

# Darwin

2009

Christ's College

## Charles Darwin: brief notes

*"Upon the whole, the three years  
I spent at Cambridge were the  
most joyful of my happy life."*



Portrait of Darwin (aged 31\*)  
by George Richmond  
Courtesy: English Heritage

\*See the new sculpture of Darwin aged 22 in the  
*Charles Darwin Sculpture Garden*





Family home: 'The Mount', Shrewsbury

### EARLY LIFE AND EDINBURGH

Charles Darwin was born at 'The Mount', Shrewsbury, on 12 February 1809. His father, Robert Waring Darwin, was a physician; his mother, Susanna Wedgwood, was a daughter of the potter Josiah Wedgwood.

Charles was tutored at home before attending a day school and from 1818–1825 was sent to board at Shrewsbury School.

It was proposed that Charles should follow his father and his grandfather Erasmus by becoming a physician. In 1825 he therefore entered Edinburgh University, where his brother Erasmus Alvey Darwin was spending one year for additional medical training.



Edinburgh University

Although Darwin found teaching at Edinburgh dull, he learned a great deal about science, especially collecting and dissecting marine invertebrates, with Dr Robert Grant. After two years in Edinburgh Darwin's father realized that Charles did not want to become a physician. An alternative career as a clergyman was finally agreed upon, but he would first need to earn a B.A. degree from an English University.

