



HENRY LYTE

Henry Lyte was born at Lytes Cary Manor, Somerset at about 1529 His first and most important work was his translation of the Cruydeboeck of Rembert Dodoens (Antwerp 1554) by way of the 1557 French translation of Charles de L'Ecluse (Histoire of Plantes). The first edition of the translation was printed in folio at Antwerp to secure the 900 woodcuts of the original by Leonhart Fuchs, the blocks being too heavy and too valuable to transport. It has 799 pages and it bears the title, A nieuwe Herball or Historie of Plantes. There is a dedication to Queen Elizabeth.

Henry Lyte was not a herbalist but someone very interested in plants and when he inherited Lytes Manor from his father he began to make a herb and plant garden. He had great respect for the power and virtues of ordinary wayside plants and thought this knowledge should be shared with the general populace. Previous herbals available at the time were in Latin or other European language and were inaccessible to the ordinary man or woman without a scholarly education. In his introduction to his Herbal he states 'My translation shall make this good and profitable Historie (which hitherto hath lien hid from many of my Countrymen, under the value of an unknown language) familiar and knowne unto them.' He then goes on to express the hope that all practising physicians will not 'mislike this enterprise which to this purpose specially tendeth, that even the meanest (poorest) of my Countrymen(whose skill is not so profound, that they can fetch this knowledge out of strange tongues, not their abilitie so wealthy, as to entertain a learned Physition) may yet in time of their necessitie have some helps in their owne, or their neighbors fields and gardens at home'.

Largely forgotten now, his translation became the standard work on herbs in the English language during the latter part of the 16th century and was hugely influential as it was the first comprehensive work to list every known plant in English. I visited Lytes Manor in Somerset recently (now owned by the National Trust) and was given permission to see and photograph the original Herbal in its glass case. Intrigued by the man himself I am now reading 'The Knot' a book written about his life but imagining some aspects of it by Jane Borodale.

