Burford contains several monuments which can be traced to the Kempster workshop, perhaps the earliest firmly attributable being the sharply cut monument to the Sylvester family at the south-west end of the Lady Chapel, Christopher Kempster's day book recording payment for this in 1674 in the sum of ten pounds.⁹⁷ Its classical frieze, segmental pediment and Corinthian columns already show affinity to Christopher's metropolitan experience. Two cartouches dedicated to the Bartholomew children, dated 1689, are typical of those found in City churches around this time. Their sophisticated form and quality of execution, together with the Kempsters' family connection, make it highly likely that these were fashioned in the Kempster workshops. These are some of the earliest memorials in cartouche format in the area, other examples being found for instance in St Mary, Great Barrington, commemorating James Stephens (d. 1692), also a relative of the Kempsters, and in St Mary, Swinbrook, St Matthew, Langford, and St Faith, Shellingford (formerly Berks.). The latter's proximity to Stanford-in-the-Vale suggests the Strongs' involvement.

By contrast, the memorial at Burford to Christopher Kempster's daughter Martha, although dated the same year as the Bartholomew cartouches, is of unusual design. It has a flowing strapwork border, a motif of earlier times treated with muscular, Baroque vigour. A similar vibrancy is found in the surround of the Perrott family crest in the Perrott aisle at North Leigh.

Christopher Kempster's own memorial in Burford is of fashionable marble rather than stone from the family quarry, emphasising his prominent social status. Although the words 'His son WILLIAM Erected this in memory of his Father' are inscribed on the monument, a receipt for payment reveals that William, already sixty-five years of age, employed his London carver John Barker to fashion it for the sum of eleven pounds twelve shillings.⁹⁸ The weeping cherub at the foot of the monument strongly resembles those around the Dean's Door at St Paul's, also carved

⁹⁴ OHC, MSS dd Par Burford c 1.

⁹⁵ S. Price and H. Rogers, 'Stone Cantilevered Staircases', *Structural Engineer*, 83:2 (2005), p. 29.

⁹⁶ TNA: PRO, C106/145.

⁹⁷ BT, day book.

⁹⁸ TNA: PRO, C106/145.

by John Barker for William Kempster.⁹⁹ Similar cherubs of fine craftsmanship are found in the area, such as those on the monument in St James, Fulbrook, to John Thorpe (d. 1698), vicar of Burford and friend of Christopher Kempster, and in St Peter, Cassington, to Francis Seale (d. 1720), gentleman of St Clement Danes, London, and relative of the Perrotts of North Leigh.

A peculiarity of sculpture around this period found predominantly in the Windrush valley is the prestigious ‘bale’ tomb. A variant of the chest tomb, it is taller and more slender, with a semi-cylindrical capstone, often contoured. Of the hundred or so surviving, all but seven are within 10 miles of Burford, half of those within 5 miles, pointing strongly to Burford workshops.¹⁰⁰ One of the earliest examples of a bale tomb is that of Valentine Strong at Fairford, Gloucestershire (1662), where he died building the adjacent Fairford House. The tomb is decorated on its sides and ends with large acanthus scrolls and a cartouche, motifs frequently found on later bale tombs. John Kempster, son of Christopher, erected his own family bale tomb in Burford churchyard upon the death of his wife Betty in 1719. His inscription ‘J^oK fecit’ has also been recorded on the Kemmet bale tomb (c.1630) standing close by, and on the Harman Fletcher tomb in the nearby village of Asthall (c.1717).¹⁰¹ The Asthall tomb, originally with three flaming urns, bears strong resemblance to that in Burford of Robert Aston (d. 1698). Of the bale tombs lying outside the Windrush area, two for children are to be found at Ardington, probably resulting from Thomas Strong’s activity at Ardington House, and one at Blockley, where John Kempster designed the church tower.

Sculptural accomplishment can also be found on chimneypieces in private houses. William Kempster’s accounts show that, concurrent with his contracts at St Paul’s Cathedral, he ran a successful business as a City mason, carrying out all kinds of building work including sculpture for funerary monuments and chimneypieces, many of which were shipped to the provinces. In 1713 he sent ‘into y^e Country’ a marble chimneypiece to his cousin John Kempster, doubtless for installation in the Burford area; three years later he sent a marble chimneypiece by barge to ‘Esq^{re} Lintell of Burford’, presumably John Lenthall at Burford Priory.¹⁰² Neither chimneypiece has been identified.

