

REVIEW

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The London Baedeker for the Darwin enthusiast

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Abstract

Public interest in Charles Darwin and in scientific climate of the Victorian era continues to grow. Darwin hobbyists are visiting sites around the world relevant to the life of Charles Darwin: The Galápagos Islands, Tierra del Fuego, Scotland and, of course, his native England. But as even as the number of Darwin enthusiasts continues to swell, there are few handbooks available to guide visitors through sites relevant to his life. Here I describe my experiences traveling through London in search of the sites relevant to Darwin's life. I give a general review of each historic site and describe what travelers might expect to find. I also offer some background history to each of the locations, and describe how each site relates to Darwin and his works.

Keywords: Darwin; Evolution; History of science; Landmarks

Review

In the spring of 2008 a Darwin enthusiast (and part-time Byron devotee) embarked on a seemingly impossible journey: London on a shoestring budget. I had developed a fascination with Darwin and the time to visit London was particularly ripe. The bicentennial of Darwin's birthday was approaching, and the air was abuzz with Darwin-mania. There were, I knew, numerous places to visit, but I was not quite sure where to begin or how to best budget my time. As I prepared for my trip, I found many travel guides in the hopes that one would provide a roadmap to the sites relevant to Darwin's life and works. The standard guide for London leads the urban trekker into a cat's cradle of monuments and museums. Highly specialized tourist guides are also peppered throughout travel shelves. Every hobby, it seems, has its *vade mecum*. For a Darwin enthusiast like me, however, there was no Baedeker, despite public interest in the life of Darwin continuing to rise^a. Hence, I made a list of places to visit and cobbled together a guide of my own. My sojourn to London was full of visits to interesting places relevant to the life and works of Charles Darwin, with pleasant surprises sprinkled throughout. These notes, I hope, may serve as a preliminary guide to other travelers.

I initiated my voyage through Darwin's life by visiting where his had ended. The first stop on my pilgrimage was Westminster Abbey, where Darwin was laid to rest. The Abbey, with its enormous peaked arches and elegant altar,

has all the Gothic charm of a continental European cathedral, and more than merits the hefty entrance fee and serpentine queue. Past the gilded choir and gated altar, beyond the mossy cloisters and pressed to the wall of a corridor in the hind nave, lies a marble slab marking Darwin's tomb in the Abbey. In contrast to the sandy checkers of the stone floor and the nearby ornate slab commemorating Sir John Herschel, a man who called the idea of natural selection "higgledy-piggledy" (Darwin 1859), Darwin's slab is white marble with black veins crisscrossing across it. Three lines in slim, elegant black font state Darwin's full name, the date of his birth, and the date of his death.

As a point of comparison, Newton's tomb, scarcely a few meters away, contains an elegy in Latin. Although Darwin's slab is surprisingly bereft of text, it is likely he would have preferred it that way. Toward the end of his life Darwin had foreseen a modest burial in St. Mary's churchyard in the small village of Downe, where he spent the last forty years of his life (Browne 2002). A Westminster burial was certainly not on his mind, but he did find the interment of Sir Charles Lyell, his close friend and fellow scientist, in the Abbey a tribute fitting to Lyell's career. After news of Darwin's death reached London, his friends and colleagues, especially his cousin, Sir Francis Galton, and his confidant, Thomas Huxley, made it their personal business to organize a burial proper to the naturalist's legacy (Browne 2002). This was more easily said than done. Darwin's accomplishments and acumen certainly earned him a resting place in Westminster, but his "monkey theory" was

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touchy, if no longer quite as polemical, especially among the conservatives and clergy who manned the gates to the Abbey. Huxley and Galton worked in concert to convince the necessary people that Darwin should be laid to rest in the Abbey. They took their petition to Parliament, where it was approved, and also received considerable support from the Royal Society and other scientific unions.

Despite the great hoopla that ensued upon the publishing of the *Origin*, Darwin's burial at Westminster went off with surprisingly few hitches. In fact, of all the tombs that I visited in Westminster, Darwin's met far less controversy than others. The great poet Lord Byron brewed, in his day, as much opposition and admiration as Darwin, if not more (Eisler 1999). At the time of my visit, I had recently edited a translation of Lord Byron's journals into Spanish and so, while at Westminster Abbey I paid a visit to the poet's memorial plaque. Byron, who died in Missolonghi, Greece whilst fighting and funding the Greek independence movement, probably had more friends in the Aegean than in his native England. Byron was denied burial at Westminster Abbey, but, after a few failed attempts, a plaque was finally placed in the Poets' Corner in 1969 (Lewis 1968). Surprisingly, despite the controversy Byron caused through his poetry and his way of life, he would have shared quite a bit in common with the fundamentalists who abused the *Origin of Species* when it came out. In the portion of his diaries known as "Detached Thoughts" Byron pondered the origin of life, saying "but even then this higher pre-Adamite Supposititious Creation must have had an Origin and a Creator – for a Creator is a more natural imagination than a fortuitous concourse of atoms – all things remount to a fountain – though they may flow to an Ocean" (Byron 1979).

