

The Young Charles Darwin - student, naturalist and gardener

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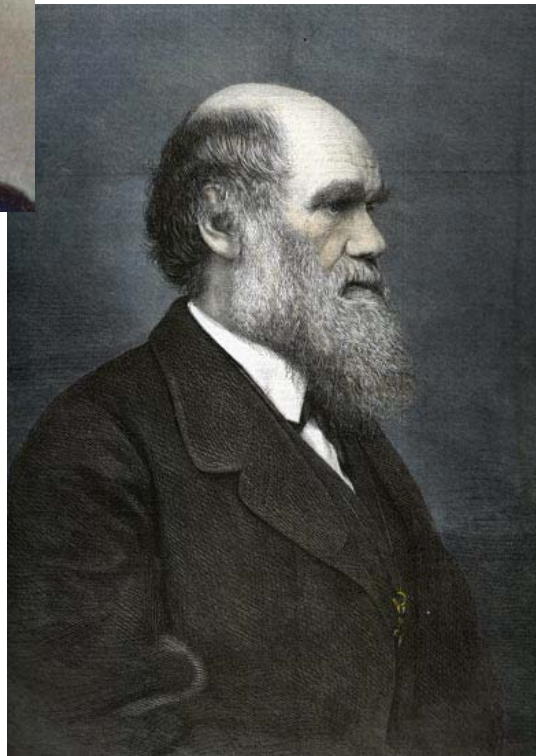
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Charles Darwin was born on 12th February 1809. It is the 200th anniversary of his birth.

It is also the 150th anniversary of the publication of his book *On the Origin of Species* in 1859.



That book was only part of his output and the synthesis of many years detailed research into plants, animals and fossils.

He wrote numerous other scientific papers and books.



However, it all started in Shrewsbury where Charles was born. Shrewsbury is in the English county of Shropshire, close to open countryside, the mountains of Wales and the coast





Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802) was father of Dr Robert Darwin and Grandfather of Charles Darwin.

Erasmus sent his son, Robert, from Lichfield to Shrewsbury in 1786 to set up practice as a doctor.

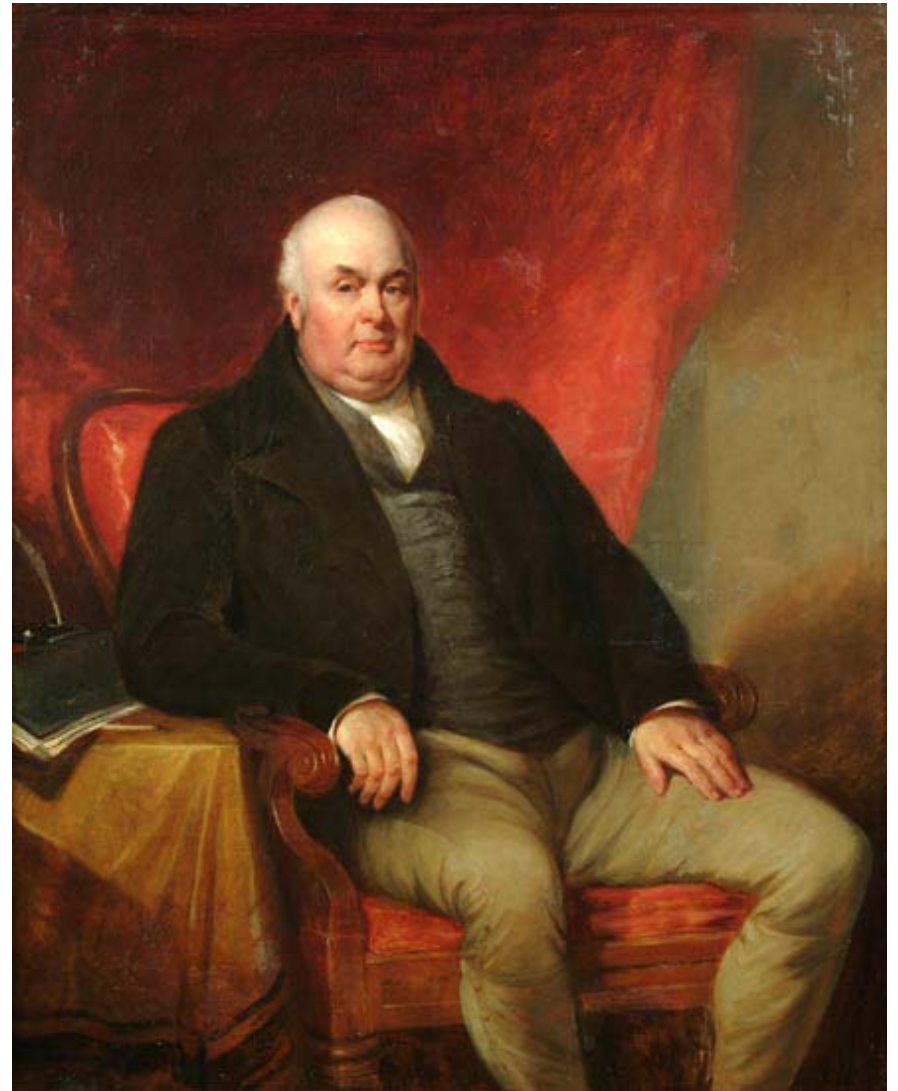
[Erasmus wrote about Evolution but his grandson Charles discovered the mechanism]



Shrewsbury was a prosperous market town in the late 18th century



The cradle of the Industrial Revolution was a few miles away in Coalbrookdale. Here it is in 1777.



Dr Robert Darwin married his cousin Susannah Wedgwood in
1796

Charles was one of 6 children:-

Marianne (1798–1858),

Caroline (1800–1888),

Susan (1803– 1866),

Erasmus (1804– 1881),

Charles (1809– 1882) and

Catherine (1810– 1866).

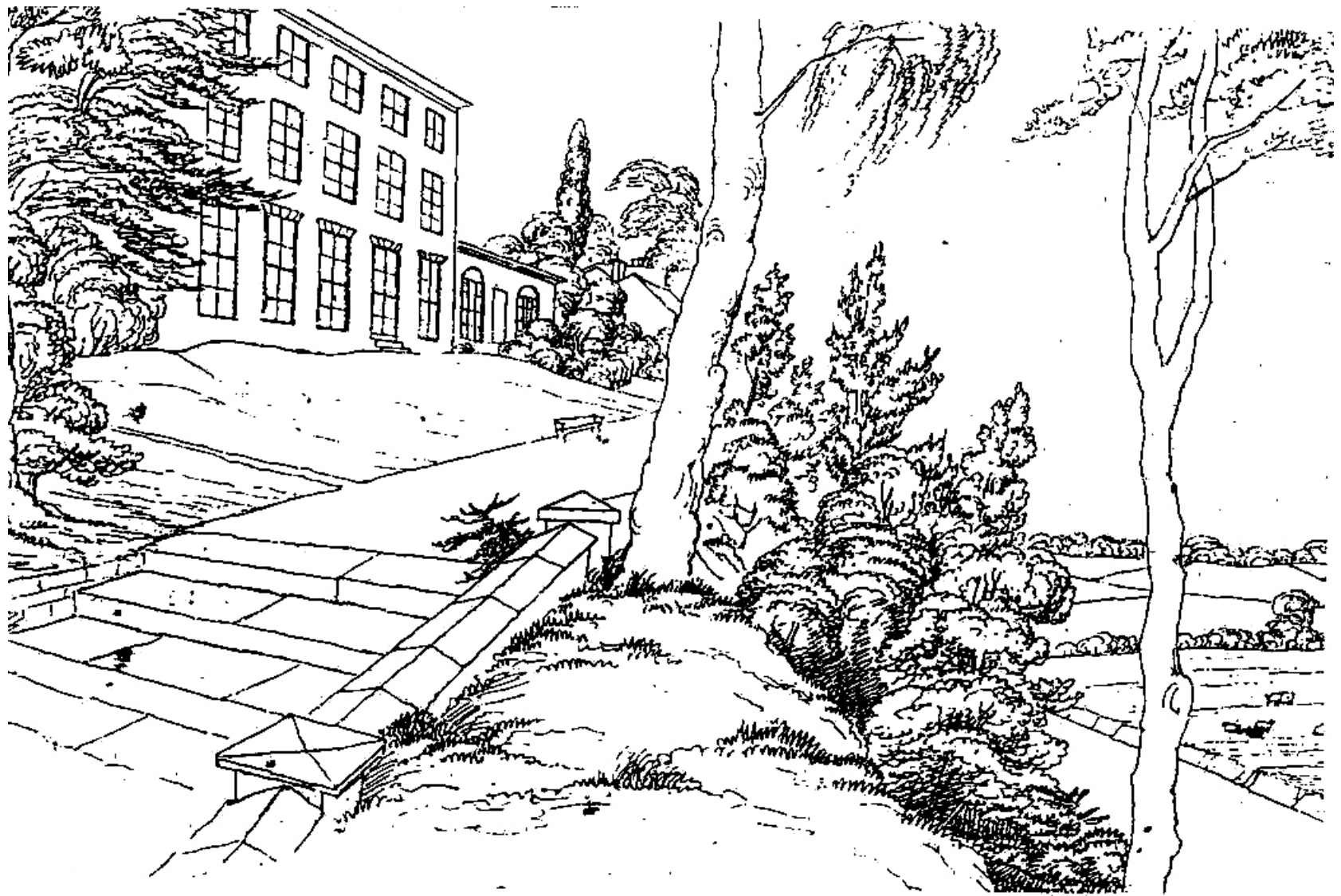
All except Marianne were born at ‘The Mount’ which was built in 1799.



