



## **Celebrating Charles Darwin**

### *A natural selection of top Kent attractions*

In 2009 the world celebrates the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) plus the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of publication of *On the Origin of Species*. His theory of evolution through natural selection revolutionised the way we see ourselves and the animal and plant kingdoms. Surprisingly, although Darwin sailed the globe aboard the *Beagle*, he gathered the majority of the evidence for his ideas around his home, Down House in Kent.

Darwin's theory of evolution sought to explain the beauty, diversity and complexity of life – and you'll find plenty of that right on the doorstep in the Garden of England. Follow our Darwin-inspired tour and enjoy Kent's wildlife, botanical and geological treasures.

#### **Day One**

Our first stop has to be **Down House**. You'll find it much as when Charles Darwin was here. Darwin arrived in 1842, looking for a rural escape from London. Just 16 miles from the capital, it nevertheless seemed to him "at the extreme verge of the world" and he was charmed by the beautiful scenery. For the next 40 years until his death he lived here with his wife Emma and their large family, experimenting and observing the natural world around him.

Be among the first to see the latest English Heritage refurbishments at Down and the fascinating new exhibition to celebrate Darwin's 2009 anniversaries.

Wander the homely rooms with their original furnishings and you sense not just the scientist, naturalist, geologist and botanist, but also the family man. In his "capital study", you can picture him writing groundbreaking works. In the Drawing Room, Emma's piano stands waiting to be played – Darwin also got her to tinkle the ivories to test the responses of earthworms to different sounds and vibrations! The Billiard Room conjures scenes of father, sons and faithful butler, Parslow, knocking balls around. For Darwin the game was therapeutic – "I find it does me a deal of good and drives the horrid species out of my head."

Step outdoors and you are in Darwin's open-air laboratory, where he grew and studied diverse plants and bred pigeons. Recreated experiments, including an Observation Beehive, enthrall: weigh up the evidence and work out your theories as Darwin did on his daily rambles along his Sandwalk or "Thinking Path".

After refreshments in Down House tearoom, explore the neighbourhood. Fresh air, exercise and vibrant countryside certainly got Darwin's inspiration flowing. Visit Downe church where members of his family are buried. Then choose from three walking trails, **Exploring in Darwin's Footsteps** (downloadable from [www.english-heritage.org.uk/downhouse](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/downhouse)), and discover spots important to his work and life: Downe Valley, High Elms, Keston and Holwood. Play I-spy as you go, spotting comma butterflies, guelder roses, black bryony, nuthatches, and listen for linnets and larks..

Finally, drop into **Downe Bank**, now a nature reserve managed by Kent Wildlife Trust between the villages of Downe and Cudham. The Darwins loved to come here, calling it Orchis Bank because it's home to several species of orchid. It's a fine place for bird watching and butterflies, too.

## Day Two

We begin today with three horticultural must-sees. First, just a few miles northeast of Down House, is **The World Garden of Plants** at Lullingstone Castle, Eynsford. Darwin studied plants from around the globe in his greenhouse, but modern-day plant hunter Tom Hart Dyke has laid out a whole garden in the shape of a world map. The daring experiment to grow exotic blooms outdoors, planted in their continent of origin in the huge map, is full of surprises, as well as rare and important specimens. Look out for the world's oldest tree, the Dinosaur Tree, growing close to Ayers Rock in the Australian border! Almost 80% of plants we now commonly grow in Britain are non-native, so here's your chance to discover the roots of a few.

Head to **Downderry Nursery**, Hadlow, for a second horticultural delight. Deep breath and let the scents of more than 150 different lavenders and 30 types of rosemary work their aromatherapy on you. The two National Collections would certainly have impressed Darwin with their amazing variety. After you've browsed them in the peaceful walled garden and picked up snippets on their history, plus culinary, medicinal and decorative uses, treat yourself to a few to take home.

Keep travelling south and we come to **Bedgebury National Pinetum and Forest**, near Goudhurst, the finest collection of conifers on one site in the world. Nearly 10,000 trees and shrubs from five continents grow in 300 acres. An impressive example of international conservation, Bedgebury is also the perfect environment for relaxing – it has been voted a best picnic spot in the South. Outdoor activities range from cycling to Go Ape! treetop adventures.

Now turn your mind to the animal kingdom as we continue east to Woodchurch and **South of England Rare Breeds Centre**. Kids just love to meet the friendly farm animals and play with piglets in the straw. See their curiosity for nature grow by the minute in the Mysterious Marsh, Walk-through Butterfly Tunnel, Walk-through Aviary and Woodland Discovery Trails.

## Day Three

At **Port Lympne Wild Animal Park** conservation goes hand-in-hand with the exciting African Experience. Take a 90-minute safari ride with on-board commentary and hear all about the fascinating creatures around you. Over 650 animals live at Port Lympne, from tiny zebra mice to huge African elephants. Maybe in The Palace of the Apes family likenesses become apparent!

Along the coast, the iconic **White Cliffs of Dover** invite you to take 80 million years of Earth's evolution in your stride. Drop into the visitor centre for imaginative displays on five miles of coast and countryside: much of the chalk downland along the clifftops is an SSSI and AONB providing habitat for many interesting species of flora and fauna. Blow away the cobwebs with an exhilarating ramble and spectacular maritime views.

Next, we breeze up the coast to **Sandwich and Pegwell Bay Nature Reserve**. Here another captivating scene unfolds through a complete series of seashore habitats: mud, salt marsh, shingle, dunes and cliffs to wave-cut platforms. Look for equally diverse flora adapted to each habitat, from golden samphire on the salt marsh to yellow-horned poppy on the shingle. It's a striking fact that Sandwich Bay's special environment supports 95% of the national population of lizard orchid. When you've had your fill of flowers, get out your binoculars to watch waders and wildfowl – it's easy to while away hours observing Nature go about its intriguing business. And in the spirit of *Beagle*, why not take a seal spotting boat trip?

#### **Day Four**

Drift back inland to **Howletts** at Bekesbourne, sister wild animal park to Port Lympne, for another thrilling expedition into the world of species now threatened in the wild. Recent arrivals include Sumatran tigers and Iberian wolves. You can get up close to glass-fronted tiger enclosures, see gorillas, clouded leopards, monkeys, African elephants and giant anteaters. Darwin pioneered the subject of animal behaviour in his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). You'll find plenty of body language to study at Howletts!

Just a few miles further west and we come to **Canterbury**, with a choice of natural attractions nearby. Right on the city's edge, find **Blean Woods** and **RSPB Nature Reserve**. One of the largest areas of ancient broadleaved woodland in southern Britain, it's a haven for all sorts of birds, butterflies and plant life. A jaunt northwards brings us to **Wildwood**: a discovery park embracing 40 acres of ancient woodland. Keep your eyes peeled for more than 50 species of native British creatures "past and present", from otters to owls, badgers to beavers and wild boars to wolves.

But for a grand finale to our tour make for the glorious **Kent Downs AONB**, stretching away south and west of Canterbury. If you've the energy you can hike along the North Downs Way right back to White Cliffs Country. Dramatic chalk escarpments, secluded valleys, meandering lanes and historic hedgerows, ancient woodlands, traditional orchards, lovely villages and precious wildlife: the Kent Downs add up to 339 square miles of diverse and enchanting landscape that stirs the imagination of any modern day naturalist or adventurer.

**For more information see [www.visitkent.co.uk/trade](http://www.visitkent.co.uk/trade)**