Robert Plot

Robert Plot's *Natural History of Oxfordshire*, first published in 1677, contained descriptions and illustrations of a wide range of Oxfordshire fossils, rocks and minerals. It also included the first known illustration of a dinosaur bone, thought by Plot to be the bone of a giant. A second edition of the book, containing additions by Plot's stepson, John Burman, and an account of the author by his successor, Edward Lhwyd, was published in 1705. Sadly, none of Plot's specimens survive in the collections, but much can be learnt from the beautiful illustrations, all of which are reproduced here.

Who was Robert Plot?

Robert Plot was born in December 1640 at the family property of Sutton Barne in Borden, Kent. The son of Robert Plot and Elisabeth Patenden, he was educated at Wye Free School and at Magdalen Hall, Oxford, obtaining a BA in 1661, an MA in 1664, and a BCL and DCL in 1671. By this time Plot had already directed his attention to the systematic study of natural history and antiquities, issuing in 1670 or thereabouts a list of *Quaer's to be propounded to the most ingenious of each County in my Travels through England*. He began with the county in which he was then living, starting work on *The Natural History of Oxfordshire* in June 1674; the first edition appeared 3 years later in 1677.

The influence of the book was immediate and far-reaching. Not only was its author ever after referred to as the "learned Dr Plot", but it may well also have confirmed Elias Ashmole in the belief that Oxford was the heaven-appointed place for his collection, and persuaded the University authorities both to accept the collection and to provide a fine building in which to house it. The new museum, sited on Broad Street, was a pioneering institution, comprising the museum display on the upper floor, a School of Natural History at ground level, and a chemical laboratory in the basement. Plot's reward soon followed the completion of the building, for in March 1683 he was appointed both Professor of Chemistry, and first Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum.

Plot was energetic and productive in his double post. His academic duties required his presence periodically in the School of Natural History, where he read "three times a week ... during the time of the chymical course, which continues an entire month, concerning all natural bodies relating to and made use of in chymical preparations, particularly as to the countries and places where they are produced, and found, their natures, their qualities and virtues, their effects, by what marks and characteristicks they are distinguished one from another, natural from artificial, true from sophisticated, with their several mixtures and preparations in trials and experiments" (Gunther, 1925, p. 310).

In the museum, he established the high curatorial standards demanded by Ashmole, including the preparation of manuscript catalogues of much of the collection. He also completed a second book, *The Natural History of Staffordshire*, which was published in 1686. "The University could hardly have found a more enthusiastic custodian than its first Keeper, for although he seems to have been a man of somewhat unusual character, - Edward Lhwyd, his assistant and successor, credits him with as bad morals as ever characterized a Master of Arts, - yet his energies all turned to the profit of the Museum. The jealous even declared that 'his acquisitiveness was such as to disgust some of his fellow antiquarians'. But he was one who gave ten-fold more than he received, and he had many friends" (Gunther, 1925, p. 320).

In 1690, Plot resigned his Oxford posts, giving insufficient stipend as the reason for his retirement. It was his desire, he said, to spend the rest of his life in doing something better than sitting still and doing nothing for nothing. He married Rebecca Burman of London, and retired to his property at Sutton Barne. In the summer of 1695 he began to suffer from urinary calculi. By September he was sufficiently recovered to go on an archaeological tour of east Anglia, but the condition worsened, and he died on 30 April 1696, suffering sufficiently greatly for the fact to be recorded on the plaque erected to his memory in Borden church.

Plot's view of the origin of fossils

In 1677, when Plot published his *Natural History of Oxfordshire*, controversy about the origin of fossils was at its height.

Scientists around the world were debating the great question:

"...whether the Stones we find in the Forms of Shell-fish, be Lapides sui generis, naturally produced by some extraordinary plastic virtue, latent in the Earth or Quarries where they are found? Or, whether they rather owe their Form and Figuration to the Shells of the Fishes they represent, brought to the places where they are now found by a Deluge, Earth-quake, or some other such means, and there being filled with Mud, Clay, and petrifying Juices, have in tract of time been turned into Stones, as we now find them, still retaining the same Shape in the whole, with the same Lineations, Sutures, Eminencies, Cavities, Orifices, Points, that they had whilst they were Shells?"

