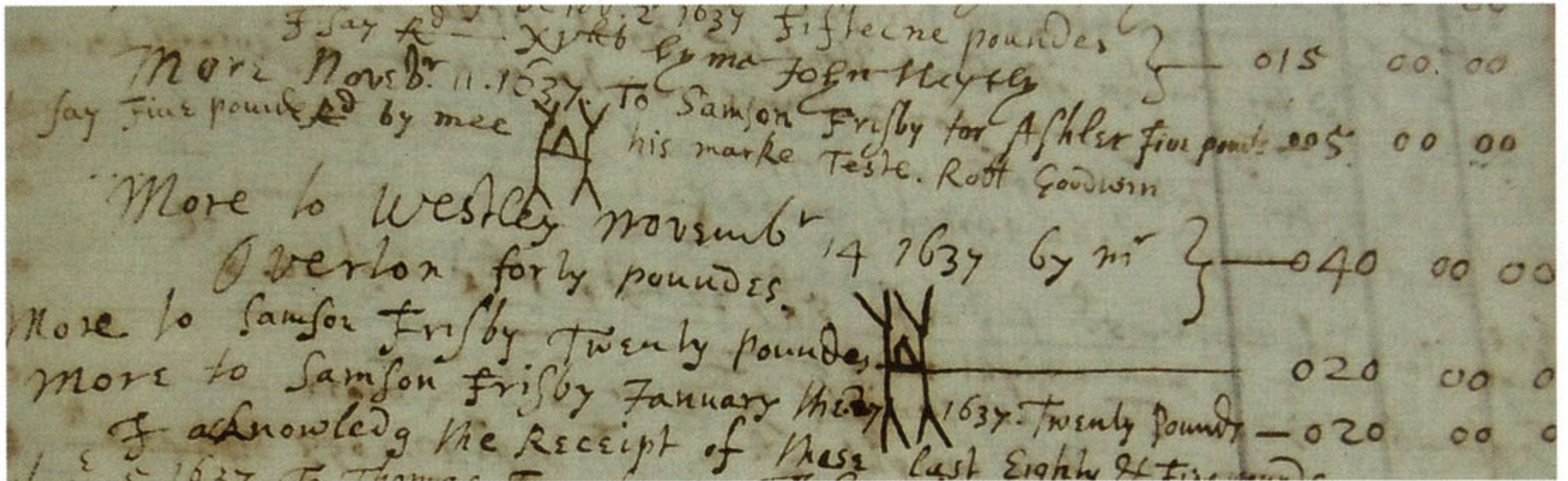


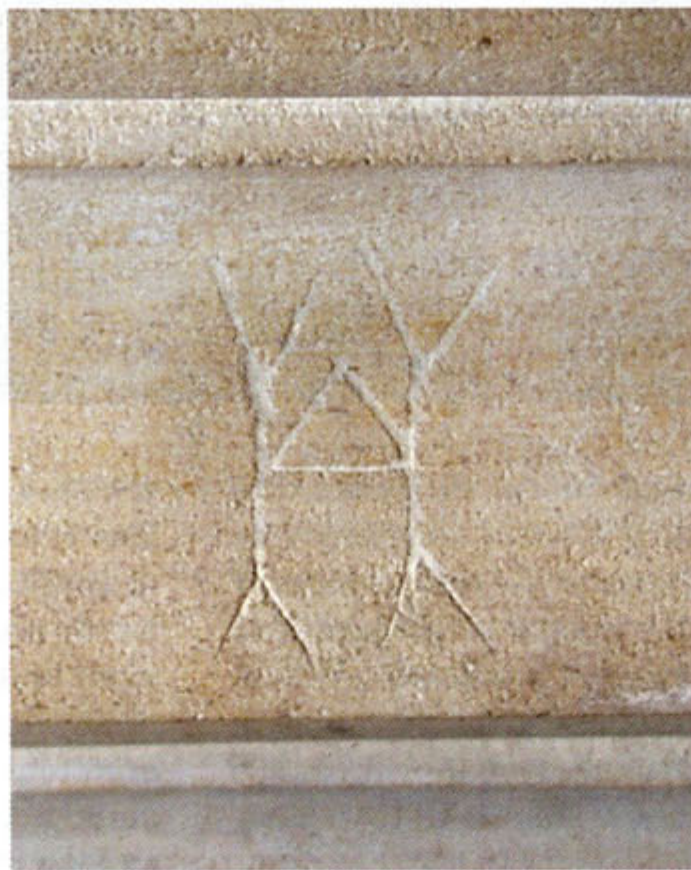
Signed in stone

New research is illuminating the lives of the craftsmen behind our greatest 17th-century buildings. Jenny Alexander explains how the career of the illiterate farmer and mason Samson Frisby has been rescued from obscurity



