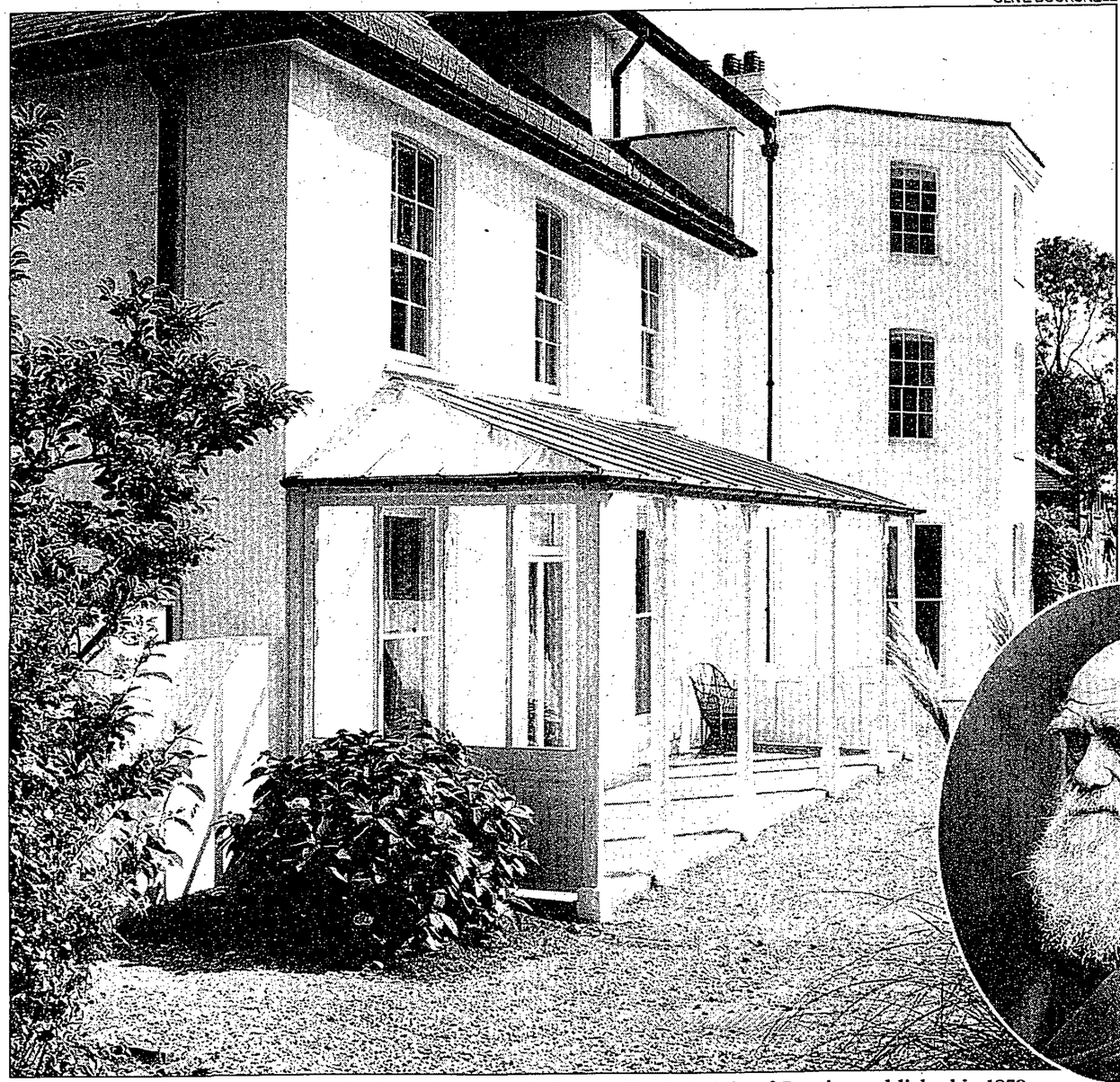
