Autumn, 1996

On the track between field and forest,
the solitary horseman moved slowly. He rode looking downwards,
eyes and head traversing, keenly searching shrub 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 spade and pick accompanied clothes and provisions. Collecting
bottles, chemicals, a compass and other mathematical instruments
were carefully packed against the shocks of the route, 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 bridleways of the southern and Midland
counties of England. The horseman is Robert Plot perambulating
England in order to record its curiosities of art and nature.
Fascinated by antiquities and the past, intoxicated by the marvels
of the natural world, Plot has understood that natural products
could be exploited 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 1640 at Sutton
Barne in the parish of Borden, near Sittingbourne, Kent and was
baptized there on the 13th 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 on the 24th March 1658, matriculated
in the University on the 2nd July, and graduated B.A. in 1661
and M.A. in 1664. After 1664 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 1665 –
and preparing his B.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 earnt him the sobriquet 'learned Dr 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 Wilden, 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 Beam Hall in St John's
Street. At Beam 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 erstwhile tutor, Josiah Pullen (1631-1714) 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 unit and interest in antiquities
of the antiquarians William Camden (1551-1623) and John Leland
(1506?-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 was talk
in the Univer sity of creating a special lecture for Plot to expound
'philosophicall history'. By this was meant the development of
reasoned explan ations 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 the bequest of his collections.
The core of Ashmole's collection, derived from that of the father
and son John Tradescant, was of natural specimens, although to
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 over which he could
exercise his explanatory skills. Between 1679 and 1683 an imposing
building was erected next to the Bodleian Library and the Sheldonian
Theatre (a visible central core of University buildings was being
created), to house 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 Musæum 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 on 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 no less learned and no
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 credulous, 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 misplaced, it was no more than old-fashioned in 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 credulity, 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 leant 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 stating at the end of *Staffordshire*
that he intended to write no more county histories, 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 antiquarian, 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
presented for an honorary doctorate at Oxford in 1684, made him
Registrar of the Court of Chivalry. In 1688 he was made Historiographer
Royal only to lose the post the following year in the wake of
the Orangist succession. In January 1695 the office of Mowbray
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 bevy of influential men
had subscribed towards it. Like Plot's own hopes however, those
of the subscribers would be disappointed, for on the 30th April
1696 Plot died after suffering sufficiently greatly for the fact
to be recorded on the memorial plaque erected to his memory in
Borden Church.

Stone, however, was not Robert Plot's true monument.
A man of contradictions, time-serving but committed to the subjects
of his research; ambitious but also concerned to be useful; grasping,
on occasion arousing the ire of his colleagues, but nonetheless
of convivial disposition, bibulous and jovial, Plot's importance
lies in the way that his early work dove-tailed with the interests
of a wide range of country gentry who were willing, even eager,
to participate in local projects such as he organized 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. Greenslade, *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. T. Gunther, *Dr Plot and the Correspondence of the Philosophical
Society of Oxford* (Oxford, 1939).