

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

DOWN HOUSE

Auteur(s) : Historic England <https://historicengland.org.uk/>

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**DOWN HOUSE**

Name: DOWN HOUSE

County: Greater London Authority

District: Bromley (London Borough)

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.327670  
Longitude: 0.052121219  
National Grid Reference: TQ 43074 60729  
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden  
Grade: II  
List Entry Number: 1000358  
Date first listed: 27-Sep-1988

## Details

A mid C19 garden which surrounds Down House, the home of Charles Darwin from 1842 to 1882. Darwin used the garden at Down as a living and working laboratory.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Down House and 7ha of land was purchased for Charles Darwin by his father in 1842. Little is known of the property before this time except that the Rev James Drummond lived there in 1840. Drummond owned 6.5ha of land and the contemporary Tithe map shows a large field, Home Meadow, to the south and west of the House, a small area of pleasure ground near to the House, and a long narrow enclosure named as 'garden' to the south-west. The main attraction of Down House for Darwin was its quietness. Between 1843 and 1846 substantial work was carried out on the House and gardens and at the same time Darwin purchased land to the north, the North Orchard, and to the south-west, Sandwalk Wood. The estate was further enlarged in 1881 when land to the west of the North Orchard was purchased.

Darwin used much of the garden for his scientific experiments and the buildings reflect this interest. Records show that in 1855 work started on an hexagonal pigeon house; the exact position is not known and it had been removed by 1869 (OS). Work on the greenhouse started in the winter of 1862.

After Darwin's death in April 1882 Down House became the summer home for his widow; after her death in 1896 the family let the House, first as a private residence and then in 1907 to Miss Willis who established Downe House School. In 1922 Miss Willis' school moved to Newbury, but Downe House continued to be used as a school. In 1927 the property was put up for sale. Sir Keith Howard, then president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, proposed that the site should be preserved as a memorial to Darwin. The funds were provided by Sir George Buckston Browne and Down House was opened to the public in June 1929. Alterations to the House and garden, including to the greenhouse which was reduced in size, are attributed to this phase of occupation. In 1952 the property was offered to the Royal College of Surgeons, who in May 1996 sold it to English Heritage, in whose ownership it remains (1998).

### DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Down House is situated c 500m to the south of the village of Downe. Biggin Hill airfield lies c 1km to the south-west, the village of Luxted c 1km to the south, and the town of Bromley 8.5km to the north. The site is bounded to the north by the backs of the houses in West Hill, to the east by Luxted Road, and to

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the south and west by pasture land. The 7ha gardens lie to the north-west, west, and south of the House on fairly level ground, with fine views to the west over the Kentish countryside.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The front, entrance court to the east of the House is separated from Luxted Road by a flint wall. Luxted Road was lowered by Darwin when he altered the approach to the House in 1843; he closed the entrance on the north side of the House and moved it to its present location on the long east front, building a fine tall flint wall, now lowered, to screen the House from the road. The entrance to the side court, to the south of the House, is dominated by a mature beech tree to the north.

The modern (late C20) visitors' approach to the House and garden is by a gravel path from the car park (the former paddock) to the north-west of the House. The gravel path leads south-east along the east boundary of the North Orchard across the terrace, added to the north-west front of the House in the early C20, to the pleasure grounds.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** White-painted and with a roof of grey slate, Down House (listed grade I) is situated to the north-east of the site, c 20m south-west of Luxted Road. It was built in 1788 for George Butler but may have earlier origins (Lea 1995). With a growing family it soon became necessary for Darwin to enlarge the House: the bay on the west side was added in 1845, the service wing to the south in 1846, and the north-west wing, which contains Darwin's study, in 1858. The verandah was added to the garden side of the north-west wing in 1872.

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** Lying to the south-west of the House, the main pleasure grounds comprise a level area of lawn ornamented, in front of the verandah, by four rectangular and four circular cut beds which contain bedding plants and small shrubs. These beds survive from the original C19 scheme which consisted of six rectangular beds and several more circular ones (Miele 1996). The sundial now in the centre of these beds was moved a few metres in c 1997 from its former position near the House. Two lime trees, all that survive from a line extended by Darwin from earlier C19 planting, and a mound planted with shrubs, provide shelter to the lawn and separate it from the North Orchard. The lawn is enclosed to the north-west and south-east by more low mounding, all of which was made from the spoil excavated when Darwin lowered Luxted Road. The trees Darwin planted on the mounds, and which augmented the existing plantings, are over mature and some have been replaced with young specimen trees. Two yew trees which stood to the south of the pleasure grounds were used by the Darwin children to hang their swing and behind another tree there once was a heap of sand for them to dig in. Located c 30m south-west of the sundial, under a large Spanish chestnut on the western edge of the lawn is a worm stone, an experiment by Darwin's son to measure the soil-moving activity of earthworms. The original stone is believed (McRobie 1998) to have been substituted in 1929 and may not be in exactly the same position. A long gravel walk extends south-west from the south-west front of the House to the kitchen garden. Most of the C19 roses which in Darwin's day decorated either side of this path and clothed an arbour part way down the path, have gone, but rhododendrons, camellias, and herbaceous plants thrive.

