

# Darwin's House a Scientific Shrine

Biology—History of Science

Readers of the *SCIENCE NEWS-LETTER* will be interested in the following extracts from an account published by the British Association for the Advancement of Science of Darwin's famous home—Down House—which is to be made a scientific shrine. George Buckston Browne, F. R. C. S., a famous English surgeon, has presented the house to the British Association, with an endowment sufficient to maintain it in perpetuity.

At present Down House serves as a private school. When the tenant's lease falls in or is acquired, the donor desires that the property be regarded as a gift to the nation and opened to visitors every day of the week between the hours of 10 and 6, without charge. He also desires that the Association should use Down House and grounds for the benefit of science. The donor has also suggested that certain of the rooms—particularly the old "study," in which the *Origin of Species* was written—should be furnished, as near as may be possible, as they were when Darwin lived in them. The donor has already taken steps to secure this end and has obtained the willing cooperation and greatest assistance from various members of the Darwin family. Indeed, without the generous cooperation of the Darwin family the transfer of ownership could not have been effected. The late Mrs. Litchfield, the third daughter of Charles Darwin, bequeathed for Down House her father's study chair and letter-weighing machine. Thanks also to the generosity of other members and friends of the Darwin family—Major Leonard Darwin, Prof. Charles G. Darwin, Mrs. Perrero, and Mrs. Berkeley Hill—together with acquisitions made by himself, Mr. Buckston Browne has already got together the nucleus of a Darwin collection for Down. He has commissioned the Hon. John Collier to paint replicas of his well-known portraits of Darwin and of Huxley to be hung at Down House; these commissions are already completed. It is hoped that the shelves of the old study may be filled with all editions of Darwin's works, and that Down House may become a repository of Darwiniana where students will have an opportunity of consulting all original documents concerning Darwin and his writings. Such an end can be attained only if the British Association succeeds in enlisting the sympathetic cooperation of all who may be the fortunate owners of articles which were in the possession of Darwin or were associated with his life.

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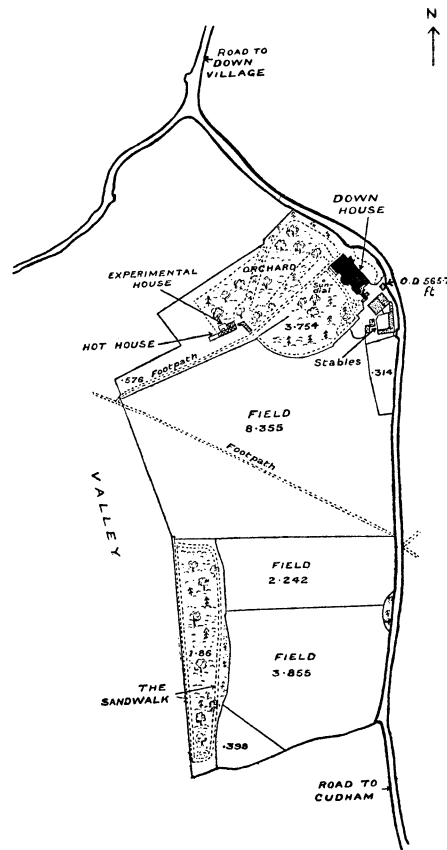


Fig. 1.—The grounds around Down House

It may not be amiss to recount some of the circumstances which led up to the appeal for the preservation of Darwin's home. Some years before his death the late Sir Arthur Shipley, Master of Christ's College, Cambridge, where Darwin was an undergraduate, wrote to a member of the British Association as follows: "It seems to me that Down House ought to be a national possession. Do you know of any means by which this can be brought about?" On the eve of the Leeds Meetings of the British Association on August 31, 1927, the Council of the Association considered this matter and empowered the then President (Sir Arthur Keith) to make a public appeal at the close of his presidential address to the assembled Association. An urgent SOS was sent out with the happy result which all now know. It was with as much surprise as satisfaction that Sir Arthur Keith learned that the man who answered the call was a Fellow of his own College. Indeed, he knew Mr. Buckston Browne as a generous benefactor to that College

and to the Harveian Society, but was unaware of his love for Darwin and for Down. It was later that he learned that Darwin's friend Huxley had long ago exerted an abiding influence on the donor of Down.