After my visit to Westminster Abbey, I decided to travel to Kent. There, I intended to visit St. Mary's Church, where, as I mentioned above, Darwin would surely have been laid to rest, if he had not been buried at Westminster, and to visit Down House, where Darwin wrote many of his works, including *On the Origin of Species*. Getting to Downe from London involved a few bus transfers, but the bus drivers were affable and took pride in Darwin's role in their local history. The driver who dropped me off in the small village informed me that Charles was not at home and was likely out playing golf. As I entered the burial ground behind St. Mary's Church, I noticed a small plaque stating succinctly that Darwin was a resident of the town and that he was buried in Westminster. Several members of the Darwin family, however, do lie in the churchyard (Browne 2002). Among others, Charles's brother, Erasmus, known lovingly as Uncle Ras in the family, and Emma, his wife, who died fifteen years after Charles, are buried in the small cemetery. Nowadays visitors come to Downe mostly to see Darwin's house, which has been acquired by English Heritage and turned into an excellent museum. Upon entering the gravel walkway, I was pleased to find the familiar white walls

contrasted with trellised panels of the photographs from Darwin's time there. Charles' home served many purposes before becoming a museum, including two different boarding schools for children. Now it is restored to its former glory, with relics and replicas filling the ground floor in order to give the appearance that the Darwin family still lives there. As a visitor I felt as though I had already been there; the accuracy between the photographs taken during Darwin's tenure there and the recreations was uncanny. I was tickled to find Darwin's bassoon in the drawing room, with which he serenaded earthworms in order to determine whether or not they were sensitive to music. To his dismay, the worms seemed incapable of distinguishing Beethoven's 5th from Mozart's Requiem.

By far the most breathtaking room is Darwin's study, which felt as though the naturalist had just been working there and had stepped out for a stroll on the Sandwalk or had gone to check on the orchids in his greenhouse. Darwin's old chair, which he had fixed with bedframe legs so that he could, at his great height, comfortably spin and pivot, and upon which he had sat to write his treatises, remained still amongst a panoply of papers, pillboxes, tomes, and scientific paraphernalia. The sense of structured pandemonium was as Darwin would have had his workspace. Several prized editions of Darwin's works were within reach just beyond the velvet rope; a great percentage of the books in this room had been found in a secret compartment above the door inside the study in the late 1990's after having escaped the notice of descendants and caretakers for over a century. Gazing at the smooth green cloth of the valuable editions, I had to repress a desire to leaf through them. I was certainly not the first to be tempted by the marvelous objects in that room. A few years earlier I met a Canadian couple at the International Antiquarian Book Fair in Boston who had also visited Down House. The husband, a demure older gentleman, told me that he asked his wife to play sentinel, because he wanted to try on Darwin's cloak and hat. I do not think he was successful, but with his beard and dimensions, he would have likely fit the bill quite nicely. I saw the cloak and the hat, along with Darwin's walking stick, reposing on a chair in the study, as though it had just been casually placed there only moments before.

I concluded my trip to Down House by taking a stroll—in the spirit of Darwin—on the famous Sandwalk, a gravel track surrounding a woody copse. To my surprise, it was much larger than I had imagined. Because of Darwin's poor health I had always imagined a short, if lush, stroll. It took me quite a while to walk the whole track, to the point that I began to worry that I had lost my way or ended up in a neighbor's property. It is as verdant as the pictures suggest, with alternating areas of great space and high canopy and other parts more snugly fit with natural pergolas. I found various flowers, plenty of beetles, and

thriving communities in fallen trees. Although I had no scientific revelations on my stroll, I did gain a deeper understanding of how Darwin produced so many excellent works. If peace and isolation were what Darwin sought, then it is no small wonder he was so prolific in his writings at Down House, for the entire property is at once serene and also buzzing with life. For those who wish to save a few quid, the gardens make an excellent setting for a picnic, and I quietly enjoyed a sandwich under a tree, undisturbed save for the warble of birds and buzz of insects.

After my tour, I went down to the George & Dragon pub to have a coffee as I waited to flag the R8 bus, which would take me back to Orpington, where I would take a train into London. The public transportation between Downe and London remains tragically scant and complicated, especially taking into account that the town is approximately seventeen miles from the capital. The pub has changed since Darwin shared pigeon breeding tips with other enthusiasts, but it retained a sense of small town hospitality. Newspaper clippings mentioning Darwin hung on the walls, and the bartender on that day was a lively lady in her twenties. No pigeon fanciers were to be found exchanging breeding tips that day; rather, a local businessman was discussing the fortune to be had in an upcoming deal with other well-dressed locals nursing pints. It seems that Downe has become a quiet suburban town for commuting Londoners. It is sufficiently removed from city traffic that newcomers like myself get a few interested glances and retains the delightful sensation of suburban isolation that Darwin relished when he lived there.

