

WILLIAM GOULD

(1715 - 1799)

William Gould wrote the first book on ants in the English language, "An Account of English Ants" which was published in 1747. Although it repeats many of the observations and legends about ants that were inherited from the Greek and Roman writers, there are many observations made by the author which show that he must have been a careful observer of nature with a very keen interest in ants. He was born in 1715, the son of Davidge Gould of Sharpham Park, Glastonbury, Somerset. He matriculated at Exeter College, Oxford on 27 March 1732, aged 17, took his BA in 1736 and obtained his MA on 30 June 1739 at the age of 24. Little is known of his life between 1740 and 1766, when he became Rector of Stapleford Abbots, Essex, except that he entered Caius College, Cambridge to study Divinity and, of course, published his book on ants! It was not until 1774 that he was awarded a Doctorate of Divinity, perhaps because he took Solomon's advice to literally. He remained at Stapleford Abbots until his death on 25 March 1799.

The book has a surprisingly modern structure once the archaic language is negotiated. Gould's meticulous observations are evident throughout. For example, on queen number he writes:

"You may sometimes expect to find two yellow Queens (Lasius flavus) in the same colony. I have once or twice met with three. They most usually reside in the same Lodgement, and live together in perfect Harmony and Union. The Hill and small Black Ants (Formica rufa and L. niger, respectively) seem to differ in this Circumstance: For I never could, by the nicest Researches, observe more than one in a Settlement. It has been already observed that the Red Queens (Myrmica sp.) exceed not their Vassals above two to one, or thereabouts. As such a Proportion might not so well answer a supply of Young, this Deficiency is made up in Number. If they inhabit under a broad Stone, you may in Summer by lifting it up often see them on the Surface intermixt with the rest. They never work, are respectfully treated, and seem to have no other Care on their Hands than to keep up their Names, and give Birth to a succeeding Posterity."

It is a delightful book and it places in perspective the knowledge available to our predecessors and the relevance of our own contributions.

Graham Elmes and Greg Peakin