Charles was born at The Mount on 12th February 1809.



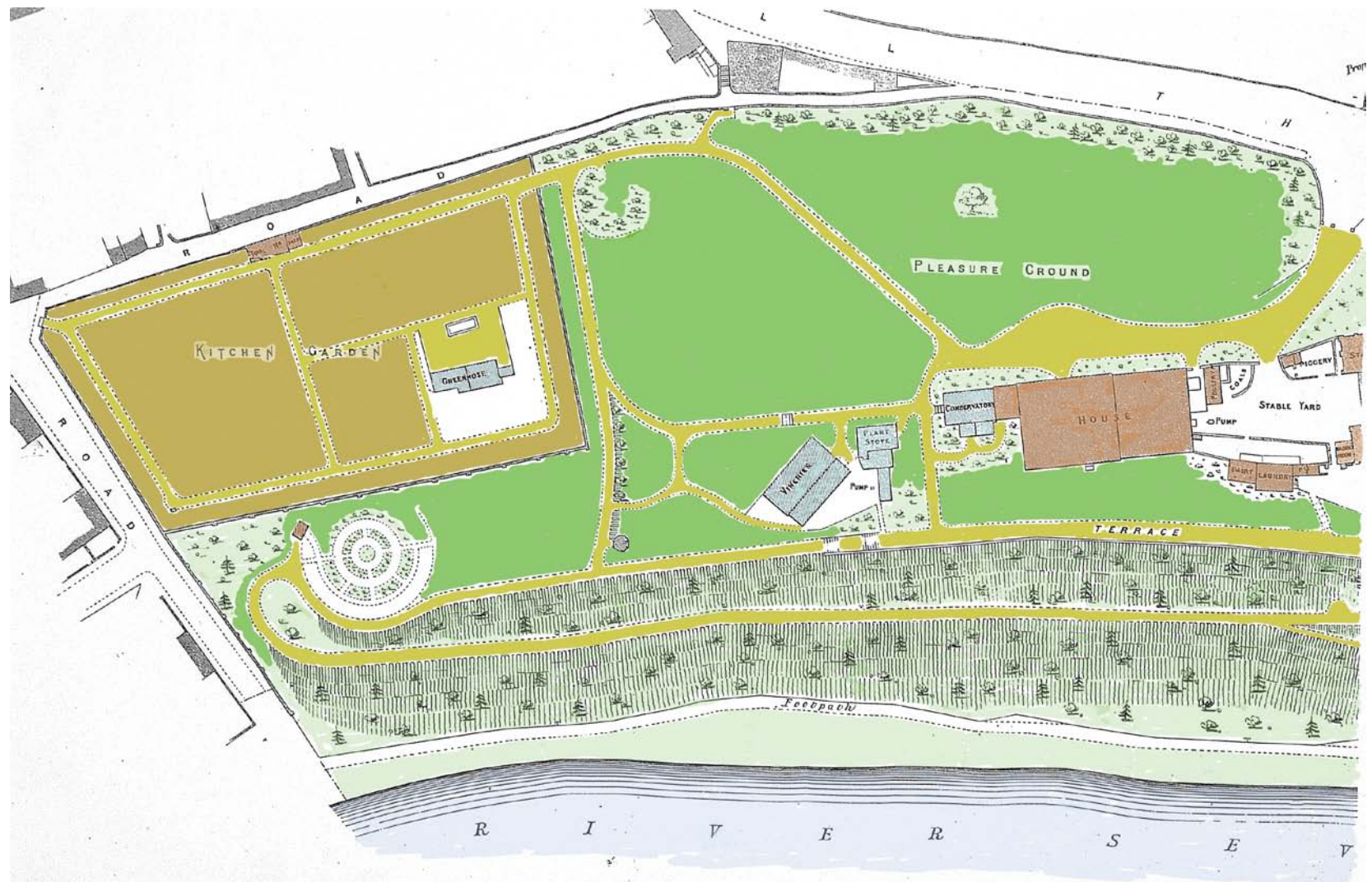
‘The Mount’, was north of the old town



As the name 'The Mount' suggests, the house was built on high ground overlooking the River Severn, This was drawn in about 1842

‘The Mount’ was a large house with about 3 hectares of garden:

*MANSION HOUSE, called "THE MOUNT",
Shrewsbury, containing Dining Room, Drawing Room,
Morning Room opening into Conservatory, Library,
Fourteen Bedrooms with suitable Dressing Rooms,
Kitchens and all usual offices, ample Cellaring, very
extensive Stabling, Coach Houses, &c., Conservatories,
Fernery, Forcing Frames, extensive walled Garden,
Pleasure Grounds, and adjoining piece of Land.*



The garden at the Mount was planted with native and exotic trees, shrubs and other plants by Robert Darwin



The surviving part of the garden still contains trees, shrubs and other plants planted by the Darwin Family including



Cucumber Tree *Magnolia acuminata*



Fruits of the 'Cucumber Tree' at The Mount



Mulberry *Morus nigra* at The Mount



Taxus baccata 'Dovastoni' at The Mount



Charles and the rest of his family were keen gardeners.

Here he is with one of his sisters, Catherine, in 1816 when he was aged 7 years.

He is holding a plant of *Lachenalia*, a tender South African plant, grown in one of the Family's greenhouses.

His mother died a year later.



It is possible that Charles had grown the *Lachenalia* himself, in the greenhouse at The Mount.

Lachenalia aloides

The Darwin Perennial Garden Diary

Robert Darwin and other members of the family maintained a perennial garden diary of which only that part which covers the period 1838-1866 has survived.

Robert Darwin, assisted by members of his family, recorded details of flowerings and fruiting in the kitchen garden, pleasure gardens and glasshouses of The Mount in the diary.

This systematic recording from an early age was useful training for Charles.

However, Charles was often rather 'naughty'.



“I sometimes stole fruit for the sake of eating it; and one of my schemes was ingenious. The kitchen garden was kept locked in the evening, and was surrounded by a high wall, but by the aid of neighbouring trees I could easily get on the coping. I then fixed a long stick into the hole at the bottom of a rather large flower-pot, and by dragging this upwards pulled off peaches and plums, which fell into the pot and the prizes were thus secured”.



Charles had been christened at St. Chad's Church (Anglican) ...



... but Charles and his mother attended the Unitarian Church



Charles attended the Rev. Case's School on Claremont Hill from 1817-1818.

The Rev. Case was Minister at the Unitarian Church.

Charles's mother died during his time at this school.



Charles did not remember very much about his Mother, Susannah but she influenced his early life in many ways.

She took him to worship in the Unitarian Church and taught him about flowers and birds.



