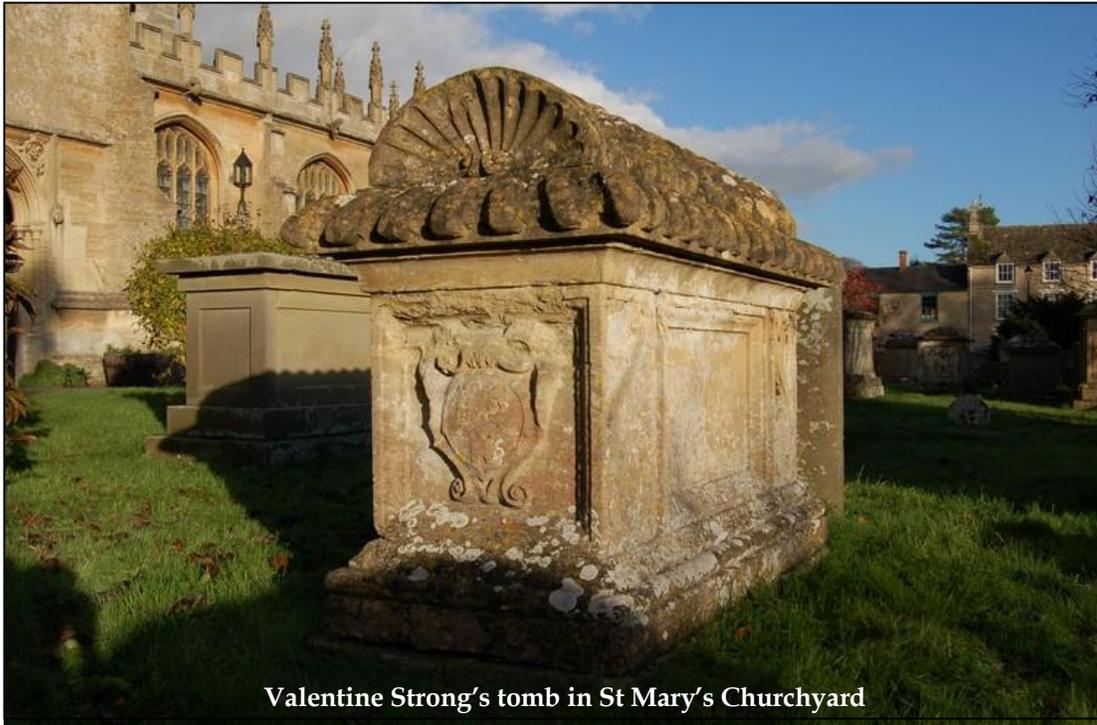


VALENTINE STRONG - COTSWOLD STONEMASON



Valentine Strong's tomb in St Mary's Churchyard

The Cotswolds has a long tradition of quarrying and stonemasonry thanks to the high quality limestone found in the area. Many prominent stonemasons have hailed from the Cotswolds and foremost among these was the Strong family who were involved in the quarrying and building business for at least four generations and who achieved national importance. Valentine Strong is best known for his rebuilding of Fairford Park House and for being the father of the master masons who built Sir Christopher Wren's new St Paul's Cathedral.

Valentine was born in Little Barrington near Burford in 1609 the only son of Timothy Strong, sometimes, like Valentine, recorded as Stronge. Timothy was born in Wiltshire (possibly in Box) in about 1565 but moved to Little Barrington in the early 17th Century and owned quarries in and near the village and at Taynton just across the border in Oxfordshire. The huge hollow in the centre of Little Barrington is the remains of one of Timothy's quarries and Valentine must have grown up within sight of the quarry workings. The family had houses in both villages and Valentine Strong is often referred to as being 'from Taynton' where he is recorded as a church warden in 1642. The fine building stone from the local quarries was much in demand and was often transported long distances. The quarries were in use up until at least the late 1950s but had all been closed by 1961.

