

Autumn, 1996



On the track between field and forest, the solitary barman moved slowly. He rode looking downwards, eyes and hand traversing, busily searching the soil and fern, tree and flower for all and anything new, different and unusual. Every now and then he would stop, dismount even, to examine more closely a stone, a stream, an insect. In his travel pack and saddle-bags a quill and pack accompanied glasses and provisions. Coloured bottles, chemicals, a compass and other mathematical instruments were carefully packed against the shocks of the road, notebooks and loose papers were equally carefully protected from dust and damp.

The time is the decade of the 1670s, the place anywhere on the borderlands of the southern and Midland counties of England. The barman is Robert Plot perambulating England in order to record its curiosities of art and nature. Fascinated by antiquities and the past, interested by the marvels of the natural world, Plot has understood that natural products could be explained far more fully than hitherto. He has also understood that what man makes with the materials nature offers, his arts and inventions, machines and models, paintings and drawings, are also a part of the environment in which he lives. Plot has set out to record the natural history of England in all its variety.

This year marks the 300th anniversary of the death of Plot who, as the first Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum and Professor of Chemistry, spent much of his working life in the Old Ashmolean, the building that now houses the Museum of the History of Science. He was born in December 1668 at Sutton Barne in the parish of Burdon, near Stretton, Kent and was baptised there on the 12th of the same month. His family had been established in the region since the fifteenth century.

Educated at the Free School in Wye, Plot entered Magdalen Hall in the 20th March 1688, matriculated in the University on the 2nd July, and graduated B.A. in 1691 and M.A. in 1694. After 1694 he stayed on at Magdalen Hall, where he held the posts of Dean and of Vice-Principal, teaching - the name of one of his pupils, Matthew Bryan, is known for 1691 - and preparing his S.C.L. and D.C.L., both of which he took in 1671.

It was during these years of teaching and study that Plot must have laid the foundation of the formidable erudition that served him the subsequent 'learned' life of Plot. He also acquired practical skills such as elementary land-surveying and the operations of chemistry.

In 1667 Plot followed a course in practical chemistry given by William Weldon, and he was a young observer and participant in the activities of the group of natural philosophers that congregated around Robert Boyle at Deep Hall until 1668, and thereafter around Thomas Willis at Boon Hall in St John's Street. At Boon Hall not only did Plot become imbued with a deep and lasting fascination for the new sciences, but he also made acquaintances whose names and influence would later be helpful to him.

Other settings were also valuable to Plot. At Magdalen Hall he belonged to a society which was home to a series of geographical writers during the seventeenth century, and which held an important collection of geographical works in its library. At Magdalen Hall too, Plot continued to be in the company of his erudite tutor, Josiah Pulvis (1621-1714) from whom he may have acquired his taste for antiquities.

The writings of Francis Bacon had an influence on Plot, but behind his Baconian rhetoric can be found the more fundamental influence of the antiquarian writers of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries - the chorographers - who had begun to write the survey of Britain county by county. Behind them, permeating Plot's whole approach and his writings, was also the humanist-classical tradition mediated through the *Historia naturalis* of Pliny.

Plot, it is not too great an exaggeration to say, saw himself as a latter-day Pliny. In about 1670, perhaps earlier, he drew up a long outline of a 'plan for a survey of Britain in search of natural and artificial curiosities, knowledge of which could improve the pleasure, the knowledge and the commerce of man.' Plot's model for this, he explicitly states, was Pliny. To Pliny he added the rhetoric and the utilitarianism of Baconianism and the concentration on a local and immediate antiquities of the antiquarians William Camden (1551-1623) and John Leland (1560-1552).

Plot managed to win sufficient financial support for his project so that, in 1674, he could set off on nearly two years of travel and writing about the natural curiosities of England. By mid-1676 he had finished his first essay in the genre, *The Natural History of Oxfordshire*.

The success of Plot's *Natural History* was immediate. It 'took' with the reading public and was approved of by his scholarly peers. Already in June 1677 there were talks in the Upper way of creating a special lecture for Plot to expound 'philosophical history'. By this was meant the development of reasoned explanations of unusual natural phenomena and controverted subjects.

In the event, this plan became involved in the project developed by the University's governors as they negotiated with Elias Ashmole to be the bequest of his collection. The core of Ashmole's collection, derived from that of the father and son John Tradescant, was of natural specimens, although in them Ashmole himself had added medals, coins, antiquities, books, manuscripts, and heraldic and genealogical collections.

