

Out and About

Charles Darwin, a voyage of discovery

Dave Martin follows Charles Darwin's journey from university back to his birthplace, Shrewsbury.



'The Young Darwin' statue in Cambridge.

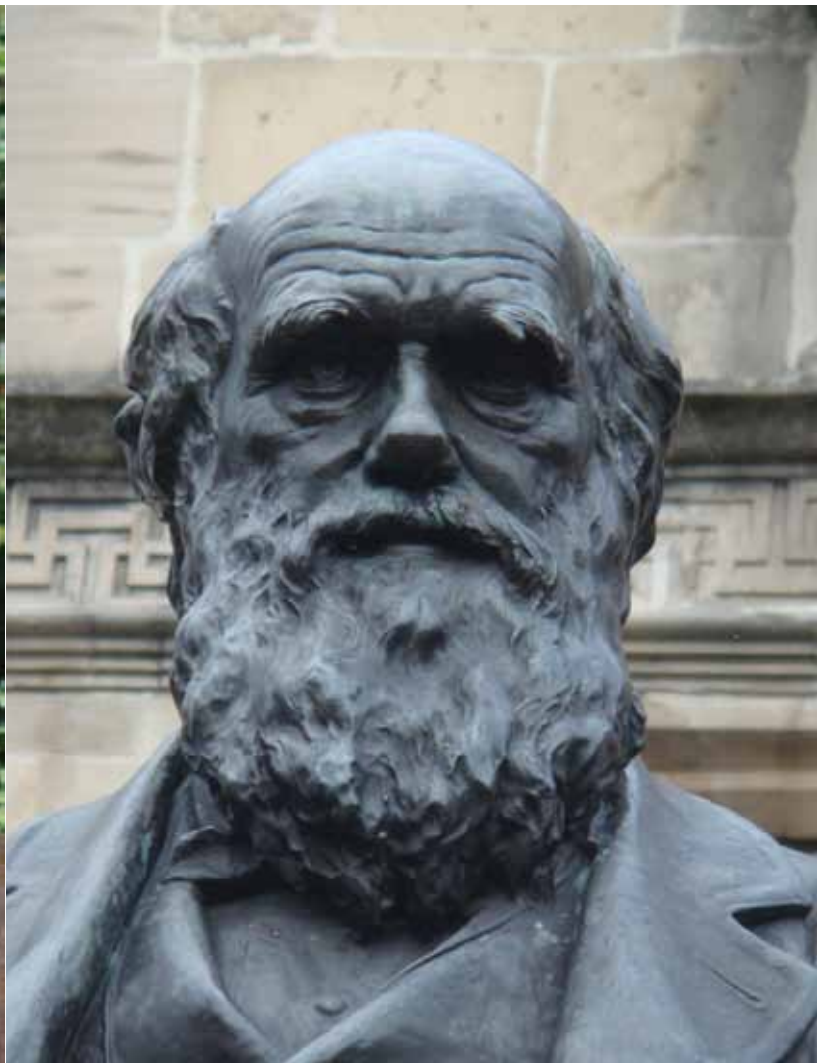
Cambridge

The bronze statue of Darwin as a young man perches elegantly on the arm of a garden bench in the grounds of Christ's College, Cambridge where he was a student from 1829 to 1831. Of this period Darwin said, 'During the three years which I spent at Cambridge my time was wasted, as far as academical[sic] studies were concerned, as completely as at Edinburgh and at school.'¹ But his time at Cambridge was well spent in other ways, as the sculptor alludes to in his work.

In his right hand Darwin holds a copy of Alexander von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative*, although not the full seven volumes. This was the book that inspired Darwin to travel to study the geology and natural history of distant places. On the bench beside him, partly covered by his coat-tails, are books intended to represent William Paley's *Natural Theology* which argued that as all beings were so well adapted to their surrounding there had to be a Designer, a view at odds with Darwin's own thinking; John Herschel's *Preliminary Discourse on Natural Philosophy* which argued that there was limitless scope for scientific explanation of the world around him which Darwin took to heart; and James Stephens's *Illustrations of British Entomology*, the essential guide to all those like Darwin bitten by the beetling 'bug'. All these contributed to his intellectual development.