Susannah kept doves in the garden at The Mount. They became well-known in Shrewsbury for their beauty and tameness

Charles stated later in life that he had been “*born a naturalist*” but he had certainly developed a strong interest in natural history and collecting man-made objects by the time that he was eight years old:

“By the time I went to this day-school my taste for natural history, and more especially for collecting, was well developed. I tried to make out the names of plants, and collected all sorts of things, shells, seals, franks, coins, and minerals. The passion for collecting, which leads a man to be a systematic naturalist, a virtuoso or a miser, was very strong in me, and was clearly innate, as none of my sisters or brother ever had this taste”.



These are the fields near his home where he played and studied natural history

“One little event during this year [at Rev. Case’s school] has fixed itself very firmly in my mind, and I hope that it has done so from my conscience having been afterwards sorely troubled by it; it is curious as showing that apparently I was interested at this early age in the variability of plants! I told another little boy (I believe it was Leighton, who afterwards become a well-known Lichenologist and botanist) that I could produce variously coloured Polyanthuses and Primroses by watering them with certain coloured fluids, which was of course a monstrous fable, and had never been tried by me”. [This was William Allport Leighton who later became a Founder of Shrewsbury Museum]

His older sisters Caroline and Susan looked after the young Charles after their mother's death. Caroline was kind and intelligent but expected a lot of Charles.

He later wrote that, as a child, he always wondered what she was going to blame him for next!



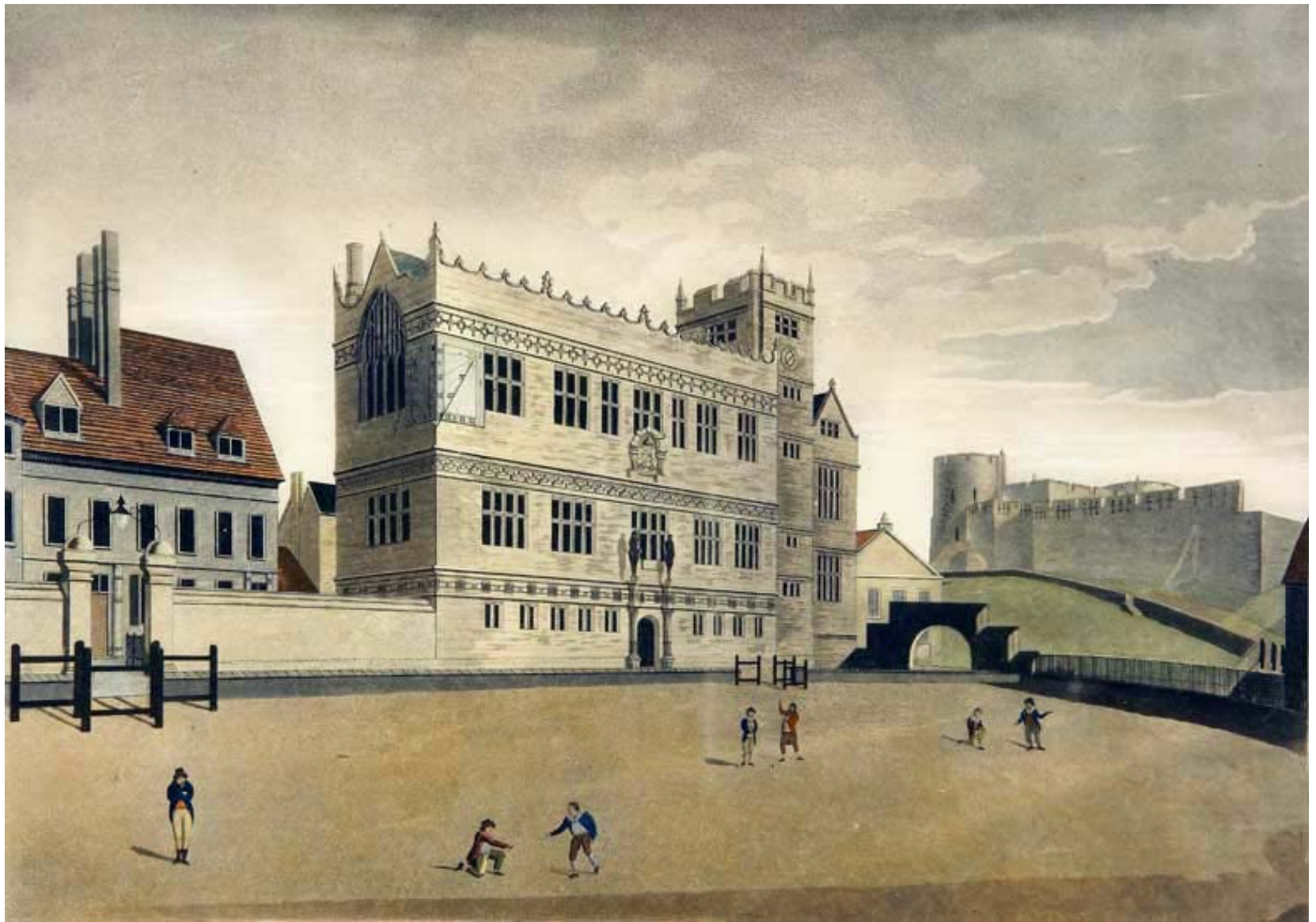
Caroline



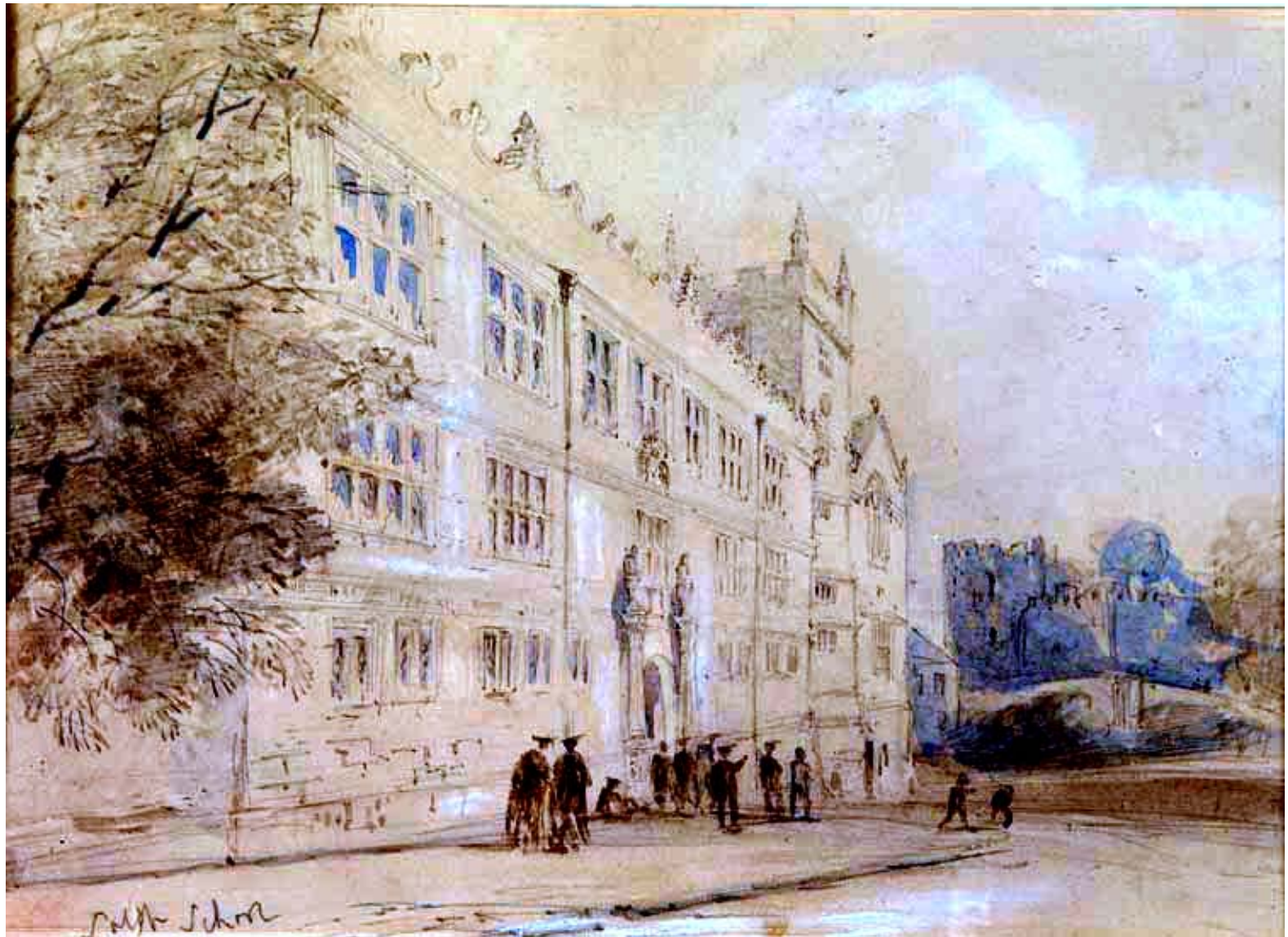
Erasmus

Charles was generally known as 'Bobby' by his family when he was a child, rather than 'Charles' but he earned the nick-name 'Gas' among his school friends because of the chemistry experiments that he carried out with his brother Erasmus ('Ras').

