

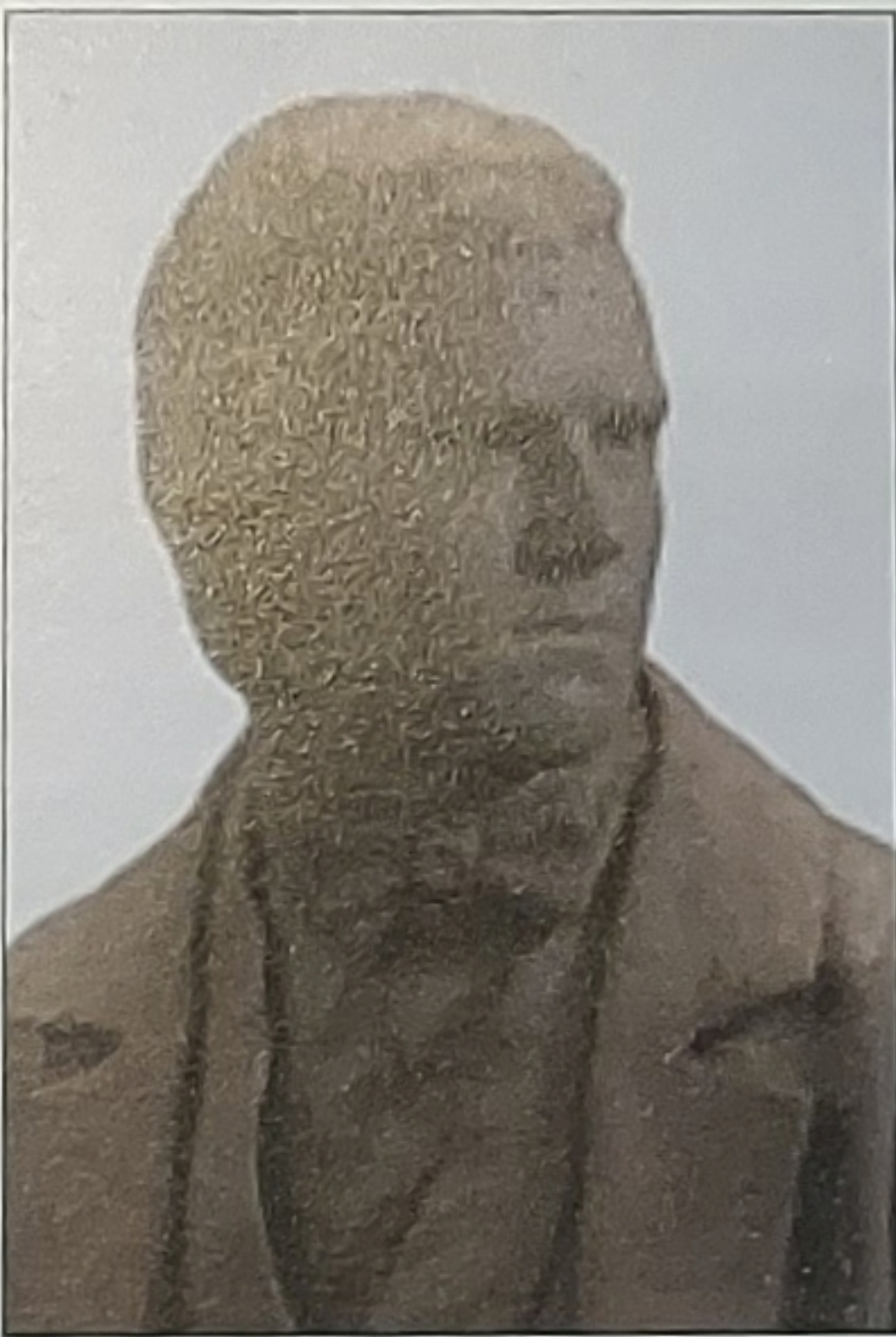
Darwin

2009

Christ's College

Charles Darwin's College Rooms

"... my most snug and comfortable rooms."