The sculptor was Anthony Smith, himself a former student of natural sciences at Christ's, who spent a year as artist in residence at the college and who approached the college with the idea. The statue was funded by another former Christ's student of natural sciences, Alan Smith (no relation). It was unveiled by the Duke of Edinburgh, as Darwin's great-great-granddaughter watched, on 12 February 2009 during the bicentenary celebrations of Darwin's birth. Smith has deliberately chosen to depict Darwin as a young man rather than the more familiar figure we see on the back of a £10 note. He said, 'I would like people to think about Darwin afresh when they see the statue. The public perception of him is as an old man with a beard, but he was, by all accounts, an energetic and life-loving student who did much of his great work in his early years.'

Smith's Darwin is well dressed – frock coat, waistcoat, shirt and bow-tie with slim-fitting trousers secured by a strap passing underneath his shoes. As his 'The Young Darwin' is aged 22 in 1831 the sculptor studied George Richmond's 1840 watercolour portrait of Darwin and Samuel Lawrence's 1853 chalk drawing. He also examined the facial features of Darwin's descendants in order to create this youthful likeness. His Darwin has a firm jaw and fine features. The overall impression is one of optimism, of things to come.



On the day I was visiting a few people ventured into the small botanical garden where the statue is sited to glance, photograph and move on.² None took the opportunity to get up close, to touch and feel the texture of its surfaces, to really look, or to sit on the bench itself, which to me was an open invitation. If they had then they might have seen that the sculptor has included a couple of surprises. The books with their titles and authors on are the most obvious but another is hiding on a book under Darwin's coat-tails, a beetle called *Brachinus crepitans* otherwise known as the bombardier beetle. This is renowned for its explosive defence system in which a foul fluid is ejected from the anus with an audible popping sound.

In Darwin's time at Cambridge beetle-collecting was both part of a wider scientific endeavour to identify and name new species; and a competitive sport. Darwin had a cabinet made especially to display his collection. As he himself recounted, on one occasion while removing the bark from a dead tree he had one new beetle in each hand when he spotted a third.

Anxious not to lose it he put one of the first two into his mouth. Unfortunately for him it was a bombardier beetle which duly squirted its noxious liquid down his throat. Shocked Darwin spat it out. He also dropped the other two. Its defences were triply effective; and the sculptor's joke is too.

The beetle-collecting craze reminded me of how in childhood I and my friends netted butterflies, killed and then pinned them on boards for display; and this was approved of by our elders. In fact I seem to remember my biology teacher showing us how to make 'killing-jars' from jam-jars filled with bruised laurel leaves. Today this would not be viewed so positively. Species are in decline and besides we can satisfy our desire to own nature in the form of trophies by taking photos and posting them on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter.

One dimension of Cambridge's influence that the sculptor cannot depict are the people – students and teachers – that Darwin mixed with. Perhaps the key one was the Reverend John Henslow, professor of botany, who had taken Darwin under his wing. It was from Henslow that the recommendation came

that secured Darwin his place on the voyage of the *Beagle*. This is the moment at which Smith shows Darwin, poised to leave Cambridge with everything ahead of him.

It was time for me to leave too, to cycle to the station and catch my train for Darwin's birthplace, Shrewsbury. What a pleasure it was to ride to the station through such a bike-friendly city and, as the London commuter



Detail of Darwin's statue in Cambridge: a bombardier beetle.

The statue of Darwin in Shrewsbury.



trains disgorged their passengers on to the platform, I'd never seen so many Bromptons together outside of a bike shop.

Between Cambridge and Shrewsbury, a journey Darwin would have made many times, I read a Darwin biography.³ His voyage on the *Beagle* lasted for five years – the longest gap year in history, goes the joke. My train journey took less than five hours but this was long enough to prepare me for the Darwin portrayed by Horace Mountford in Shrewsbury. Next day my cycle journey to the statue was quite brief but not quite as easy as the flat streets of Cambridge. I had to climb Castle Hill.

