
Offer of a lifetime



Activity 3: What happened when?

Subject: English

90 minutes

Suggested preparation

Presentation:

[The offer of a lifetime](#)

What do I need?

Letter 105 John Stevens Henslow to Charles Darwin, 24 Aug 1831

Letter 107 Charles Darwin to John Stevens Henslow, 30 Aug 1831

Letter 108 Robert Waring Darwin to Josiah Wedgwood, 30 July–1 Aug 1831

Letter 109 Josiah Wedgwood to Robert Waring Darwin, 31 Aug 1831

Letter 110 Charles Darwin to Robert Waring Darwin, 31 Aug 1831

Letter 111 Robert Waring Darwin to Josiah Wedgwood II, 1 Sept 1831

Letter 112 Charles Darwin to Francis Beaufort, 1 Sept 1831

Letter 115 Charles Darwin to Susan E Darwin, 4 Sept 1831

Letter 118 Charles Darwin to John Stevens Henslow, 5 Sept 1831

A flurry of letters was exchanged in the months before Darwin joined the Beagle voyage. Chart the events and how he felt about what was happening by writing his diary for this time.

What do I do?

1. Read through the letter extracts. Make a summary of what happens in each one.
2. Create a table with dates showing what happened at each date.
3. Write down words expressing how you think Darwin would have felt at different stages in the process (such as when he first receives the offer from Henslow, when he declines the offer, when he writes to his father and when he finally accepts).
4. Write diary entries for Darwin over this period, describing what has happened and expressing how he would have felt.

Letter 105 John Stevens Henslow to Charles Darwin, 24 Aug 1831

24 Aug 1831

My dear Darwin,

... I have been asked by Peacock who will read & forward this to you from London to recommend him a naturalist as companion to Capt Fitzroy employed by Government to survey the S. extremity of America— I have stated that I consider you to be the best qualified person I know of who is likely to undertake such a situation—



I state this not on the supposition of yr. being a finished Naturalist, but as amply qualified for collecting, observing, & noting any thing worthy to be noted in Natural History. Peacock has the appointment at his disposal & if he can not find a man willing to take the office, the opportunity will probably be lost— Capt. F. wants a man (I understand) more as a companion than a mere collector & would not take any one however good a Naturalist who was not recommended to him likewise as a gentleman. Particulars of salary &c I know nothing. The Voyage is to last 2 yrs. & if you take plenty of Books with you, any thing you please may be done— You will have ample opportunities at command— In short I suppose there never was a finer chance for a man of zeal & spirit...

J S Henslow



Letter 107 Charles Darwin to John Stevens Henslow, 30 Aug 1831

30 Aug 1831

My dear Sir

...— As far as my own mind is concerned, I should I think, certainly most gladly have accepted the opportunity, which you so kindly have offered me.— But my Father, although he does not decidedly refuse me, gives such strong advice against going.—that I should not be comfortable, if I did not follow it.— My Fathers objections are these; the unfitting me to settle down as a clergyman.— my little habit of seafaring.— the shortness of the time & the chance of my not suiting Captain Fitzroy.— It is certainly a very serious objection, the very short time for all my preparations, as not only body but mind wants making up for such an undertaking.— But if it had not been for my Father, I would have taken all risks.—



What was the reason, that a Naturalist was not long ago fixed upon?— I am very much obliged for the trouble you have had about it—there certainly could not have been a better opportunity.— I shall come up in October to Cambridge, when I long to have some talk with you.— I will write to Mr. Peacock at Denton, (in Durham?) but his direction is written so badly, that even with the assistance of the Post office, I am not certain about it— Would you therefore be so kind, if you know his or C. Fitzroys direction, would you send one line to the same effect...

Yours most sincerely

my dear Sir. Chas. Darwin

I have written to Mr. Peacock, & I mentioned that I have asked you to send one line in the chance of his not getting my letter.— I have also asked him to communicate with Cap. Fitzroy.— Even if I was to go my Father disliking would take away all energy, & I should want a good stock of that.— Again I must thank you; it adds a little to the heavy, but pleasant load of gratitude which I owe to you.—



Letter 108 Robert Waring Darwin to Josiah Wedgwood, 30
July–1 Aug 1831

...Charles will tell you of the offer he has had made to him of going for a voyage of discovery for 2 years.— I strongly object to it on various grounds, but I will not detail my reasons that he may have your unbiassed opinion on the subject, & if you think differently from me I shall wish him to follow your advice.



Dear Wedgwood yours affectionly

R W Darwin

...

Wednesday 31.

Charles has quite given up the idea of the voyage.



Letter 109 Josiah Wedgwood to Robert Waring Darwin, 31 Aug 1831

31 Aug 1831

My dear Doctor

I feel the responsibility of your application to me on the offer that has been made to Charles as being weighty, but as you have desired Charles to consult me I cannot refuse to give the result of such consideration as I have been able to give it. Charles has put down what he conceives to be your principal objections & I think the best course I can take will be to state what occurs to me upon each of them.



