

The science of plants in the early modern period was not quite modern Plant Sciences. The most common kind of serious engagement with plants was the practice of 'simpling', or the identification and gathering of medicinal plants. This was rooted in the work of the ancient Greek botanist and pharmacist Dioscorides, and the college owns seven early editions of his *De materia medica*, an early pharmacopeia. But there were new initiatives in the early modern period both to improve the taxonomy and to investigate the structure and physiology of plants, and in Britain these culminated in the work of later seventeenth-century scientists such as Robert Hooke, John Ray, Robert Morison, and Nehemiah Grew.

In Oxford, the study of these related areas was put on an institutional footing by the founding in 1621 of the Botanic Garden, which only acquired its own salaried Curator in the early 1640s. There was plenty of informal activity in the colleges, however, and in New College, two names have traditionally stood out: those of the simpler William Coles (1626–1662), who matriculated in 1642 but migrated to Merton as a Postmaster in 1650; and of the lawyer, churchman, and botanist Robert Sharrock (1630–1684, matr. 1650, BCL 1654, DCL 1661), who had a much longer college career, and who also served as the college librarian for the first half of the 1660s. Sharrock published a number of works in different disciplines, but his major work in plant science was *The History of the Propagation and Improvement of Vegetables*, published in Oxford in 1660, with later editions of 1666 and 1672.<sup>1</sup> I shall leave discussions of these men for another time, but in his *Art of Simpling* (1656), Coles recorded a vignette about Warden Pincke of New College (1573–1647) in his garden:

Dr. *Pinck* late Warden of *New Colledge* in *Oxon.* whereof I was once a Member (whose memory I very much honour) was a very learned Man, and well versed in Physick, and truly he would rise very betimes in the morning, even in his later dayes, when he was almost fourscore yeares old, and going into his Garden he would take a Mattock or Spade, digging there an houre or two, which he found very advantagious to his health.<sup>2</sup>

This note is dedicated to another, slightly later college digger, one so far as I know forgotten to history until now, and still only barely visible. This is a man called John Tayler, who was the college gardener in the 1680s. We know of him solely through three kinds of record: his matriculation record, mentions in the college accounts, and a notice in the library benefactors' register of a monetary bequest to the college together with what the college chose to purchase with this bequest.

John Tayler or Taylour or Tayler, as he appears in different records, matriculated as a *privilegiatus* or privileged person of the university on 13 November 1685, when he was described as son of Christopher, of Shapwick, Dorset. (Shapwick is not far from Blandford Forum, home of the Ryves, a prominent New College family, and this may have provided the college connection.) He was at this date twenty-seven years of age, and his occupation was given as 'hortulanus' of New College (Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses*).

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My thanks to Jennifer Thorp for her customary assistance in the college archives.

<sup>1</sup> The college owns nothing by Coles, whose botanical work is characterized by his belief in the *signatura rerum* or 'doctrine of signatures'; but by Sharrock we have *The History of the Propagation & Improvement of Vegetables by the concurrence of art and nature* in both its first (Oxford, 1660) and second (Oxford, 1672) editions, the latter purchased in 2009. Sharrock himself was a significant donor to the library.

<sup>2</sup> William Coles, *The Art of Simpling* (London, 1656), p. [120] (misprinted as '96').



Who was responsible for this? Purchasing was normally done by the *bibliothecarius*, and we can work out who the college librarians were in this period by consulting the bursarial rolls, where we find that Nathaniel Pelham (1680–87), and then Robert Sewster (1687–96) were the fellows paid to be the college *bibliothecarii* for the periods indicated. If direction was needed from a more informed figure in the college, then the obvious candidate is William Musgrave (1655–1721; matr. 1675, BCL 1682, MB 1685, MD 1689). He was elected FRS in 1684, and also appointed second secretary to the Royal Society in the same year, hence editing several numbers of the London society's *Philosophical Transactions* from New College. In 1685 he was one of the founders of the Philosophical Society of Oxford, a kind of off-shoot of the London Royal Society, which held its meetings in the newly-opened Ashmolean Museum. Given the high number of 'Royal Society' books among those bought using Tayer's bequest, Musgrave sounds like our man, although the virtuoso Ralph Bohun, who specialised in meteorology Tm0.024 59[( )] TJ9. 1 285.65 59





### Grew's *Anatomy of Vegetables, Trunkes, &c.*

Grew, Nehemiah. *The Comparative Anatomy of Trunks*. London: J. M. for Walter Kettilby, 1675. 8°. Followed by Grew, *An Idea of a Phytological History Propounded*. London: J. M. for Richard Chiswell, 1673.

BT3.205.8(1, 2). Aleph system nos. 015528425, 013421975. Later binding, now split and damaged, later endpapers. Once chained from lower right of front board.

The latter work is more common in Oxford. Compare in New College also BT3.264.25(2), Grew's *Anatomy of Vegetables* (London, 1672), bound after Robert Sharrock of New College's own *History . . . of Vegetables* (London, 1660).

### Cowley de Plantis.

Cowley, Abraham. *Poëmata Latina . . . sex libri plantarum*. With Sprat's biography prefaced. London: Thomas Roycroft for John Martyn, 1668. 8°.

BT3.264.14. Aleph system no. 013544369. Later binding, but the first front end-paper still bears the original inscription 'Liber Johannis Goodwin pr. Q. 2. O.

Of the several copies in Oxford libraries, the Christ Church copy is from the Wake bequest.

### Rapinus de Hortis.

Rapinus, Rhenanus. *Hortorum libri, Eclogæ, Liber de carmine pastorali, Odaë*. Leiden: Arnold Doude, 1672. 12°.

BT3.177.27. Aleph system no. 013458295. Contemporary or near-contemporary calf binding with gold-tooled frames. Once chained from upper right of front board.

### Drope of Fruit Trees.

Drope, Francis. *A Short and Sure Guid in the Practice of Raising and Ordering of Fruit-Trees*. Oxford: Richard Davis, 1672. 8°.

BT3.264.26. Aleph system no. 011739968. Rebacked, with marbled paper boards.

Of the several copies in Oxford libraries, Bodleian Locke 7.274a