CONCLUSION

Building on Colvin’s observations about quarry-based nurseries of stonemasons, this paper, by scrutinising three dynasties of Burford masons, has identified several criteria which combine to establish them as a school of the first order. This school of masons manifested itself in Oxfordshire for almost a century. It transmitted new stylistic ideas from London into their county. The method of examination has brought to light the careers of the Strongs, Kempsters and Beauchamps in Oxfordshire.

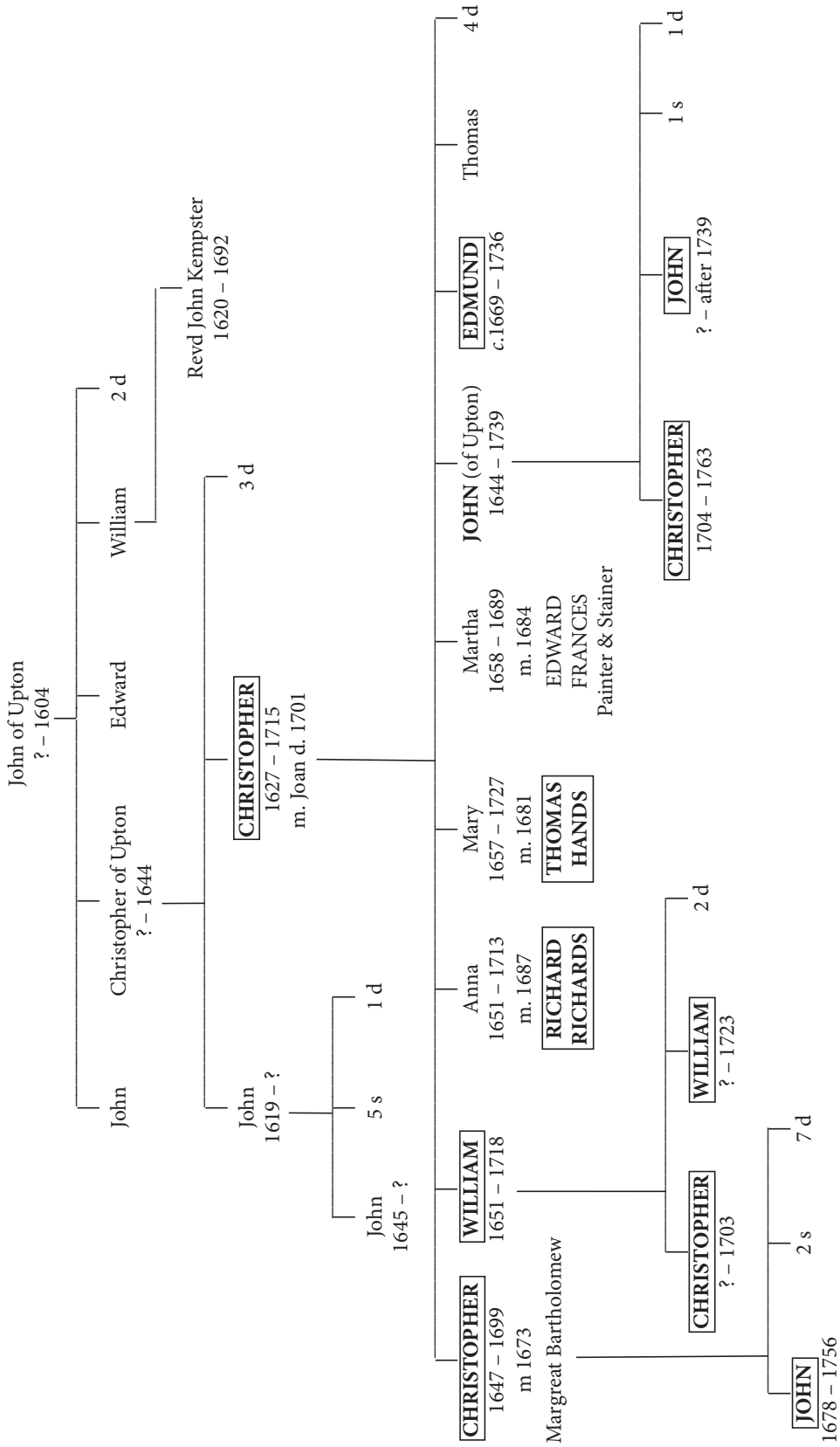
In view of the Burford masons’ unique operation as a group, their close co-operation with foremost architects, and their engagement on many seminal buildings in the new styles, it is unlikely that the characteristics found in this investigation would fit all masons. The criteria described, however, may prove useful research tools for examining the role of quarry-based masons of the early modern period, who have so far been neglected in the literature.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ B.J. Marples, ‘Some Capped Tombs’, *Oxoniensia*, 47 (1982), p. 140.