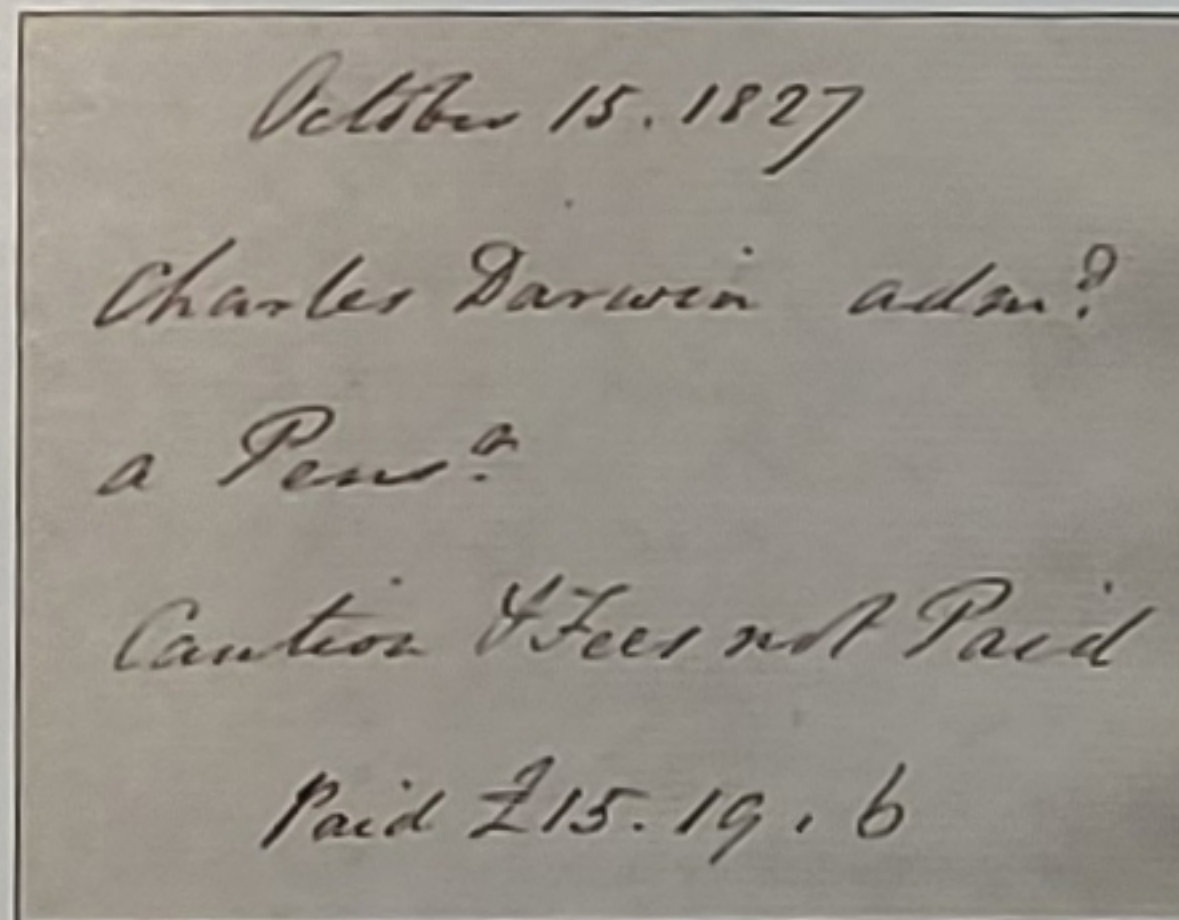


The view from Darwin's College rooms

### CHRIST'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

It was decided that Charles should go to Christ's College, Cambridge. His grandfather and his cousin Hensleigh Wedgwood had both attended St John's, which had a connection to Shrewsbury School, but Hensleigh transferred to Christ's in 1821 because of the harsh discipline at St John's. Hensleigh graduated in 1824 and was elected a Finch and Baines Fellow in 1829. It may have been Hensleigh's presence that led Darwin's brother Erasmus to join Christ's in February 1822; he graduated with a medical degree in 1828.

William Darwin Fox (1805–1880), a second cousin and lifelong friend, was also at Christ's when Charles arrived in 1828. He introduced Darwin to beetle collecting and to Professor Henslow.



Darwin's entry in a College Admissions Book

The Darwin family's relationship with Christ's College continued. Darwin's son William Erasmus came up as an undergraduate in 1858, son Francis was made a Fellow in 1888, and an Honorary Fellow in 1906, and grandson Sir Charles Darwin was the 29<sup>th</sup> Master from 1936 to 1939 (see the Portico family tree).

### STUDENT LIFE

Darwin would have been woken by his College servant at 7am, with Chapel at 7.30 followed by breakfast in his rooms at 8.00. Darwin and Fox often ate together, planning the day ahead. Breakfast was followed by two hours of College lectures in classics and mathematics.

Darwin's Tutor at Christ's was Joseph Shaw and later John Graham. Students had to keep ten terms of residence and pass two university exams to earn their degree. Tutors saw their students on a regular basis, prescribing reading, checking their progress, advising on their readiness to sit the university examinations, and exercising discipline when required.



Darwin's room 1909 (see new restoration)

An entry in William Darwin Fox's diary for 27 October 1824 records that one week was to be deducted from his term as punishment for missing his lectures that morning.

Afternoons were free, and horse-racing and hunting with hounds were popular pastimes for those who could afford them. Charles kept a horse and dog, and his autobiographical reminiscences reveal that he also enjoyed visiting the Fitzwilliam Museum and the Botanic Garden.

