In the mid twentieth century, the meaning of Plant was revised to ‘gardener’ and this affected the interpretation of the royal name Plantagenet (JOONS, vol.10, no.8, pp.14-15). In the last issue of JOONS (vol.11, no.1, p.34), Debbie Kennett reviewed the book SDFH - Surnames, DNA & Family History by George Redmonds, Turi King and David Hey; and, on page 30, Redmonds writes, ‘Reaney’s explanation of Plant as a by-name for a gardener received little support from John Plant in his recent article on the surname (Nomina, vol.28, pp.115-33) and yet ‘William Plant, gardiner’ was a Hull taxpayer in 1379’.

In the said Nomina article, I had not dismissed ‘gardener’ but suggested that Ernest Weekly’s earlier meaning ‘sprig’ or ‘offspring’ should not be ignored. The gardener at Hull in 1379 corresponds to item 10 in Figure 1. It is only one of many medieval Plant records. Some other of the early records state explicit occupations: merchant (Geoffrey Plaunt in 1273); once bailiff of Maresfelde (Robert Plonte in 1280); priest (Henry Plante in 1350); draperie (Will. Plante in 1376); agricole (Johannes Plante in 1381); and chaplain (William Ploente in 1386). Though they are not gardeners, they are all offspring, in keeping with the Oxford English Dictionary which lists the archaic meanings ‘sprig’, ‘scion’ and ‘young person’. Moreover, in Welsh, plant literally means ‘children’ and item 7 in Figure 1 corresponds to an early Plant in Wales. This suggests a link of the meaning ‘offspring’ to the nearby main Plant homeland, which is shown as item 11 in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Some selected medieval records for Plant:
For a fuller list, see http://www.plant-fhg.org.uk/origins.html#13c

1. 1139-1798 Seat of the noble Planta family in the Upper Engadine
2. 1202 Lands at Chinon and Loudun of Emeric de la Planta alias de Plant’
3. 1262 First known evidence of the name in England; spelled Plaunte
4. 1273 Three Rouen merchants called de la Plaunt and Plaunt
5. 1279 At Burgh-le-Marsh near Bolingbroke, the name Plante is indicated to have been hereditary for 3 generations
6. 1282 The name form de Plantes in Huntingdonshire
7. 1301 First evidence of the Plant name local to the subsequent main homeland of the surname
8. ca.1280-ca.1360 Records of Plonte name at Bath, explicitly hereditary by 1328
9. 1350 London priest Henry Plante of Risole: 9a is Risoul; 9b is London
10. 1379 A gardener called Plant
11. 1379 onwards Several records of the name Plonte, sometimes Plont, in the subsequent main homeland of the Plant surname
Figure 2 shows the distribution of the Plant surname in the 1881 census and, also, its green circles indicate the number of Plant households in available Hearth Tax returns (1662-89) for each hundred around an evident homeland. This and baptism and other records locate this homeland at the northernmost tip of Staffordshire, spreading to the north into Macclesfield hundred of east Cheshire. Here, there is evidence for Welsh culture. For example, there is Luds Church, a rock cleft, which is reputedly the Green Chapel of the Green Knight of the late fourteenth century epic poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The Green Knight embodies Celtic traditions, such as beheading contests.

There were several Plants in this homeland by the late fourteenth century. For example, in 1379, John and Richard Plant were sued for trespassing with herds of cows at Quarnford, not far from Dieulacres Abbey near Leek. In 1380, the Abbot was arrested following his use of armed men ‘to do all the mischief they can to the people in the county of Stafford and that they had lain wait for them, assaulted, maimed, and killed some and driven others from place to place’. In 1381, Thomas Plonte surrendered himself at Stafford to the complaint by the widow of John de Warton that he had abetted other Leek men in beheading her husband, though he was released on finding security for good behaviour. Nearby, in 1383-4, Ranulph Plont was paying rent for a parcel of land, formerly belonging to John Walshe (evidently a Welshman), at Rainow in Macclesfield manor. His son John Plont senior had sons William Plont and John Plont junior - it may have been the latter who appears as John Plant junior in a 1445 list of 98 Knights, Gentlemen and Freeholders in Macclesfield hundred.

From this main homeland, the DNA evidence indicates that the main English Plant family grew to an unusual extent. An initial result, from my collaborator’s computer simulation, is that three or four generations of early polygyny, throughout a single family, can explain the 6615 Plants in England and Wales by 1881. However, this would give around a thousand Plants by 1670, whereas my searches of Hearth Tax records have found only 51 taxed households in their main homeland. Either the early polygyny model for the simulation needs amending or some data for the Plants is missing. The latter possibility cannot be ruled out since their homeland is in a remote region, at the southern extremities of the Pennines. In SDFH, Redmonds suggests that large families, such as Sykes and Dyson, had single origins in remote Pennine valleys in West Yorkshire though, if true, the reason for their unusual growth remains unclear.

So where does this leave the meaning of Plant? Certainly, it is not as simple as all early Plants were gardeners. There are traces of early ‘de la …’ forms of the name (items 2, 4, and 6 in Figure 1) and an indication of migration to England from the Alps (items 1 and 9). One view is that the name could initially have meant from *la Planta* region of the Alps before it morphed, or arose independently, for a gardener near Hull and to mean clan or children near Wales. This remains controversial; but, at least, progress has been made beyond the doubtful claim in M.A. Lower’s 1860 Surname Dictionary that Plant was a corruption of Plantagenet (item 2 is in the Plantagenet homeland). The persistent ‘gardener’ meaning from P.H. Reaney’s 1958 Surname Dictionary has merit, in one instance (item 10). However, ignoring the ‘offspring’ meaning seems remiss, since names of relation (e.g. Child) vie equally with occupational ones in Staffordshire, unlike Yorkshire which has no special claim, with its by-name, to underlie any of the hereditary manifestations of the name (items 1, 5, 8 and 11) including that in the main Plant homeland.