After abandoning Downe and returning to the noisy London, I instantly realized the appeal of the village for Darwin. It was no small wonder that he eschewed the hustle and bustle of the city. My next stop was to trace the origins of Darwin's writings by visiting the John Murray publishing house, which was located for centuries at 50 Albemarle Street, in Mayfair. John Murray, the editorial company that published *On the Origin of Species*, as well as Lord Byron's poetical works, was run for over 200 years by a successive line of John Murrays (from I to VII!). The building is surrounded by an iron gate with a shiny coat of wine colored paint, the same color as the letters on the façade reading "John Murray 50". I walked into the foyer, which more resembled the entrance to a local theater than an editorial agency, with a table loaded with fliers and what resembled a ticket booth. Having quite casually walked right in, I had no expectations of getting access to the inner rooms, but I tried asking the attendant at the booth if I could have a look around. As good fortune would have it, Sir John Murray VII, descendant of the two different John Murray's who worked with Darwin and Byron, happened to be there when I stopped by. I had actually only hoped to photograph the building and, perhaps, take a peek into its

historic rooms. The opportunity to meet a descendant of the editor who worked with Darwin—an exciting opportunity for any fan—provided me with a direct link to the naturalist. In a flurry the editor came down the stairs at the end of the hall and heartily greeted me. Murray, tall even for an Englishman, had to hunch over to shake my hand, and he offered a polite smile as he beckoned me up to the library. As we climbed the carpeted stairs leading to the famed "Byron room", in which various portraits and relics are stored, the editor leaned back over the banister and asked which author was of personal interest in my visit to the editorial. I answered, "Darwin, first and foremost", to which Murray simply said, after a contemplative pause, "I have always rather liked Darwin". He then asked who else was of interest and I said "Byron", to which the editor stopped and, his demeanor instantly darkened, exclaimed, "Byron! Always Byron! I have been trying to get away from Byron my entire life!".

We then entered a carpeted study, whereupon Murray pointed to the fireplace and, in a desultory manner, stated that it was *there* that the crime had been committed. He was referring, of course, to the hasty cremation of Byron's *Memoirs* after the poet's death in 1824 (Marchand 1957). Byron's *Memoirs*, those who read them attested, contained inflammatory material about prominent figures, and were excessively honest with respect to the poet's own escapades. When Byron passed, John Murray II and others threw the document into the fire, leaving to posterity apocryphal tales of secret copies and much polemic as to its content. It had been Byron's desire that his *Memoirs* be published after his death. Darwin had feared he might die before completing *On the Origin of Species* or, perhaps, preferred his ideas be published posthumously to avoid the certain furor it would cause. In 1844, well before his full treatise was published, Charles had sketched his ideas on natural selection into an essay, and he asked Emma to publish it in the event of his death (Darwin 1844). Although there is no reason to doubt Emma's commitment to honor Charles' wish, any combination of circumstances might have prevented its release and it would have faded into obscurity, with not even the notoriety of Byron's *Memoirs*.

I continued to trace Darwin's tracks by visiting Gower Street, which is hidden behind the British Museum in Bloomsbury, to find the site where Charles and Emma Darwin first lived together after getting married in 1839. It had all the charm of a starter home: The Darwins called it 'Macaw Cottage' because of the gaudy color combinations of the drapes and wallpaper. Although the Darwin family left for Down after a few years, Charles became a father while living at Macaw Cottage and made considerable progress on his ideas concerning evolution. The site itself has undergone considerable evolution. The building endured bomb damage during the 1941 Blitz, and was later renovated to become, fittingly enough, part of the Biological

Sciences Building of the University College of London. I visited the building, which bears a plaque remembering Darwin's first home, but I would have liked to see Macaw Cottage in all of its original garish humility, to be able to imagine Darwin before he enjoyed the comforts of greater space and isolation at Downe House. While at Macaw, he was living modestly as a budding scientist, more like the manner of young scientists today, than in his later years at Down.

