

# Darwin's Mentor

JOHN STEVENS HENSLOW  
1796–1861

S.M. WALTERS & E.A. STOW



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# Contents

List of Illustrations viii

Foreword by Professor Patrick Bateson xi

Prefaces and Acknowledgements xiii

## **Part I** Origins 1

1 Family background: growing up in Kent and London 3

## **Part II** Cambridge 9

2 The young Henslow at Cambridge 11

3 Henslow: men who influenced him at Cambridge 22

4 Harriet 38

5 The young Professor 49

6 Educating Charles Darwin – and others 78

7 The middle years: politics, policing and publication 108

8 The Botanic Garden: Old and New 128

9 A Liberal Churchman 155

## **Part III** Hitcham 175

10 Early years as Rector of Hitcham 177

11 The Rector 194

12 The later years 220

Epilogue 253

Appendix 1 Genealogical tables 261

Appendix 2 Chronology 264

Appendix 3 Dramatis Personae 271

Appendix 4 Eponymous taxa 285

Appendix 5 Local botanical records 289

Endnotes 293

Bibliography 309

Index 331

# Illustrations

	Frontispiece: John Stevens Henslow: The young Professor of Botany	page ii
	Colour plates	between pp. 172 and 173
1	Sir John Henslow, Chief Surveyor to the Navy, 1784–1806	
2	Still life of molluscs painted by Henslow when a boy	
3	Original teaching drawing	
4	Illustration from Henslow's paper on a hybrid <i>Digitalis</i> , 1831	
5	The young Charles Darwin	
6	Audubon's illustration of Henslow's Sparrow	
7	Day-flowering cactus	
8	Sketch of Hitcham Rectory	
9	Design for Ploughing Match Prize	
10	Silver cup presented to Henslow by the Hitcham farmers in 1854	
11	All Saints' Church, Hitcham	
12	Site of Hitcham Great Wood, 1999	
13	<i>Polypodium vulgare</i>	
14	The Henslow Walk in the Cambridge Botanic Garden	
	Figures	
1	Clarke's <i>Platanus orientalis</i> in Jesus College Fellows' Garden	17
2	Henslow's crab, <i>Polybius henslowi</i>	20
3	Henslow as a young man	21
4	Fossil ammonite collected by Henslow in the Isle of Man, 1819	27
5	Geological illustrations by Henslow from the paper on Anglesey	32
6	Harriet Henslow	45
7	Graph of attendance at Henslow's Botany lectures	58
8	Bladderwort, <i>Utricularia</i>	68
9	Sketch of ' <i>Carex fulvus</i> ' by Henslow	73
10	Henslow's specimen of the aquatic moss <i>Fontinalis</i>	74
11	Illustrations accompanying Henslow's <i>Paris quadrifolia</i> paper	75
12	Cone-scales of Spruce (1834)	76
13	Sketch of ' <i>Helix Madingleyensis</i> ' by Henslow	90

## List of illustrations

14	Henslow's sketch of pressed leaf	98
15	A Galapagos fern collected by Darwin	99
16	Map of the 'Beagle' voyage	102
17	<i>Opuntia</i> plate drawn by Henslow	106
18	Map of Cambridge in 1810	109
19	Cholsey Church	112
20	'Henslow Common Informer' inscription on Corpus Christi College	118
21	Henslow's specimen of Box leaves	127
22	The Old Botanic Garden	131
23	Entrance to the Old Botanic Garden	132
24	Lecture-room in the Old Botanic Garden	133
25	Plan of the Old Botanic Garden	134
26	Site of the New Botanic Garden, 1809	138
27	Lapidge plan of the New Botanic Garden, 1830	141
28	Henslow's sketch plan of the New Botanic Garden	146
29	Murray's plan of the New Botanic Garden, 1846	149
30	<i>Pinus gerardiana</i> in the Botanic Garden	151
31	Plate of tropical plants, from Henslow's pamphlet for the parish visit to Cambridge in 1854	154
32	<i>Primula</i> species	164
33	Map of Hitcham in Henslow's time	176
34	Henslow's annotated specimen of <i>Equisetum hyemale</i>	184
35	Programme of the Hitcham Horticultural Show, 1859	186
36	First page of Hitcham Vestry Meeting Book	195
37	'Penny Black' letter from Henslow at Downing, May 1840	202
38	Henslow's Potato leaflet, 1845	212
39	Anne Henslow (later Barnard) with Floss	217
40	Herbarium sheet from Madeira of <i>Ilex perado</i> in Herb. Lemann	218
41	Portrait of Henslow in later years	220
42	Henslow's 'Bioscope'	221
43	The Prince Consort at the Ipswich Museum	227
44	Village-School Botany: Henslow's pamphlet	235
45	Hitcham Great Wood: aerial photograph (1940)	241
46	One of the nine Botanical Diagrams published in 1857	242
47	Henslow's sketches for <i>Wellingtonia</i> exhibit at Kew	249
48	<i>Lathyrus aphaca</i> woodcut from Henslow's text-book	255
49	Henslow's Museum specimen of <i>Tetrapanax (Aralia) papyrifera</i>	257
50	Title-page of Eliza Youmans' book	259

