

UK marks Darwin's bicentennial

Scientist is among the most influential Britons ever, but polls show many have doubts about his theories.

By Raphael G. Satter
Associated Press

LONDON — They threw him a party at the Natural History Museum, they trotted out a set of stamps in his honor, and a zoo offered free admission to anyone sporting a beard in recognition of his famous facial hair.

While more than 600 events took place worldwide Thursday, Feb. 12, to commemorate "Darwin Day" — the 200th anniversary of scientist Charles Darwin's birth — it was a particularly special occasion in his native land.

Darwin enjoys a special pride of place in Britain,

where his face adorns the 10-pound note. In a message to Parliament, British Culture Secretary Andy Burnham called the scientist "one of the most influential Britons of all time."

The British are celebrating his birthday with commemorations, lectures — and a good dose of homegrown irreverence. Bristol's zoo offered free entry to anyone sporting a beard, whether real or fake — a homage to Darwin's big bushy white whiskers.

"We had beards of all different colors, shapes and sizes," zoo spokeswoman Lucy Parkinson said. "It was a bit of fun, but also a nod to Darwin" — whose cottony beard fills the 19th century photographs of the aging scientist.

Amid all the celebrating, a note of skepticism: A poll compiled by ComRes showed that as many as 43 percent of all Britons believed in "young earth

creation" — or the idea that God created the world within the past 10,000 years. An even greater percentage thought "Intelligent Design," or the idea that evolution was not alone enough to explain the origin of some living things, was or may be true.

The poll of 2,060 adults was taken in October. No margin of error was given.

None of that took the wind out of Thursday's commemorations.

At Westminster Abbey, the final resting place for Britain's great and good, a solemn ceremony was held at Darwin's tomb with Anglican prayers sung at the simple white headstone in the massive cathedral's nave. Canon Nicholas Sagovsky was to lay flowers and foliage picked from Darwin's family home in southern England.

In Christ's College at Cambridge, where the scientist studied, the Duke

of Edinburgh unveiled a bronze statue showing a young Darwin sitting on the arm of a bench.

London's Natural History Museum said it was offering visitors "Darwin's birthday soup" — a pea-based broth based on a recipe from Darwin's wife's cook book — along with the more traditional birthday cake. The museum also was showing film and holding special exhibits in its Marine Invertebrates Gallery. Those who missed the soup can still see the exhibit: the "Darwin Show" is billed as the largest exhibition ever devoted to the naturalist. It runs until April.

Celebrations in Britain were accompanied by events around the world, but for those who missed his birthday, never fear: Darwin's complete publications and 20,000 private papers are available online at darwin-online.org.uk.



Botanist Sarah Darwin, the great great granddaughter of botanist Charles Darwin, sits by the new statue at Christ's College, in Cambridge, England, on Thursday, Feb. 12. Associated Press photo by Stefan Rousseau