MUCH has been written about the architects of the 17th century who introduced Classicism into England, but the men who actually created their buildings remain obscure. Stonemasons of the period were trained much as their medieval predecessors, learning to square and carve stone as apprentices. One tradition that they continued, however, can help illuminate their lives and careers. This was the practice of incising stones with a cipher like a signature. Such marks were normally used when masons were paid by 'piece'—in other words, for each stone they fashioned—and they allowed a paymaster easily to identify the blocks cut by a particular individual. Confusingly, there were other common ways of paying masons, such as by day, and stones produced under other contracting systems will not bear marks.

For the first time, it is proving possible to connect masons with their marks through the careful scrutiny of documents and buildings. When these links can be fleshed out, lost biographies suddenly spring into existence. A pioneering investigation of this kind, undertaken by myself in collaboration with Kathryn Morrison and Christopher Sealey, concerns Samson Frisby (1597–about 1656), who came from a long line of stonemasons based around the quarryfields in Northamptonshire. Frisby was evidently not literate and used his mark to attest to payments made to him for supplying ready-worked stone to Clare College, Cambridge, in the 1630s. Crucially, the same mark can be found on buildings with which he may be otherwise connected.



As far as we know, Frisby's career started at Blickling Hall in Norfolk. The building accounts record that the stone for the windows and other architectural features was supplied between 1618 and 1623 by Thomas Thorpe, a quarrymaster from Northamptonshire who was one of a family of stonemasons and surveyors. Frisby's mark is on the mouldings of mullions and transoms of the windows on the south and east ranges, on the frieze of the east range, and on the archways into the Stone Court, as well as on the simpler quoins. The stone was worked at Thorpe's quarry and was despatched to Norfolk ready to be installed.

Frisby's next building projects were on two sites closer to the quarry site at King's Cliffe, in the neighbouring village of Apethorpe, Northamptonshire. Sir Francis

Above Two examples of Samson Frisby's mark in the accounts of Clare College, Cambridge. The first is witnessed by the literate Robert Goodwin. Left The mark as it appears on a fireplace at Apethorpe (facing page). It is cut into the entablature of the upper section of the overmantel

Fane and his wife had inherited her family's extensive property and they built a chapel in the parish church and one range of Apethorpe Hall soon after. Frisby, together with other Blickling Hall masons, was given the task of cutting the moulded stones for the arcade piers of the new chapel.

The project on Apethorpe Hall was a much more ambitious one. Between 1622 and 1624, a new wing was added to the hall to provide accommodation for James I on his progress through the county. Fane employed Thomas Thorpe's team for the work, including masons who had also worked at Blickling. At least five masons cut stone for both sites, including Frisby, whose mark can be found on a variety of stonework at Apethorpe.

As at Blickling, he was a specialist mason, working on the mouldings of windows, friezes and the jewelled keystones of doorway arches. He was also one of the elite masons who worked on the fireplaces of the state apartments. His task was to carve the capitals and entablatures that frame the fire openings, and he placed his mark close to the centres of his work, so that they are clearly visible and appear almost as marks of authentication.

After Apethorpe, Frisby worked at Quenby Hall in Leicestershire, a brick building