The earliest recorded date for Timothy Strong as a stonemason and builder is 1632-1633 when he rebuilt part of Cornbury House near Charlbury in Oxfordshire for Henry Danvers, the Earl of Danby, to the design of Nicholas Stone. In 1634 Timothy and his son Valentine started work on the Canterbury Quadrangle of St John's College in Oxford, the first example of Italian Renaissance architecture in Oxfordshire. It has been suggested that Timothy may also have been responsible for the magnificent gatehouse of Sir John Tracy's house at Stanway near Winchcombe (built during the 1630s) as its design bears some similarity to the Canterbury Quadrangle.

Around 1634 the Strongs built Lodge Park in the deer park of Sherborne House near Burford. Sherborne House was owned by John 'Crump' Dutton who had been a friend of both King Charles I and Oliver Cromwell and who was reputedly one of the richest men in England. Lodge Park was an almost unique building in that it was built with a flat roof to serve as a grandstand for visitors to watch deer-coursing. The design may conceivably have been either



Valentine's or his father's or possibly that of Inigo Jones, one of Britain's foremost architects. This rare building was converted into a private residence about 1900 having been extensively renovated several times and is today in the hands of the National Trust and open to the public.

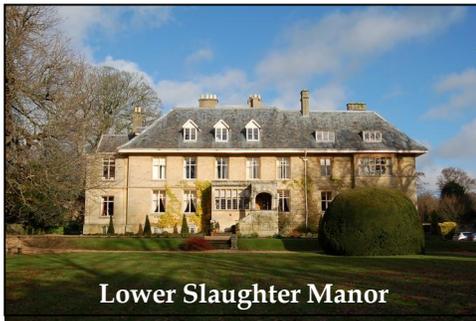
When Timothy died in 1635 or 1636 Valentine took over the family business and most likely completed the work at St John's College. It was possibly during the work on Cornbury House that Valentine met Ann Margetts of Charlbury whom he married on 9 November 1633. Over the next 20 years the couple had a total of 10 or 11 children, which was by no means

uncommon for this period. Five of his sons would become stonemasons. There is no definite record of Valentine having worked on any major project during the 1640s. This is not surprising as much of the commercial life of England was disrupted by the Civil War that raged throughout most of that decade and which greatly affected the counties of Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire.

The first major project that Valentine is known to have undertaken after he inherited his father's business was on familiar ground. In 1651 Valentine returned to Sherborne House to do some major work on John Dutton's residence, a task which occupied some three years. The work involved enlarging Dutton's late 16th Century manor house, most likely in a similar style to the original building. It is thought probable that Valentine was not only the builder but also the designer of the new Sherborne House. Valentine's building was almost completely rebuilt by Lewis Wyatt between 1829 and 1834 with the 17th Century house being dismantled and the stones numbered to be re-used in the new work. Although substantially altered there are still some original features remaining of Valentine Strong's building.

