

DARWIN CELEBRATIONS IN CAPE TOWN: A GRAND TRIBUTE TO A CURIOUS MIND

Simon's Town Jetty | Sunday, 20 April 2025

On a crisp and windy autumn Sunday, the Simon's Town Jetty was transformed into a hub of heritage, science and celebration, as a bust of Charles Darwin was unveiled—marking a momentous tribute to one of history's most influential thinkers. The unveiling crowned months of tireless dedication and vision from renowned ichthyologist and science communicator, Professor Mike Bruton, whose quiet resolve turned a dream into a historic reality.

Anchored gracefully in Simon's Bay, the 108-year-old tall ship *Oosterschelde*, flagship of the global *Darwin200* voyage, welcomed curious minds aboard with warm coffee, biscuits, and guided tours that traced the legacy of Darwin's own five-year voyage aboard the HMS *Beagle*. Ferries brought guests to and from the ship throughout the morning, setting the tone for a day that honoured the spirit of discovery.



By early afternoon, a buzz of anticipation filled the jetty as the formal unveiling ceremony commenced. Master of Ceremonies Professor Mike Bruton opened proceedings with warmth and passion before the Deputy Mayor of Cape Town, Councillor Eddie Andrews, delivered a stirring welcome, reminding those gathered of Cape Town's deep connection to the global scientific journey.



Additional speakers enriched the event with layered perspectives: Roger Bagshaw of the Simon's Town Historical Society brought historical context; Andrew Jones of the Cape Town Heritage Foundation spoke on behalf of the main donor; and Dr John Rogers emphasised the important role that the Geological Society of South Africa plays in conserving and interpreting our geological heritage.

When the sculptor, Johan Steyn, addressed the audience, he spoke modestly and with artistic conviction, describing how capturing Darwin's spirit of curiosity and humility had been both a challenge and a privilege. "Sometimes," he said, "the statue must speak for itself."



In a poignant highlight, Darwin's own great-great-grandson, Andrew Darwin, stood before the crowd to reflect on the enduring legacy of his ancestor, before unveiling the bronze

bust—a powerful likeness sculpted by Johan Steyn, one of South Africa’s most celebrated artists, whose work graces many of the country’s coins. In a touching moment, Steyn presented miniature versions of the bust to both Andrew Darwin and Professor Bruton, honouring their roles in keeping Darwin’s legacy alive.



Deputy Mayor Councillor Eddie Andrews, Mrs Lucy Darwin, Andrew Darwin and Professor Mike Bruton with the sculpture of the “young” Charles Darwin

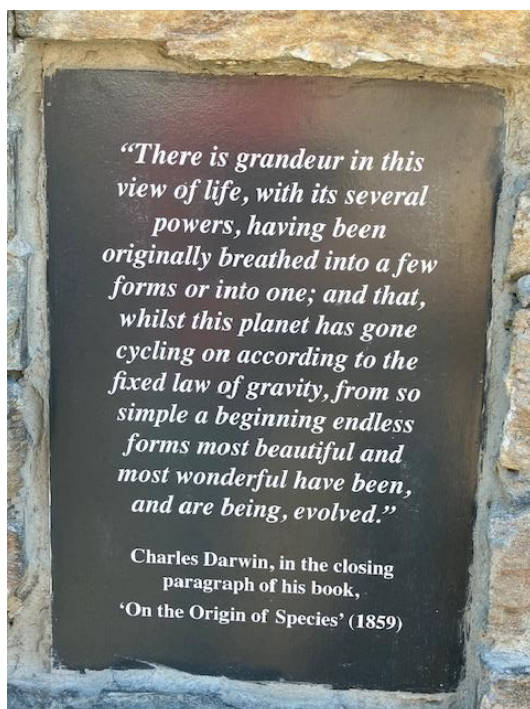
After two years of studying medicine at the University of Edinburgh, Darwin changed direction and enrolled at the University of Cambridge to study theology, however his true passion lay in geology. During his 1836 stopover in Cape Town, he spent 19 days in the company of scientific minds, none more influential than Sir John Herschel, the eminent astronomer at the Royal Cape Observatory. It was Herschel who urged the young Darwin not to remain a mere collector of specimens or a chronicler of natural oddities, but to “form bold hypotheses and prove them.”

This intellectual provocation, along with Darwin’s visit to the Sea Point Contact—where molten granite had intruded into ancient shale—played a pivotal role in crystallising Darwin’s ideas of geological time, transformation, and ultimately, evolution. In honour of

that formative moment, new interpretive plaques have been installed at the Sea Point Contact, forever linking this dramatic geological seam with Darwin's developing theory of life.

