



The Royal College of Pathologists

Pathology: the science behind the cure

Object 31: The pigeon



What is it?

The Rock Dove or Pigeon is a member of the Columbidae family, which includes domestic and feral pigeons as well as fancy varieties. Pigeon-breeding has been a popular pastime since Victorian times. One famous breeder was the nineteenth century naturalist Charles Darwin, who is better known for his studies of Galapagos finches.

History

Darwin began his research on a five-year journey on HMS Beagle in his twenties. He observed plants and animals in a wide range of habitats and began to formulate his theory of evolution. He bred hundreds of pigeons at his home in Kent and carefully recorded their characteristics. Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 in which he described evolution by natural selection, proposing that individuals best adapted to their environment are more likely to survive and pass on their genes to their offspring. Darwin's work was so well researched that his theory of evolution was widely accepted within a decade.

Pathology

In the early nineteenth century most people thought that the earth was created by God in seven days, as described in the Bible. Darwin's observations of pigeons led him to the conclusion that birds with different colouring, patterns and feathers were all members of the same species. The theory of evolution is one of the most important in medicine and predates the understanding of genetics and the way in which genetic material is inherited.

Find out more

Next time you're in the [Natural History Museum](#) in London, have a look at the statue of Darwin in the central hall.

Learn more about Darwin's pigeons on the [Darwin's Pigeons website](#). Darwin is on the back of the £10 note.

You can [visit Darwin's home](#), Down House in Kent, and see the study where he wrote *On the Origin of Species*.