They made a laboratory in one of the outhouses in the yard at The Mount, buying their chemicals and minerals from Thomas Blunt's shop in Shrewsbury.



Charles attended Shrewsbury Grammar School 1818-1825



The exterior of Shrewsbury School in Charles Darwin's time



The school-room of the school in Charles Darwin's time



The library of the school in Charles Darwin's time



The chapel of the school in Charles Darwin's time

Charles did not enjoy most of his lessons at school - it was a 'Classical' education with too much Latin and Greek. He preferred working with his brother Erasmus on chemistry experiments in their home-made laboratory.

The fact that Charles and his brother worked at chemistry became known at the school. This was such an unprecedented activity that he was given the nick-name 'Gas' by his school friends.

However, his teachers were not impressed and Charles was publicly rebuked by the head-master Dr. Butler for wasting his time over such useless subjects.

It is not surprising that Charles did not flourish in such an educational environment.



The Headmaster's House in Charles Darwin's time

Charles thought that, at the time when he left school, he was considered a very ordinary boy and rather below the average in intellect by all his masters and by his Father.

He was deeply upset when his father told him: "*You care for nothing but shooting, dogs, and rat-catching, and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family*".

However, in later life, Charles commented that his father "*who was the kindest man I ever knew, and whose memory I love with all my heart, must have been angry and somewhat unjust when he used such words*".

Charles Darwin's father was a remarkable man - loved by his patients, admired by his son and loved by him more as both of them grew older.



Charles went to Edinburgh University in 1826 at the age of 17 years to become a doctor like his father and grandfather



Caroline missed him when he went to university. In a letter written by her to Charles on the 22nd March 1826, she wrote:

“It made me feel quite melancholy the other day looking at your old garden, & the flowers, just coming up which you used to be so happy watching. I think the time when you & Catherine were little children & I was always with you or thinking about you was the happiest part of my life & I dare say will always be”.

During his time in Edinburgh, Charles became acquainted with a black man called John Edmonstone who was a freed slave and who had travelled with the naturalist Charles Waterton, (1782-1865) in South America:

“He gained his livelihood by stuffing birds, which he did excellently; he gave me lessons for payment, and I used often to sit with him, for he was a very pleasant and intelligent man”.

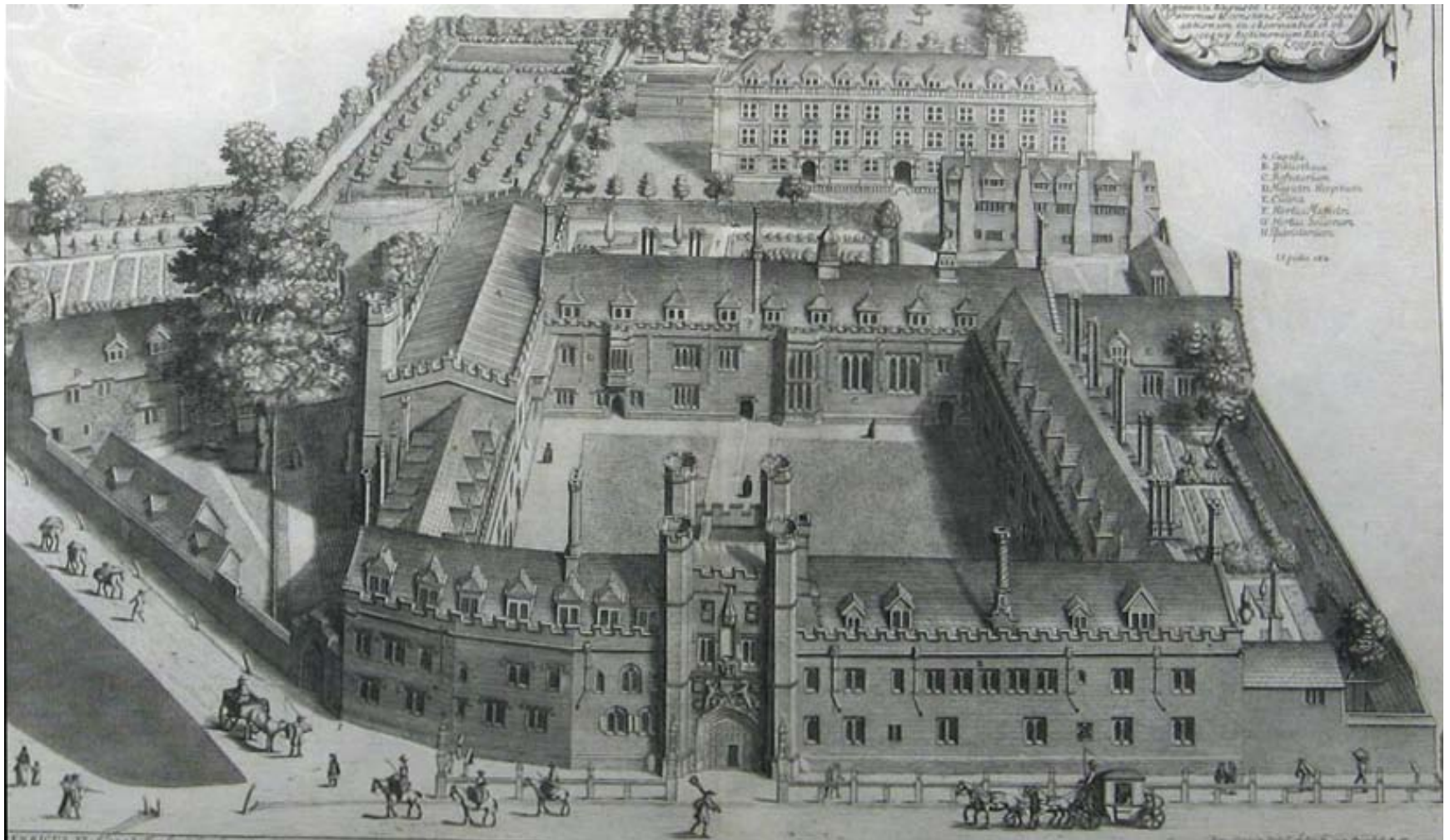
Later, during his time in South America, Charles was horrified by slavery and the way that black slaves were treated.

Charles had been brought up in a family that campaigned against slavery and injustice but developing a personal relationship with and respect for this man must have influenced him.

Charles leaves Edinburgh for Cambridge

Charles had successfully helped his father diagnose and treat patients in Shrewsbury but he did not like medical operations which were carried out on people before the time of anaesthetics and he thought that the lectures were boring. He preferred to study in the university library or go collecting natural history specimens.

As he was clearly not going to become a doctor, his father sent him to Cambridge University to study to become a clergyman!



Charles went to Christ's College, University of Cambridge in 1828 as preparation to become a priest in the Church of England

Charles rather liked the idea of life as a country clergyman. He probably thought that it would give him plenty of opportunity for country pursuits such as shooting, fishing and studying natural history! However, he asked his father for more time to consider the proposal more carefully because he had *“scruples about declaring my belief in all the dogmas of the Church of England”*.