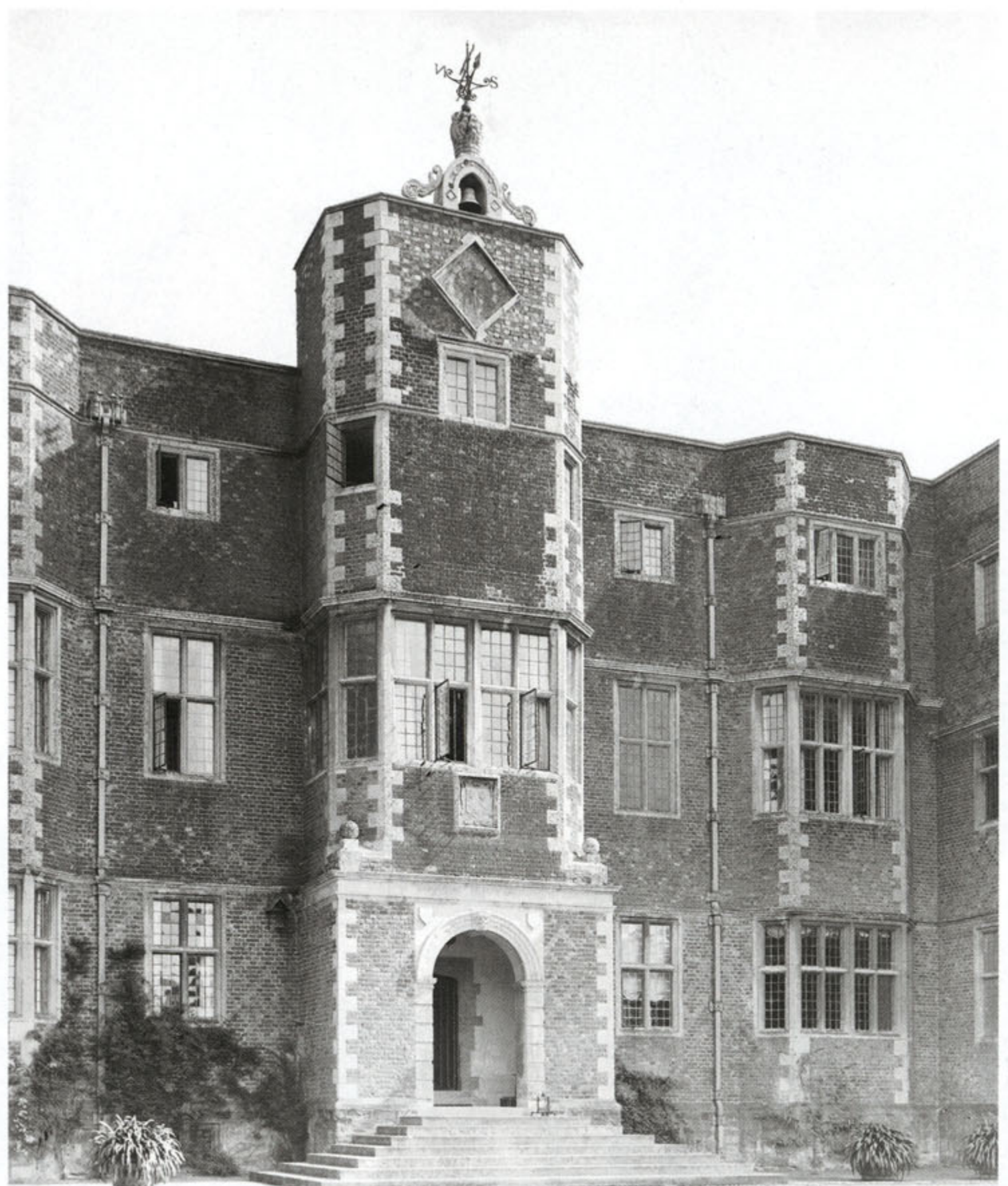
Blickling Hall, Norfolk, where Frisby's career appears to have begun. His mark is found in the stone detailing of this brick building

detailed in stone. This house has been dated to the years between 1620 and 1636. Frisby's mark is on the window frames of the ground and first floors, together with those of several other masons who worked at Blickling Hall. This work is of a more routine nature, and the superb stone fireplaces in the house have no visible masons' marks, so we cannot determine whether Frisby was involved in their production.

Finally, Frisby's mark also appears at Thorpe Hall, near Peterborough, for which he was contracted to provide windows and an architrave in February 1654. There are no marks visible on the stonework of the windows, as the method of payment was per window (rather than by stone), but the mason's mark can be seen on two rusticated archways in the garden wall that date from the same period.

Beside these dated works, Frisby's mark is also found on the west gate of the outer court at Kirby and a window of the Oak Passageway at Deene Park, two neighbouring houses in Northamptonshire.

It is very unlikely that Frisby himself was a designer. Rather, he will always have worked from a specification given to him by an architect. Indeed, he seems never even to have risen to the status of mason-contractor, but remained a member of a working team. He also had a farm, and this would have provided him with an income during the winter lay-offs and when building work wasn't available. Frisby was, however, one of the group of highly skilled men—most of them now forgotten—who brought into being some of our most celebrated buildings. 🐦



Quenby Hall, Leicestershire, erected between 1620 and 1636, where Frisby's mark appears