(Plot, 1677, p. 111).

Many ideas were put forward concerning the nature of fossils. While some believed them to be the remains of living organisms, others felt they were more likely to be salt crystals, or the results of 'seeds' of plants and animals that had entered the earth along with the rain, germinated and grown there.

What is 'Learning more'?

'Learning more' presents a series of articles about the Museum and its collections. It is designed for older students, teachers, researchers, and anyone who wants to find out more about particular aspects of the Museum's work and its history.

This article gives an extensive account of the life and work of the pioneering geologist Robert Plot. It includes a discussion of Plot's views on fossils as well as plates from *The Natural History of Oxfordshire*, first published in 1677.

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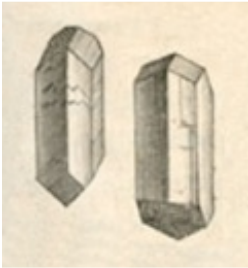
Fossils as crystallizations



Plot rejected the idea that fossil shells had ever been living creatures and suggested that they were actually the crystallizations of mineral salts, their zoomorphic appearance as coincidental as the regular shapes of stalactites or snowflakes:

"That Salts are the principal Ingredients of Stones, I think has so sufficiently been noted already, that to endeavour any further Evidence of the thing, would be actum agere in me, and loss of time to the Reader: And if of Stones in general, much rather sure of Formed Stones, it being the undoubted Prerogative of the Saline Principle to give Bodies their Figure, as well as Solidity and Duration: No other Principle that we yet know of naturally shooting into Figures, each peculiar to their own kind, but Salts; thus Nitre always shoots into Pyramids, Salt Marine into Cubes, Alum into Octo, and Sal Armoniac into Hexaedrums,and other mixt Salts into as mixt Figures"

(Plot, 1677, p. 123).

Frozen urine

From his work as a chemist, Plot was familiar with the crystallization patterns of a wide range of solutions, and he set about naming salts which could have been responsible for the forms of various fossils, e.g. bivalves:

"The Conchites, Pectinites, and Ostracites, whether transversly striated, or from the Commissures to the Rim, seem to own their Origin to Urinous Salts, which shoot likewise from a Center (as suppose from the Hinges of these Stones) but generally are most extended to one side, as may be seen in the branched Figure formed on the Surface of Urine by freezing, in Mr. Hook's Micrography; whose Striae not obtaining much above the Quadrant of a Circle, whatever other Difference there may be, in this respect at least is agreeable to our Stones"

(Plot, 1677, p. 124).

Organic resemblances

Although similarities between fossils and living organisms could clearly be perceived, it did not, to Plot, necessarily follow that the one had come from the other. According to the neoplatonic school of thought, the whole cosmos is a web of hidden affinities, made visible in the resemblances between Man and his external world, between the heavens and the Earth, and between living and non-living entities. Neoplatonists could therefore attribute organic resemblances to the action of a pervasive moulding force or "plastic virtue" that governed the growth of living organisms, but also operated within the Earth. For Plot, this "plastic virtue" was crystallization, which he felt capable of remarkable feats:

"Come we next to Formed Stones that resemble the parts of Four Footed beasts, whereof we meet of one sort in the Quarries of Heddington, set in the Body of the Stone, the most like to the Head of a Horse of any thing I can think of; having the Ears, and Crest of the Mane appearing between them, the places of the Eyes suitably prominent, and the rest of the Face entire, only the Mouth and Nostrils absent in them all ... These are plentifully enough found, and of divers Sizes, yet not mention'd that I know of by any Author, wherefore I have taken the Boldness to fit them with a Name, and in Imitation of other Authors (in the like Case) shall call them Hippocephaloides"

(Plot, 1677, p. 128).