He read some books about divinity and *“as I did not then in the least doubt the strict and literal truth of every word in the Bible, I soon persuaded myself that our Creed must be fully accepted. It never struck me how illogical it was to say that I believed in what I could not understand and what is in fact unintelligible.*

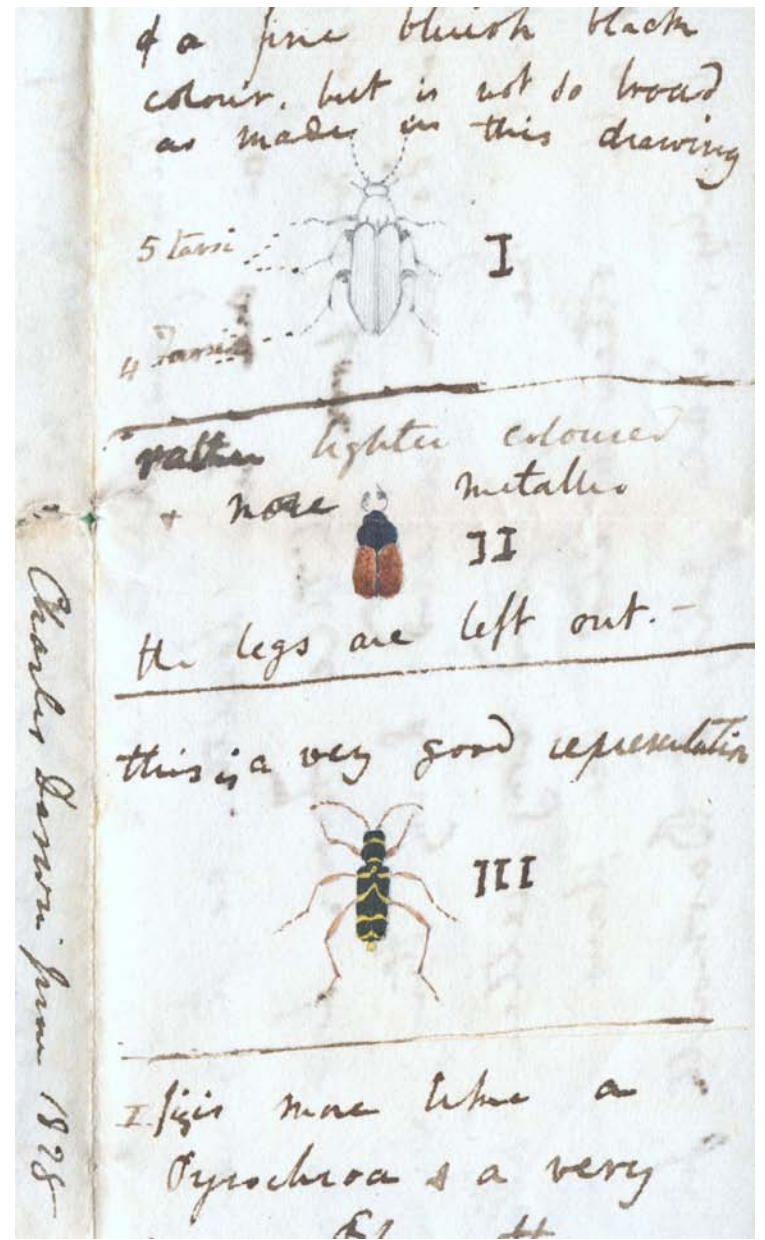
.....Considering how fiercely I have been attacked by the orthodox it seems ludicrous that I once intended to be a clergyman”. [Charles writing in his autobiography late in life]

However, while he was at Cambridge University he was more interested in beetles than what he was expected to learn! One of his friends drew cartoons of him on beetle hunting expeditions!

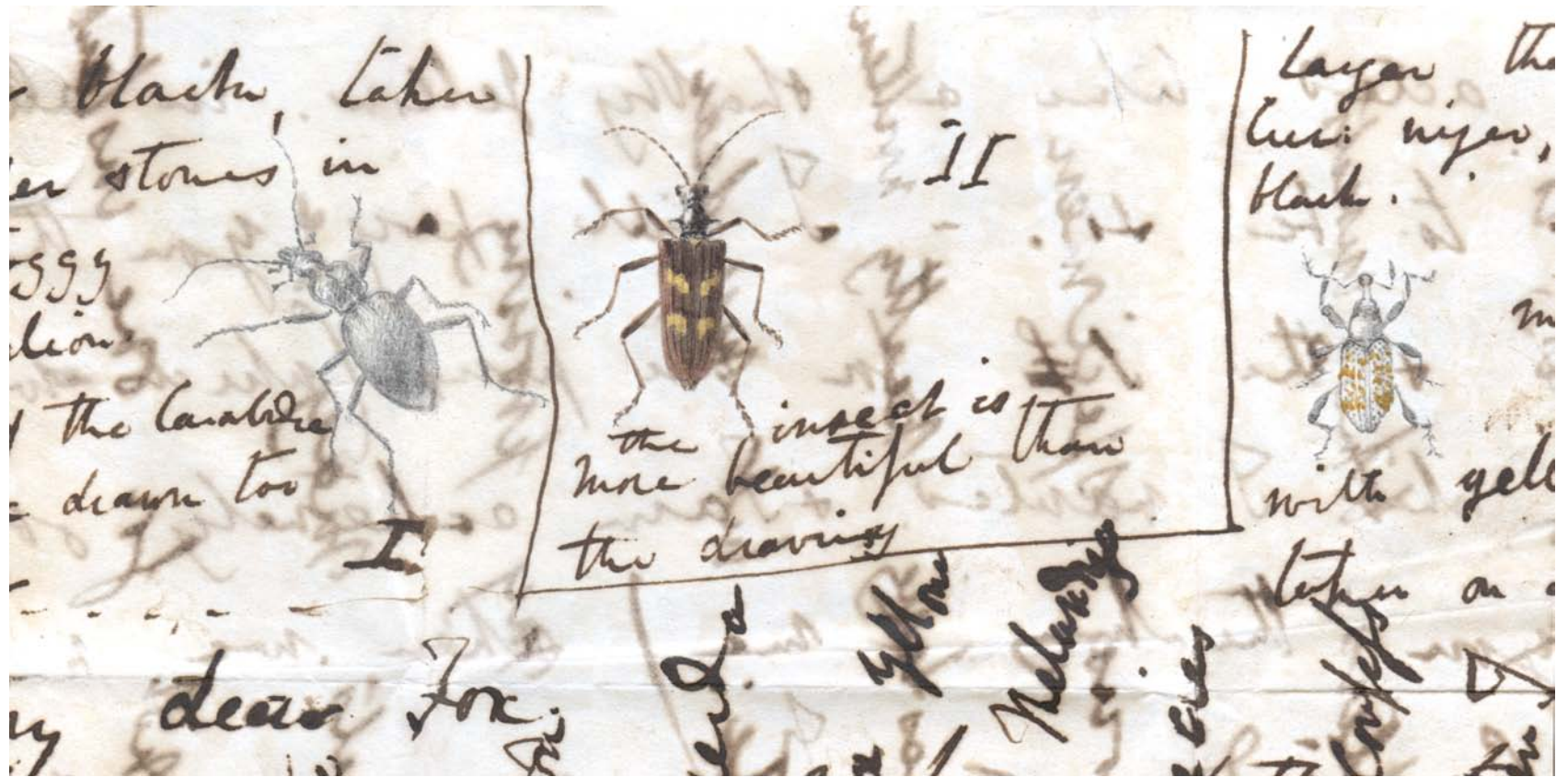


He was supported in his beetle studies in Cambridge by his more knowledgeable second cousin, William Darwin Fox. He wrote to him on 12th June 1828 during the summer vacation:

“I am dying by inches, from not having any body to talk to about insects I have been very idle since I left Cambridge in every possible way & amongst the rest in Entomology. I have however captured a few insects, about which I am much interested: My sister has made rough drawings of three of them ...”



In a letter from Charles, dated 30th June 1828, in which his sister contributes more charming drawings of his beetles, he tells William that regarding 'Insectology', his "*ardour as it is I think redoubled; but my success does not equal what it did in Cambridge.*"





Charles made his own original natural history observations in Cambridge (particularly beetles) but his mentor Professor Henslow encouraged him to learn more about Botany and Geology.