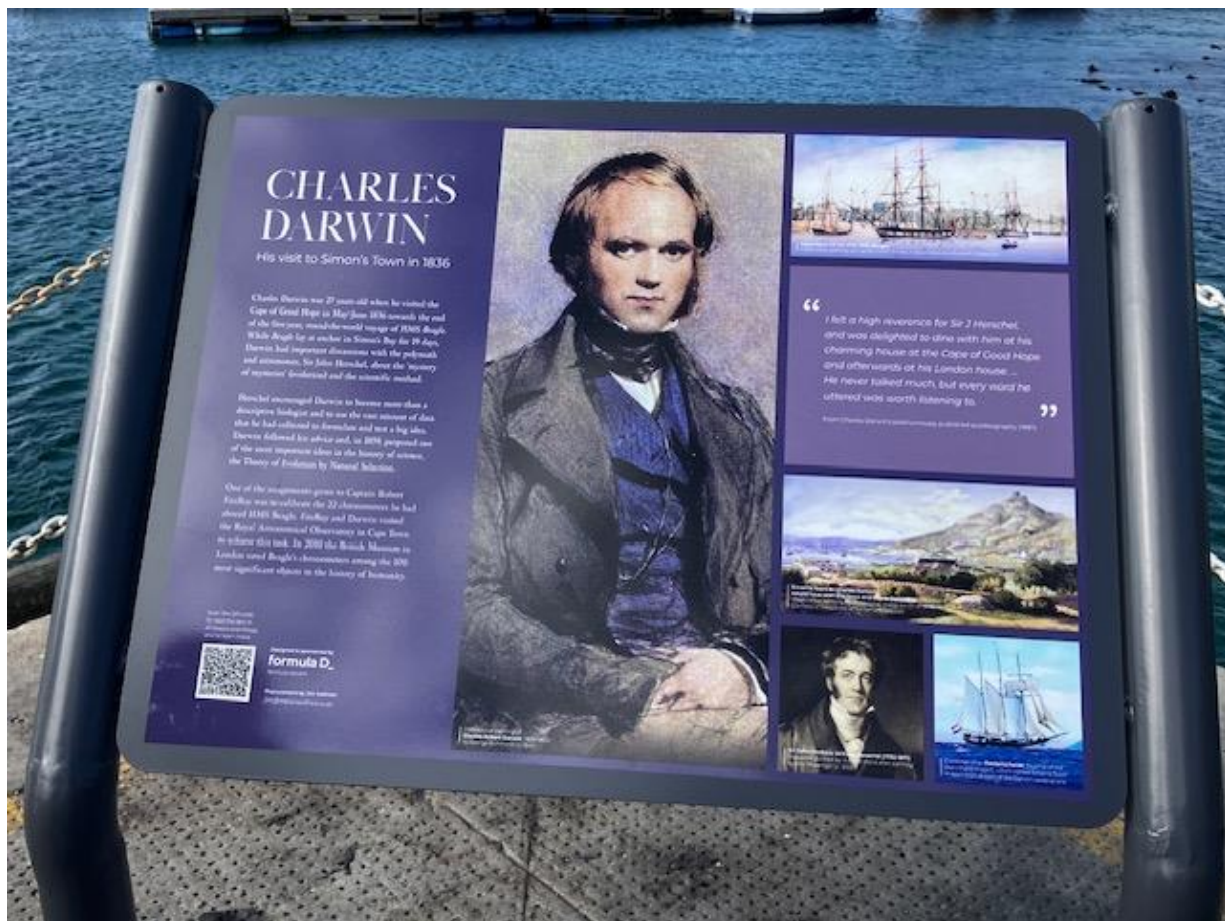


Professor Bruton closed the ceremony with heartfelt remarks, tying together the day's themes of science, heritage and human imagination. Quoting the closing paragraph of *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Bruton reminded the audience of Darwin's timeless message:



The celebration continued, with five of the next generation of scientists from across Africa (*Darwin 200 Leaders*) presenting their research, bringing fresh energy and relevance to Darwin's legacy. The day ended with a gala performance of *Darwin. A Curious Mind*, a new play by Sir Alexander McCall Smith in the Simon's Town City Hall. Performed by the acclaimed South African duo Nicholas and Elizabeth Ellenbogen, with Andrew Roux as the young Darwin, the play offered an intimate and moving portrayal of the man behind the monumental ideas.

From the creaking deck of the *Oosterschelde*, to the Simon's Town Jetty, from the ancient rocks of Sea Point to the theatre stage, the event was a living tribute to the power of curiosity, courage, and continuity. It reminded all present that the seeds of world-changing ideas can be sown anywhere—even on a windswept shoreline at the southern tip of Africa.



(By Siegi and Irene Juhnke, 21 April 2025)