

Charles Darwin and Overton

Did you realise that when you walk along the High Street in Overton that this is a street and village that the great Charles Darwin knew well? His connection with Overton was through his sister who married and lived here and Charles spent many happy holidays with her here in Overton.

The eldest of the Darwin children was Marianne, born in 1798 to her mother Emma Wedgwood and father Robert Darwin, the famous Shrewsbury doctor and financier. Their home was The Mount in Shrewsbury. Marianne was 11 when her youngest brother Charles was born. The Darwin and Wedgwood cousins spent much time together and Marianne traveled on holidays with them including staying in the fashionable towns of Bath and Scarborough.

Mrs. Darwin did not enjoy good health and the responsibility of looking after the youngest children including Charles fell to the eldest sisters, Marianne and Caroline. This continued, when in 1817 their mother died. Charles was only 8 years old and his eldest sisters replaced his mother in his affections. In 1824 Marianne married Henry Parker, a doctor and colleague of her father's. Charles and his father were witnesses at their marriage. Dr. Parker then decided to begin a country practice of his own and he and Marianne set up home in Overton. They lived at The Brow, Wrexham Road, Overton for the rest of their lives and here he and Marianne were to have 5 children, 4 boys and a girl. The teenage Charles was to be a frequent visitor.

Catherine and Sarah, the two other Darwin sisters, were regular visitors to Overton, although they were not impressed with Welsh weather, "*horrid rainy weather as is always the case there I think*". Despite the weather Marianne writes of the flower garden she created here, her interest in botany inherited from her mother, and also passed on to Charles.

When the young Charles left Shrewsbury School to go to Edinburgh University, Marianne looked after his favourite dog Spark in Overton "*as we need a watch dog and there is a profusion of rats and mice to kill.*" Dr Parker was very fond of Spark, "*she is privileged to go into any room in the house that she pleases*" and letters to Charles usually gave reassurances about the dog even before mention of their new baby,



Charles's new nephew Robert, who was born at Overton in 1825. But there was sad news next spring. Spark had run away after she had first come to Overton. A guinea reward was offered and a great many little black and white dogs were brought for inspection to The Brow. After two weeks she was discovered being looked after by the Rector, Dr Wynne. But after this excursion she was found to be having puppies, and their birth killed her. Very apologetic letters were sent to Charles at university.

The Brow

In 1829 in the first week of August Charles was staying in Overton to be godfather to his two eldest nephews, Robert aged 4 and Henry aged 2, baptized at St Mary's Church, Overton. By 1831 there were 4 boys, the fourth named after his Uncle Charles who was about to set sail on his famous voyage on the ship "The Beagle".

During his famous voyage Charles wrote to all his family and they all wrote to him with all the family news. From these letters we hear about life in Overton. Marianne taught her young boys at home, *"Master Robert (the eldest, also known as Parky) went through the whole of your voyage as a geographical lesson so Marianne makes profit as well as pleasure from your letters."* And Marianne's sister Caroline writes in 1833! *"I finished my last letter at Overton, Parky and Henry feel proud in finding the place on the map where their Uncle Charles is – Parky is growing very manly, coming on nicely in his Latin and the most regular flirt I ever behold."*

In May 1834 Marianne's sister Susan writes, *"I am just come from Overton, you cannot think what nice little boys all your 4 nephews are. Marianne had serious thoughts of sending Parky to school this summer as he will be 9 next Sept. However instead she has got a Schoolmaster from Overton to come and put Latin into him every day which is a very good thing; for he is happy and good at home that I shall be very sorry when he is sent to school."* In March 1835 Caroline writes *"Cath is at Overton, gone to comfort Marianne for the approaching separation from Parky who goes to Oswestry (School) at Easter."*

But illness struck. *"Marianne has been suffering a good deal of anxiety this month owing to Parky having got Scarlet fever at his school on Oswestry and he had it so severely that he could not be moved. Marianne went there to nurse him and was several nights without sleep, which quite knocked her up. She is expecting to be confined in January so she was not at all in a fit state for such exertion. She has however not caught the fever and now as it is 3 weeks since we hope she will certainly escape. Parky is now at Overton and Caroline is there whilst we have the three younger boys here (the Mount in Shrewsbury) and they are the best and nicest little men you ever saw, and often talk of Uncle Charles with awe and reverence."*

The young man had recovered by December 1835 and the boys were staying at the Mount, the Darwin's family home in Shrewsbury for Christmas. *"We have had a weeks visit from Parky in his Christmas holidays. He is such a big fine spirited lad of 10 years old enjoying everything to the utmost, especially going on the box of his Grandpapa's carriage which was his great pleasure, hoping to be trusted with the reins for a few minutes. He rode over from Overton to Shrewsbury on his pony and is a capital horseman."*

In January 1836 Marianne had her 5th child, a much longed for little girl, and the news was quickly sent to Charles on the Beagle *"which has made Marianne excessively happy. She is a very nice little thing and is to be called Mary Susan. Parky is grown a famous fine lad and gets on capital at school being now head of his class. He says he remembers his Uncle Charles."*

Charles Darwin wrote a letter to the family in Overton from Valparaiso in April 1835, *"I suppose the young gentlemen will be a troop of grenadiers by the time I return. What a gang of little ones have come in to the world since I left England."*

In 1836 'The Beagle' returned to England after its 4 year voyage around the world. And Charles Darwin began the work on the fossils and observations he had made, that would lead him to the writing of the "Origin of Species" and world fame. But first he wrote *"my fossil bones are all unpacked at the College of Surgeons, some of them are turning out great treasures ... but first a couple of days...and Overton"*.

Marianne died in 1858 at the age of 60, two years after her husband's death. She and her husband are buried in the churchyard of St Mary's Parish Church, Overton. Charles wrote on hearing of her death *"a blessed relief after long continued & latterly very severe suffering"*.

In the following year, 1859, "The Origin of Species" was published, and the world would never forget Marianne's youngest brother.



The tomb of Marianne and Henry Parker next to the north wall, St. Mary's Parish Church, Overton