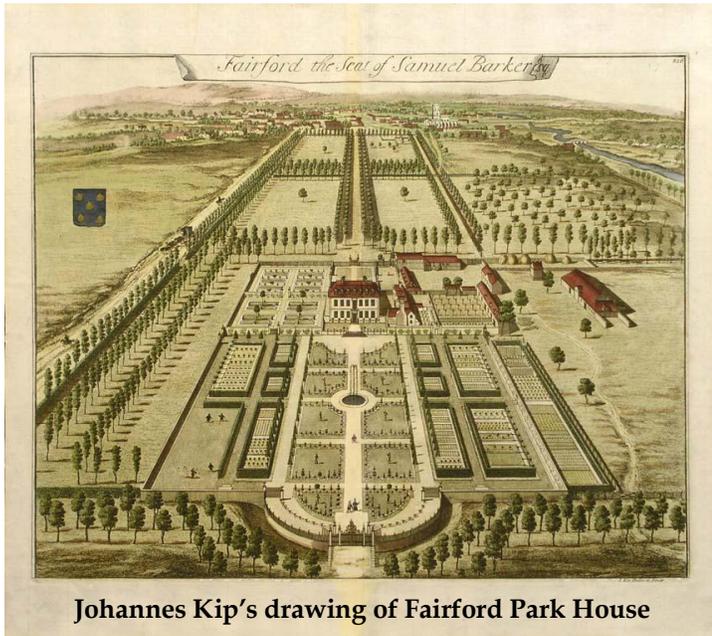


In 1656 Richard Whitmore, the Sheriff of Gloucestershire, commissioned Valentine Strong to completely rebuild his medieval manor house at Lower Slaughter which had become ruinous. The building contract was said to be "for the sum of £200 in lawful English money". The building had originally been a convent but was seized by the Crown during the Reformation and granted in fee in 1611 to Richard's father, Sir William Whitmore, the Member of Parliament for Bridgnorth in Shropshire, who passed it to his son in 1649. It was deemed to be beyond repair as early as 1637 and the Victoria County History makes reference to Valentine Strong building a new house at Lower Slaughter about 1640 but the same reference also notes that the date is probably in error. Building work had certainly commenced by 1656 and the date of 1658 still exists on a stone fireplace in the entrance hall. Having remained in the possession of the Whitmore family for over 350 years, today Lower Slaughter Manor is a luxurious hotel, greatly altered in 1864 and 1891 both inside and out from Valentine Strong's mid-17th Century building.



In 1661, at the age of 53, Valentine Strong was engaged by Andrew Barker to build the large house that came to be known as Fairford Park House. When Barker bought the Fairford estate Warwick Court, John Tame's 16th Century manor house, was no longer in good condition so he decided on a new, more extensive residence set back further away from the church. The design of Park House was very similar to that of Sir Roger Pratt's mansion at Coleshill in Berkshire which was influenced, if not actually designed, by Inigo Jones just a few years before work began at Fairford.

Sadly, Valentine Strong did not live long enough to see Fairford Park finished as he died in September 1662 and the work was completed by his son Thomas. The drawing by Johannes Kip of about 1710 gives some idea of what Fairford Park looked like within a generation of its completion. The house was greatly altered to suit the Rococo style of the mid-18th Century and it was modified again in the 1780s, this time by Sir John Soane. The decay and eventual demolition of Fairford Park in 1955 was a cruel end to Valentine Strong's great masterpiece.



It is not known where Valentine Strong was living in Fairford during his rebuilding of Fairford Park. It is possible that he was staying at the Park itself as parts of it would have remained habitable during the building work. His body was not taken back to the family homes at either Little Barrington or Taynton but was buried under a magnificent bale tomb near the porch of St Mary the Virgin in Fairford. A bale tomb is a type of chest tomb that has a semi-cylindrical capping stone on the top. The bale itself often has a banded design and is thought to represent either corded bales of cloth or the palls that often covered the hearse. Whatever the origin of the design, bale tombs are largely confined to the eastern Cotswolds and can be found in equal quantity on either side of the Gloucestershire/Oxfordshire border and most seem to date from the 17th and 18th centuries.

Valentine Strong's well preserved tomb is a Grade II* listed monument. It has a spiral-patterned bale top which gives the tomb a distinctive appearance. At the eastern end of the bale is a skilfully carved skull with wings while at the western end is a simpler fluted, or scalloped, design. The tomb lid or ledger upon which the bale sits has a gadrooned edge, a series of convex protrusions, sometimes referred to as 'piecrust' moulding. One of the advantages of the chest tomb design is that it gives scope for inscriptions on four sides. Unfortunately the inscription on Valentine's tomb is now much worn and practically indecipherable. However, the inscription was recorded before it began to decay and reads:

*Here lyeth the body of Valentine Stronge, Free Mason
He departed this life November the ... AD 1662
Here's one that was an able workman long
Who divers houses built, both fair and Stronge
Though Strong he was, a stronger came than he
And robb'd him of his life and fame, we see
Moving an old house a new one for to rear
Death met him by the way, and laid him more*

It is curious that although the inscription states that Valentine died in November 1662, the entry for Valentine's burial as recorded in the Fairford Parish Register (available on microfilm in the Gloucestershire Archives) is clearly written as 26 September 1662.