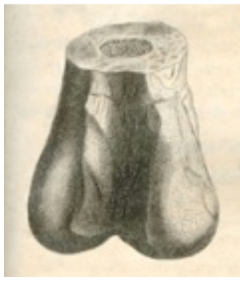
Medicinal uses

According to the neoplatonists, man was the "microcosm", the epitome of the universe, the reflection in miniature of the structure, variety and purpose of the "macrocosm" outside him. Every feature of the universe around him could therefore be expected to have some analogy, some token or symbol, within his being. It followed that to look for specific remedies for specific ills was no mere empirical hunch but rather an attempt to trace the implications of the fundamental pattern of nature. This idea is also reflected in his book:

"On the Chiltern Hills near Sherbourn, I found a White Flint, with another set in it, in the Form of a Luca Olive ... To which may be added the Lapides Judaici of Oxford-shire, which though of a much more slender and longer Figure than any sort of Olive, yet because in other Countries they are found in that Shape ... and treated of by Authors amongst stones relating to the Fruits of Trees, I shall not change their place ... By Authors they are said to be of different Sexes, the lesser and rounder of the Feminine, and the greater and longer of the Masculine Gender; whereof the former is good against the stone in the Bladder, and the latter against it in the Kidneys, for which reasons they are sometimes by Authors called Eurrhei, and tecolith"

(Plot, 1677, p. 126).

True petrified organisms



Not all the fossils known to Plot were explained by the action of a "plastic force". Having described fossils resembling the human brain, eyeball, ear, heart and kidney, he came to an object of particular strangeness:

"Come we next to such [stones] as concern the ... Members of the Body: Amongst which, I have one dug out of a quarry in the Parish of Cornwell, and given me by the ingenious Sir Thomas Pennyston, that has exactly the Figure of the lowermost part of the Thigh-Bone of a Man or at least of some other Animal, with capita Femoris inferiora, between which are the anterior ... and the large posterior Sinus ... : and a little above the Sinus, where it seems to have been broken off, shewing the marrow within of a shining Spar-like Substance of its true Colour and Figure, in the hollow of the Bone ... In Compass near the capita Femoris, just two Foot, and at the top above the Sinus ... about 15 inches: in weight, though representing so short a part of the Thigh-Bone, almost 20 pounds"

(Plot, 1677, p. 132).

Plot decided, on the basis of the internal structure, that this specimen was indeed a petrified bone but, given its great size, what animal could it have come from?

Mystery bone

According to Plot, some specimens did seem to have a true organic origin. If this large specimen was indeed part of a femur, from which creature did it come?

Nowadays we can identify it as part of the femur of the dinosaur *Megalosaurus*, but this was not an explanation available to Plot. He wondered whether it (and others like it) might be the bones of elephants brought to Britain during the Roman invasions, but soon realised this could not be the case, and finally settled upon what is, to us, an even more bizarre suggestion:

> *"There happily came to Oxford while I was writing of this, a living Elephant to be shown publickly at the ACT, An. 1676, with whose Bones ... I compared ours; and found those of the Elephant not only of a different Shape, but also incomparably different to ours, though the Beast were very young and not half grown. If then they are neither the Bones of Horses, Oxen, nor Elephants, as I am strongly persuaded they are not ... It remains, that (notwithstanding their extravagant Magnitude) they must have been the bones of Men or Women: Nor doth any thing hinder but they may have been so, provided it be clearly made out, that there have been Men and Women of proportionable Stature in all Ages of the World, down even to our own Days"*
>
> (Plot, 1677, p. 137).

Archives

Bodleian Library, Department of Special Collections and Western Manuscripts
Broad Street, Oxford OX1 3BG
Tel: +44 (0)1865 277158

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96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB
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Tel: +44 (0)1865 278087

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Plates from *The Natural History of Oxfordshire*

Robert Plot's *Natural History of Oxfordshire*, first published in 1677, contained descriptions and illustrations of a wide range of fossils, rocks and minerals found in Oxfordshire. It was a seminal work in early geology.

The plates in Plot's book are beautifully executed and represent an early example of the scientific illustration of fossil material. Among the figures are the first recorded illustration of a dinosaur bone. They are presented here with modern identifications of each specimen.