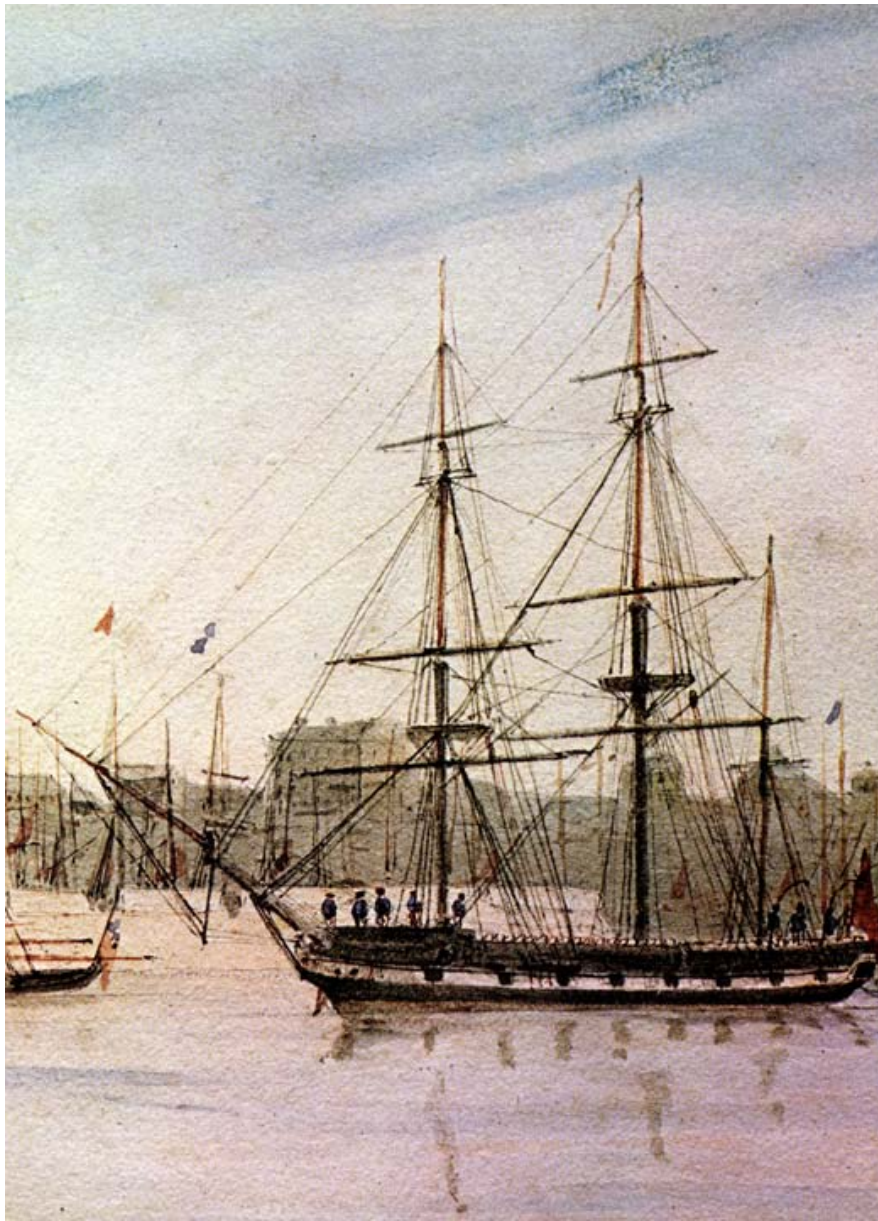
Charles already had some interest in Geology. An “Old Mr Cotton” had showed him ‘The Bellstone’ in Shrewsbury when he was about 14 years old and assured him that “the world would come to an end” before anyone would be able to explain how it came to lie in Shrewsbury, the nearest rock like it being no nearer than Cumberland or Scotland. Later, Charles learnt that it was glacial erratic.

In the summer of 1831, Charles accompanied Professor Adam Sedgwick from Cambridge on a geological excursion to North Wales and learnt a great deal about geological observation and recording - a good preparation for his Beagle voyage.

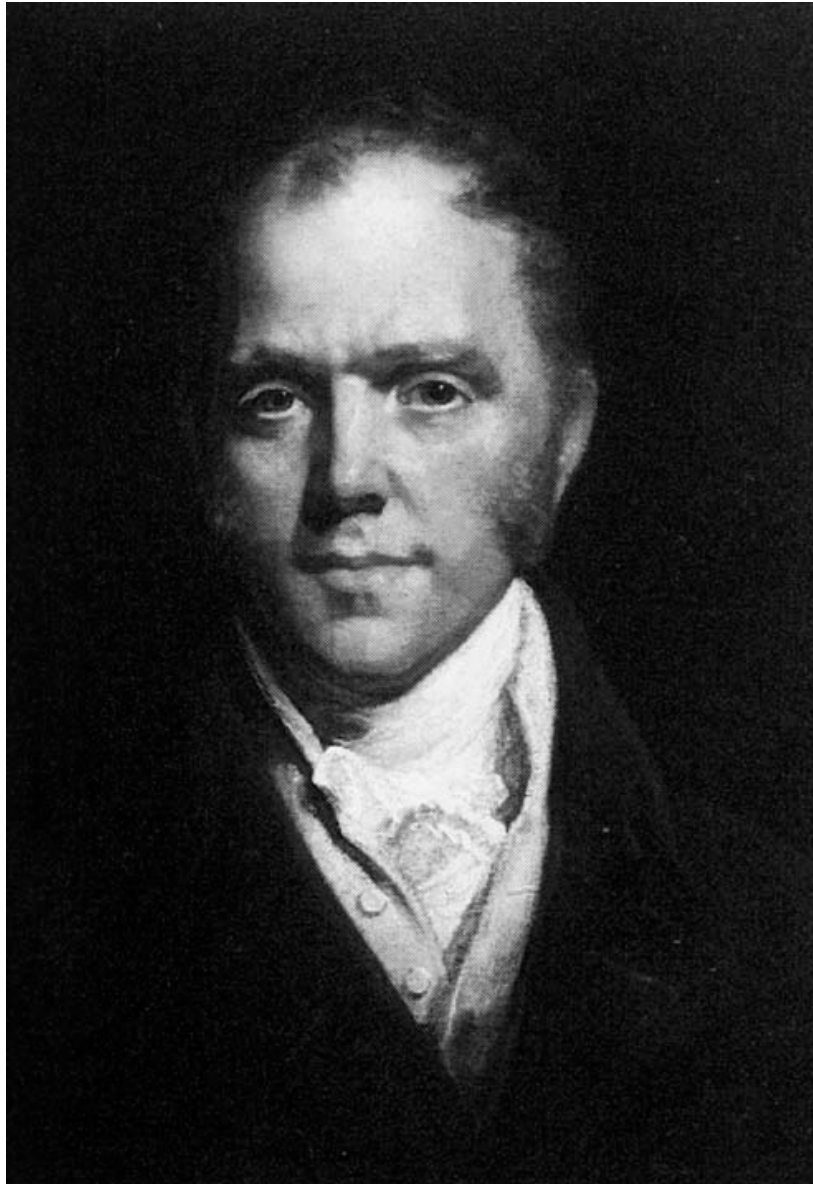


When Sedgwick visited The Mount in Shrewsbury, Susan Darwin was very attracted to him - but, unfortunately, her attentions were not reciprocated!





