

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHARLES DARWIN



Charles Robert Darwin was born February 12, 1809 in Shrewsbury, England. His family was of the newly emerged, newly wealthy, provincial professional class. Early in his youth he demonstrated predilections for hunting, natural history, and scientific experimentation. In 1825, after public school education, he enrolled at Edinburgh University. His intention was to follow his father in the practice of medicine, but he soon found such studies rather distasteful.

Two years later Darwin enrolled at Christ's College, Cambridge to study theology—a subject which he didn't enjoy either, with the intention of a career in the Church of England. As at Edinburgh, he often neglected his studies. In spite of this, he managed to pass his examinations in 1831 and left Cambridge.

While pondering his future and whiling away the time hunting and exploring local natural history and geology, he was presented with an opportunity that would change the course of his life. John Henslow, Professor of Botany at Cambridge, had recommended him for a position on a British Navy survey vessel. The *HMS Beagle* was outfitting to sail on a two year coastal survey expedition to South America, and her captain was anxious to have a naturalist and gentleman companion on board. The voyage ended up lasting five years, during which time Darwin was able to explore extensively in South America and numerous islands in the Pacific Ocean, including the Galapagos.

On returning to England in 1836, Darwin set to work examining and disseminating the extensive collection of natural history specimens acquired during the voyage. He quickly established a reputation as an accomplished naturalist on the London scene. In 1839 he married Emma Wedgwood, and saw his journal of the voyage of the *Beagle* published. In 1842 he and Emma moved to Downe house, Kent where Emma would bear 10 children and she and he

would live for the rest of their lives.

Shortly after his return to England Darwin had begun the first of his “species transmutation” notebooks. On his great adventure as the *Beagle's* naturalist Darwin had noted and begun to ponder certain aspects of the morphology and biogeography of the many species of plants and animals that he had observed. In particular, he had begun to explore the possibility, and eventually concluded, that species exhibited varying degrees of similarity because they are to varying degrees related. It appears that by 1838 his concept of descent with modification by the mechanism of natural selection was largely formed. And then he mostly, but not entirely, abandoned the enterprise for the time being.

However, in 1858 Darwin learned that a naturalist working in south Asia, Alfred Russell Wallace, was developing ideas about the evolution of species similar to his own. At the urging of friends he prepared a brief paper which was read before the Royal Society along with the paper Wallace had written. He then published in 1859 *On the Origin of Species*, which he considered an abstract of a larger future work.

During the remainder of his life Darwin continued his research, publishing three additional books on explicitly evolutionary topics, and other books on topics including climbing plants, insect-orchid mutualisms, and earthworms. The gentle and unassuming Charles Darwin, loving and devoted spouse and parent, dedicated scholar, intellectual giant, died at Downe House on April 19, 1882 with his wife Emma by his side.

(text by Dr. Stan Guffey, University of TN)

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