Each February Shrewsbury marks the birthday of Charles Darwin with lectures and meetings celebrating aspects of his life and work. Bicton cannot claim any special link to him except by being part of the countryside near the family home on The Mount, over which he would have wandered in his youth, both collecting and shooting. He certainly passed by on the way to his girlfriend at Woodhouse near Rednal. Also, his father Robert, a doctor, is likely to have visited his patients amongst the gentry around here and in the end was himself buried in Montford churchyard.

Charles did not enjoy his education at Shrewsbury School, but nevertheless, a seated statue of him in later life was erected outside the old building (now the library). Since Shrewsbury can only claim association with his earliest years, a recent youthful statue of him erected at the School's Kingsland site is far more relevant. Bicton residents who belong to the Mytton Oak Medical Practice may be familiar with a small version of this statue in its waiting room.

Elsewhere in the Town, a strange structure now stands at the head of Mardol, which authorities claim to be another Darwin monument, but any connection is far from obvious. More logically, it can represent the collaboration between Thomas Telford, who reintroduced Nesscliffe stone into his work (e.g. Montford Bridge), and ironmaster William Hazeldine of Coleham, who produced the metalwork for his bridges. Judge for yourself when out shopping.

Father Robert wanted Charles to be a doctor in his footsteps and therefore sent him to Edinburgh, one of the best medical schools in the kingdom (famous for the Burke and Hare body scandals). Unfortunately, Charles had no stomach for it and instead he chose to go to Cambridge to study theology. This may seem a strange choice for a budding scientist, but Charles thought that a life as a country parson could give him spare time to pursue his interests in natural history. We have already remarked how our very small modern clergy team must serve six churches 'around the loop' where at least five Victorian clergy once operated.

At this time, the ancient universities were still dominated by the established church, so that it could also be politic to be ordained as part of a career teaching other subjects. Charles as a student used his spare time to get involved with the geological and biological interests of such academics, which were to be of greater use to him when invited to join the voyage of the Beagle. As they say, the rest is history.

One problem with the fame which his later work brought him is that one tends to forget how many others contributed ideas and knowledge at various stages in his life. In his youth, for instance, there were already several enthusiastic naturalists in the town with whom he could associate. In a way, they were all heirs to the eighteenth century 'enlightenment', which sought to view the world in a fresh, logical way, without the burden of superstition. His grandfather Erasmus of Lichfield, for instance, was a member of the Lunar Society, a Midlands-based group of intellectuals and pioneer industrialists including Josiah Wedgewood, pushing forward the frontiers of technology, which drove the Industrial Revolution. Then, in Edinburgh, Charles would have found himself in one to the 'hot spots' of the whole European enlightenment buzzing with new radical ideas.

The Industrial Revolution was now exploiting ever more of the Country's mineral wealth, while also digging for canals and roads with the result that knowledge of geology advanced enormously. This included the recognition of the vast scale of geological time, dispelling those calculations based on

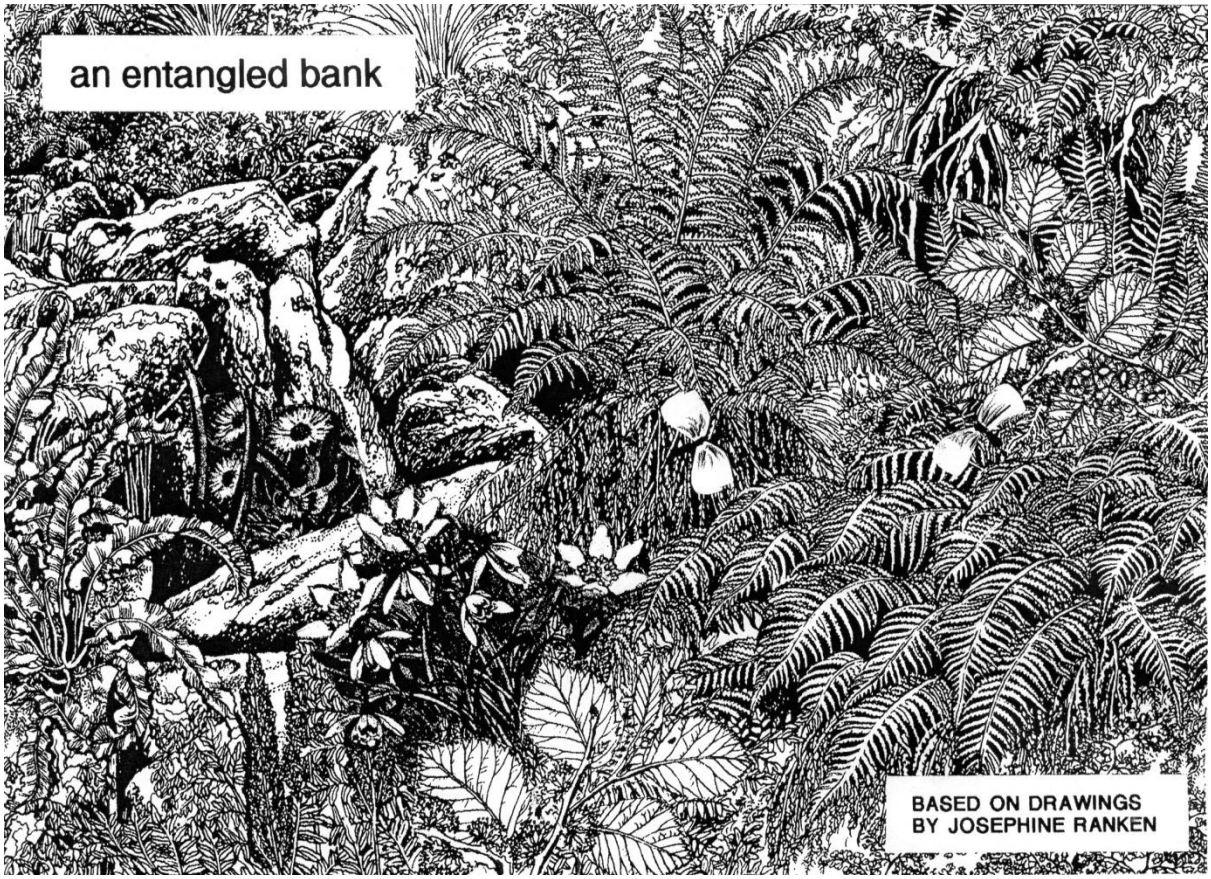
ancient Israelite myths. Moreover, the fossil record showed how life had been changing over that long period and extinctions had nothing to do with Noah's flood or the curse of Adam's sins.

However, the philosophical aspects of the enlightenment in Europe also helped promote the French Revolution, the American independence and later 1848 uprisings so that conservative elements in most countries became suspicious of new ideas which 'might rock the boat'. For instance, a meeting of that Lunar Society was actually attacked by a Birmingham mob (is fear of GM crops and Fracking any different today?).

In this climate it was no wonder that Charles hesitated to publish his conclusions until prompted by Alfred Wallace. At least by this time, thanks to all that financial support from wife Emma Wedgewood, he had amassed loads of evidence to support his ideas, and had already published some as part of special studies, including that of the humble earthworm.

To sum up those conclusions it is perhaps best to use his own words which, although rather verbose, show what ideas could be illustrated by looking at our familiar countryside rather than some exotic location:

> *'It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing in the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws ..... being Growth and Reproduction; Inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the conditions of life..... a Ratio of increase so high as to lead to a struggle for life, and as a consequence to 'Natural Selection', entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature ..... the production of the higher animals directly follows.'*


an entangled bank
BASED ON DRAWINGS
BY JOSEPHINE RANKEN