Darwin was born at Shrewsbury, February 12, 1809. Down House was purchased for him by his father, Dr. Darwin, and he took up his residence there on September 14, 1842. Darwin was then in his thirty-fourth year; three years previously he had married his cousin, Emma Wedgwood. His two eldest children, William and Anne, were born in London; the third, Mary, was born and died just after arrival at Down. Then followed in 1843 Henrietta, who became Mrs. Litchfield; in 1845 George, who became Sir George Darwin, F. R. S., and whose son, Prof. Charles Darwin, F. R. S., succeeded to the ownership of Down and is the fifth of a succession of father and son who have been elected Fellows of the Royal Society—an unique record; in 1847 Elizabeth was born; in the following year Francis, who became Sir Francis Darwin, F. R. S.—a distinguished botanist and president of the British Association. His son, Bernard Darwin, is known to all as an exponent as well as an authority on golf. Leonard followed in 1850—Major Leonard Darwin, scientist, philanthropist and the founder and still active supporter of the Eugenics Society. Then came Horace, now Sir Horace Darwin, F. R. S., happily still alive. And last number ten, Charles Waring Darwin, who died in childhood. Down was thus the home of a large and happy family, perhaps the most gifted family ever born in England. There the great naturalist died on April 19, 1882, in his seventy-fourth year. He worked continuously at Down for almost forty years.

In that period he made his first draft of the *Origin of Species* (1842), he wrote his researches on the *Zoology of the Beagle*, on *Coral Reefs*, and prepared a new edition of a *Naturalist's Voyage*. Before he settled down to work at *Barnacles*, to which he gave seven years (1847-54), he prepared his papers on *Volcanic Islands* and on the *Geology of South America*. Preparations for the *Origin of Species*, which did not receive its final form until 1858-59, went on continuously from 1842 (Turn to next page)

## Darwin's House a Scientific Shrine—Continued

onwards. Then followed his inquiries into *Fertilisations of Orchids* (1862), *Variations of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (1868), *Descent of Man* (1871), the *Expression of the Emotions* (1872), *Movements and Habits of Climbing Plants* (1875); *Insectivorous Plants* appeared in the same year; *Cross and Self Fertilisation* in 1876, and his last work of all, one which was begun soon after he settled at Down, *The Formation of the Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms*. No single home in the world can show such a record. Truly from Down Charles Darwin shook the world and gave human thought an impress which will endure for all time. Down is a priceless heirloom not only for England but for the civilized world. One of the greatest men of all time lived there.

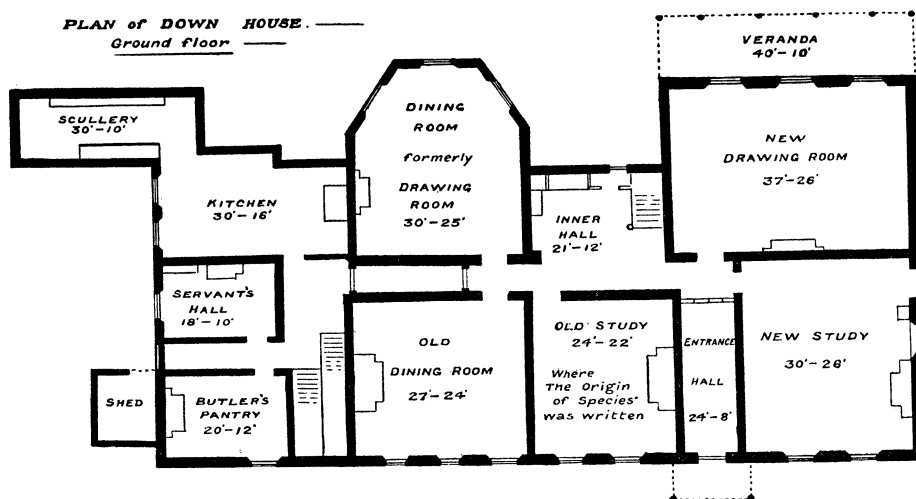
As to the character of Down House, much is to be learned from the account which Sir Francis Darwin has given in his father's biography:

