

DOWN HOUSE

Reported by Pat Hooper

2009 is the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Darwin, a man born into a privileged wealthy family, having no financial problems throughout his life but in the beginning having no real idea of where his vocation lay. He started school at Shrewsbury but was not happy with the classical education preferring to investigate the insects, plants and animals in the surrounding Shropshire countryside. His father who was a physician then sent him to study medicine at Edinburgh, and, when that did not appeal, sent him to Cambridge to prepare for a career in the Church. That was not right for him either.

Nothing seemed to satisfy him but he continued to take a great interest in the natural world about him and attended lectures on plant biology at the university. So when the opportunity arose for him to join HMS Beagle as a natural history observer alongside Captain Robert Fitzroy he readily agreed. At the age of twenty-two he had at last found his niche and his role in life for the next sixty years. For forty of those years he lived almost exclusively at Down House in Kent. This is where he worked on his theory of evolution carrying out his experiments with plants and animals to test his ideas.

This was the house our Dover Society group had come to see and to help us understand how his dedication and work in this place caused such a mind changing revolution in the way we all think about life on earth today. Only two hundred years ago people had little idea of the age of the earth and most still held a religious



belief that everything had been created at one time in its existing form. There had been other thinkers who were questioning these beliefs but it required a genius to gather the information and bring all the observations together to prove his theory of life evolving over millions of years; 'the survival of the fittest'.

On the arrival at Down House we were directed up to the first floor rooms, which would have been bedrooms in Darwin's time. Here displays showed his early life and his family tree indicated how both he and his wife were grandchildren of Josiah Wedgwood of pottery fame. He married his cousin Emma after returning from his worldwide journeys aboard the 'Beagle'. He had made a list of what he would look for in a wife and Emma was the perfect answer, and proved to remain so all of their days together.

After two years living in London they bought Down House in 1842 and moved in with their two children. He liked the idea of the property being quiet and away from the noise and bustle of London and yet close enough for access to the city when required. Over the years he went on to make improvements in the building adding

extra rooms and altering accommodation to suit their growing family. They had ten children but three died in childhood and he was devastated at the death of his oldest and most loved daughter, Annie, at the age of ten. He had entered wholeheartedly into family life involving his children in many of his investigations and ongoing experiments on plants and animals in his house and grounds. He kept dozens of pigeons of all shapes and kinds so that he could observe how Man had carried out his own form of evolution by cross breeding the birds over a period of time.

Displays in other first floor rooms illustrated Darwin's life as a young man. A reconstruction of his overcrowded cabin aboard the 'Beagle' brought to life its cramped conditions where he had to carry out his research and work on specimens that he was collecting, recording, preserving and sending back to England. During the five years that they circumnavigated the world Darwin would go ashore sometimes for many weeks at a time to make his observations, writing copious notes and making sketches in a series of small pocket books. Many of these were on display in this part of the house.

On arrival back in England in 1836 Darwin started to meet with members of the scientific world and he began to acquire a considerable reputation not only for his authoritative understanding of the living world but also for his geological knowledge and his observations and thoughts about the fossils found in the rocks. At the time some people believed that the Creator had put these interesting shaped objects there for decoration.

The ground floor rooms in the house



where the Darwins lived a normal family life have been retained in much of their original form with some actual furniture and fabrics and wall coverings accurately reproduced. Darwin had added a fine dining room for his large family and their many visiting relations and friends. The pleasant sitting room contains Emma's grand piano and comfortable chairs some of which had been specially adapted by Darwin to accommodate his large stature. He was over six feet tall. In his study, now faithfully reconstructed, can be seen all the desks, chairs, tables and equipment necessary for observing, measuring, weighing and writing up his findings. Many of these items are originals used by Darwin. Although Down House was finally given up by the family at the turn of the century some twenty-five years after Darwin's death, many pieces of furniture were kept elsewhere by family members and were returned to the house when it opened to the public in 1998. In this bicentenary year even more has been done to bring the whole house and grounds to life and present it as it would have appeared in Darwin's time.

Going out into the garden viewed so pleasantly from the living rooms it was good to see that the flowerbeds at the side of the lawn have plants which Emma

Darwin would have recognised and would herself have chosen. Darwin's work was not all done sitting in his study. The garden and grounds were of great importance. He spent time thinking, walking and working in his eighteen-acre estate. He had constructed some extensive greenhouses where he could carry out his biological experiments. These structures still exist and have been stocked with plants similar to those he would have been studying. Leading away from the walled kitchen garden he laid out the Sand Walk known to the family as his 'thinking path'. This half mile round trip allowed him to walk with his dog, sometimes twice in a day, and think about what he was learning from all his observations. These parts of the garden are still there to be experienced by the present day visitor. It is possible by wandering down the Sand Path to go back a century and half and imagine Darwin walking there and pondering on the huge reaction that his discoveries were going to make, not only on the scientific community but in the minds of ordinary



The Thinking Path

people who still believed in what the Bible told them about a Creator. Emma was sorely at odds with his new beliefs and he was concerned that it upset her. For these reasons he delayed publishing his findings knowing it would cause so much opposition and disbelief. However, he was forced to go into print in 1859 after much hesitation when in the year previous a young naturalist, Alfred Russell Wallace, wrote to him to say that he had come to same conclusions as Darwin about natural selection. This spurred Darwin into taking action to get his work published. He could not allow over nearly thirty years of his painstaking research to be overtaken, unrecognised and unrewarded.

Visiting Down House made it more possible to get a little closer to the man we have heard so much about in this his centenary year. He appeared to be a very gentle man who lived with his family always around him. He was concerned greatly for the welfare of other people, was against slavery when it was not popular to be so and wished not to harm animals even when he had to use them for his studies. He was a man dedicated to his scientific discoveries which have affected profoundly the way we think about life on earth. He laid the foundations for the preservation of the natural world which is so much a part of our environmental concern today.

After we left Down House we had a pleasant drive through the Kentish lanes to Tunbridge Wells where we sat in the sunshine at the Pantiles having afternoon tea and in some cases a welcome glass of Kentish beer. Some of us discovered a real treasure trove of a shop filled from top to bottom with every bit of kitchen equipment you could think of. Wonderful if this is what fires your imagination! Quite a few of us got lost in there!