

Piesse, J

**Perspective: The History and Afterlife of Darwin's Childhood Garden**

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/11934/>

#### Article

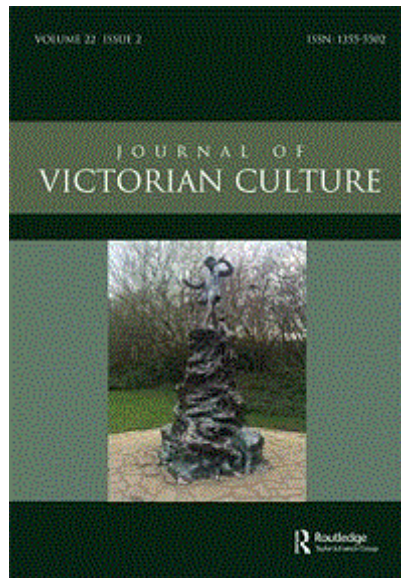
**Citation** (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

**Piesse, J (2020) Perspective: The History and Afterlife of Darwin's Childhood Garden. Journal of Victorian Culture, 25 (2). pp. 264-278. ISSN 1355-5502**

LJMU has developed **LJMU Research Online** for users to access the research output of the University more effectively. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LJMU Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of the record. Please see the repository URL above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information please contact [researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk)



### The History and Afterlife of Darwin's Childhood Garden

Journal:	<i>Journal of Victorian Culture</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Charles Darwin, garden history, history of science, creative history, heritage conservation, ecology

SCHOLARONE™  
Manuscripts

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8                   **The History and Afterlife of Darwin’s Childhood Garden**

9

10       **Abstract**

11

12

13       This article examines the history and significance of Charles Darwin’s childhood garden at The  
14       Mount in Shrewsbury. Unlike the mature Darwin’s garden at Down House, Kent, his childhood  
15       garden at The Mount has only recently begun to be restored and it is not well known outside  
16       of local or specialist circles. The first part of the article aims to recover the story of the garden  
17       for a wider interdisciplinary readership. It builds upon research in the fields of garden history  
18       and biography to make a case for the garden’s importance to Darwin’s life and scientific work  
19       while also revealing the site’s afterlife as a lost garden and challenging restoration project. The  
20       second part of the article argues that the garden can be viewed as an enchanted space that  
21       enables us to connect more closely with a positive vision of a romantic, ecologically conscious  
22       Darwin who is of particular relevance to our times. I conclude by briefly outlining how these  
23       ideas were tested at the Darwin’s Childhood Garden Study Day, organised with Shropshire  
24       Wildlife Trust in 2016 following its purchase of part of the site in 2013.

25

26

27

28

29

30

31

32

33

34

35

36       **Keywords:** Charles Darwin, garden history, history of science, creative history, heritage  
37       conservation, ecology.

38

39

40

41

42

43

44

45

46

47

48

49

50

51

52

53

54

55

56

57

58

59

60

## The History and Afterlife of Darwin's Childhood Garden

In the summer of 2015, I moved to Shrewsbury to take up a fixed-term lectureship and found a lost garden on my doorstep that was to fascinate and frustrate me for two years. Charles Darwin once described his childhood garden at The Mount as 'a Paradise', vividly picturing himself returning to it from the *Beagle* 'like a Ghost' to find his sisters 'working with the flowers', but it has long since fallen into obscurity.<sup>1</sup> Like other locals and Darwin pilgrims who had 'discovered' the garden before me, I felt that the site was compelling and elusive from the outset. Located on the steep banks of the River Severn, what remains of the original seven acre garden is semi-wild and seldom visited: a beguilingly secret place hidden by overgrown sycamores and giant buddleias. But above all, of course, it was a vision of the boy Darwin in this garden – a 'ghost' Darwin who haunts the tangled greenery and imbues it with multiple resonances – that beckoned to me with its hubristic promise of meanings to be grasped.

This article aims to put both the physical site of Darwin's childhood garden and some of its less tangible significations more firmly onto the map of interdisciplinary nineteenth-century studies. Unlike the mature Darwin's garden at Down House, Kent, his childhood garden in Shropshire has attracted relatively little scholarship and is not well known outside of local or specialist circles. The first part of the article aims to recover the story of the garden for a wider interdisciplinary readership. It builds upon research in the fields of garden history and biography to make a case for the garden's importance to Darwin's life, scientific work, and characteristic methodologies, while also revealing the site's afterlife as a lost garden and challenging restoration project. The second part of the article appropriates this history to articulate the garden's potential as a resonant site that enables us to come into closer contact with some of the most positive and exciting dimensions of Darwin's twenty-first century legacy. The garden, I shall argue, quite literally embodies that rejuvenating 'space of enchantment' which George Levine locates more figuratively in Darwin's life and writings.<sup>2</sup> Moreover,

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Darwin to Caroline Darwin, 20 September 1833, in *Darwin Correspondence Project* <<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-215>> [accessed 1 June 2017]

<sup>2</sup> See George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-Enchantment of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p.35. The phrase 'spaces of enchantment', appropriated by Levine, is sourced from William Connolly, *Why I am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.17.