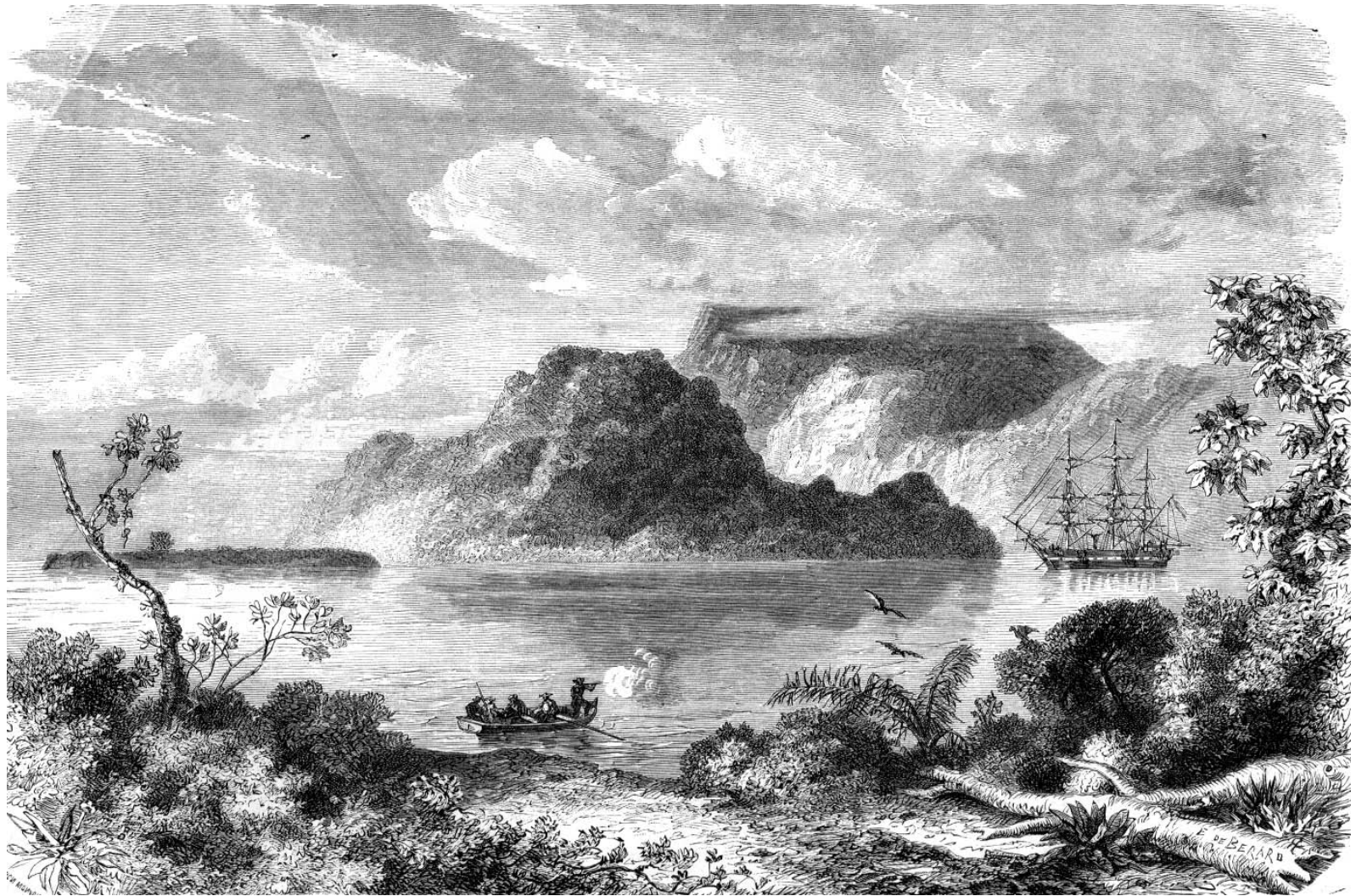
When he returned from Wales, Charles found that Henslow had recommended him to be companion to Captain Fitzroy and ship's naturalist on *The Beagle*.



Charles would never have gone on *The Beagle* were it not for this man, Josiah Wedgwood II (1769-1843) - his uncle and later to become his father-in-law who persuaded his father, Robert Darwin, to let him go!



The voyage lasted from 1831 to 1836 when Charles returned to Shrewsbury



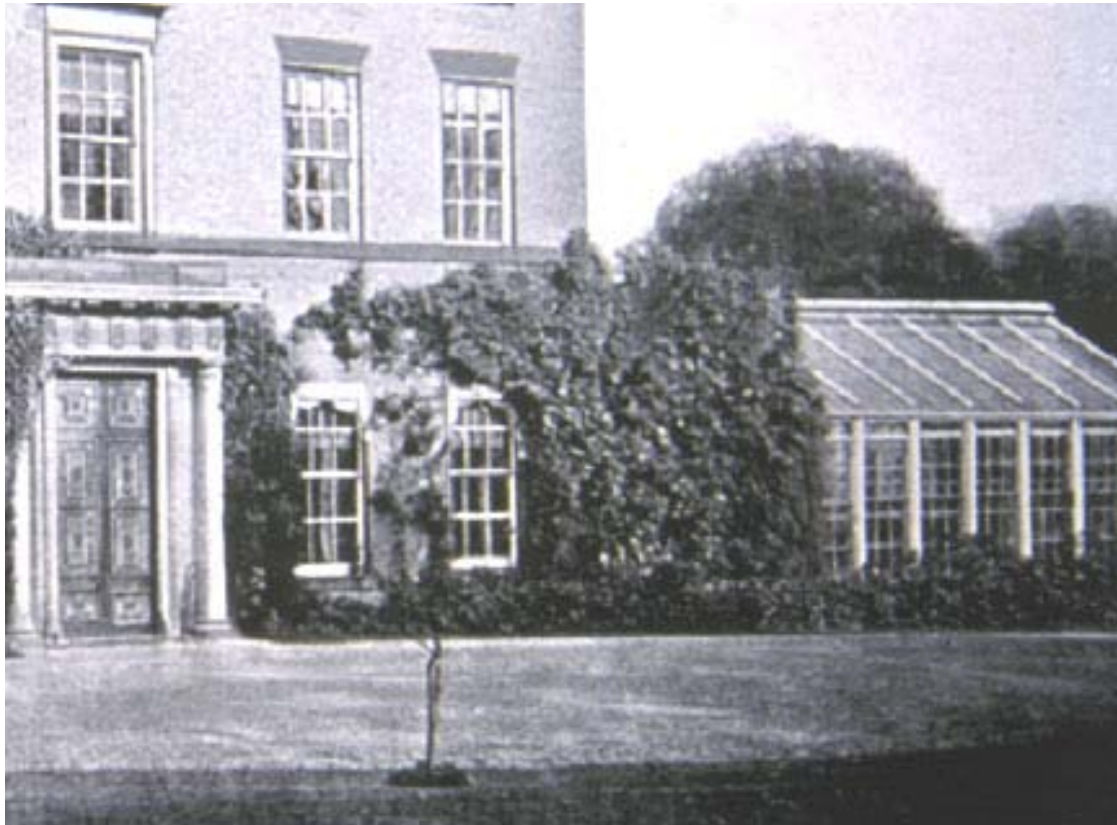
Charles and his family kept in touch with each other by letter during the voyage but he sometimes missed his home ...

In September 1833, Charles wrote to his sister Caroline from Buenos Ayres:-

"It is now Spring of the year, & every thing is budding & fresh: but how great a difference between this & the beautiful scenes of England. – I often think of the Garden at home as a Paradise; on a fine summers evening, when the birds are singing how I should enjoy to appear, like a Ghost among you, whilst working with the flowers".

Much of the correspondence in the previous two years had mentioned the garden – particularly the greenhouse conservatory and the hot house

The conservatory that opened off the Morning Room was called 'the Greenhouse' in correspondence of the time. A separate 'Hothouse' was built in late 1831 or early 1832 near the conservatory. The hothouse was a favourite of Robert Darwin.





The conservatory greenhouse opened off the Morning Room which was a grand room with ornate columns

Pineapples in the hothouse at The Mount



Susan wrote to Charles in February 1832:

"Our Hot house is quite finished & we have got several Pines & plants in it. Papa sits there a great deal & it answers very well as a hobby for him".

By August 1832, Susan was able to write:-

"The Hot house is a great pleasure --- we eat our first Pine from the Hothouse on Monday last Uncle John being with us who pronounced it very good".

‘Going Bananas’ in the hot house at The Mount



In May 1832, Charles wrote to Catherine from Rio de Janeiro in South America:-

"I am very glad to hear the hot-house is going on well; how when I return I shall enjoy seeing some of my old friends again. – Do get a Banana plant, they are easily reared & the foliage is wonderfully beautiful".

The 'old friends' to which he referred seem to be plant friends!