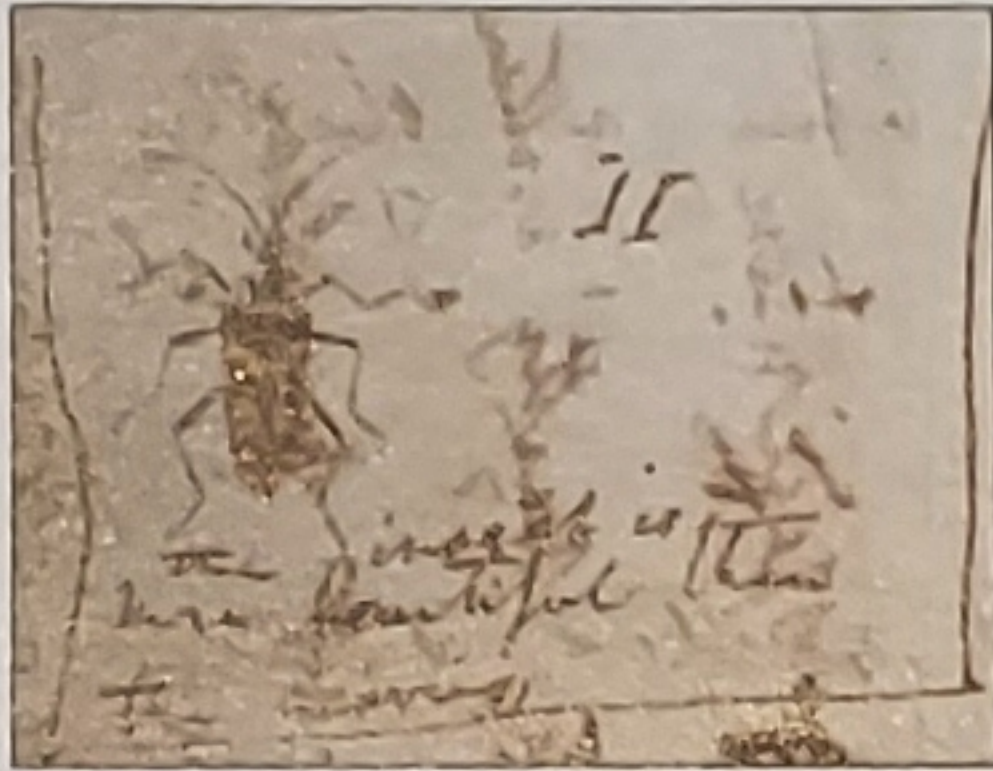
Dinner in Hall was at 4.00 pm and evening chapel at 6.00 pm. In the evenings Darwin often dined and played cards with friends.



## DARWIN-HENSLOW AND SCIENCE

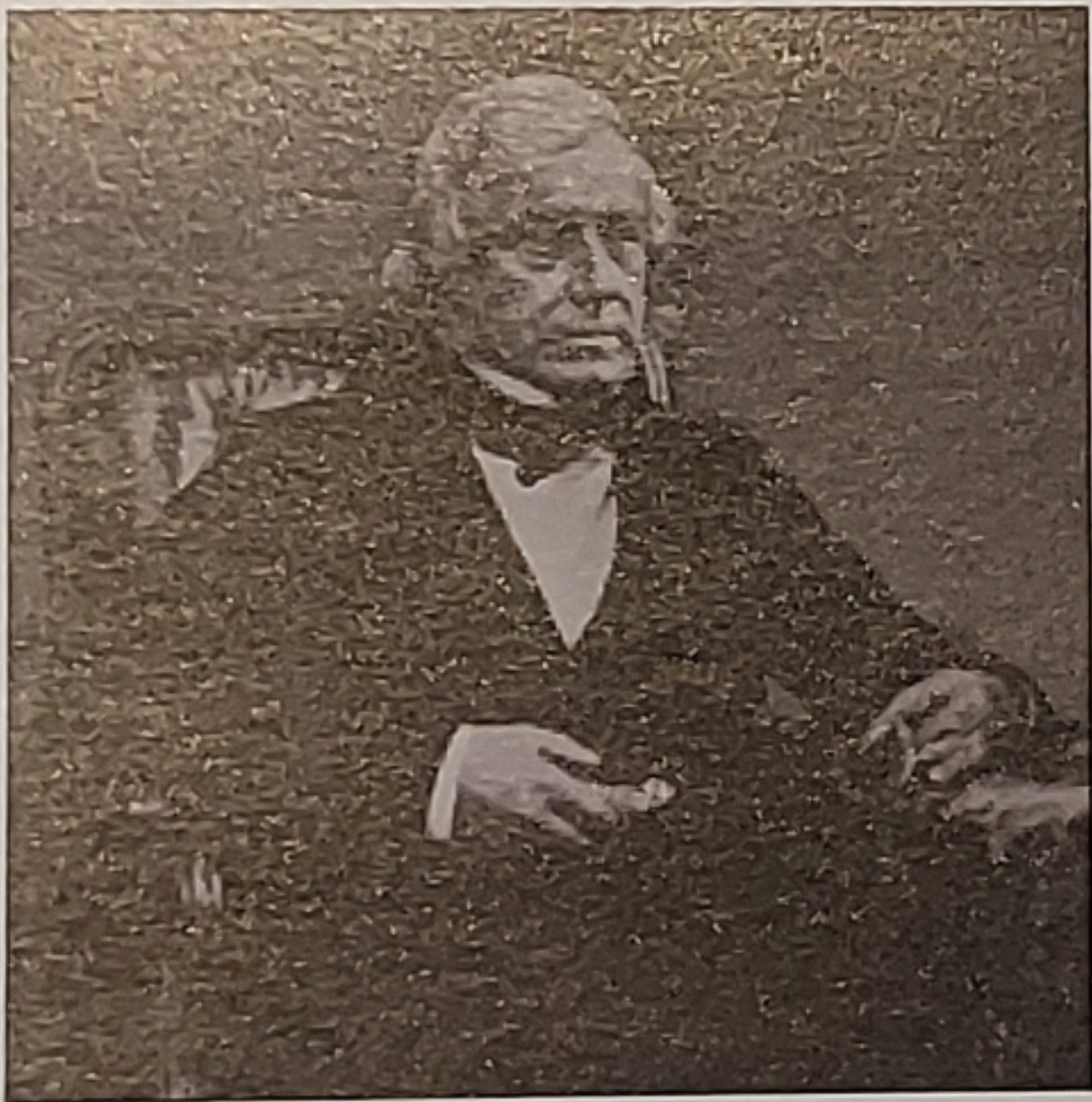
There was little formal scientific instruction offered in Cambridge in Darwin's time. Significantly, however, he did attend the botanical lectures of John Stevens Henslow (1796–1861) and some on geology by Adam Sedgwick (1785–1873).