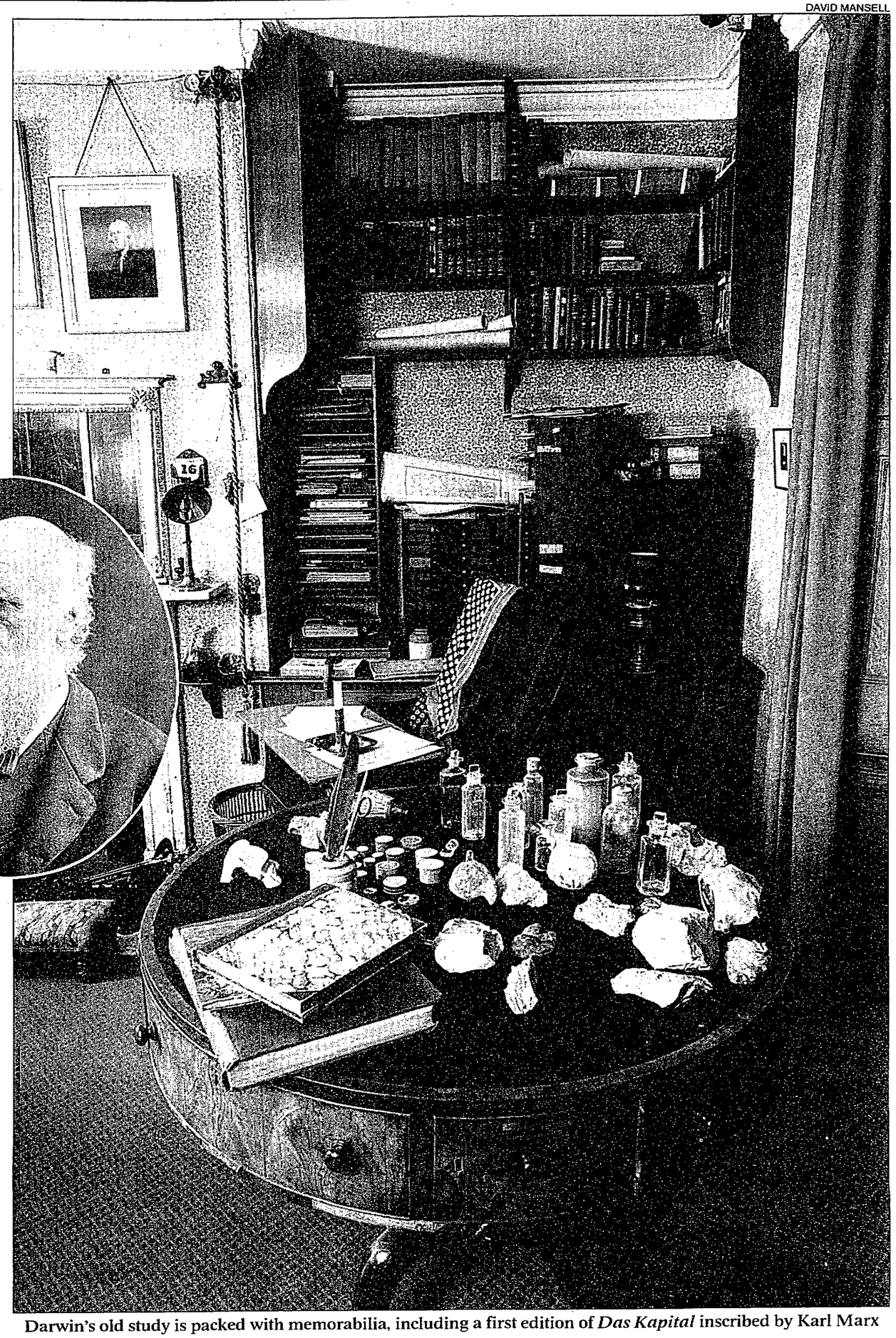
OPEN HOUSE AN ENGLISHMAN'S HOME

