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Does Darwin's Home Deserve the Same Status as Egypt's Pyramids?



Cleaned and dusted, renewed and refurbished, [Down House](#) will reopen its doors this Friday (13 February) with a new permanent exhibition on the life and work of its most famous owner: Mr Charles Darwin, Esq.

The exhibition is an interesting mix of old and new, work and leisure. Darwin's study on the ground floor, where he worked for 40 years is full of surprises—Darwin never had a proper desk. He wrote all of his books and correspondence on a board resting on the arms of a chair customized with wheels. Down House's gardens and surrounding fields are restored to their original setting, including the Sandwalk, Darwin's thinking path. The greenhouses where Darwin did his botanical research are once again home to pots and vases of orchids, carnivorous plants and his other botanical favorites.

Down House also opens a window on Darwin's private life. On the ground floor, next to the study, visitors can see the drawing room where he spent time with his family, the dining room complete with original Wedgwood china, or the games room where Darwin played billiards with the butler. The top floor of the exhibition has details on his scientific work, including a reconstruction of the *Beagle's* cabin and a first edition of the *On the Origin of Species*. Thanks to the Darwin family's obsession with keeping old things, the exhibition also shows Darwin's medals and awards, his children's toys and drawings, and family photographs. Darwin's personal copy of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* is one of the books on show.

The £1 million investment in the new exhibition and the estate's restoration should certainly delight visitors but more questionable is whether the improvements will help Down House and its surrounding grounds become a [World Heritage site](#).

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As a part of the Darwin year celebrations and the 150th anniversary of the *On the Origins of Species*'s publication, the [London Borough of Bromley](#), [English Heritage](#), and the U.K.'s [Ministry of Culture, Media and Sport](#) have now submitted Darwin's Landscape Laboratory (Down House and its surroundings) as the U.K.'s 2009 candidate for World Heritage status, an honor that has gone to such wonders as Egypt's Pyramids and Australia's Great Barrier Reef. According to the U.K. government, Darwin's Landscape Laboratory deserves World Heritage status because it fulfills the [UNESCO criteria](#) of bearing "a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition" and of being "directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance."

Still, Darwin himself described the house as "ugly, it looks neither old or new." Without disputing Darwin's contributions to science, should Down House and its environment be mentioned in the same breath as Stonehenge or the old city of Jerusalem? Should Darwin's home be as celebrated as his ideas?

UNESCO is supposed to announce its decision by the summer of 2010, but the *Origins* blog asked a few evolutionary biologists their opinion on whether Down House and its environs really deserve World Heritage status. Perhaps predictably, they all agree that indeed it does:

Paul Harvey (University of Oxford, U.K.) notes that while many laboratories are transient and transportable, here the environment of the house is the laboratory. "We still have the environment where Darwin thought about his ideas and wrote his books."

Stu West (University of Edinburgh, U.K.): "Darwin changed our fundamental understanding of the natural world, and our place in it. Darwin's house provided the location for this to happen, and stands as a monument to his huge intellectual step."

Armand Leroi (Imperial College London,): "Darwin did not simply live in the Kentish landscape; he got some of his best ideas from it. That's why it should be preserved."

Allen Moore (University of Exeter, U.K..) says that surely there are few scientists who have had a greater effect on the world and "all the world should celebrate that".

William Friedman (University of Colorado, Boulder, U.S.): "One of the most important paradigm shifts in human thought ... was worked out there; on the sand walk, in the greenhouses, in the house while playing with and observing his children, and of course, in Darwin's study."

Leonie Moyle (University of Indiana): "Throughout the *Origin* Darwin refers to a number of experiments that he undertook in the grounds around his house, that provide empirical support for individual arguments he presents. Therefore, Down House and it's grounds could be considered scientific artifacts, equivalent to (for example) Newton's experimental equipment."

What do you think?

—Sara Coelho

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