1  
2  
3 appreciating the site’s material identity and status as a ‘lost’ garden enables us to recognise  
4 ecological dimensions of evolutionary theory that are still sometimes overlooked. The article  
5 concludes by briefly reflecting upon my attempt to formulate and apply these ideas at the  
6 Darwin’s Childhood Garden Study Day, organised with Shropshire Wildlife Trust in 2016.  
7  
8  
9

10 This article does not aim to present a comprehensive account of scientific experiments  
11 undertaken at the garden or of the plants that were grown there.<sup>3</sup> Neither can it fully address  
12 the complex local politics surrounding the garden’s ongoing restoration. Rather, I aim to  
13 introduce scholars working across disciplines to a neglected but pivotal historic site in a way  
14 that evokes as much as explicates. My departure, at times, from a neutral academic voice for a  
15 more personally and emotionally engaged tone presents a formal risk, but is very much part of  
16 this endeavour. The style of the article ultimately aims to both complement its investment in  
17 ideas of Darwinian enchantment and to draw inspiration from Darwin’s own accessible,  
18 imaginative, and often surprisingly autobiographical prose.<sup>4</sup>  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27

28 **1. The History of a Secret Garden**  
29  
30  
31

32 The road at the back of my rented house in Shrewsbury ended abruptly with a metal fence, and  
33 over the fence there was a steep flight of stone steps leading down to an overgrown riverside  
34 path (Figure 1). I discovered the garden on my first walk down this path. I would not have  
35 known about its history without the picture on the plaque that stands in neighbouring ‘Doctor’s  
36 Field’, once also owned by the Darwin family. The 1816 portrait by Ellen Sharples reproduced  
37 there shows two children: a girl with a garland of flowers, and a boy to her left holding an  
38 exotic yellow-flowered plant, which I later found out is the South African opal plant,  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47

48  
49 <sup>3</sup> These details have already been supplied by Susan Campbell in the two articles that this  
50 article references throughout: Susan Campbell, ‘Its Situation ... Was Exquisite in the  
51 Extreme: Ornamental Flowers, Shrubs and Trees in the Darwin Family’s Garden at The  
52 Mount, 1838-1865’, *Garden History*, 40.2 (Winter 2012), 167-198, and Campbell, ‘Sowed  
53 for Mr. C. D.’: The Darwin Family’s Garden Diary for The Mount, Shrewsbury, 1838-65’,  
54 *Garden History*, 37. 2 (Winter 2009), 135-150.  
55  
56 <sup>4</sup> My approaches here are also informed by current debates in the humanities about the value  
57 of using creative methods to produce different kinds of knowledge and reach wider audiences.  
58 See Karen Harvey’s ‘Envisioning the Past: Art, Historiography and Public History’, *The*  
59 *Journal of the Social History Society*, 12.4 (2015), 527-43. Similar ideas were explored at the  
60 *Creative Histories* conference at the University of Bristol in July 2017.

*Lachenalia aloides*.<sup>5</sup> I was standing on the borders of Darwin's childhood garden, I realised, beneath the large red-bricked Mount house where he lived as a boy.

In 2013, approximately two acres of the overgrown riverbank that constituted part of the original garden were bought by Shropshire Wildlife Trust for restoration (Figure 2). This steep site includes a now dilapidated icehouse and a terrace walkway once frequented by Darwin and his doctor father, Robert.<sup>6</sup> The portion of the bank owned by the Trust now forms the only clearly demarcated remains of grounds that originally spanned 37,752 square yards, and is itself not readily locatable due to its semi-rural situation on the outskirts of town.<sup>7</sup> The Mount house itself is currently in use as a local valuation office.

But the Shrewsbury suburb of Frankwell forms a palimpsest beneath which the original contours of the larger garden site can still be traced. Part of the garden's vinery walls survive in one of the houses in 'Darwin's Gardens', a 1930s housing development built on top of The Mount's spacious spherical flower garden and its kitchen garden.<sup>8</sup> The original walls of the kitchen garden are still extant, facing, as it happens, directly onto the living room of my house on Hermitage Walk – and providing a daily reminder of Darwin's autobiographical accounts of climbing them to steal fruit from the family's orchards (Figures 3a and 3b).<sup>9</sup> In Doctor's Field, once roamed by Darwin but now used primarily by dog walkers, apple trees that Darwin may once have walked past are still producing sour green-gold fruits that lie hidden in long grass. To live in Frankwell is to live deeply in Darwin's long shadow. I cannot open my curtains without picturing the boy Darwin balancing on top of the old red wall. I cannot take a walk along the river path without thinking of Charles and Catherine hiding amongst the foxgloves.

---

<sup>5</sup> The plant has recently been identified by Nick Wray, Curator of the Botanic Garden at the University of Bristol. See 'Important Darwin Plants Unveiled at the Botanic Garden' in *University of Bristol News* < <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2017/march/darwin-plants.html> > [accessed 1 June 2017].

<sup>6</sup> Campbell, 'Its Situation', p.177.

<sup>7</sup> Messrs. Salt and Sons, 'The Mount, & Coton Hill, Shrewsbury. Particulars and Plans of The "Mount Mansion House," and lands, and two pieces of land at Coton Hill, Shrewsbury. Advertised to be Sold by Auction, by Mr. William Hall, at the George Hotel, Shrewsbury, on Friday November 30, 1866' (Shrewsbury: Leake and Evans, 1866), n.pag.

<sup>8</sup> Details about the features and development of the garden in this paragraph reference Campbell, 'Its Situation', p.167. They are also informed by the conversations with Sara Lanyon that went into our planning of the Darwin's Childhood Garden Study Day (see below).

<sup>9</sup> Charles Darwin, *Autobiography*, ed. by Gavin de Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 24.