## I    **Family background** *growing up in Kent and London*

This is a book about an admirable man whose qualities have been overshadowed, even distorted, by the reputation of his most famous pupil, Charles Darwin. Both Henslow and Darwin came from richly-endowed families whose local wealth and esteem had their roots in the rise of industrial England and the increasing power of the British Empire. There are, however, significant differences between the two stories. John Stevens Henslow was the eldest of a large family of eleven children, born at the very end of the eighteenth century into a stable, happy home in Rochester, Kent. Charles Darwin, thirteen years younger, was the fifth child of Robert Darwin, a rich Shrewsbury physician, whose wife Susanna was a daughter of Josiah Wedgwood, founder of the famous Wedgwood chinaware business. The picture we have of Darwin's childhood is of a somewhat withdrawn little boy, apparently of a placid temperament, with little contact with his ailing mother, who died when Charles was only eight years old, and rather afraid of his large, stern and frugal father.<sup>1</sup> No such complications are present in our account of John Henslow's childhood, which seems to have been uniformly smooth and happy, as we shall see.

The Henslow family probably originated in Devon, but moved to Burhunt, now Boarhunt, a village in Hampshire north of Portsmouth, in the sixteenth century. Another branch of the family, which moved to Sussex, included Philip Henslowe, an Elizabethan theatrical manager who held offices at Court, and left a manuscript diary (1591–1604) which is a rich storehouse of facts about contemporary productions of Shakespearean and other plays. The spelling of the surname, with or without a final 'e' throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, seems to have remained uncertain until well into the eighteenth.<sup>2</sup> Ralph Henslowe of Burhunt was granted a coat of arms which was confirmed by his son Thomas in 1591,<sup>3</sup> and another Thomas helped to conceal Charles II in September 1651. From then on the line can be traced from contemporary wills, with the name Thomas persisting through the generations until we reach a Thomas Henslow who married in 1686, and had two sons, the elder Thomas and the younger John. It was this John Henslow who became a

master carpenter in the dockyard at Woolwich, marrying Mary David in 1719, and receiving from his father-in-law the family Bible which passed down in the family.<sup>4</sup> The master carpenter had seven children, of whom the seventh, John (1730–1815) became Sir John Henslow(e), the grandfather of John Stevens Henslow (Plate 1).

Sir John was Chief Surveyor to the Navy, a post he held jointly or solely for 23 years from 1784 to 1806. He was responsible for the design of 156 naval vessels in a period when British sea power was increasingly asserting itself. A clever draughtsman whose talent developed during his apprenticeship at the age of 15 to Sir Thomas Slade in the naval dockyard, Sir John carved out his career as naval architect, with promotion to Master Boat Builder at Woolwich in 1762, then to posts in Chatham and Portsmouth naval dockyards, leading to his appointment as Assistant Surveyor of the Navy in 1771. After the death of his first wife, Frances Hooper, niece of Sir Thomas Slade, in 1764, he married Ann Prentis, daughter of Edward and Damaris Prentis of Maidstone in 1766. Ann had been christened in 1739 in Maidstone Presbyterian Church, which can be taken as evidence that her parents were Presbyterians. Ann bore him two daughters before their first son, John Prentis, was born in 1770. Sir John was knighted in 1793, widowed in 1803, and retired in 1806 to Sittingbourne in Kent, where he died in 1815. His name is perpetuated in the Solomon Islands where there is to this day a Cape Henslow on Guadalcanal. We should not, however, assume from this that he ever undertook extensive sea voyages: it was the tradition in the Navy to name significant geographical features after eminent naval men, whether or not they were present on the occasion of the first charting of ‘unknown’ seas.<sup>5</sup>