Tab. 2. Stones relating to the Heavenly Bodies, or to Air (Moon-stone, Star-stones, Brontiae)

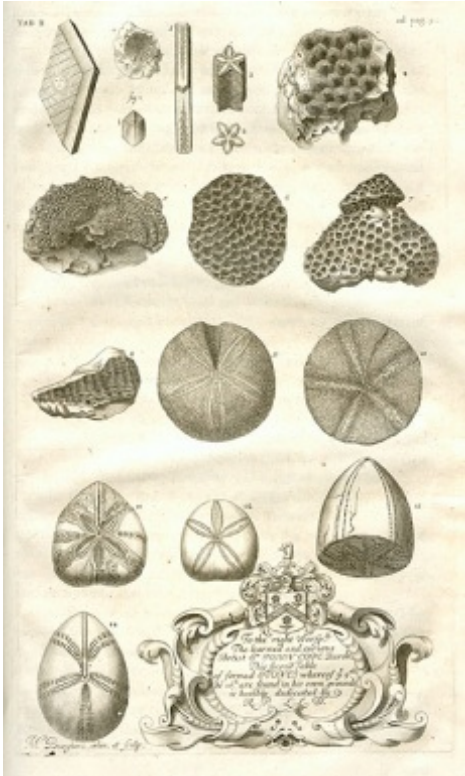


Figure 1 Gypsum var. selenite, Headington
Figure 2 *Isocrinus* sp., Lower Lias, Lower Jurassic, Claydon
Figure 3 I*socrinus* sp., Lower Lias, Lower Jurassic, Claydon
Figure 4 *Isastrea explanata*, Coral Rag, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 5 *Thamnastrea concinna*, Coral Rag, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 6 *Isastrea* sp.,Mid-Upper Jurassic, Steeple Barton
Figure 7 *Isastrea explanata*, Coral Rag, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 8 *Isastrea explanata*, Coral Rag, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 9 *Clypeus ploti*, Inferior Oolite, Middle Jurassic, Cotswolds
Figure 10 *Clypeus ploti*, Inferior Oolite, Middle Jurassic, Cotswolds
Figure 11 Flint cast of *Micraster* sp., Upper Chalk, Upper Cretaceous, Aston Rowant
Figure 12 *Nucleolites scutatus*, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Iffley
Figure 13 *Conulus albogalerus*, Upper Chalk, Upper Cretaceous, Chilterns
Figure 14 Flint cast of *Echinus scutata*, derived from Upper Chalk, Cretaceous, Ewelme

Tab. 3. Stones relating to Air, or to the Watery Kingdom (Thunder-bolts, stalactites, Cockle-stones)

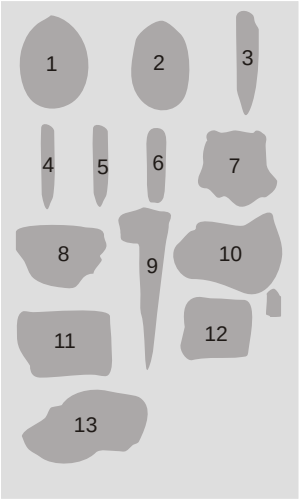


Figure 1 Flint cast of *Echinocorys scutata*, Upper Chalk, Upper Cretaceous, Pyrton
Figure 2 Flint cast of *Echinocorys scutata*, Upper Chalk, Upper Cretaceous, Pyrton
Figure 3 *Belemnites abbreviatus*, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 4 *Belemnites* sp., Lower - Middle Jurassic, Rollright
Figure 5 *Belemnites* sp., Lower - Middle Jurassic, Rollright
Figure 6 *Belemnites sulcatus*, Oxford Clay, Middle - Upper Jurassic, St Clements
Figure 7 Flint + imagination ?, Whitchurch
Figure 8 Weathered corallian limestone, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 9 Stalactitic calcite from fissure in limestone, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 10 Calcite crystals lining cavity in limestone, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 11 *Stigmaria ficoides* ?, Carboniferous (from a block of household coal)
Figure 12 Probably *Ostrea sowerbyi*, Forest Marble, Middle Jurassic, Wychwood
Figure 13 Probably *Tetrarhynchia tetrahaedra*, Middle Lias, Lower Jurassic, Adderbury

Tab. 4. Stones belonging to the Watery Kingdom (Snail-stones, Cockle-stones)