The garden at The Mount would be a historically significant site even without its famous connections. Robert Darwin bought the site in 1796, following his marriage to Susannah Wedgwood the previous year, and the couple designed the garden's layout at around the same time that the house was built between 1798 and 1800. Surveyor's maps relating to the sale of The Mount nearly seventy years later reveal the garden's design (Figure 4). The family's wealth enabled notable landscaping features, including the geometric flower garden that Susan Campbell notes was unprecedented in the area.<sup>10</sup> A state-of-the-art hothouse enabled Robert Darwin to develop his passion for growing exotic plants and fruits in Shropshire climates, including pineapples and the opal plant drawn by Sharples.<sup>11</sup> The garden at The Mount was an early adopter of many of the exotic plants that were becoming increasingly accessible in the early nineteenth century owing to the expansion of the British empire and the efforts of increasingly mobile plant collectors. Plants grown at The Mount are known to have included peonies, opium poppies, camellias, azaleas, orange trees, chrysanthemums, cactuses, and melons.<sup>12</sup> The Mount was often compared with the impressive gardens at Cote House, near Bristol, owned by Susannah Wedgwood's brother, John. John Wedgwood established the forerunner of the Royal Horticultural Society in 1804, just a few years after The Mount was built, and is known to have exchanged plants with his sister and brother-in-law.<sup>13</sup> A garden diary kept by Robert Darwin and subsequently his daughter Susan adds considerably to the site's importance to horticulturalists by providing a daily record of plantings between 1838 and 1865.<sup>14</sup>

Yet it is of course the connection to Charles Darwin that makes the garden's history of the widest significance. In the first instance, the garden is important to those with an interest in Darwin's formative years. Darwin's autobiographical writings show that The Mount garden was fundamental to his development and self-education, in contradistinction to his sterile

---

<sup>10</sup> Campbell, 'Its Situation', p.179, p.174.

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, 'Its Situation', p.185. Drawing upon Campbell's article, Nick Wray notes that the *Lachenalia aloides* in Sharple's portrait is likely to have been grown in the hothouse. See 'Important Darwin Plants Unveiled at the Botanic Garden' in *University of Bristol News* <<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2017/march/darwin-plants.html>> [accessed 1 June 2017].

<sup>12</sup> See Campbell, 'Its Situation', pp.189-194, for an appendix that lists many of the plants originally grown in the garden. See also Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: Voyaging* (London: Pimlico, 2003), p.15, for an account of the garden's exotic plants.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Wedgwood and Hensleigh Wedgwood, *The Wedgwood Circle, 1730-1897: Four Generations of a Family and their Friends* (London: Studio Vista, 1980), p.107, p.117.

<sup>14</sup> See Campbell, 'Sowed for Mr. C. D.', pp.138-139.



experience of formal education at Shrewsbury School.<sup>15</sup> In his 1838 autobiographical fragment, Darwin reveals that some of his earliest and most formative memories are in fact garden memories, dating back to the time he spent as a child in the care of his older sister, Caroline.<sup>16</sup> He writes that he was ‘was very fond of gardening, & invented some great falsehoods about being able to colour crocuses as I liked’, an incident which he returns to in the mature posthumously published autobiography of 1887.<sup>17</sup> In the fragment he also writes about trying to impress a labourer by climbing a mountain ash, and in both the autobiographical works of pretending to discover fruit he had himself stolen and hidden in order to play at being ‘a very great story teller’<sup>18</sup> Repeatedly, the suggestion is of a strong link between the garden and the development of both an appreciation of the natural world and a powerful imaginative faculty that were to be brought to fruition in the works of the mature scientist.

The garden also appears to have had an emotional significance for the Darwin family, becoming evocative for Darwin and his siblings of their mutual embedment in a rich domestic life. Darwin and his sisters Caroline, Emily Catherine (known as Catherine), and Susan frequently refer to the site in the correspondence dating from Darwin’s early years away from home, both at Edinburgh and Cambridge Universities and on board the *Beagle*. ‘It made me feel quite melancholy the other day looking at your old garden, & the flowers, just coming up which you used to be so happy watching’, a young Caroline Darwin wrote in 1826. ‘I think the time when you & Catherine were little children & I was always with you or thinking about you was the happiest part of my life & I dare say always will be.’<sup>19</sup> The garden was strongly associated with Darwin’s sisters, with Caroline, Catherine, and Susan all involved in tending the flower garden for many years. The unmarried sisters, Susan and Catherine, lived on at The

---

<sup>15</sup> For Darwin’s views of his schooling, see Charles Darwin, *Autobiography*, in *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin and Selected Letters*, ed. by Francis Darwin (New York: Dover, 1958), pp.5-58 (p.9).

<sup>16</sup> Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp.12-13.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Darwin, ‘Life. Written August – 1838’, in *Darwin Online* <<http://darwin-online.org.uk>> [accessed 2 June 2017]. For Darwin’s later reference to this incident, see Darwin, *Autobiography*, ed. by Francis Darwin, p.6.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Darwin, ‘Life. Written August – 1838’. For the later reference, see Darwin, *Autobiography*, ed. by Gavin de Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Caroline Darwin to Charles Darwin, 22 March 1826, in *Darwin Correspondence Project* <<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-28>> [accessed 1 June 2017].



Mount after their father's death in 1848, and Susan remained following Catherine's move to London in 1857 until her own death some ten years later.<sup>20</sup>

As well as being a biographically significant site that played a key role in shaping Darwin's intellectual and emotional development, the garden retains particular importance for the history of science as the location of numerous early experiments. These include not only those conducted by Darwin and his brother Erasmus as boys in a makeshift 'lab' housed in an old laundry building, and well-documented by Janet Browne, but also Darwin's series of later botanical experiments leading to the development of the theory of evolution.<sup>21</sup> The Mount was a particularly important resource for Darwin in this respect during the summers of 1840 and 1841, when he visited with his wife Emma and their two young children and used the garden for 'almost obsessively investigating all factors affecting variation'.<sup>22</sup> One experiment carried out at Shrewsbury according to Darwin's *Questions and Experiments* notebook involved putting sticky paper in the flower garden in order to catch and count seeds distributed by wind.<sup>23</sup> Other experiments are known to have centred upon examining how weather affects the production of nectar and on exploring the effects of nitrate soda as a fertilizer on plants such as orange trees and cypripediums. It is apparent from Susan Campbell's work on the Darwin family garden diary and from Darwin's own letters and notebooks that relatives and gardeners in Shrewsbury were also often tasked with using the resources of The Mount's grounds for ongoing botanical research.<sup>24</sup> For instance, the Doctor's hothouses were used to nurse cucumbers and sensitive plants with the assistance of gardener John Abberley, who also provided advice on ants and bees.

