**IMAGES – these seem to be copyright free**

*This article might work neatly with a link to the map and Downe village/Down House, and perhaps a link to the very nice old geology map used for Landscapes file.*

Down House = <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Down_House.jpg>

Darwin – classic image <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charles_Darwin_by_Julia_Margaret_Cameron_3.jpg>

Venus flytrap = <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Drawing_of_Venus_Flytrap.jpg>

Haeckel – Tree of Life = <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tree_of_life_by_Haeckel.jpg>

Haeckel – pitcher plant (Nepenthaceae: insectivorous) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Haeckel_Nepenthaceae.jpg>

**Charles Darwin 1809-1882**

**‘There is grandeur in this view of life’**

**Kent 1842-1882**

Few people generally think of Charles Darwin as a writer, let alone a prolific and gifted writer based in Kent. They may be aware of his \_*Journal and Remarks\_* (generally known as \_*The Voyage of the Beagle\_* (1839)), in which a youthful Darwin recounted his five years travelling the world. \_*Beagle*\_brought him fame and recognition and his name is forever tied to that of the Galapagos Islands. Most may only know (but have never read) *On the Origin of Species* (1859) in which he outlined his concept of ‘natural selection’. It was written while Darwin was resident in the village of Downe in Kent, where he also wrote \_*The Descent of Man\_* (1871). The excerpt below demonstrates his ability to write with a lyrical passion for his subject:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us … There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, while this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed laws of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

From the final paragraph of \_On the Origin of Species\_ (First Edition)

His capacity to write with clarity and an ability to engage his readers is evident throughout his work. The chapter entitled ‘Natural Selection’ ends with a vivid use of metaphor that has influenced ideas of evolution ever since. The paragraph finishes thus:

As buds give rise by growth to fresh buds, and these, if vigorous, branch out and overtop on all sides many a feebler branch, so by generation I believe it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications. From the final paragraph of Chapter IV, *\_On the Origin of Species\_* (First Edition)

This metaphor was enthusiastically adopted by one of Darwin’s key early supporters, Ernst Haekel, a very talented artist as well as a zoologist. Sadly, as Julia Voss has noted, Haekel’s image places ‘MAN’ [sic] at the top of the of his evolutionary tree with other apes ‘banished to lower branches’, while Darwin’s own sketch of the primate tree grants humans no exceptional status[[1]](#footnote-1).

Darwin moved to Kent in 1842 and this remained his home until his death forty years later. While resident at Down House Darwin wrote over a dozen science books and a handful of important monographs, many based on observations and experiments undertaken in his house and grounds. Darwin established ‘experimental beds’ in the kitchen garden and had a hothouse constructed next to his greenhouse to allow him to examine delicate and demanding plant species. His observations provided much of the material for several seminal works on plants and related themes, including: \_*The Movements and Habits of Climbing Plants\_* (1875); \_*The Power of Movement in Plants\_* (1880); and his wonderful examination of \_*The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms*\_(1881). The nature writer Richard Mabey describes Darwin as an ‘ingenious writer’ and notes that his work on \_*Insectivorous Plants\_* (1875) was forensically researched and written with the ‘craft skills of a country-house thriller author’ in which the mystery of the ‘murderous flytrap, is a page turner’.

A doting father, Darwin was often helped in his research by his children, although sometimes they became the observed rather than observers. He took a scientific interest in his children’s development, using his observations to determine which expressions were instinctive and which learned (published in \_*The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals\_* (1872)).

Despite his own considerable writing abilities, he found, as he grew older, that reading of anything except factual material (and ‘silly’ romantic novels) became a chore or worse; he found reading Shakespeare to be exceedingly dull and nauseating. This disinterest or worse extended to the arts more generally, he could, for example see ‘absolutely nothing’ of merit in Turner’s watercolours. He acknowledged this as a failing of sorts:

My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of the part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend I cannot conceive.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This makes Darwin’s profound influence on the arts, as well as the sciences, all the more interesting. Diana Donald, in a profound, multi-authored book on Darwin and the arts, states that he is now widely regarded as ‘an imaginative writer, whose construct of the workings of nature, expressed in metaphorical and even visionary language, deeply influenced novelists and poets’.

Article by Peter Vujakovic

It is interesting to note that Darwin is one of several writers with a strong Kent connection to feature on a Bank of England bank note. He displaced [**Charles Dickens](** **/dickens/dickens-biography)** from the £10 note, before being in turn displaced by [**Jane Austen](/19c/19c-austen-biography)** in 2017. The Austen note features [**Godmersham Park](/austen/austen-godmersham)**, on the Great Stour (south of Canterbury) as the backdrop. The estate was inherited by her brother in 1794 and she became a regular visitor. The Dickens note also featured a (fictional) Kentish scene – the cricket match Dingley Dell against All Muggleton (Maidstone) from [\_*The Pickwick Papers\_*](/dickens/pickwick-papers). Other Kent literary and artistic connections include Sir Winston Churchill on the £5 note and **J.M.W. Turner** on the £20 note.

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1. Darwin Papers, Cambridge University Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted by Steve Jones in \_Darwin’s Island\_. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)