Shrewsbury

Mountford's Darwin is a careworn old man seated four-square in a substantial study chair set up on high; not a young man perched languidly on a bench end. This Darwin's lined face shows his long years of study, of worrying at the impact of his revolutionary evolutionary ideas, of enduring bouts of ill health and of grieving at the death of his loved ones, especially his daughter Anne.

This statue was unveiled in 1897, fifteen years after Darwin's death, and stands outside Shrewsbury Library, a building that once housed the school that Darwin attended. Its story is not quite the usual Victorian statue story.

There was a letter to the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* in 1893 bemoaning both the absence of a suitable monument to the town's famous son and the time that had already elapsed since his death. A couple of public meetings followed and then a subscription list was opened. By 1896, however, just £400 had been raised. It was then that the Shropshire Horticultural Society stepped in. They agreed to provide the £1000 required for a bronze statue and commissioned Horace Mountford, a sculptor working in London, but born in Shrewsbury, to do the work.

He had a far wider range of resources available to him than had Anthony Smith. Mountford was able to use the many photographs of the older Darwin, was advised by members of the Darwin family who visited his studio and was even able to take a model of the hands of one of Darwin's sons. The end result, cast by Broad and Son, Founders of London was praised as an excellent likeness and since then has been described as '... Victorian naturalism at its best, solidly visualised and carried out with real feeling.'⁴ I found myself in agreement with that. The statue is very imposing up on its pedestal. Mountford's Darwin is balding, bearded, bushy eye-browed, his clothing conservative. Double-breasted waistcoat, jacket, trousers and stout shoes (six eyelets).

To one side is a small sign with bar code that I scanned with my phone. This took me to a 30-second YouTube audio which confirmed that Darwin hated school, and perhaps that makes it fitting that he is seated with his back to the building.

Comparisons

Standing there I was struck by a number of interesting contrasts and connections between the two statues. One was planned after his death while the other was planned to commemorate the 200th anniversary of his birth. Both are by 'local' sculptors, the college graduate and the townsman. Both feature books prominently. In Cambridge they are named and represent those thinkers who influenced the young Darwin while in Shrewsbury the weighty tomes at his feet and the papers on his lap represent his body of work that influenced so many others. In the first he is reading the authorities, in the second he is the authority having written one of arguably the most important books in history. Both statues also feature insects. In Cambridge it is the bombardier beetle on the book while in Shrewsbury it is the bee fertilising an orchid that is shown on the side of the chair.

Mountford also took the opportunity to allude to other aspects of Darwin's work on his chair with corals on one side and barnacles on the back. Darwin spent eight years working on barnacles before finally returning to the origin of species, a subject he had begun to theorise in secret notebooks in July 1837.

What is missing?

There are a number of things that neither statue is able properly to portray. The first, as mentioned, is the support that Darwin received from so many others in his work both in the scientific community and in his family, notably his wife. In March 1838 Darwin went to the zoo and saw his first orang-utan, a female. This animal made a deep impression on him, particularly her comprehension of what she needed to do to get an apple from her teacher. These two points are wryly combined by Carol Ann Duffy in her poem, 'Mrs Darwin'.

7 April 1852

Went to the Zoo.
I said to Him –
Something about that Chimpanzee
over there reminds me of you.⁵