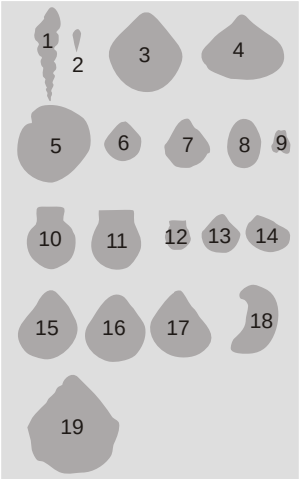
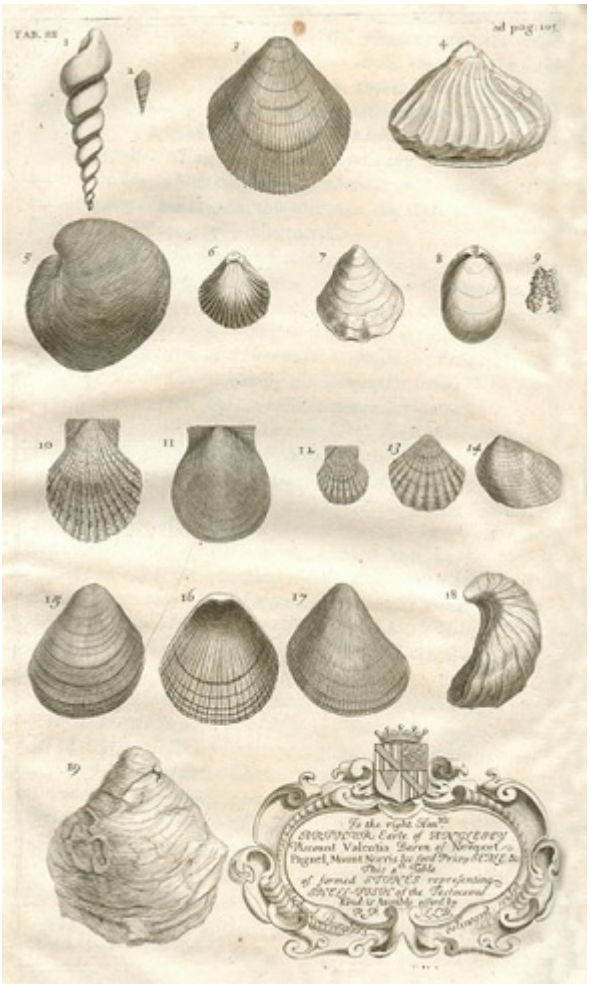


Figure 1 *Pseudomelania heddingtonensis*, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 2 *Cerithium muricatum*, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 3 *Spondylus spinosus* or *Pecten cretosus*, Upper Cretaceous, Henley
Figure 4 Unidentifiable, Great Rollright
Figure 5 *Ceratomya concentrica* ?, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 6 *Rhynchonella concinna*, Great Oolite, Middle Jurassic, Burford, etc.
Figure 7 *Epithyris bathonica* ?, Great Oolite?, Middle Jurassic, Cornwell
Figure 8 *Lobothyris punctata*, Middle Lias, Lower Jurassic, Hornton
Figure 9 Lophophore support of *Lobothyris punctata*, Middle Lias, Lower Jurassic, Hornton
Figure 10 *Pecten articulatus*, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 11 *Camptonectes auritus*, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 12 *Pecten vagans*, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 13 *Pecten vagans*, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 14 *Lima* sp. ?, horizon and locality not recorded
Figure 15 *Lima rigida* ?,Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Oxfordshire
Figure 16 *Lima rigida* ?, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Oxfordshire
Figure 17 *Lima rigida* ?, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Oxfordshire
Figure 18 *Gryphaea incurva*, derived from Lower Lias, Cowley, etc.
Figure 19 *Ostrea* sp., River gravels, Oxfordshire



Tab. 5. Stones belonging to the Watery Kingdom (Echinites, Cornu Ammonis)