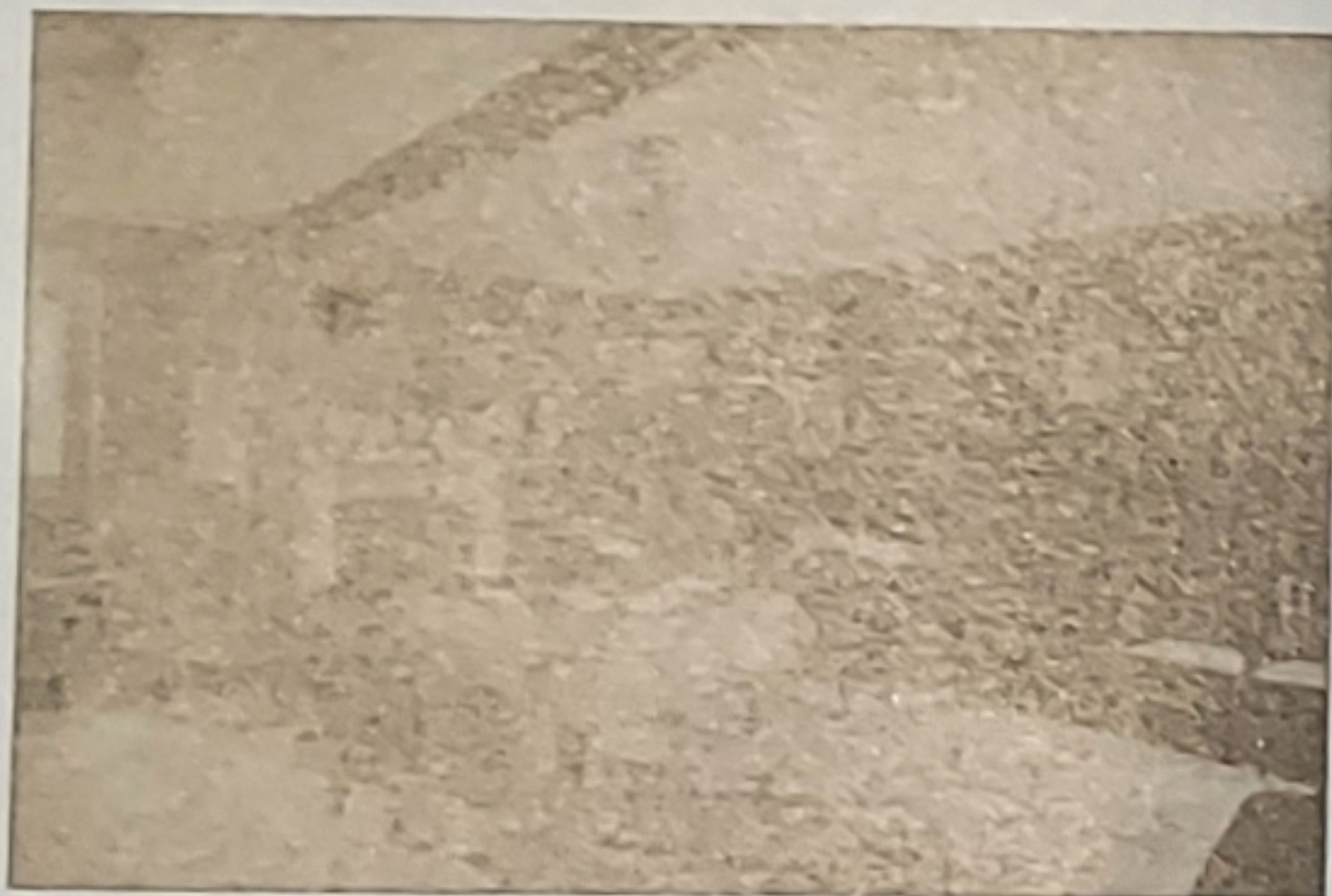


Charles Robert DARWIN
(1831 – 22 year old student)

Sculptor: Anthony Smith

Original is in the Darwin Sculpture Garden
Christ's College

Charles Darwin occupied rooms in the First Court at Christ's College from November 1828 to June 1831. They are in a building constructed in the early Sixteenth Century. This year, they are open to the public for the first time since 1909.



Darwin's sitting room during the 1909 celebrations

In the early nineteenth century, the wealth and status of each student was evident in the rooms they took and their contents. As Darwin was a 'Pensioner' (a student of private means) he took well-appointed rooms at the front of College. His rooms have been re-instated, as accurately as possible. This has meant having the paint analysed, undertaking research into historic fabric found in the room, looking at Darwin's correspondence and accounts for the period in order to

draw up a list of contents, and researching student rooms and daily life in the 1820s.

When it came to domestic matters, a 'bedder' or housekeeper, and a male servant known as a 'gyp', or valet, were employed directly by the student. This ensured that the rooms were kept in good order, and the young men had their needs catered for and could therefore concentrate on their studies.

Students provided the furniture, soft furnishings, crockery, cutlery and household linens in their rooms. Often they were purchased from the out-going tenant for a percentage of their original cost. They took breakfast in their rooms, boiling the kettle and making toast on the fire.



"Imposition" by William Makepeace Thackeray

PAINTED OR 'BARE' PANELS?

