Charles Darwin was an English natural scientist who laid down a framework for the theory of evolution – showing how Man evolved from lower life forms. At the time, his research and publication led to bitter controversy, but his theory of evolution and natural selection became accepted within the scientific community.

Charles Darwin was born on 12 February 1809 in Shrewsbury, Shropshire. He was born into a wealthy and influential family. His grandfathers included – china manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood, and Erasmus Darwin, one of the leading intellectuals of 18th century England.

Darwin planned to study medicine at Edinburgh University, but later, at the instigation of his father, changed to studying Divinity at Christ’s College, Cambridge University. Darwin was not a great student, preferring to spend time in outdoor pursuits, he spent a lot of time examining natural science and beetle collecting. After gaining a passionate interest in natural science, Darwin was offered a place on the HMS Beagle to act as natural scientist on a voyage to the coast of South America.

At the time, religion was a powerful force in society, and most people took the Bible as the infallible, literal word of God. This included the belief that God created the world in seven days, and the world was only a few thousand years old. However, on the voyage, Darwin increasingly began to see evidence of life being much older. In particular Lyell’s ‘Principles of Geology’ suggested that fossils were evidence of animals living hundreds of thousands of years ago.

On the voyage, Darwin made copious notes about specimens he found on his voyages. In particular, at the Galapagos Islands 500 miles west of South America, Darwin was struck by how the Finch was different on each individual island. He noticed that the Finch had somehow adapted to the different aspects of the particular island.

Over the next 20 years, Darwin worked on the dilemma of how species evolve and can end up being quite different on different islands. Influenced by the work of Malthus, Darwin came up with a theory of natural selection and gradual evolution over time.

In the struggle for survival, the fittest win out at the expense of their rivals because they succeed in adapting themselves best to their environment.

– Charles Darwin

Darwin continued to refine his theory, and would intensively breed plants to work on his theories. However, realising how controversial his ideas were, Darwin delayed publishing them. It was not until learning that another naturalist, Alfred Russel Wallace, had developed similar ideas, that Darwin was galvanised into publishing his own book.
In 1859, the ground-breaking ‘On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection’ was published. It immediately gained widespread interest and attention, leading to intense debate about the contention that man – by implication was descended from animals like the Ape.

Owing to this struggle for life, any variation, however slight and from whatever cause proceeding, if it be in any degree profitable to an individual of any species, in its infinitely complex relationship to other organic beings and to external nature, will tend to the preservation of that individual, and will generally be inherited by its offspring.

– Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species* (1859)

However, by the time he died on 19 April 1882, his ideas had increasingly become accepted – at least by the scientific and non-religious society. He was given a state burial at Westminster Abbey.

**Darwin’s Religious Beliefs**

Darwin was brought up in the Church of England, and at one point was being trained to be an Anglican priest. Like many of his generation, he took the Bible as the literal word of God, and often quoted it as a source of moral authority. However, after his epic voyage to South America, he became doubtful of the Bible as a source of history; he also felt no reason why all religions couldn’t be true.

From 1849, he stopped going to church, though he never considered himself to be an atheist. He felt that ‘agnostic’ suited his beliefs more closely. He wrote in his autobiography that he eventually gave up Christianity as he disagreed with the conclusion that all non-believers spend eternity in hell.

I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished.

He was politically liberal, being an opponent of slavery. He experienced the brutality of how people treated their slaves in a Spanish colony.

I have watched how steadily the general feeling, as shown at elections, has been rising against Slavery. What a proud thing for England if she is the first European nation which utterly abolishes it!

*Letter to J. S. Henslow (March 1834)*


**Facts about Charles Darwin**

1. He was the grandson of Josiah Wedgwood the famous furniture manufacturer.
2. He studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh but found lectures dull.
3. He learned taxidermy from John Edmonstone, a freed black slave.
4. Darwin became an enthusiastic Beetle collector – which was a craze at the time.
5. His father sent him to Christ’s College, Cambridge with the intention of training him as an Anglican parson. He later gave up Christianity.
6. His five-year voyage on HMS Beagle established him as an eminent geologist and popular writer. His observations would be used to develop his theory of evolution.

7. He sometimes questioned his own scientific discoveries. ‘I feel most deeply that this whole question of creation is too profound for human intellect.’

8. In modified form, Darwin’s theory of evolution is now seen as the unifying theory of the life sciences.

9. On the new Galápagos Islands Darwin saw many samples of animals which showed relations to animals in other parts of the world, e.g. Mockingbirds in Chile.

10. During the Beagle expedition Darwin shipped home a total of 1,529 species preserved in spirit and 3,907 labelled dried specimens.

11. Darwin and Wallace’s theories on evolution were both presented on the same day in 1858 to the Linnean Society of London.

12. Darwin took 22 years from the end of the voyage to publish his findings – he was worried about the reaction of people. It is said the thought of Wallace publishing first, galvanised him into action.

13. The full title of Origin of Species is On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life.

14. Darwin did not coin the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’. It was added to the fifth edition of Origin of Species. The phrase came from economist Herbert Spencer.

15. Darwin has appeared on more UK stamps than anyone outside the Royal Family.

16. Seven months after the publication of ‘Origin of Species’ the famous 1860 Oxford evolution debate occurred between Thomas Henry Huxley and Bishop Samuel Wilberforce. The debate is considered to be a great moment in natural history – and a key moment in the acceptance of evolution.