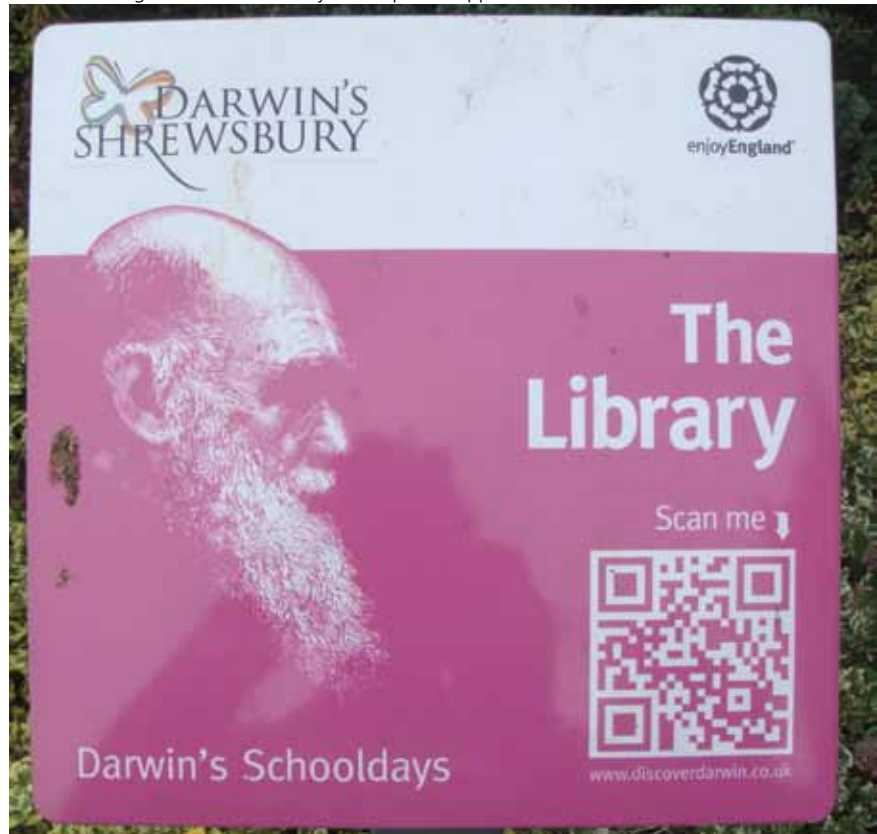
The second is the big question, why it took Darwin so long to publish. He first began working on evolution in 1837, had a 35-page sketch of his evolution theory by 1842, but did not publish *On the Origin of Species* until 1859, and only then when prodded to do so when one of his correspondents, Alfred Russel Wallace, was coming to similar conclusions.⁶ Personally I think this 20-year delay was because he wanted to complete his other work first, he was aware of the enormous impact his theories would have and how well supported they would need to be. To many Anglicans of the day it was a choice between Christianity and the theory of evolution and Darwin's ideas and book were damned as dangerous. Additionally his working time was constrained by his illnesses and his other responsibilities. That said, perhaps the Shrewsbury statue's careworn face does convey all of that.

Journey at an end, it was time to go home. There are no more statues of Darwin in the street in this country although there is one indoors in the Natural History Museum in London. Further afield there are at least two, one by an Ecuadorian sculptor in the Galapagos Islands that was paid for by the Galapagos Conservation Trust and another at the University of Chicago. This last was unveiled in 2014. Funds were originally raised to erect a statue of

Detail of Darwin's statue in Shrewsbury: wild orchid and bee.



Board showing Darwin's Schooldays smartphone app link.



scientist James Watson, of DNA renown, but he felt that as he was still alive it was too early. Instead one of Darwin was sculpted. But for the moment these will have to wait.

REFERENCES

- ¹ He originally went to Edinburgh to study medicine but did not enjoy it and gave up after the first year. There is no statue of him in Edinburgh.
- ² The Charles Darwin Sculpture Garden is planted to offer a botanical voyage of the *Beagle* with specimens from the continents, countries and islands that it visited.
- ³ Desmond, Adrian & Moore, James (1991) *Darwin*, London: Penguin.

⁴ Kenneth G. Kinrade (July 1958) *Shropshire Magazine*.

⁵ Carol Ann Duffy (1999) 'Mrs Darwin' in *The World's Wife*, London: Picador. Darwin actually visited the Zoological Gardens in Regents Park in 1831 and noted, 'On a hot day when the beasts look happy and the people gay it is most delightful.'

⁶ There is a statue of Wallace, also sculpted by Anthony Smith, outside the Natural History Museum in London.

Dave Martin is a history adviser and author. He is still researching a book on historical statues.