



Charles Darwin at Down House

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Down House, Darwin's home in the village of Downe, Kent, just a 30 minute train ride from central London.

Much of Charles Darwin's life after his return from the Beagle voyage was spent at Down House in Kent. He moved here in September 1842 and died in one of the bedrooms on 19th April 1882.

The Big Picture on pages 10-12 shows Darwin's study roughly as it would have looked during his lifetime. A key to the contents of his study appears on page 13. Here you can read about his life at Down.

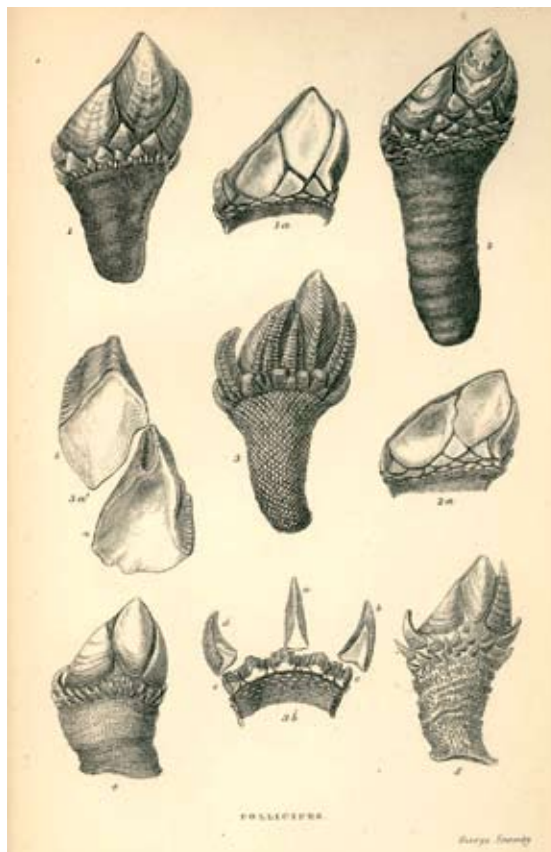
A day in the life of Charles Darwin at Down House

Most of Darwin's time at Down was spent in 'the Old Study' or out strolling along the Sandwalk. It is remarkable that such an important idea as Darwin's Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection should have been formulated and refined in this study, and largely as a family enterprise. Overleaf you can find a panorama of the Old Study as it has been recreated by English Heritage today. In the key some objects are highlighted and we will use the photograph, the key and some other images to take us through a typical Darwin day.

Charles was an early riser, being outside at sunrise for a short walk. At 7.45 he would breakfast and then go into the study to work until 9.30.

This work might involve writing books or papers or dealing with specimens. For these activities he would use a quill pen **8**, and, if parceling up specimens, maybe the string on the spool his son Horace had made him **11**. During the years 1846-

1854 he would almost certainly work on barnacle dissection during this time, using the instruments shown **10**. This work led, in the years 1851-1854, to the publication of a major work on the barnacles (or cirripedes) of the world (see CATALYST vol 18 issue 3, 2008).



Darwin's study of barnacles included detailed observations of the characteristics which distinguished different species.

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Charles Darwin's study at Down House served as his laboratory and writing room - see key on page 13. Photo: Gary Skinner

Darwin's study - Key



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- 1 Map of Caribbean, annotated by Darwin
- 2 Partition hiding Darwin's privy with bowls, towels and water
- 3 Dog basket
- 4 Darwin's walking stick
- 5 Joseph Hooker, botanist
- 6 Charles Lyell, geologist
- 7 Josiah Wedgwood, pottery manufacturer, maternal grandfather
- 8 Quill pen
- 9 Microscope
- 10 Dissecting instruments
- 11 Spool for string made by son Horace Darwin
- 12 Pembroke table
- 13 Darwin's wheeled chair
- 14 Correspondence
- 15 Darwin's microscope stool
- 16 Pill boxes for collecting insects
- 17 Preserved specimens in spirit
- 18 Erasmus Darwin, paternal grandfather

At 9.30 or so, he would go into the drawing room, where he would read letters, or listen to his wife, Emma, reading him a novel. More research followed until 12. This might involve more dissection of specimens which he had been sent from all over the world preserved in spirit 17.

During this time, and because of his lifelong illnesses, he found it convenient to be able to tend to his daily needs in the study. For this purpose he installed a 'privy' with a commode (portable toilet) and hand washing facilities, hidden behind a screen 2.

If he was reading or writing letters he would probably sit in his chair 13. This was specially made for him, with wheels so he could move about without having to stand. He might do this to get to the spittoon or to see who was at the door if he heard the bell ring - he had a mirror positioned so he could do this from the chair. He wrote *The Origin of Species* in this chair, with a board laid across the arms to hold the papers.

For microscope work he would sit on the low stool 15, with the microscope 9 on the window ledge. This stool was also fitted with wheels and Darwin's children used to ride around the dining room on it using one of his walking sticks 4 to push themselves along.



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Darwin's microscope

At 12.00 Charles would embark on something which he had made a tradition, and which was no doubt very important in allowing him thinking time. Whatever the weather, he would embark on a stroll along the Sandwalk, his 'thinking path', always taking his white terrier Polly 3. On his way he would normally check up on his plants in the greenhouses he had had specially built. He was most interested in orchids and plants that eat insects (carnivorous plants), on which he wrote books in 1862 and 1875 respectively.

At 1 pm he would return to the house and have lunch and read the papers until 2pm. From 2 until 3 he would sit in the chair by the fireplace writing letters 14. Darwin was an inveterate letter writer and we know of over 15 000 which still exist!

Darwin spent most of his life struggling with illnesses, some of which no doubt arose from tropical conditions he encountered on the Beagle voyage 1. By 3pm he would often be very tired



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The Sandwalk at Down House, designed for thinking.

and would now rest in the bedroom, with his wife Emma reading him more of the novel.

On some days, Darwin would have guests visiting, socially or maybe for professional discussions. Frequent visitors included Joseph Hooker 5, the botanist and Darwin supporter, and Charles Lyell 6, from whose writings Darwin learnt much in his early years.

At 4 pm Charles would emerge from the bedroom and go for another think on an afternoon stroll, returning by 5 for more research on his current project.

This would be followed by further rest and more of the novel, a light dinner and some games of backgammon with his daughter Emma. He kept the scores of all these games in a notebook for many years. At 9 he would finish off his day with some reading of a scientific text, listening to his daughter Emma play the piano and bed at 10.

As well as the undoubted quality of Darwin's mind, this routine, with the convenience of his study, garden, greenhouse and Sandwalk, together with his love of correspondence with scientists all over the world, put Charles Darwin in a unique position to formulate what is one of the most important ideas in the history of science.



This engraving shows Darwin's study as it was shortly after his death.

Gary Skinner is biology editor of CATALYST

Look here!

Visiting Down House and virtual tours of its rooms:
www.english-heritage.org.uk/Darwin2009/