

DARWIN GOES ON-LINE

The project run by Cambridge University has digitised some 50,000 pages of text and 40,000 images of original publications — all of it searchable.

Surfers can even access downloadable audio files to use on MP3 players.

The resource is aimed at serious scholars, but can be used by anyone with an interest in Darwin and his theory on the evolution of life.

"The idea is to make these important works as accessible as possible; some people can only get at Darwin that way," said Dr John van Wyhe, the project's director.

Dr van Wyhe has spent the past four years searching the globe for copies of Darwin's own materials, and works written about the naturalist and his breakthrough ideas on natural selection.

The historian said he was inspired to build the library at www.darwin-online.org.uk when his own efforts to study Darwin while at university in Asia were frustrated.

"I wrote to lots of people all over the world to get hold of the texts for the project and I got a really positive reaction because they all liked the idea of there being one big collection."

Darwin Online features many newly transcribed or never-before published manuscripts written by the great man. These include a remarkable field notebook from his famous Beagle voyage to the Galapagos Islands, where detailed observations of the wildlife would later forge his scientific arguments. The original notebook was stolen in the 1980s and is still missing, but the text has been transcribed from a microfilm copy made two decades earlier.

"It is astonishing to see the notebook that Darwin had in his pocket as he walked around the Galapagos — the scribbled notes that he took as he clambered over the lava," said Randal Keynes, the great-great-grandson of Charles Darwin.