In October 1832, Catherine wrote:-

"Papa is very well now, much better than he was in the Summer, and more occupied than ever with his pet, the Hot house; his Banana Tree is sent for, and a deep hole made for it in the highest part of the Hot house, that it may have room. Papa means to call it the Don Carlos tree, in compliment to you". ['Carlos' being the Spanish for 'Charles'].

Robert Darwin wrote to Charles in March 1833 telling him:-

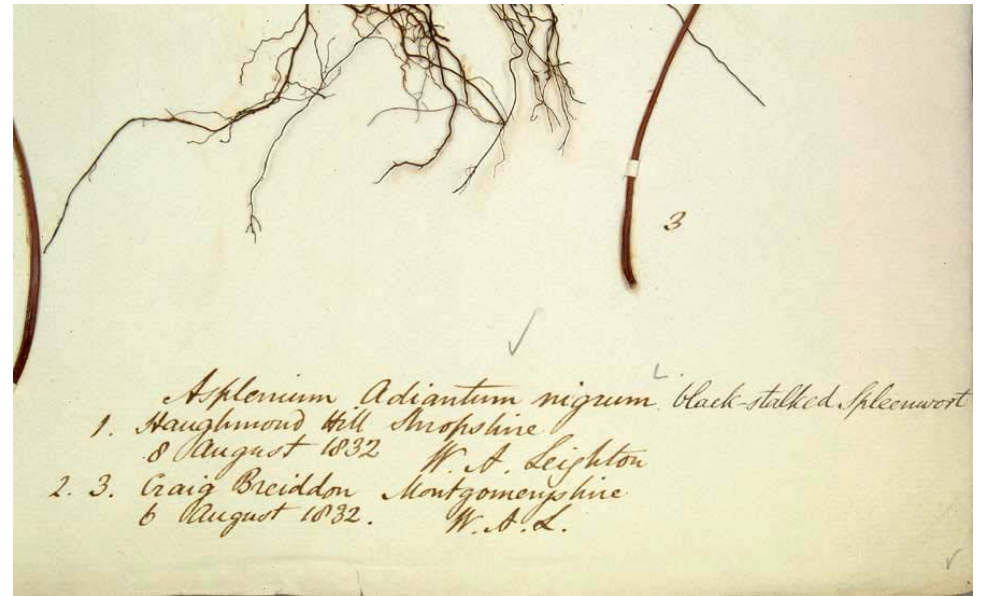
"In consequence of the recommendation in your first letter I got a Banana tree, it flourishes so as to promise to fill the hothouse. I sit under it, and think of you in similar shade".

Formation of a museum in Shrewsbury

In 1835, while Charles was on the Beagle, one of his sisters wrote to him telling him about the formation of the Shropshire and North Wales Natural History Society.

This society formed the museum which became the basis of the collections of Shrewsbury Museums.

It was founded by William Allport Leighton (botanist) and Thomas Campbell Eyton (zoologist) who were fellow students of Charles Darwin at Cambridge with Professor Henslow.



Adiantum Adiantum nigrum. Black-stalked Spleenwort
1. Haughmond Hill Wiltshire
8 August 1832 W. A. Leighton
2. 3. Craig Breidden Montgomeryshire
6 August 1832. W. A. L.

One of the many herbarium specimens donated to the new museum in 1835 by William Allport Leighton



Robert Darwin had paid his son an allowance that had supported him during *The Beagle* voyage and afterwards.

Although Charles returned to Shrewsbury in 1836 after his voyage, he soon made a new home in London - closer to the libraries and collections of museums, the university, botanic gardens and zoo that he needed for his research.



After weighing up the pros and cons of marriage, Charles married his cousin Emma Wedgwood in 1839.

When Charles married, his father gave them £10,000 capital - a fortune at that time. The income from investment of this capital and Emma's dowry of £5,000 plus £400 per year from her father (Josiah Wedgwood II) gave them a comfortable lifestyle. Financial security and Emma's support, allowed Charles to concentrate on research.



At first they lived in London but London was dirty, noisy and dangerous. They moved to Down House in Kent in 1842 and this remained their home for the rest of their lives.

Charles and Emma had ten children but only seven of them survived to become adults.

William Erasmus 1839-1914

Anne Elizabeth 1841-1851 ('Annie') died at 10 years old.

Mary Eleanor 1842 (died as an infant)

Henrietta Emma 1843-1929

George Howard 1845-1912

Elizabeth 1847-1926

Francis 1848-1925

Leonard 1850-1943

Horace 1851-1928

Charles Waring 1856-1858 (died as a baby)

Charles was productive in many ways! Although he is best known for *On the Origin of Species*, his books included:

- 1838 *First part of The Zoology of the Voyage of HMS Beagle, 1839 Journal of Researches into the Geology and Natural History of the Various Countries Visited by HMS Beagle.*
- 1842 *The Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs.*
- 1844 *Geological Observations on the Volcanic Islands ... with Some Brief Notices of the Geology of Australia and the Cape of Good Hope.*
- 1846 *Geological Observations on South America.*
- 1851-1854 A four-part monograph on living and fossil barnacles.
- 1859 *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection.*
- 1862 *On the Various Contrivances by which British and Foreign Orchids are Fertilised by Insects.*



Charles Darwin spent many years studying fertilization in Orchids

1865 *On the Movements and Habits of Climbing Plants.*

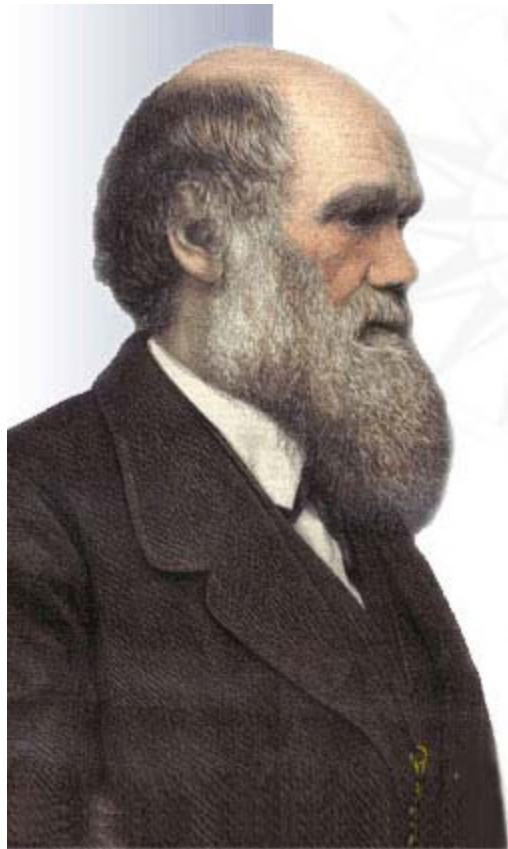
1868 *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication.*

[including Scotch (Scots) Roses - cultivars of *Rosa spinosissima* (*Rosa pimpinellifolia*)!]

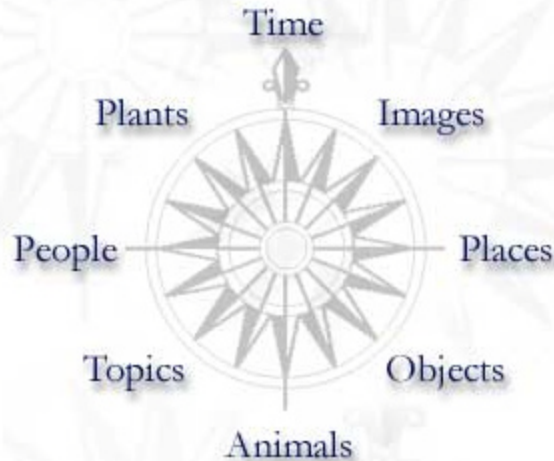


- 1871 *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex.*
- 1872 *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals.*
- 1875 *Insectivorous Plants.*
- 1876 *The Effects of Cross and Self-Fertilisation in the Vegetable Kingdom.*
- 1877 *The Different Forms of Flowers on Plants of the Same Species.*
- 1880 *The Power of Movement in Plants.*
- 1881 *The Formation of Vegetable Mould, through the Action of Worms, with Observations on Their Habits.*

Charles died in 1882 and was buried at Westminster Abbey in London.



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