An obituary declares Sir John to have been ‘scrupulously just, active, persevering . . . a good husband and father and warm and constant friend’.<sup>6</sup> Since John Stevens Henslow was born in 1796, and therefore was his eldest grandchild, it seems certain that as a child and a youth he would have known his eminent grandfather, and more than likely that he would have been influenced by him. It has not, however, been possible to trace any direct evidence of such a relationship, and we can only speculate; but we might note that Jenyns himself (Henslow’s brother-in-law and author of the *Memoir*, 1862) felt that some of Sir John’s ‘ingenuity & skill in designing’ had obviously passed to the grandson, in ‘whom they were equally conspicuous’.<sup>7</sup>

John Prentis Henslow, after what must have been a very comfortable

## *Family background*

childhood shared with his two elder sisters, Ann and Frances, and his younger brother, Edward, was early launched into a career as a solicitor in Enfield 'in consequence of the death of his Principal by a fall from his horse'.<sup>8</sup> He was soon, however, beguiled by an attractive offer to enter into partnership with his uncle Walter Prentis, a wine-merchant in Rochester. There he was fortunate in meeting Frances, the eldest daughter of a rich brewer, Thomas Stevens, and married her in 1795 when she was just 20. His father-in-law took him into partnership in the brewery business, and John and Frances set up their home in Rochester, where their eldest child, John Stevens, was duly born on 6 February 1796.<sup>9</sup>

There seems to be little doubt that this, their firstborn child, was especially dear to his parents. We learn that he was 'a beautiful boy, with brown curling hair, a fine straight nose, brilliant complexion, soft eyes, and a smile that reached everybody's heart'.<sup>10</sup> A regular succession of brothers and sisters followed him, in the way of Georgian and Victorian families, until 1814 when the youngest child, baptised Alexina Frederica, was born and lived for only three months. In all, John Stevens was the eldest of eleven children, three of whom died in infancy; he outlived all his four brothers, but four sisters outlived him, Louisa (Kirkpatrick) living until 1903.

It was obviously a relatively prosperous and happy childhood, and both physically and mentally the eldest child was apparently specially favoured. Jenyns paints a picture from which we can learn something of the early influences from each parent:

He may have inherited some part of his taste for natural history from his mother, an accomplished woman, who, though she never studied it as a science, was . . . a great admirer as well as a collector of natural and artificial curiosities. His father, too, was extremely fond of birds and other animals, as well as of his garden. At one period of his life his father had an extensive aviary, comprising a great variety of species, some of which are not often seen in cages in private houses. His library also contained a good many books on Natural History. This was quite enough to create an interest for such things in the child, while the taste thus excited was, as might be supposed, duly encouraged by his parents.<sup>11</sup>

Since both his parents indulged in various aspects of collecting natural objects, it is not surprising that their bright, active little son should follow in their footsteps. Jenyns tells us that:



## ORIGINS

The passion for collecting was first exemplified by his bringing home the different natural objects he met with on his walks. In one instance, while yet a child in a frock, he dragged all the way home from a field a considerable distance off a large fungus, which when exhibited to the family was said to be almost as big as himself. This fungus being dried was hung up in the hall of his father's house, and often pointed out to strangers as an indication of the future botanist.<sup>12</sup>

Young John's schooling began when he was seven, first at a small private school in Rochester kept by Mr and Mrs Dillon who were French émigrés, and then at Rochester Free School, at which Mr Hawkins was headmaster. When he was nine years old, in March 1805, he was sent as a boarder to a school in Camberwell run by the Revd W. Jephson, where he remained until the time for entering on his University career.