"On September 14, 1842, my father left London with his family and settled at Down. In the autobiographical chapter his motives for moving into the country are briefly given. He speaks of the attendance at scientific societies and ordinary social duties as suiting his health so 'badly that we resolved to live in the country, which we both preferred and have never repented of.'

"The choice of Down was rather the result of despair than of actual preference; my father and mother were weary of house-hunting, and the attractive points about the place thus seemed to them to counterbalance its somewhat more obvious faults. It had at least one desideratum—namely, quietness. Indeed, it would have been difficult to find a more retired place so near to London. . . . It is a place where newcomers are seldom seen, and the names occurring far back in the old church registers are still known in the village.

"The house stands a quarter of a mile from the village, and is built, like so many houses of the last century, as near as possible to the road—narrow lane winding away to the Westerham high road. In 1842 it was dull and unattractive enough; a square brick building of three stories, covered with shabby whitewash and none of the shrubberies or walls that now give shelter; it was overlooked from the lane, and was open, bleak, and desolate.

"The house was made to look



neater by being covered with stucco, but the chief improvement was the building of a large bow of three stories. This bow became covered with a tangle of creepers, and pleasantly varied the south side of the house. The drawing-room, with its verandah opening into the garden, as well as the study in which my father worked during the later years of his life, were added at subsequent dates.

"Eighteen acres of land were sold with the house, of which twelve acres on the south side of the house form a pleasant field, scattered with fair-sized oaks and ashes. From this field a strip was cut off and converted into a kitchen garden, in which the experimental plot of ground was situated, and where the greenhouses were ultimately put up."

To fill in some further details of this picture of Down we may also draw upon the description given by Mrs. Litchfield, in the life of her mother, Mrs. Darwin—(*Emma Darwin*, privately printed 1904).

"For some time there had been a growing wish on the part of my parents to live in the country. Their health made London undesirable in many ways, and they both preferred the freedom and quiet of a country life. They decided to buy a country house, but out of prudence resolved upon not going beyond a moderate price, and as they also wished to be near London, there was a weary search before they found anything at all suitable. In her little diary, under July 22, 1842, I find the entry 'went to "Down,"' and this I think must have been the first sight of her future home. It was bought for them by Dr. Darwin for about £2,200, and the purchase was quickly completed,

for they moved in on September 14, 1842.

"Down was then ten miles from a station, and the whole neighborhood was intensely rural and quiet, though only sixteen miles from London Bridge."

The two accompanying plans, the data for which were obtained through the kindness of Major Leonard Darwin, will give a precise idea of the extent of the property and of the plan of Darwin's home. Fig. 1 shows the arrangement and extent of the grounds; the figures indicate the acreage of each part. Down House is seen to be situated at 565.7 feet O. D. The plantation with the sand walk around it—Darwin's "thinking path"—with the dry chalk valley beyond, are depicted; so, too, are the orchard, gardens and hot-houses. In Fig. 2 is given a plan of the ground floor of Down House, the dimensions of each room being indicated in feet. It will be seen to be a commodious house, and remains just as Darwin lived in it. He added a new wing—that which includes the "New Study and the New Drawing Room."

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London theaters of Queen Elizabeth's day were closed whenever deaths from the plague reached about thirty in a week.

A dog doubles its weight in the first eight days of life, whereas a baby takes six months to double its weight.

Heat released by the sun yearly is equal to that produced by a burning mass of coal equal to 60 of our earths.