The next stop on my London tour was the Natural History Museum. I was particularly excited to visit the museum—admittance is free—because it is steeped in Darwinian lore. Its founder, Sir Richard Owen, was the foil to the Darwinian perspective following the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. Owen wrote one of the most hostile reviews of Darwin's work, which turned a shaky relationship between the two scientists into a permanent rift (Desmond and Moore 1991). Owen's encounters with Huxley were particularly acerbic; Owen coached the Bishop Wilberforce before the latter went into the famous Oxford debates with Huxley in 1860 (Hooker 1860). After entering the museum, I searched for the three famous statues of Huxley, Darwin, and Owen. I had envisioned the statues forming a comical triptych, its components forever frozen in an uncomfortable alliance, but I quickly learned that the statues were not placed together. It did not take me long to find the statue of Owen, which was at the top of the stairs in the Central Hall. His statue cut an impressive figure as 'fearfully great' as the dinosaurs that populated the hall^b. From his altar, Owen could see throughout his Cathedral of natural history. I searched nearby for Darwin and Huxley, and concluded they were not in the main hall. I wandered into the cafeteria and found their white marble statues flanking either ends of a buffet table^c. I was initially quite surprised at the sight of them completely unnoticed amidst screaming schoolchildren and the scent of burgers and coffee. I noticed, however, that their seated forms both faced galleries featuring exhibits providing evidence for the evolutionary theory. Thus, I decided that, despite the fact that over a century and a half had passed, nothing had changed. While Owen, the first director, manned the entrance to the museum, Darwin and Huxley were sneaking evolution in through the back door. Nowadays, the topic of evolution is even more prominent in the Natural History Museum, particularly with the new Darwin Centre, which was inaugurated in 2009 and houses both public displays and research facilities.

I finished my Darwinian voyage with a visit to the open-air markets in Notting Hill. Saturdays in this upscale neighborhood are famous for the second hand market at Portobello Road. The used goods and antiques range from the useless to the priceless. I was interested in digging up underpriced rare editions of Byron, Darwin, and other figures. The middle of Portobello Road was covered with

stands featuring various fares. Some had fruits, others jewelry, and others collectable prints or old coins. There were several stores selling books, and these were a bit more hidden from the bustling mayhem of the road. I entered various little shops, some completely dedicated to books, and others where a variety of collectables were for sale. I uncovered several gems, including a first edition of Darwin's *Variation in Plants and Animals under Domestication*, for sale at the price of two hundred and twenty-five pounds. I really suffered when I saw this book because I knew that it was not that expensive, especially not for a first edition, and that I could probably lower the price at least twenty-five pounds. But then I remembered that I did not have even the twenty-five pounds, let alone the other two hundred. The other treasures in these markets were unquestionably inaccessible for purchase, but the dealers were friendly and knowledgeable and even though I gave off the distinct air of "just browsing", humored me and let me handle rare editions of Byron and Darwin.

My trip left me with a desire to see much more. There are other sites that the Darwin enthusiast would do well to visit in London. The Linnean Society of London, for example, is where Charles Lyell and Joseph Hooker read out Darwin's and Wallace's papers in 1858. Also in London is the headquarters for the Royal Society of London, where Darwin was awarded the Royal Medal in 1853 (for his work on barnacles) and the Copley Medal in 1864 for his body of work.

Outside of London, there are also sites that the Darwin enthusiast might like to see. I would have enjoyed traveling to Christ's College in Cambridge and the University of Edinburgh, where Darwin studied theology and medicine, respectively. It would have been fascinating to take a trip to Malvern and visit the sites where Darwin underwent water cures for unknown and sundry ailments under the guise of Dr. James Gully, as much a conjurer as a healer, who had the entrepreneurship and wits of a Galvin. Luckily for Darwin, Gully's 'cures' involved water rather than electricity. Also left for the next trip are the landscapes of Staffordshire and Shrewsbury, which enchanted Darwin as a young boy and fomented his life-long fascination with the natural world. The ways to enjoy the United Kingdom through the lens of Darwin are numerous, and require going back. I hope that the preliminary sketches I have laid out here will help fellow enthusiasts through their visits to London.

Conclusions

I describe several landmarks in and near London that are relevant to the life of Darwin: the John Murray publishing house, which published Darwin's works; the Gower Street site where Charles and Emma Darwin first lived as a married couple; Westminster Abbey, where Darwin is buried; the Natural History Museum; Downe House where

Darwin lived for most of his adult life; St. Mary's Church, where members of the Darwin family are buried; the George & Dragon pub in Downe, where Darwin exchanged tips with pigeon fanciers; and the Portobello Road antiques market, where rare editions of Darwin's works can be found for sale.

Endnotes

^aAfter my visit, I did find a travel guide available through the Evolution and the Nature of Science Institute (ENSI) web portal at Indiana University, Bloomington (<http://www.iub.edu/~ensweb/dar.quest.pdf>).

^bOwen coined the term 'dinosaur' by combining the Greek terms *deinos*- ('fearfully great') and *sauros* ('lizard').

^cOn May 23, 2008, a few weeks after my visit, Darwin's statue was moved to a more prominent place at the top of the staircase in the Central Hall (Conniff 2008). During this move, Owen's statue was deposed from the main stairs and moved to the balcony. It is unlikely that Owen would have been fond of this shift in prominence.

Competing interests

The author declares she has no competing interests.

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