To the south of the verandah a gravel path leads between the House and the edge of the lawn to a mature mulberry tree, the path then turning slightly west before continuing south for c 20m to meet with the wooden gate to the adjoining cottage garden. Here the path turns west again to run another c 20m between the cottage garden and a mound planted with mature trees, until it meets with the gate to Home Meadow (outside the area here registered) to the south. The pleasure grounds were extended to the south in the mid C20 by taking in land from Home Meadow and resetting the fence/hedge line further to the south. This altered the openness of the garden to the country and the original proportions of the lawn.

The North Orchard, to the north of the pleasure grounds, was extended when land to the west was purchased in 1845 and 1881. It is bounded to the north and west by a flint and brick wall and is divided from the kitchen garden by a brick wall faced on the orchard side with flints. The Orchard, which is screened from the House by the remains of a shelter belt, was replanted in the 1960s and is today (1998) laid to grass and subdivided by a yew hedge. Paths are still discernable in the lawns, which are scattered with more recent ornamental and fruit trees; some older trees remain though their age is uncertain. The remains of the hard tennis court (1881) survive at the western end.

**KITCHEN GARDEN** The kitchen garden is a long narrow strip of ground to the south-west of the pleasure grounds, outlined and named as a garden on the 1840 Tithe map. Walled to the north and east, hedged on the south, and fenced on the west, the kitchen garden is still cultivated in parts. It retains a path edged with box to the north which runs alongside the hedge from the

pleasure grounds to the Long Walk (see below). Darwin used the area not only as a productive kitchen garden but also as the location for many of his experiments with plants.

Set against the north side of the brick wall which divides the kitchen garden from the North Orchard are the remains of Darwin's greenhouse complex. Work on the greenhouse, which was built in four phases, commenced in the winter of 1862 starting with the hot house. Early in 1863 Darwin requested stove plants from Joseph Hooker, the director of Kew Gardens (qv). A month after this request a greenhouse was added to the west, and by 1869 a further two bays had been added in this direction (OS 1868(9)). A fifth bay was added in 1881. The greenhouse complex was probably augmented (Miele 1996) by a lean-to structure and experimental beds close by. Refurbished in 1997, the greenhouse, of which only two of the five bays survive, houses (1998) specimens of orchids and carnivorous plants similar to those used by Darwin in his later experimental work. Against the north side of this kitchen garden wall is Darwin's brick-built laboratory which connected with the greenhouse. Built c 1881, the laboratory now consists of the brick shell of the lean-to building. Some 10m to the west of the greenhouse the wall is breached by an entrance through to the orchard and the tennis court. The wall continues for another 100m with occasional fruit trees trained against it. In the south-west corner of the kitchen garden is a high wooden door through which the path continues, immediately crossed by the public footpath running north-west from Luxted Road to the now derelict Buckstone Browne Research Farm which was added to the Down estate c 1930.

**OTHER LAND** At the junction with the public footpath, the path from the kitchen garden turns sharply to the south, past the stump of a hollow beech tree (known by the Darwin children as the 'elephant foot') and continues along the west side of Home Meadow. The Long Walk, which is open to Home Meadow to the east and is bordered to the west by a hawthorn hedge and mature chestnut trees, leads c 150m to Sandwalk Wood. Darwin first leased (1846) and later purchased (1847) this 0.6ha strip of land adjoining Home Meadow and the cricket field to the south. The Darwins further planted the wooded bank or Shaw, which already formed the eastern boundary to this land, and encircled it with a gravel and sand path, the Sand Walk (refurbished 1998). Darwin regularly walked along the path and it was popular with the children who named the west side, with its views across the falling land to Snotsdale Wood and Biggin Hill, 'the light side'. The east side of the Sand Walk, which was screened from the adjacent meadow by trees and hollies, was known as 'the dark side'. An alternative route back to the House was provided c 1868 (OS) by a footpath which ran from the north-east corner of the Sand Walk along the southern and eastern boundaries of Home Meadow. This route had gone out of use by 1895 (OS). At the southern end of the Sand Walk the Darwins had a summerhouse, since demolished.

#### REFERENCES

R Lea, Down House, Bromley: Notes on the Historical Development of the House, (English Heritage 1995) C Miele, Darwin's Garden, The Estate and Gardens at Down House, Bromley: A Preliminary Assessment, (English Heritage 1996) [Note: The above report forms the basis for ongoing research by English Heritage and contains numerous other references and illustrations.]

L Mcrobie, Charles Darwin's Estate: Down House, Kent, (Management Plan 1998)

Maps Tithe map, 1840 (PRO Kew) Leonard Darwin, Sketch of the planting at Down House, 1931 (reproduced in Miele 1996)

Map of Down House, c 1930 (after conversion to Buckston Brown Research Farm), (reproduced in Miele 1996)

OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1868-9 2nd edition surveyed 1895-6

Description written: April 1998 Register Inspector: LCH Edited: November 2001

## Legal

This garden or other land is registered under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 within the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens by Historic England for its special historic interest.