In its entirety the collection provided an excellent assembly of specimens similar to those that Plot himself had for some time been collecting, and one which he could exercise his explanatory skills. Between 1679 and 1683 an imposing building was erected at the Museum Library and the Sheldonian Theatre (a viable central core of University buildings was being created), in whose Ashmole's museum, a lecture hall and a chemical laboratory, Plot was appointed to give life to the whole as both Keeper of Ashmole's Museum and as Professor of Chemistry.

Plot was energetic and productive in his double post. During the seven years in office he wrote and published two books (although one, it must be admitted, was only a Latin translation of part of the other), founded and animated the Oxford Philosophical Society, lectured in chemistry, augmented the Ashmolean collection, and for two years acted as Secretary of the Royal Society of London, editing the *Philosophical Transactions*.



His major achievement during this period was the completion of his *Natural History of Staffordshire* which was published in 1686. The county was no doubt chosen to please Ashmole, but the book was intended to be the second instalment of Plot's survey of England. It is a more mature and readable book than *Oxfordshire*, although as less learned and less committed to finding phenomena and practices, knowledge of which might be useful to others. Even so, the book is far more philosophical, the explanations of the reasons of things longer, more wide-ranging and more trenchant.

Plot has sometimes been accused of being erudite, mainly on the strength of an unsubstantiated remark in an early nineteenth-century source. In reality he was simply typical of his times. If his belief in pharmaceutical alchemy now seems implausible it was no more than did traditional contemporary terms. It is perhaps to be linked with a tendency on Plot's part towards Catholicism and towards an older world view than the apparent modernity of his books would suggest.

Rather than erudite, the fault that might be found with Plot is ambition linked with greed. As a collector he was clearly somewhat grasping, with a reputation, if stories recorded by Thomas Hearne are to be believed, for not returning antiquities and specimens lent to him for study.

It was ambition (as well as marriage) which also seems to have led to Plot's resignation from the Museum. Already in 1687 he tried to obtain the Wardenship of All Souls. This may have resulted from a recognition that having failed to obtain the royal patronage for which he had angled in the dedications of his *Oxfordshire* and *Staffordshire* volumes to Charles II and James II, the Keepership of the Ashmolean Museum offered no great promise of further advancement.

Despite starting at the end of Staffordshire, it is clear that Plot's commitment to such works never entirely waned. For he projected surveys of Kent and of London and Middlesex, issuing questionnaires and subscription proposals for them. Nonetheless in the last ten years of his life he concentrated more seriously on antiquities, particularly genealogical and heraldic studies, than on those of natural history.

To some extent the move was successful. In 1687 Henry Howard, Duke of Norfolk, a patron whom Plot had courted for an honorary doctorate at Oxford in 1684, made him Registrar of the Court of Chancery. In 1688 he was made Historiographer Royal only to lose the post the following year in the wake of the original succession. In January 1689 the office of Honorary Herald Extraordinary was created for him, and two days later he was given the place of Registrar of the College of Heralds by the Earl Marshal.

That in 1694 Plot was nonetheless at work on the *Natural History of London and Middlesex* may not be unconnected with the fact that a body of influential men had subscribed towards it. Like Plot's own hopes however, those of the subscribers would be disappointed, for on the 20th April 1696 Plot died after suffering sufficiently gravely for the fact to be recorded on the memorial plaque erected to his memory in Burdon Church.

Shame, however, was not Robert Plot's true monument. A man of contradictions, hard-working but committed to the subjects of his research, ambitious but also concerned to be useful, grasping, at occasion exercising the favours of his colleagues, but nonetheless of essential disposition, hibulous and jovial, Plot's importance lies in the way that his early work dovetailed with the interests of a wide range of country gentry who were willing, even eager, to participate in local projects such as he organised and were therefore prepared to support Plot's perambulations and to send specimens to his Museum.

Plot at the Ashmolean created a true centre of empirical research and also a tradition of study. From his example during the next fifty years flowed a series of studies in local or delimited natural history. Plot's work supplied a model, and remained a point of reference throughout the eighteenth century for antiquaries and naturalists alike. More important, as the several copies of his works that survive with annotations show, his works were read by the men at whom they were directed - the county gentry of England.

Anthony Turner
Further reading: the best modern account of Plot is M. W. Greenwood, *The Staffordshire Historians*, (Collections for a History of Staffordshire, Staffordshire Record Society, 4th series, vol. 11, 1982), ch. v.
A valuable collection of source materials relating to him is in R. V. Guesber, *Dr Plot and the Correspondence of the Philosophical Society of Oxford*, 1939.