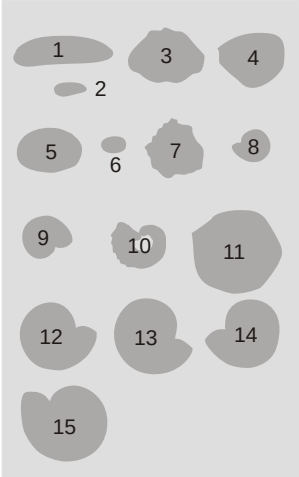
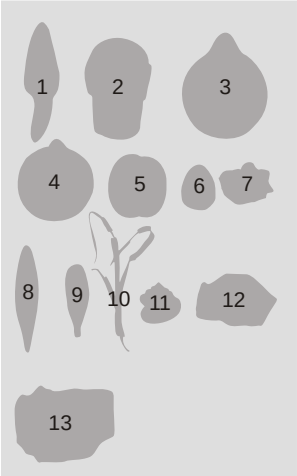
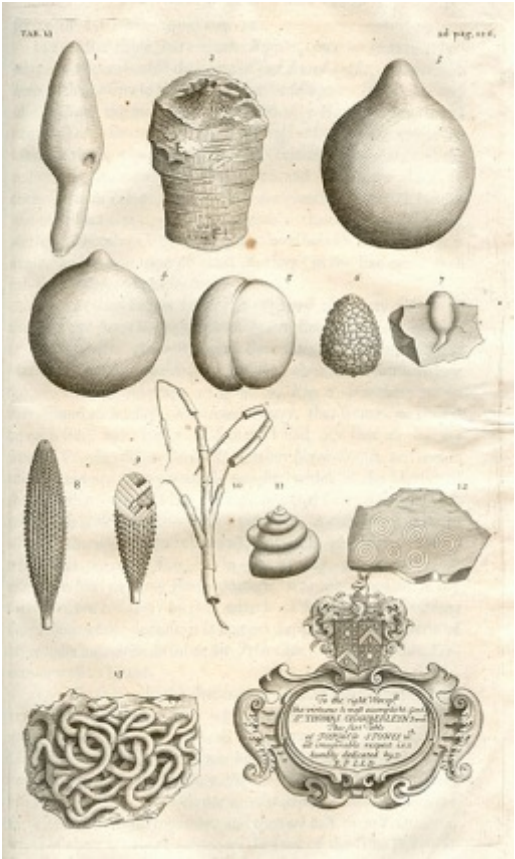


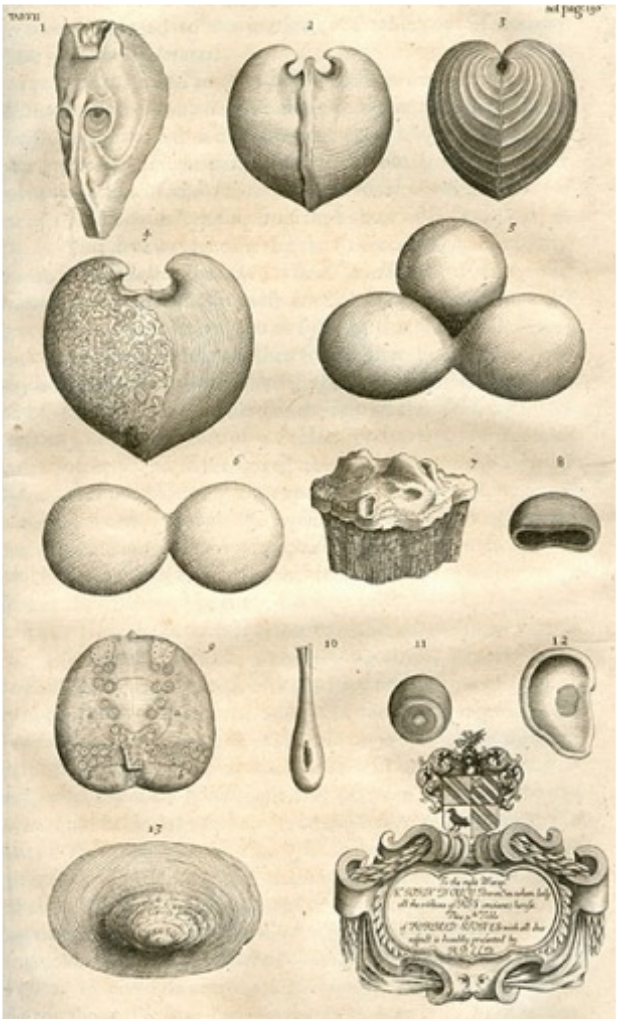
Figure 1 *Modiolus scalprum*, Lower Lias, Lower Jurassic, Claydon
Figure 2 *Lithophaga inclusa*, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 3 Internal mould of *Cidaris* sp., Upper Chalk, Upper Cretaceous, Stonor
Figure 4 *Cidaris* sp., Upper Chalk, Upper Cretaceous, Stonor
Figure 5 *Stomechinus* sp., Great Oolite?, Middle Jurassic, Taynton
Figure 6 *Pseudodiadema* sp. ?, Great Oolite?, Middle Jurassic, Taynton
Figure 7 *Thecosmilia annularis*, Corallian?, Upper Jurassic, near Shotover
Figure 8 Perisphinctid?, Oxford Clay?, Middle - Upper Jurassic, Oxford
Figure 9 *Quenstedtoceras lamberti*, Jurassic, Oxford
Figure 10 *Kosmoceras* or *Aspidoceras*, Jurassic, Oxford
Figure 11 Ammonite, Jurassic, Claydon?
Figure 12 *Titanites* sp., Portlandian, Upper Jurassic, Thame
Figure 13 *Stephanoceras humphriesianum*, Inferior Oolite, Middle Jurassic, Great Rollright
Figure 14 *Coroniceras rotiforme*, Lower Lias?, Lower Jurassic, Oxfordshire
Figure 15 Aspidoceras sp., Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Sandford