According to the dates supplied by Darwin's biographers Adrian Desmond and James Moore, Darwin was also in Shrewsbury when he completed his first written sketch of

---

<sup>20</sup> Campbell, 'Its Situation', p. 178 and p.188. Darwin's oldest sister Marianne married in 1824, as Campbell notes, and so would have been involved in gardening at The Mount for a briefer period.

<sup>21</sup> Browne, *Charles Darwin: Voyaging*, pp.29-31.

<sup>22</sup> Campbell, 'Sowed for Mr. C. D.', p.142. Details of the experiments noted in this paragraph are all sourced from this article, pp.142-43.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Darwin, *Notebooks: Questions, and Experiments*, ed. by Paul H. Barrett, Peter J. Gaitrey, Sandra Herbert, David Kohn, and Sydney Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.495. See Campbell, 'Sowed for Mr. C. D.', p.142.

<sup>24</sup> See Campbell, 'Sowed for Mr. C. D.', for details of the nature of this botanical research and the individuals involved. Darwin also discusses plants grown at The Mount in several letters, including Charles Darwin to Daniel Oliver, 16 November 1860, in *Darwin Correspondence Project*, <<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-2985>> [accessed 2 June 2017].

1  
2  
3 evolutionary theory in 1842, a thirty-five page outline written rapidly on a combined visit to  
4 Emma's childhood home at Maer Hall in Staffordshire and The Mount. Darwin describes its  
5 composition as follows: 'May 18<sup>th</sup>. Went to Maer. June 15<sup>th</sup> to Shrewsbury; & on 18<sup>th</sup> to Capel-  
6 Curig, Bangor, Carnarvon to Capel-Curig; altogether ten days, examining glacier action.  
7 During my stay at Maer & Shrewsbury, 5 years after commencement wrote pencil sketch of  
8 my species theory.'<sup>25</sup> As Darwin mentions both Maer and Shrewsbury, it is likely that the  
9 sketch's final pages were written at The Mount between June 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, when he left for  
10 Bangor. The provenance of this sketch has been overlooked by both Darwin biographers and  
11 the Shropshire tourism industry, but adds considerably to The Mount's significance to the  
12 history of evolutionary theory.

13  
14  
15 The movement back and forth between Shrewsbury and London – between the world  
16 of Darwin's childhood and the world of his maturity – was undoubtedly an important part of  
17 Darwin's intellectual and creative rhythms right up until the point that he moved to Kent at the  
18 age of thirty-three in September 1842. Indeed, the centrality of the garden to the development  
19 of Darwin's experimental processes is confirmed by the large extent to which its features were  
20 replicated at the new family home, a property complete with what Darwin termed a 'little  
21 garden ... worth its weight in gold.'<sup>26</sup> Many features developed at Down have their origins in  
22 the design of The Mount gardens, including an aviary for pigeons and the now celebrated route  
23 for reflective walking known as the 'Sandwalk'.<sup>27</sup> Michael Boulter has described in fascinating  
24 detail the range of 'cottage-industry' experiments and observations carried out at Down,  
25 including a revelatory examination of the varieties of hedge parsley growing in newly disturbed  
26 soil by a fence that led to Darwin's understanding of the importance of migration in driving the  
27 adaptation of species.<sup>28</sup> More recently, James T. Costa has revealed the extent to which Darwin  
28 often worked collaboratively on these garden experiments with family, friends, and servants.<sup>29</sup>  
29 Both Boulter and Costa only mention The Mount in passing, but it is my contention that it was  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47

48  
49 <sup>25</sup> Charles Darwin, 'Journal', 1837-1843, in *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, vol. 2,  
50 1837-1843, ed. by F. Burkhardt et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.435.

51 <sup>26</sup> Charles Darwin to Emma Wedgwood, 31 December 1838-1 January 1839, in *Darwin*  
52 *Correspondence Project* < <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-466> > [accessed 2  
53 June 2017]

54 <sup>27</sup> For details of the garden at Down House, see Michael Boulter, *Darwin's Garden: Down*  
55 *House and The Origin of Species* (London: Constable, 2009). See also Campbell, 'Sowed for  
56 Mr. C. D.', p.148.

57 <sup>28</sup> See Boulter, *Darwin's Garden*, p.130, pp.71-76.

58 <sup>29</sup> James T. Costa, *Darwin's Backyard: How Small Experiments Led to a Big Theory* (New  
59 York: W. W. Norton, 2017).  
60

the childhood garden, as the model for Down, that originally provided scope for Darwin's development of his characteristically 'homespun' approach to research.<sup>30</sup> The Shrewsbury garden can be viewed not only as the site of important individual experiments, but also as the birthplace of a characteristic methodology that deduced highly abstract laws by attending to localized details in a domesticated setting. This methodology ultimately enabled Darwin to diligently extrapolate the theory of evolution by natural selection from such stuff as the study of pigeons and hedge parsley.