The Camberwell schooling had a profound influence on the development of young Henslow's already keen interest in natural history. By a fortunate chance, the drawing-master at Jephson's school was George Samuel, who was a keen entomologist. Finding that his pupil was enthusiastic, Samuel encouraged the collection and study of insects. As Jenyns puts it: 'Young Henslow was often seen running about an orchard adjoining the school with his green gauze butterfly net; and occasionally the drawing-master and he went out to longer distances insect-hunting together.' Samuel also taught his young pupil the art of 'setting' and mounting the captured butterflies and other insects, and these collections were proudly displayed to his sister Charlotte and doting parents when he came home for the holidays.<sup>13</sup> It seems very likely that it was through Samuel that he was introduced to two established naturalists in London who greatly influenced his further development. The first of these was William Elford Leach, six years his senior, who was already a widely-respected zoologist and was appointed Assistant Keeper at the British Museum in 1813 when he was 23. The other was James Francis Stephens, a celebrated amateur entomologist reputed to have the best collection of British insects in the country.

We can let Jenyns tell us of the happy influence these two eminent naturalists had on their young friend:

Naturalists of this stamp and standing were not likely to let the young collector's zeal evaporate. They at once fixed him down to the pursuits, which had been hitherto taken up as a mere boyish amusement, but which were henceforth to be made regular studies. The woods of Kent were now well

## Family background

searched for insects, while the Medway was explored for shells. He was always active and busy. He had, indeed, before this, shown a desire to become acquainted with the inhabitants of the water as well as the inhabitants of the air. His father was in the habit of making yearly picnic excursions with his family up the Medway, and the boy was delighted with the opportunity thus afforded him of fishing for all he could get, while the family were enjoying themselves in a very different way. He has been heard to say that these were the happiest days of his life, though he generally got well scolded by his parents for spoiling his clothes. The fruits of his industry, however, now acquired more value from his superior knowledge of the science. Among the acquisitions made to his collections were many interesting and little-known species, – crustacea and shells from the Medway and the adjoining salt-marsches, – lepidoptera, of which few specimens previously existed in cabinets. Some of these being shown and given to his patrons Dr. Leach and Mr. Stephens, the habitats were recorded by those gentlemen on the authority of the captor, and the specimens found a place in their respective drawers in the British Museum.<sup>14</sup>

Another talent developed early by Henslow was the ability to draw. No doubt in the Henslow household in Rochester drawing and painting were encouraged, though perhaps more amongst his sisters as a lady-like accomplishment; but we have evidence that he was already enjoying exercising his skill in drawing when a schoolboy (Plate 2). We shall see how important this skill became in the development of his botanical teaching career and indeed in the wider sphere of teaching science in primary schools.

In 1810, Henslow was awarded as a school prize a book which greatly fired his enthusiasm to become an explorer-zoologist in the African continent. This was *Travels in Africa*, by Levaillant, a traveller's tale of the marvellous wild animals of that 'Dark Continent' which, as the nineteenth century proceeded, yielded up its secret interior to European colonisation. Apparently, in his desire to become an African explorer and zoologist, the young Henslow was strongly backed by William Leach himself, and other friends who saw how talented and enthusiastic the boy was, but his parents were utterly opposed to such a dangerously outlandish profession. Jenyns tells us that

his mother had many anxious moments, from the pertinacious way in which he clung to the idea of going out. He himself, too, often came home

## ORIGINS

depressed and out of spirits. And even long after he had given in to the wishes of his relations, he still continued to think much upon the subject, read with the greatest interest many other African travels that were published from time to time, and the volumes, procured to gratify the taste, continued to occupy a place on the shelves of his library to the day of his death.<sup>15</sup>

In these ways the future career of the young Henslow was shaped. In spite of parental refusal to countenance any career in African exploration for their beloved eldest child, it was a generally fortunate set of circumstances and influences that prepared the schoolboy for further education and academic success in Cambridge. He duly arrived to begin his undergraduate studies at St John's College in October 1814, in his eighteenth year.