Tab. 6. Stones resembling Plants or Animals (Fruits, Snail-stones, Worm-stones)

Figure 1 Flint, Upper Chalk, Upper Cretaceous, Stokenchurch
Figure 2 *Thecosmilia annularis*, Coral Rag, Upper Jurassic, near Shotover
Figure 3 Flint, River gravels?, near Bix-brand
Figure 4 Flint, River gravels?, Waterstock
Figure 5 Flint, River gravels?, Whitchurch
Figure 6 Flint flaked by weathering, River gravels?, near Shotover
Figure 7 Sponge in flint, Upper Chalk, Upper Cretaceous, near Sherbourn
Figure 8 Spine of *Paracidaris florigemma*, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Oxfordshire
Figure 9 Spine of *Paracidaris florigemma*, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Oxfordshire
Figure 10 Encrustation on grass, "The cascade", Summertown
Figure 11 Gastropod, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, near Shotover
Figures 12 & 13 *Serpula* sp. Corallian, Upper Jurassic, near Shotover

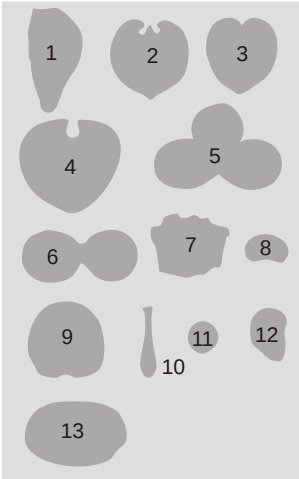






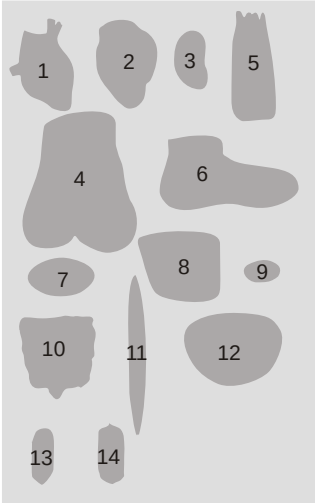
Tab. 7. Stones resembling parts of Animals, or parts of Men (Horse's head, eye-ball, ear)

Figure 1 Internal mould of *Trigonia* sp., Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 2 *Protocardia* sp., Portlandian, Upper Jurassic, Headington
Figure 3 *Pholadomya deltoidea*, Cornbrash, Middle Jurassic, Brize Norton
Figure 4 *Homomya gibbosa*, Inferior Oolite?, Middle Jurassic, Shetford
Figure 5 Concretion, Portlandian, Upper Jurassic, Shotover
Figure 6 Concretion, Portlandian, Upper Jurassic, Shotover
Figure 7 *Trichites ploti*, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, near Shotover
Figure 8 Part of hollow concretion, River gravels, Magdalen College, Oxford
Figure 9 Flint cast of *Micraster* sp.,Upper Chalk, Upper Cretaceous, Chilterns
Figure 10 Indeterminate, Jurassic, Shotover
Figure 11 Palatal tooth of a fish?, River gravels, near Oxford
Figure 12 *Exogyra nana*, Corallian, Upper Jurassic, Oxfordshire
Figure 13 Sponge, Upper Chalk, Upper Cretaceous, Stokenchurch