One of Darwin's particular passions was beetle collecting and he had special cabinets built to house his collection.



A drawing of a beetle in one of Darwin's letters (see the Old Library exhibition)

Darwin passed his B.A. examination on 22 January 1831 but remained at Cambridge until the summer to complete his residence. During this period he was inspired by the scientific travel writing of Alexander von Humboldt and planned an expedition to Tenerife.



Darwin's mentor Prof. J. S. Henslow

Charles became a devoted pupil of Henslow, from whom he learned a great deal about science. The two became such good friends that Cambridge academics referred to Darwin as 'the man who walks with Henslow'.

## THE VOYAGE OF THE BEAGLE

In 1831 Henslow was asked to recommend a naturalist for the survey ship HMS *Beagle*. Rather than go himself he recommended Charles Darwin: the opportunity changed Darwin's life – and science – completely.

Between 1831 and 1836 the *Beagle*, captained by Robert FitzRoy (1805–1865), surveyed much of southern South America, the Galapagos and Pacific Islands, and briefly visited New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. Throughout the voyage Darwin investigated the geology of the lands visited as well as their fossils, and collected and examined a vast range of living things.



HMS *Beagle*

Darwin returned to Cambridge (1836–1837) to sort through his collections and, then, in London and later at Downe in Kent, published important work based on his *Beagle* experiences and began to develop his theory of evolution. His great work, *On the Origin of Species*, was published in 1859 and within two decades Darwin had convinced most of the scientific world that Evolution, by means of Natural Selection, provided the best explanation for the diversity of life on Earth.

Charles Darwin died in 1882 and is buried in Westminster Abbey.

### FURTHER READING

J. van Wyhe. *Darwin in Cambridge*. Christ's College, 2009.

### WEB RESOURCES

*Darwin Online* (<http://darwin-online.org.uk/>)

*Correspondence of Charles Darwin*  
(<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/>)