On the eastern face of the tomb is an escutcheon or shield bearing the initials VS and the date 1662. On the opposite, western, face is a similar escutcheon, more severely eroded, containing three castles. This symbol is probably taken from the London Company of Freemasons who were granted Arms in 1473 consisting of three castles and a mason's compass. While the Freemasons organization of today has its roots in the ancient companies of masons that were set up in London and the provinces to protect the profession, the freemason of Valentine Strong's era was still very much a worker with stone and it would be wrong to ascribe any other significance to the symbol on Valentine's tomb. It has been suggested by W R Elliott that the Strongs and their mason neighbours the Kempsters may even have originated the bale tomb design. Valentine's tomb certainly has some similarity with other bale tombs closer to the Windrush valley home of these two families but, as yet, no direct evidence of the Strongs being involved in tomb design or building has been found.

Although Valentine and his father had been prominent stonemasons in their own right, two of Valentine's sons were to reach the very top of their profession and achieve great fame and considerable fortune. Valentine's eldest son Thomas, like his father and grandfather, worked on Cornbury House near Charlbury as well as on Longleat House for Sir John Thynne. In about 1666 he built lodgings for the scholars of Trinity College at Oxford to the designs of

Christopher Wren, who was then a professor of anatomy at Oxford but was becoming more and more interested in architecture. Following the Great Fire of London in September 1666 there was a huge demand for stonemasons to rebuild the City in stone. Through his acquaintance with Wren, Thomas Strong, and his younger brother Edward, became involved in the rebuilding of many ruined churches in the City of London while their brothers maintained the quarrying business at home and supplied some of the stone used in the rebuilding. Under Wren the Strong brothers were contracted to rebuild St Benet in Paul's Wharf, St Augustine in Old Change, St Stephen's in Walbrook, St Michael's in Paternoster Royal and several other of London's churches. In 1675 after Wren had been appointed as chief architect for the rebuilding of St Paul's Cathedral, he chose Thomas to be one of the two master masons for the mammoth project and it fell to Thomas to lay the first foundation stone for the new cathedral on 21 June 1675. The master masons were responsible for translating Wren's design into solid reality and managed a large workforce of stonemasons, craftsmen and labourers. Some of the stone for St Paul's, especially the fine stone used for interior decoration, was brought to Paul's Wharf from the Strong's own quarries but the majority came from the Portland quarries in Dorset which produced a coarser, harder form of limestone.



Valentine Strong's tomb showing his initials and the year of his death

Thomas died in 1681 and was buried at Taynton and his brother Edward was appointed as Wren's sole master mason for the remainder of the St Paul's contract, although several firms of masons were involved in the actual building work. It was Edward who laid the very last stone on the dome of the cathedral on 20 October 1708 to complete a project that had taken 33 years. Edward's son, also called Edward, was also a stonemason and was contracted to build the lantern that sits on the top of the dome of St Paul's. Edward Strong senior became the Master of the Worshipful Company of Masons which in 1775 erected a plaque in the Crypt to commemorate the work of the Strong brothers at St Paul's. Edward became a very wealthy man from his work at St Paul's and on other projects including the Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich and Blenheim Palace. He built at least two large houses in St Albans, Hertfordshire and lived at nearby Abbots Langley until his death on 8 February 1723, just three weeks before the death of his old friend and colleague Sir Christopher Wren. Edward Strong was buried in St Peter's Church in St Albans where there is an impressive monument to him.

Chris Hobson

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