Tab. 8. Stones resembling parts of Men, or things of Art (Heart, kidney, button-mould, whet-stone)

Figure 1 Flint nodule, Upper Chalk, Upper Cretaceous, Chilterns
Figure 2 *Stylina ploti*, River gravels, near Oxford
Figure 3 *Anabacia* sp., Great Oolite, Middle Jurassic, Oxfordshire
Figure 4 Femur of *Megalosaurus*, Great Oolite, Middle Jurassic, Cornwell
Figure 5 Molar tooth of Ox, Great Oolite, Middle Jurassic, Cornwell
Figure 6 Concretion, Portlandian, Upper Jurassic, Shotover
Figure 7 Spindlewhorl, Great Oolite, Middle Jurassic, Cornwell
Figure 8 Indeterminate, Jurassic, near Oxford
Figure 9 *Anabacia complanata*, Great Oolite, Middle Jurassic, Taynton
Figure 10 Calcite, Shotover
Figure 11 Indeterminate, Jurassic, Heath
Figure 12 Pyrite, Near Cornwell
Figures 13 & 14 Gypsum var. selenite, locality not recorded



The two faces of *The Natural History of Oxfordshire*

Robert Plot's *Natural History of Oxfordshire* was first published in 1677. A second edition of the book, containing additions by Plot's stepson, John Burman, and an account of the author by his successor, Edward Lhwyd, was published in 1705.


THE
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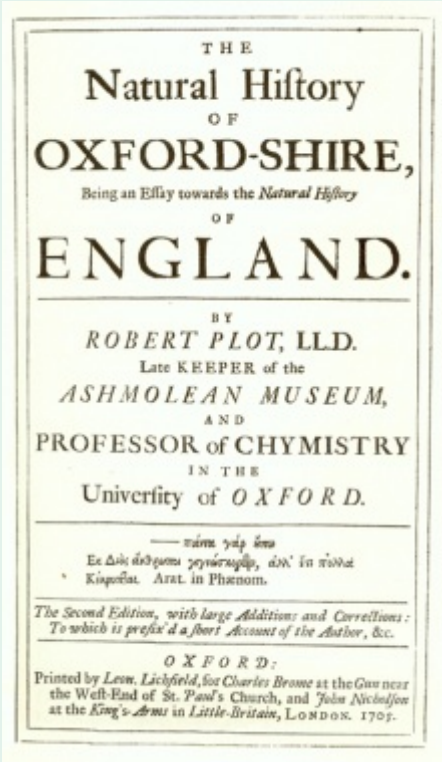
ENGLAND.
By R. P. LL. D.


THE
Natural History
OF
OXFORD-SHIRE,
Being an Essay towards the Natural History
OF
ENGLAND.
BY
ROBERT PLOT, LL.D.
Late KEEPER of the
ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM,
AND
PROFESSOR of CHYMISTRY
IN THE
University of OXFORD.
The Second Edition, with large Additions and Corrections: To which is prefix'd a short Account of the Author, &c.
OXFORD:
Printed by Leon. Lichfield, for Charles Brome at the Gun near the West-End of St. Paul's Church, and John Nicholson at the King's-Arms in Little-Britain, LONDON. 1705.

In 1677 the frontispiece states: 'The Natural History of Oxfordshire, being an essay toward the Natural History of England. By R. P. LL.D. Printed at the Theater in Oxford, and are to be had there: and in London at Mr. S. Millers, at the Star near the west-end of St Paul's church-yard. 1677. The price in sheets at the press nine shillings. To subscribers, eight shillings.'
In 1705: 'The Natural History of Oxfordshire, being an essay toward the Natural History of England. By Robert Plot. LL.D. Late Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum and Professor of Chemistry in the University of Oxford. The Second Edition, with large additions and corrections: to which is prefixed a short account of the author, etc. Oxford: printed by Leon. Lichfield, for Charles Brome at the Gun near the West-end of St Paul's Church, and John Nicholson at the Kings-arms in Little-Britain, London 1705.'

The frontispiece from 1677 (left), and from 1705 (right), both include a quote from the 'Phaenomena' by Aratus of Soli.