¹⁰¹ As recorded in 2003 by Christopher Walker, chairman of Burford Tolsey Museum.

¹⁰² TNA: PRO, C106/145.

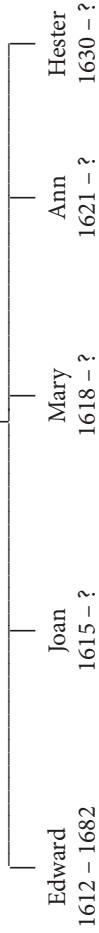


Key: s = son, not identified as mason
 d = daughter, not marrying identifiable mason
BOLD CAPITALS = master mason

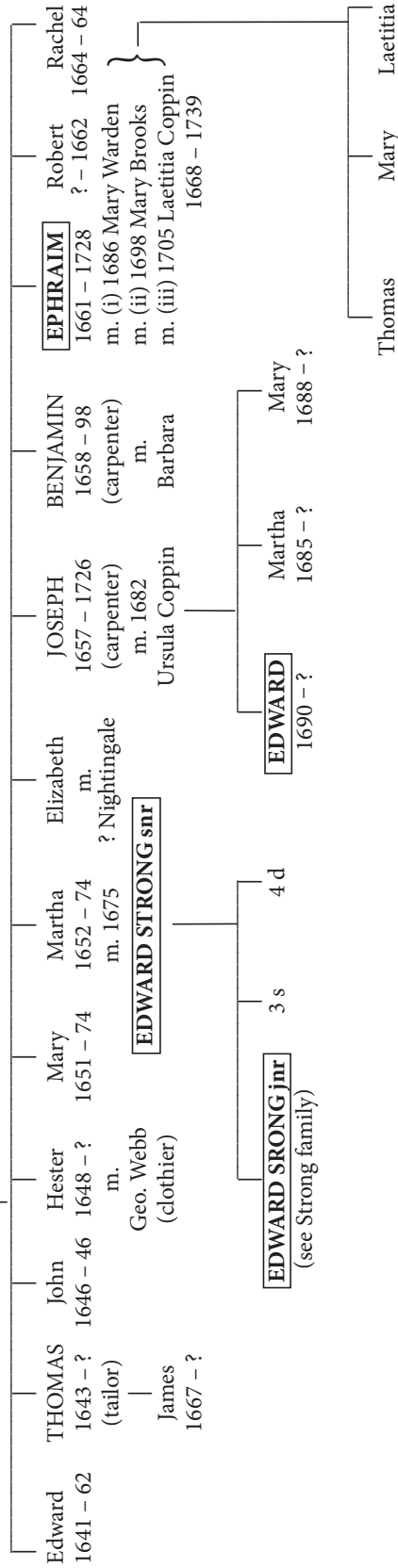
BOLD CAPITALS = mason apprenticed and/or working in London
 CAPITALS = other master tradesmen in London

Fig. 2. The Kempster dynasty.

Edward of Upton
? - 1642



Margery Haines of Upton d. 1682



Key: s = son, not identified as mason
 d = daughter, not marrying identifiable mason
BOLD CAPITALS = master mason

CAPITALS = mason apprenticed and/or working in London
 CAPITALS = other master tradesmen in London

Sir William Proctor-Beauchamp
 1722 - 1773
 3 d

Fig. 3. The Beauchamp dynasty.