After Susan Darwin died in October 1866, the contents of The Mount house and gardens were auctioned over a period of six days in November.<sup>31</sup> The catalogue for the second day of sale runs to sixty-five pages and lists hundreds of miscellaneous items. These range from 'a pair of grape scissors' – perhaps used to cut grapes from the vinery – to 'a costly white, green and gold Wedgwood pearl dinner service', 'a curious carved ivory ball', and a 'black cross-bred retriever and newfoundland dog.'<sup>32</sup> Darwin's friend William Hooker attended the auction with a view to obtaining Wedgwood medallions, but was unsuccessful in making any purchases.<sup>33</sup> Under the categories of 'Garden' and 'Plants and Pots', the catalogue lists items including 'Shanks patent mowing machine', a 'daisy rake', 'nine large orange trees', and quantities of azaleas, camellias, roses, fuchsias, and *lilium lancifolium*, all sold in lots.<sup>34</sup> The eight pages dedicated to 'Books' include numerous works on gardening such as 'Donn's Catalogue of Plants', 'Newton's Complete Herbal', and 'Macdonald's Gardener's Dictionary'.<sup>35</sup>

This auction marked the end of the Darwin family's long residence at The Mount and the point at which 'Darwin's garden' vanishes from view, its unity soon to be divided by the more complex lines of multiple private ownerships.<sup>36</sup> However, it also marks the beginning of

---

<sup>30</sup> Costa, *Darwin's Backyard*, p.xiii.

<sup>31</sup> Desmond and Moore, *Darwin*, p.541.

<sup>32</sup> 'The Mount, Shrewsbury. Important Sale of Excellent Household Furniture.' (Shrewsbury: Leake and Evans, 1866), p.19, p.16, p.36, and p.60.

<sup>33</sup> Desmond and Moore, *Darwin*, p.541.

<sup>34</sup> 'Important Sale', p.60.

<sup>35</sup> 'Important Sale', p.21, p.25, p.22.

<sup>36</sup> A separate auction to sell the house and grounds was held on 30 November 1866, and then again on 15 August 1867, owing to the first auction's failure. See Salt and Sons, 'The Mount, & Coton Hill, Shrewsbury' and Salt and Sons, 'The Mount, Shrewsbury: Particulars and Plan of a Very Valuable Freehold Mansion House and Grounds, Gardeners House, Building Sites & Land, to be sold by auction by Mr William Hall, at the George Hotel, Shrewsbury, on Thursday, August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1867' (Shrewsbury: Leake and Evans, 1867).

the site's even longer conceptual afterlife as a 'lost' garden, surviving only in fragments that often feel as transitory and elusive as the ceramic pieces that Hooker unsuccessfully tried to purchase in 1866. Until 2013, the garden was completely subsumed into other landscapes and developments, traceable only in local stories and old maps. Its main textual repository, the Darwin family garden diary, is itself cloaked in a fitting aura of secrecy. Apparently purchased at auction over thirty years ago, the diary has not yet been made widely available to the scholarly community or to the public. Even Shropshire Wildlife Trust's restoration initiative for its two-acre plot appears to have been complicated by the difficulties of working on an extremely steep site liable to flooding and by ongoing debates about the extent to which the site should be left undeveloped to support wildlife. Many local residents feel that the site should not be developed at all owing to concerns about the impact of tourism.

When The Mount comes onto the market after the current lease expires in 2021, as is anticipated, changes to the garden are likely to be imminent. But in 2019, at least, the site continues to be difficult to access and largely undeveloped. The Trust-owned section of the site is not yet regularly open to the public and remains tantalisingly overgrown. Other remnants of the original site, along with its secret diary, are only explicable in fragments. Though the obscurity and wildness of the garden are at times frustrating for those who seek to study it, these very qualities also, as I shall argue below, contribute to its particular potential and appeal.

## 2. Twenty-first Century Darwins and The Uses of an Enchanted Garden

For some time now it has seemed that the two questions we should ask of any strong landscape are these: firstly, what do I know when I am in this place that I can know nowhere else? And then, vainly, what does this place know of me that I cannot know of myself?

Robert MacFarlane, *The Old Ways*.<sup>37</sup>

Particular places, Robert MacFarlane suggests, have the capacity to convey special, site-specific meanings. For MacFarlane, these become explicable through physical contact with and immersion in the given site: through walking riverside paths, climbing steep banks, or watching

---

<sup>37</sup> Robert MacFarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (London: Penguin, 2013), p.27.

the pattern of light on water. Darwin's garden, I felt upon first and repeated contact with it, has the capacity to impart a special kind of knowledge that is unique to its situation and history in just such a way. It is a charged and evocative space that has the capacity to contain conflicting ideas and forces. Within its boundaries are both nature and culture, myth and modernity, public and private histories, science and religion, competition versus community, progress and decline. The power of evolution, Gillian Beer has argued, lies in its capacity to sustain 'contradictory elements' that 'can serve as a metaphorical basis for more than one reading of experience' – and the same might be said of the garden as well.<sup>38</sup> To follow MacFarlane's train of thought in the quotation cited above, it is perhaps not too much to claim that the garden reveals us through how we attempt to appropriate it. What follows is one deliberately personal reading of the site's potential signification as an 'enchanted space' that enables us to connect more closely with a positive vision of a romantic, ecologically conscious Darwin who is of particular relevance to our times. Furthermore, this is a vision that the garden has the capacity to render accessible to a broad range of people, both within and beyond the scholarly community, and in the humanities as well as the sciences. As I shall show, I was able to put these ideas into practice at a 2016 public study day about the garden that may point the way towards further twenty-first century applications for the site.

In his exemplary work of personally-engaged, impassioned scholarship, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-Enchantment of the World*, George Levine makes a powerful case for the benefits of recognising a 'kinder, gentler' Darwin who provides 'an excellent figure around which to build an argument for the possibility of value and meaning in a world gone completely secular.'<sup>39</sup> This Darwin, he argues, provides a route towards rediscovering feelings of 'enchantment' and 'wonder' that have too often been viewed as incompatible with a scientific worldview.<sup>40</sup> In the course of his own 'long argument', Levine is at pains to claim that scientific rationality does not have to result in the narrative of modern disenchantment outlined by Max Weber, and to rescue Darwin from the darker readings of evolutionary theory promoted by social Darwinists in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>41</sup> Rather, Levine's readings of Darwin's work show how scientific enquiry can be paired with human feeling and romantic, poetic sensibility; qualities which, he argues, are explicable in the 'anthropomorphic'

---

<sup>38</sup> Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.6.

