

Erasmus Darwin's Commonplace Book

What is the significance of this book?

Is it the most significant object in the EDH collection? It's certainly not the most valuable object (in financial terms) in the collection. So what makes it so special? – it's value lies in that it gives us a glimpse into his mind – who he was. An insight into his concerns, personality & interests – of which we know he had many! So it's a useful object for us to have – to be able to understand who he was enables us to interpret him better for our visitors.

What is a Commonplace Book?

Wikipedia describes them as 'scrapbooks', a way to compile knowledge – a place to store anything – recipes, quotes, letters, poems, prayers, influences and inspirations. They were often used by students for remembering useful concepts.

At the front of the Commonplace Book it is printed with 'Bells Commonplace Book, Founded generally on the principles, recommended and practised by, Mr Locke'. John Locke was an English Enlightenment Philosopher who wrote *A New Method of Making a Commonplace Book* in 1706, in which techniques for entering ideas were formulated. He also gave advice on how to arrange material by subject and category. He stressed that Commonplace books are *not* journals, which are chronological and introspective.

Each Commonplace Book is unique to its creator. It starts life with empty pages and begins to be filled with, in our case, the personality and passions of its writer.

Marcus Aurelius (Roman emperor who died in 180AD), Thomas Jefferson, Napoleon & Bill Gates – all kept/keep one.

Common people also kept them – e.g. our true understanding of the Civil War comes from the notebooks & diaries which the soldiers kept.

'Commonplacing', as it is known, became a recognised practice by the 17th C but in recent years hasn't remained so popular.

Some people have gone so far as to say 'blogging' is a form of commonplacing, and that Pinterest is a modern day equivalent of the Commonplace Book! The internet is taking over from paper.

History of the Book

ERASMUS Darwin wrote the book between 1776 – 1787 while he lived in Lichfield and at Radburn Hall in Derby. When he died the book passed to...

-- Elizabeth Pole, who died in 1832. After including a few family details it went to

-- Sir Francis Sacheverel Darwin – son of Elizabeth, then to

(Mary Jane Darwin – daughter of Francis, made some additions)

-- Reginald Darwin – son of Francis, it was then borrowed by cousin CHARLES

-- Sacheverel Charles Darwin, died 1900 – son of Reginald

-- Rev Darwin Wilmot – cousin of Sacheverel

-- Leonard Darwin (last surviving son of Charles) was sent the book in 1929 with a letter from Rev Wilmot requesting it should be given to the Curator at Down House which was, by then, a museum. This letter is stuck to the outside front cover. Since then English Heritage have cared for it until it was loaned to EDH in June 1999.

A microfilm of the book was made in the 1970's. Desmond King-Hele (Darwin's only biographer) printed out the microfilm on to A3 sheets on 2nd Nov 1999 after receiving permission from English Heritage and George P Darwin, the copyright holder. The copy of the book we have on display for visitors comes from Desmond's printout.

The Book is in good condition – English Heritage check it every 5 years, along with all of their other objects

What does this book show us?

Erasmus numbered the pages 1-160 – although accidentally missed out page 134. Most of the pages are filled by Erasmus, although 6 are blank.

Others contain such topics as follows

- 63 pages on inventions
- 60 on medical topics
- 17 on meteorology
- 7 on chemistry
- 7 on other topics (botany, gardening, music)