CLIVE BOURSNELL



Down House in Kent where Charles Darwin wrote his famous book *Origin of Species*, published in 1859

DAVID MANSELL



Darwin's old study is packed with memorabilia, including a first edition of *Das Kapital* inscribed by Karl Marx

Survival of the original naturalist

Charles Darwin's restored home hopes for 40,000 visitor a year.

Paul Barker has a look around

Walk into the study at Down House, jam-packed with furniture, books and specimen jars, and it feels as though its world-famous occupant, Charles Darwin, has just slipped into the corridor for a pinch of snuff. The great naturalist kept the snuff pots outside, to cut down on temptation.

At his study window he fixed a little mirror, so he could see visitors at the front door, and decide whether or not to be at home. "This was his nest," says Julius Bryant, Director of Collections at English Heritage, who is responsible for the makeover of the house, which re-opens on Good Friday, April 10.

In this house, Darwin wrote *The Origin of Species*, one of the most influential books of the 19th century. On its publication in 1859, it transformed how we saw the natural world. On the bookshelves I glimpsed a first edition of *Das Kapital*, inscribed to Darwin by Karl Marx, who saw him as a mentor.

Until now, Down House has been a place of pilgrimage for only the most dedicated Darwin fans, with less than 6,000 visitors a year. Having a son who was keen on botany, I was one of them.

In May 1996, English Heritage bought the house and its 36 acres of land. Restoration has cost more than £2 million, mainly from the Heritage Lottery Fund. It now has a car park, a shop, a tea room, and a plan for 40,000 visitors a year.

The core of the large white house is Georgian, which looks out over the Kentish North Downs. It is Grade I listed because of its association with Darwin, not its architecture. "This is English Heritage's first 'personality' house, where the collection is more important than the building," says Mr Bryant. His aim has been "to present it as if Darwin were still here".

Here is the chaise longue Darwin liked to lie on, listening to his wife, Emma, play Mendelssohn; and here is her piano. The house was always full of children. The Darwins had nine; you can see their names carved on a schoolroom shelf.

As the Down House restoration shows, a real house is built up from strata of many periods, and not decorated in just one era.

Darwin, born in 1802, was a surprisingly conservative revolutionary. He bought Down House in 1842, with Victoria on the throne, but his own taste stuck with plainer, Regency tables or chairs. His one concession to fashion was wallpaper, including William Morris's "Willow Trail" design.

Darwin lived at Down House for 40 years (until his death in 1892). He had wanted to create a "dynastic seat", but the house was sold after Emma's death (in 1896) and was a girls' school for several years until a philanthropic surgeon, Sir George Buckstone Browne, bought it as a national memorial in the 1920s.

The garden awaits restoration, but you can follow Darwin's invigorating Sand Walk — a quarter-mile pathway loop, beneath trees he planted.

The interior restoration has been done tastefully, with raids on the V&A vaults and Sotheby's salerooms. But I missed how the house used to be: a hugger-mugger mess of old-fashioned glass-sided wooden cases; a Soviet centenary medal, struck in 1959; his collection of pistols; his panama hat; the manuscript of the journal of his voyage in the *Beagle*.

Many of the exhibits have been moved upstairs, away from the restored rooms, into educational displays. But the outcome is less intimate, less touchingly eccentric. The *Beagle* manuscript, once in pride of place, feels rather downplayed.

Do make the pilgrimage. This is the home of one of our greatest men. But remember that the research, the writing, is what it was all about. Darwin's intellectual powder-keg had nothing to do with his choice of wallpaper.

DOWN HOUSE FACT FILE

- Down House is beside Downe village, Kent. Signposted from Farnborough on A21, or from Biggin Hill on A233.
- Trains take 30 mins from Victoria to Bromley or from Charing Cross to Orpington. Call National Rail Inquiries (0345 484950).
- Entry by pre-booked ticket only. Call 0870 6030145. Adults £5; seniors and students £3.80; children £2.50; English Heritage members free.
- The house is open from April 10, Wed-Sun 10am to 6pm (or till dusk in October). From November 1: closing 4pm. Closed December 24-26 and February.
- BBC 2's *Darwin: The Life* (8pm tonight).