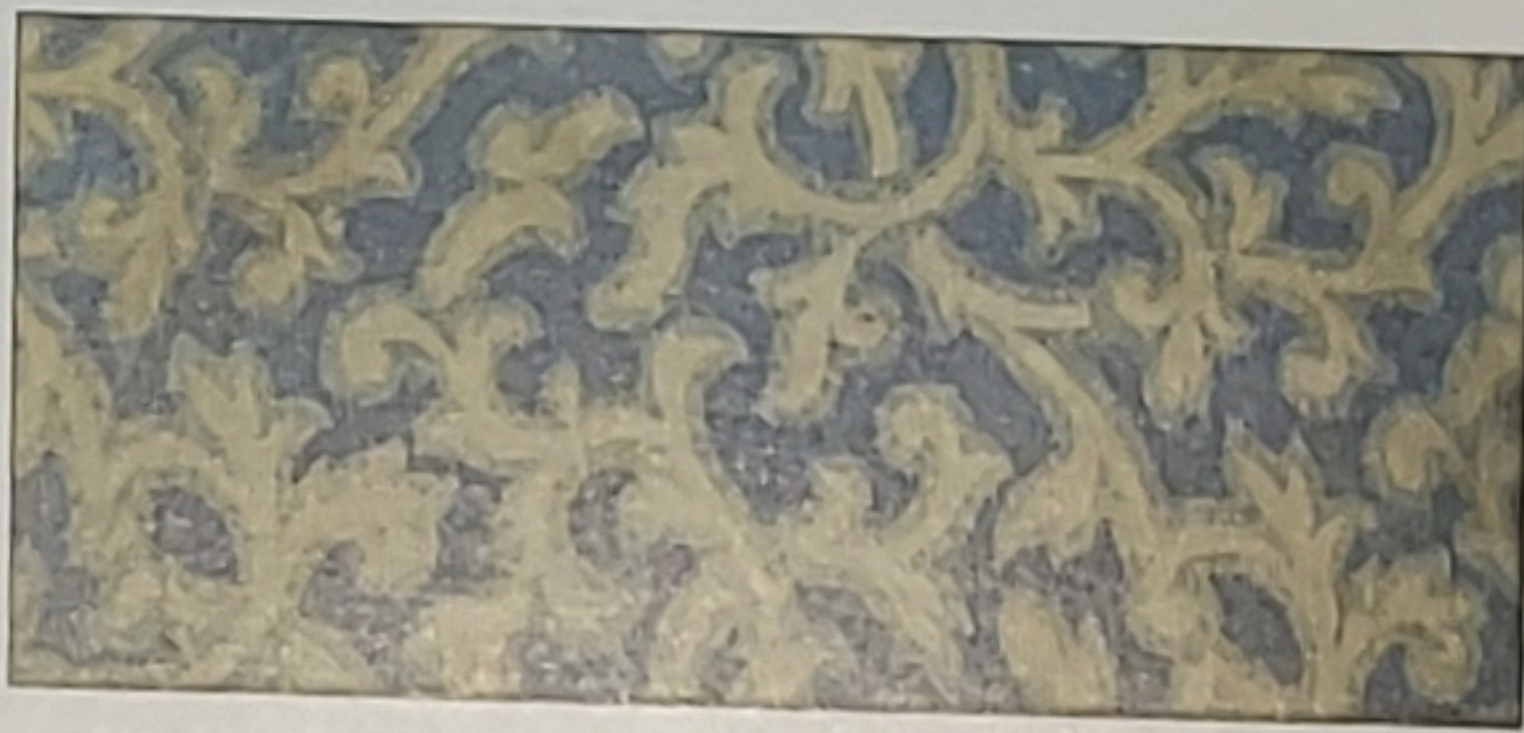
Paint analysis in the room dictated the choices of colours for the restoration. In the 1820s the oak panelling would have been painted a light colour, and the carved frieze picked out with gilded (gold) and red elements. The small star marks in the wood are a technique used to ensure gilded decoration sparkled under candlelight. The panelling shown in the 1909 photograph (far left) is not bare wood, but painted with a dark brown varnish.



Paint layers from the window shutters

Situated between the windows in the sitting room is a Wedgwood medallion donated by George Darwin in 1885 to commemorate his father's time at Christ's.

There are two window seats in the sitting room with horsehair cushions that date to the early 19thC. The printed cotton in a foliage-based design (top of next page) is stylistically correct for the period of 1828–1831. This historic fabric was reproduced for the curtains and drapery.



Historic window seat fabric found in room

The carpet was ordered to a pattern that was in production in 1828. It is made in 27inch strips and then stitched to order, with a matching border finishing the design. A looped wool pile is in keeping with the references of student rooms of the period, and the colours were taken from the scheme of the window seat cushions. Looking at Darwin's College accounts, it is very likely he had a new and costly carpet in the rooms.



Student room, 1824. "Quite Unexpected"

The picture (below left) clearly shows the style of carpet and furniture common in rooms at the time. Meals not taken in Hall were eaten at a small table spread with a white linen cloth in front of the fire. The man entering the room is a proctor, disturbing the young couple.

The room would have been lit by oil lamps and candles, the lamps would have burnt colza oil, now known as rapeseed oil, and the candles would have been made of wax or tallow. Gas lamps were not in use in the colleges until later in the century.

Darwin is known to have had the following items in his rooms:

- Looking Glass
- Candlestick
- Double-Barrelled percussion gun
- Shot flask
- Insect sweeping net
- Cary-Gould Microscope
- A Beetle collection
- Beetle Cabinet (lent by Dr Milo Keynes)
- Two easy chairs
- A table that could seat 8 for dinner
- Furniture containing drawers
- Cap and gown .
- A snuff box or jar
- Crockery and cutlery
- Playing cards
- Quill, inkwell and other writing equipment
- Bird skins
- Sappho, his dog
- Blowpipe (used for rock identification)