<sup>39</sup> Levine, *Darwin Loves You*, p.25, p. xiv.

<sup>40</sup> Levine, *Darwin Loves You*, p.24.

<sup>41</sup> Levine, *Darwin Loves You*, p.xxi.

but never ‘anthropocentric’ imagery and modes of focalisation that Darwin used to explicate his theory of evolution.<sup>42</sup>

Darwin’s childhood garden has the potential to become a material version of the space of enchantment that Levine identifies figuratively in Darwin’s life and work. Considering the garden’s private history enables us to connect more closely with the emotionally engaged family man who is central to Levine’s thesis. The garden’s physical identify as a literal *space* of enchantment also enables us to experience at first-hand something of the ‘beauty and infinite complexity’ that inspired Darwin’s characteristic attitude towards the natural world.<sup>43</sup> Through viscerally experiencing the riverside location, plants, and wildlife that helped shape Darwin’s imagination, visitors to the site are perhaps able to share in Darwin’s enthusiasm for the natural world to a greater extent than they would from reading what may now be viewed as his challenging and historically distant works.

The garden’s association with Darwin’s childhood also brings into view a specifically youthful manifestation of Darwin that plays an integral, if implicit, part within Levine’s thesis of enchantment. Levine’s model of a ‘kinder, gentler’ Darwin is predicated on his being a significantly *younger* Darwin too: ‘not the weary, disenchanted, long-bearded Darwin of the most famous images but an exuberant young lover of nature, feeling the enchantment he has long been accused of banishing.’<sup>44</sup> The younger Darwin was, after all, a poetic as well as a scientific man, who repeatedly turned to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* while he was on the *Beagle* and whose first ‘literary child’ – as he termed the narrative of scientific adventure now known as *The Voyage of the Beagle* – made him a popular author before he was a famous scientist.<sup>45</sup> It is this young ‘Romantic Darwin’ who has the strongest capacity to represent ‘the possibility of value and meaning’ in a secular world.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the years since the publication of Levine’s book have confirmed that the young, romantic Darwin is an ascendant figure in our broader popular culture, as well as within academia. Of the many works on Darwin published in recent years, several have focused on his youth, or have images of the younger Darwin, such as that

---

<sup>42</sup> Levine, *Darwin Loves You*, p.250.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.84.

<sup>44</sup> Levine, *Darwin Loves You*, p.208.

<sup>45</sup> Janet Browne and Michael Neve, ‘Introduction’, in Charles Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*, ed. by Janet Browne and Michael Neve (London: Penguin, 1989), p.3. For details of Darwin’s reading on the *Beagle*, see Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, p.27.

<sup>46</sup> Levine p.204 and p.xiv.



1  
2  
3 painted by George Richmond in 1840, on their covers.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, a small industry of books  
4 about Darwin and evolution aimed at children and young adults has flourished over the last  
5 decade.<sup>48</sup> Darwin's childhood garden is a natural locus for the examination and promotion of  
6 this inspiring twenty-first-century model of Darwin as young romantic, with particular  
7 applications for the education and engagement of children and young people. Several youth  
8 projects, spearheaded by Sara Lanyon for Shropshire Wildlife Trust, have already explored this  
9 potential. For instance, Lanyon's 'Young Darwins' project for the Trust involved a group of  
10 18-25 year olds in the restoration of the site and engaged them in the production of related  
11 community events and artwork.<sup>49</sup>

12  
13 If the garden's biographical connections to the young Darwin equip it to function as a  
14 contemporary space of enchantment, then its status as a *lost* garden also paradoxically  
15 contributes to this potential in enabling us to consider the limitations of all humanistic  
16 perspectives. While biographies and scholarly works about Darwin privilege human endeavour  
17 and activity, the garden in its present state requires us to remember that even Darwin is  
18 expendable within the wider natural systems that he helped to conceptualise – ultimately erased  
19 by the passage of time and the complex interactions of insects, plants, animals, and weather  
20 patterns working the site into wildness. For Darwin, to quote Love's workable definition of  
21 ecology, 'everything is connected to everything else' – each living organism bound up in  
22 multifarious 'mutual relations' with one another and with the wider environment in which the  
23 human has no privileged status.<sup>50</sup> Being in the garden enables us not only to come close to  
24 experiencing something approximate to Darwin's own sense of wonder in nature, but to go  
25 about 'confronting the not-ourselves everywhere' in the world of non-human organisms and  
26 forces that make the site what it is.<sup>51</sup>

27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60  

---

<sup>47</sup> See for instance Boulter, *Darwin's Garden* and Keith Thomson, *The Young Charles Darwin* (New Haven: Yale, 2009).

<sup>48</sup> See for example Jennifer Thermes, *Charles Darwin's Around-the-World Adventure* (New York: Abrams, 2016), Catherine Barr and Steve Williams, *The Story of Life: A First Book about Evolution* (London: Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 2015), and Sandra Markle, *Animals Charles Darwin Saw: An Around the World Adventure* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Lanyon is herself the author of a children's book about the young Darwin at The Mount, published in the name of Sara Bellis: *The Curious Mind of Young Darwin* (Telford: Field Studies Council, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> Glen A. Love, *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p.83.

<sup>51</sup> Levine, *Darwin Loves You*, p.271.



