

Institute of Physics

LONDON AND SOUTH EASTERN BRANCH REMS SECTION Visit to Charles Darwin's Home & Garden at Down House, Downe, Orpington. Tuesday 15 June 2004

This visit has been organised by Geoff Cockett

Following his five year epic voyage on HMS Beagle when he achieved fame for his scientific discoveries in geology and natural history, Charles Darwin spent some time in London before moving to Down House. This was prompted by his wish to live in peace in the open country and because of the first signs of his own poor health. Originally a 18th century farmhouse lying on the edge of a Kent village, this became his family home, laboratory and field trial site for forty years. It was in his study that he formulated and wrote his ground breaking *On the Origin of Species*. Today it stands as a testimony to a man who shocked and subsequently revolutionised the Victorian world.

The house was sold in the 1920's and subsequently became a small Museum with a few rooms on the ground floor containing Darwin memorabilia. At one stage in the early 90's, there was a possibility that Down House and much of the contents might be sold by public auction. Randal Keynes, a great-great grandson and an authority on Charles Darwin took the initiative with his uncle, for action to preserve Down House and its grounds for the nation. As a result, English Heritage(EH), largely through grants made by the Wellcome Trust and the National Lottery Fund was able to achieve this objective. The house was shut for two years to allow extensive major repairs and redevelopment to be undertaken. The exterior, gardens and the interior decoration of the ground floor rooms now look very much as they did in the late 1870's. The upstairs rooms follow his unpromising start as a scholar, through his adventures on the Beagle including his huge original bound manuscript of his journal, and then to the controversial publication of his radical ideas. Exhibits also illustrate his extensive correspondence with fellow scientists, the meticulous recording of his experimental data and his "secret" health diary. Overall the EH refurbishment has increased the number of rooms open to visitors almost threefold.

The ground floor rooms are essentially domestic and help to bring out his way of life, evoking his taste, his interests and personality as context for the evolution of his theories. Visiting these rooms is enhanced by the personal audio tour narrated by David Attenborough with optional supplements covering the pictures, furniture etc in each room. The study was the centre of Charles's life, for writing his famous papers, meeting fellow scientists, and one of many areas for his experiments; it contains hundreds of objects connected with his work. The family gathered in the drawing room in the evening, sometimes around the Broadwood piano played by his wife Emma, or listened to her reading from popular novels or played backgammon. The dining room is set up for Charles's use as the local JP for dealing with minor local offenders with other records bringing out his social conscience. Furniture and Wedgwood china are also of interest.

http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/museum_gfx_en/MW1104.html

Outside you can walk in Darwin's footsteps, along the Sandwalk where he pondered his most difficult problems, around the gardens which after 5 years work have completed restoration in period correct plants and garden arrangements, and into his restored greenhouses of experimental plants.

Apart from the standard self guided tour available on public days, this exclusive visit includes a garden tour led by the Head Gardener, Toby Beasley and a talk by Randal Keynes. The programme is:-

10:30 - 11:00	Arrive Down House for coffee etc in Tea Room
11:00 - 11:45	Audio Tour of Family Rooms, Ground Floor.
11:45 - 12:30	Self guided tour of 1 st floor exhibition.
12:30 - 13:30	Light lunch in Tea Room
13:30 - 14:30	Charles Darwin - family man. Talk by Randal Keynes
14:30 - 15:30	Garden tour conducted by Toby Beasley,
15:30 - 16:00	Discussion etc in Tea Room , then disperse.

Down House (Downe, BR6 7JT; TQ 432 603 tele: 01 689 859 119), with ample car parking, is 0.3 mile from Downe Village, some 6 miles from J4 M25. There is an hourly London Transport bus service(146) from Bromley South station and another (R8) from Orpington station. Maps will be provided. Entry fees, Light lunch, Garden Tour and the talk by Randal Keynes will cost £14 per person; for English Heritage members producing their card on entry, the cost will be £10. Pay on the day.