

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Sedgwick Museum
of Earth Sciences

Darwin Rocks

Remarkable exhibition reveals Darwin's life-long love of stone collecting

Charles Darwin is best known for his work on species, but a new exhibition opening at Cambridge University this week reveals another side to one of its most famous sons.

Aimed at debunking the popular image of Darwin as a white-bearded, old naturalist, *Darwin the Geologist*, at the Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences, tells an entirely different story.

The new exhibition projects the image of Darwin as a young, energetic field scientist, whose grounding and early training as a geologist informed much of his work on the *Beagle* and his fledgling career after returning to England.

Exhibition organiser Dr Francis Neary said: "Charles Darwin had an early passion for geology that stayed with him throughout his life. His collecting of rocks and fossils on the *Beagle* made his reputation as a scientist. His first theories and scientific publications were all concerned with geological topics.

"Many of Darwin's geological theories have been proved right by new evidence gathered in the 20th century. His ideas about continental uplift paved the way for the important unifying theory of plate tectonics in the 1960s.

"His theory about the formation of coral reefs by the subsidence of old, inactive volcanoes was confirmed by drilling into reefs by the US government in the 1950s, as part of their research for the testing of nuclear bombs."

“Unlike many of his animal and plant specimens, Darwin kept his geological collection close by him during his lifetime. It was only donated to the Sedgwick Museum by one of his sons after Darwin’s wife’s death in 1896. This is clear evidence of the importance that Darwin placed on his geological specimens.”

On permanent display at the Sedgwick will be some of its vast collection of 2,000 rocks and fossils collected by Darwin while on HMS *Beagle* from 1831-6.

Darwin’s own pistol, hand lenses and field notebook are also on display in a reconstruction of what Darwin’s *Beagle* cabin might have looked like after a day of collecting rocks on Wollaston Island (south of Chile), as well as four of his *Beagle* dry specimen catalogues.

The exhibition also features a bust of Darwin as a young man by sculptor Anthony Smith.

The aim of *Darwin the Geologist* is to focus on the making of Darwin’s scientific career, before his life-changing publication of *On the Origin of Species*, decades later.

During his early geological work, Darwin amassed a collection that took on a life of its own as it was re-interpreted by other scientists, as well as being used as a promotional tool by Darwin himself to create scientific social networks. He used the collection to build his reputation as a scientist and often sent samples to renowned experts to identify.

Neary added: “The exhibition is a unique opportunity to see important parts of a complete collection that Darwin made on his travels around the world 175 years ago and to learn how Darwin used it to make pioneering contributions to the science of geology.”

As well as Darwin's *Beagle* specimens, the centrepiece of the exhibition is a Magic Planet globe that projects moving images of the Earth onto a plastic sphere. The globe traces the route of the *Beagle* voyage, triggering content about Darwin's experiences on the voyage at the location where specific samples in the exhibition were collected.

Funding for Darwin the Geologist was provided by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Entry to the Downing Street Museum is free from Monday-Friday, 10am-1pm and 2pm-5pm and on Saturdays from 10am-4pm.

For further details visit <http://www.sedgwickmuseum.org/>

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Note to Editors

1. The Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences is the oldest established Museum at the University of Cambridge (having been founded in 1728). Its collections of over 1.5 million specimens have received the accolades of Designation and Accreditation because of their national and international importance. Since the mid 1990s it has been undergoing a period of renovation and refurbishment.

2. Charles Darwin attended Christ's College, Cambridge, between 1828 and 1831.

3. Cambridge is home to the vast majority of Darwin's output, including specimens from his voyage on the *Beagle*, manuscripts, correspondences, working papers, notebooks and journals.