It is possible to view the decentring of human experience that attends evolutionary theory as dark and depressing, but equally viable to read more positive meaning into what Levine might term the garden's own 'anthropomorphic', as opposed to 'anthropocentric', history and identity.<sup>52</sup> Though the garden and its culture-making story have been dwarfed by the larger workings of the natural world, it is the wider reality of its green space that makes the human embroidery stitched onto it all the more poignant. It is moving, for instance, to read the interchanges about the garden that spanned the oceans between Darwin and his sisters, or to discover that The Mount and its gardens formed a sanctuary for two of Marianne's young adult children, Charles and Mary Parker, following her death in 1858.<sup>53</sup> Viewed in this way, Darwin's garden enables us to experience at close quarters something of the interplay between human and non-human elements that forms the bedrock of contemporary ecological consciousness, and of the ecocritical agenda that is its correlative within the field of humanities. As *Darwin's* lost garden, the site also speaks specifically to the imperative to rehabilitate Darwin himself into this ecocritical project, both as the 'wellspring of evolutionary thinking' that inevitably shapes our understanding of human culture and as the progenitor of a less widely acknowledged ecological vision that is of crucial importance in our current moment of environmental crisis.<sup>54</sup> Stepping into Darwin's childhood garden, whether literally or imaginatively, allows us to come closer to recognising an ecological vision of human situation within a wider natural context that is particularly pertinent for our times.

Read in this way, the value of the garden in its current underdeveloped form resides not so much in teaching us something new about Darwin as in enabling us to realise dimensions of his legacy that are of marked contemporary relevance in strikingly concrete ways. As I have argued, the site has the potential to connect us with Levine's vision of the 'enchanted' Darwin at visceral levels, and to bring to the fore the romantic, ecologically conscious dimensions of Darwin and his work that are implicit within that thesis.

### 3. The Darwin's Childhood Garden Study Day

---

<sup>52</sup> Levine, *Darwin Loves You*, p.250.

<sup>53</sup> Campbell, 'It's Situation', p.197, n.119; *1861 England Census*, Class: RG 9; Piece: 1874; Folio: 15; Page: 27; GSU roll: 542881. *Ancestry.com* <[https://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=8767&h=19741826&tid=&pid=&usePUB=true&\\_phsrc=VMV182&\\_phstart=succesSource](https://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=8767&h=19741826&tid=&pid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=VMV182&_phstart=succesSource)> [accessed 10 September 2019]

<sup>54</sup> Love, *Practical Ecocriticism*, p.49. The case for Darwin's recognition of 'ecological principles' in evolutionary theory is made by Love pp.49-50.

1  
2  
3 It was with a view to realising something of the potential of the garden as a ‘space of  
4 enchantment’ that I sought to co-organise a one-day public event in March 2016. The Darwin’s  
5 Childhood Garden Study Day was a collaboration between Shropshire Wildlife Trust and  
6 University Centre Shrewsbury, a new university centre set up by Shropshire County Council  
7 and the University of Chester. Working together with Sara Lanyon, for the Trust, we aimed to  
8 create an event that was inclusive, interdisciplinary, and inspiring, and that would also serve to  
9 raise interest in the garden restoration project, thus drawing upon the momentum generated by  
10 Lanyon’s youth engagement and education work at the garden. The event’s interdisciplinary  
11 scope was predicated upon both the different backgrounds of the two organisers, in heritage  
12 conservation and literature respectively, and my interest in using Darwin’s own wide-ranging  
13 interdisciplinary facility, particularly as a young man, as a model that could help break down  
14 contemporary divides between science and the arts and humanities.

15  
16 The final programme incorporated a range of diverse contributors and formats,  
17 including a lecture from garden historian Susan Campbell, a talk from botanist Mark Duffell  
18 about the site’s plant life, and a multidisciplinary panel event that aimed to address the site’s  
19 future development. My own workshop on Darwin’s literary and imaginative life explored  
20 links between his scientific methodologies and those employed by creative writers. The day  
21 centred upon a site visit attended by approximately thirty participants, including local people  
22 with an interest in Darwin or gardening, students, and academics.<sup>55</sup> Participants walked the  
23 short distance from the university to Hermitage Walk, through the grounds of The Mount house,  
24 down the steep path that leads across Doctor’s Field (Figure 5) and on into the Trust-owned  
25 section of the garden. Here, Sara Lanyon, Mark Duffell, and independent scholar Peter A. Boyd  
26 led us up the newly installed steps to the location of the original terrace walk. We felt that  
27 walking the garden path would enable us to experience the site’s potential as an enchanted  
28 space in a way that workshops and lectures could not. We also hoped that bringing participants  
29 together in an informal setting would foster connections between the diverse range of people  
30 who continue to share an interest in the garden’s future.

31  
32 The Darwin’s Childhood Garden Study Day never grew into the longer-term  
33 collaborative venture we had hoped it might become. Plans for the site’s development have  
34 stalled until at least 2021, when it is anticipated that the Trust will be part of a bid to purchase  
35 The Mount house and further sections of its grounds with local partners, including University  
36 Centre Shrewsbury. But on its own modest terms, the study day nevertheless succeeded in

37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60  

---

<sup>55</sup> Numbers were restricted due to the limited capacity of the Trust-owned section of the site.

showing how the garden might enable people to connect with Darwin's legacy in fresh and inspiring ways. Many participants used the words 'inspirational' or 'inspiring' to describe their experience in the feedback they supplied. Several reflected upon the fact that, as one respondent put it, the 'visit to the actual garden [was] a wonderful highlight.'<sup>56</sup> For now at least, Darwin's garden continues to exist as much in the mind as it does under foot, but it is to be hoped that the study day heralds a new and more accessible phase in its history.

## Conclusion

This article has aimed to introduce a broad range of readers to an important historical site and to make a case for its place within an understanding of Darwin's life, scientific work, and twenty-first century legacy. In keeping with my investment in ideas of Darwinian enchantment, I have also tried to allow some scope for the kinds of personal experiences and creative connections that are perhaps too often edited out of academic writing. In the spirit of such connections, and to return to the imagery with which this article began, I like to think that memories of the garden at The Mount may have interpenetrated Darwin's experiences of more exotic locations when he read Milton's description of Eden on his *Beagle* expeditions:

So on he fares and to the border comes  
Of Eden where delicious Paradise,  
Now nearer, crowns with her enclosure green  
As with a rural mound the champaign head  
Of a steep wilderness whose hairy sides  
With thicket overgrown, grotesque and wild,  
Access denied. (...) <sup>57</sup>

In following Darwin up the steep banks of his own lost paradise, I hope to have both increased access to the story of the garden and to have captured and capitalised upon something of its enchanting potential.

---

<sup>56</sup> Participants' comments are cited from the Darwin's Childhood Garden Study Day feedback forms, which I distributed at the end of the event. The form stated 'We hope that you enjoyed this event and we'd value your feedback', inviting respondents to provide comments on the blank page supplied.

<sup>57</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Gordon Teskey (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), IV 131-37.

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

Word count excluding footnotes: 5195.  
Word count including footnotes: 6525.

**Disclosure statement**

There is no potential conflict of interest connected with the publication of this essay.

**Figure Captions**

- Figure 1. The riverside path leading to Darwin’s garden. Photo: author.
- Figure 2. The section of the garden owned by Shropshire Wildlife Trust. Photo: author.
- Figure 3a. The kitchen garden at the corner of Drinkwater Street and Hermitage Walk in 1866. Detail of T. Tisdale’s ‘Plan of Property at The Mount in The Parish of St. Chad, Shrewsbury, for Sale by Auction, by Mr. W. Hall’, 1866. Photo: author. Courtesy of Shropshire Archives. Ref 6007/107.
- Figure 3b. Approaching the author’s former rented house on Hermitage Walk in 2016. The original kitchen garden wall can be seen to the left. Photo: author.
- Figure 4: Auction map of The Mount House and gardens. Detail of T. Tisdale’s ‘Plan of Property at The Mount’, 1867. Photo: author. Courtesy of Shropshire Archives. Ref D3651/B/165/51.
- Figure 5. Path leading through Doctor’s Field. Photo: author.



Figure 1. The riverside path leading to Darwin's garden. Photo: author.





Figure 2. The section of the garden owned by Shropshire Wildlife Trust. Photo: author.



Figure 3a. The kitchen garden in 1866. Detail of T. Tisdale's 'Plan of Property at The Mount in The Parish of St. Chad, Shrewsbury, for Sale by Auction, by Mr. W. Hall', 1866. Photo: author. Courtesy of Shropshire Archives. Ref 6007/107.





Figure 3b. Approaching the author’s former rented house on Hermitage Walk in 2016. The original kitchen garden wall can be seen to the left. Photo: author.



Figure 4: Auction map of The Mount House and gardens. Detail of T. Tisdale's 'Plan of Property at The Mount', 1867. Photo: author. Ref D3651/B/165/51. Courtesy of Shropshire Archives.

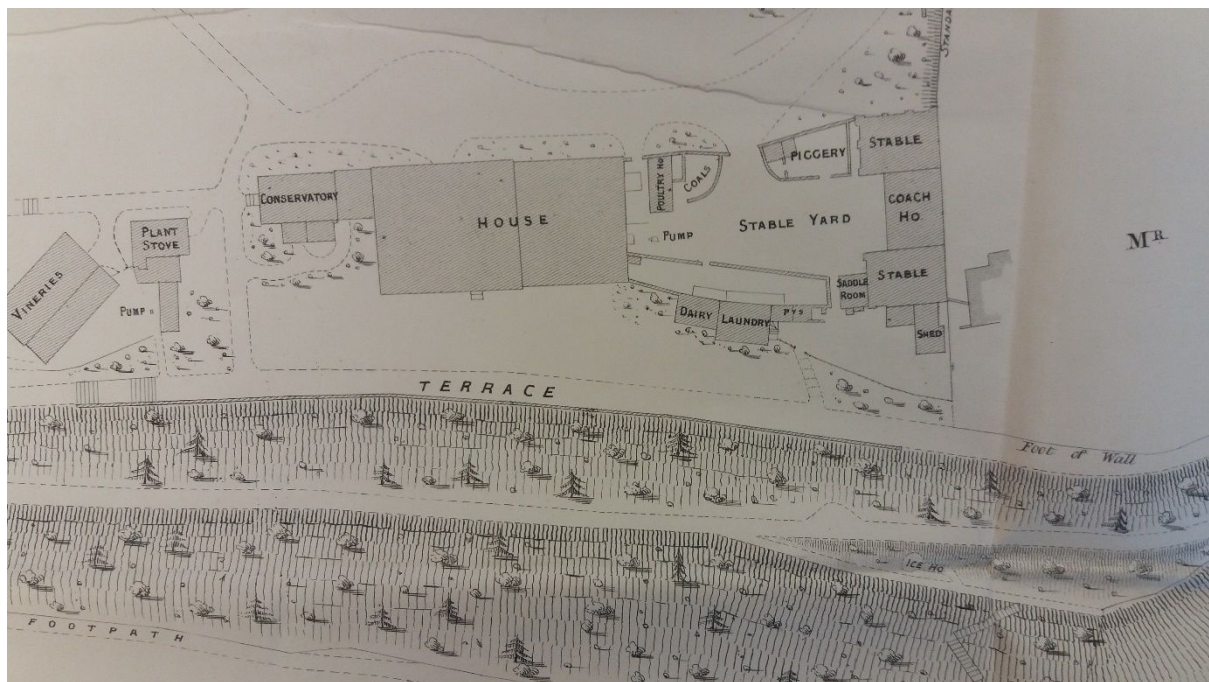




Figure 5. Path leading through Doctor’s Field. Photo: author.