1— I should not think that it would be in any degree disreputable to his character as a clergyman. I should on the contrary think the offer honorable to him, and the pursuit of Natural History, though certainly not professional, is very suitable to a Clergyman

2— I hardly know how to meet this objection, but he would have definite objects upon which to employ himself and might acquire and strengthen, habits of application, and I should think would be as likely to do so in any way in which he is likely to pass the next two years at home.

3. The notion did not occur to me in reading the letters & on reading them again with that object in my mind I see no ground for it.

4. I cannot conceive that the Admiralty would send out a bad vessel on such a service. As to objections to the expedition, they will differ in each mans case & nothing would, I think, be inferred in Charles's case if it were known that others had objected.

5— You are a much better judge of Charles's character than I can be. If, on comparing this mode of spending the next two years, with the way in which he will probably spend them if he does not accept this offer, you think him more likely to be rendered unsteady & unable to settle, it is undoubtedly a weighty objection— Is it not the case that sailors are prone to settle in domestic and quiet habits.

Letter 109 Josiah Wedgwood to Robert Waring Darwin, 31 Aug 1831

6— I can form no opinion on this further than that, if appointed by the Admiralty, he will have a claim to be as well accommodated as the vessel will allow.

7— If I saw Charles now absorbed in professional studies I should probably think it would not be advisable to interrupt them, but this is not, and I think will not be, the case with him. His present pursuit of knowledge is in the same track as he would have to follow in the expedition.

8— The undertaking would be useless as regards his profession, but looking upon him as a man of enlarged curiosity, it affords him such an opportunity of seeing men and things as happens to few.

You will bear in mind that I have had very little time for consideration & that you & Charles are the persons who must decide.

I am
My dear Doctor
Affectionately yours
Josiah Wedgwood



Letter 110 Charles Darwin to Robert Waring Darwin, 31 Aug 1831

31 Aug 1831

My dear Father

I am afraid I am going to make you again very uncomfortable.— But upon consideration, I think you will excuse me once again stating my opinions on the offer of the Voyage.— My excuse & reason is, is the different way all the Wedgwoods view the subject from what you & my sisters do.—



I have given Uncle Jos, what I fervently trust is an accurate & full list of your objections [see below], & he is kind enough to give his opinion on all.— The list & his answers will be enclosed.— But may I beg of you one favor. it will be doing me the greatest kindness, if you will send me a decided answer, yes or no.— If the latter, I should be most ungrateful if I did not implicitly yield to your better judgement & to the kindest indulgence which you have shown me all through my life.—& you may rely upon it I will never mention the subject again.— if your answer should be yes; I will go directly to Henslow & consult deliberately with him & then come to Shrewsbury.— The danger appears to me & all the Wedgwoods not great.— The expence can not be serious, & the time I do not think anyhow would be more thrown away, than if I staid at home.— But pray do not consider, that I am so bent on going, that I would for one single moment hesitate, if you thought, that after a short period, you should continue uncomfortable.—

I must again state I cannot think it would unfit me hereafter for a steady life.— I do hope this letter will not give you much uneasiness...

I do not know what to say about Uncle Jos.' kindness, I never can forget how he interests himself about me

Believe me my dear Father

Your affectionate son

Charles Darwin.

(1) Disreputable to my character as a Clergyman hereafter

(2) A wild scheme

8

Letter 110 Charles Darwin to Robert Waring Darwin, 31 Aug 1831

- (3) That they must have offered to many others before me, the place of Naturalist
- (4) And from its not being accepted there must be some serious objection to the vessel or expedition
- (5) That I should never settle down to a steady life hereafter
- (6) That my accomodations would be most uncomfortable
- (7). That you should consider it as again changing my profession
- (8) That it would be a useless undertaking



Charles Darwin

Letter 111 Robert Waring Darwin to Josiah Wedgwood II,
1 Sept 1831

Shrewsbury
1 Sept 1831

Dear Wedgwood,

Charles is very grateful for your taking so much trouble & interest in his plans. I made up my mind to give up all objections, if you should not see it in the same view as I did.—

Charles has stated my objections quite fairly & fully—if he still continues in the same mind after further enquiry, I will give him all the assistance in my power.

Many thanks for your kindness—

yours affectionly

R W Darwin



Letter 112 Charles Darwin to Francis Beaufort, 1 Sept 1831

Shrewsbury
September the 1st.

Sir

I take the liberty of writing to you according to Mr. Peacocks desire to acquaint you with my acceptance of the offer of going with Capt Fitzroy. Perhaps you may have received a letter from Mr. Peacock, stating my refusal; this was owing to my Father not at first approving of the plan, since which time he has reconsidered the subject: & has given his consent & therefore if the appointment is not already filled up,—I shall be very happy to have the honor of accepting it.— There has been some delay owing to my being in Wales, when the letter arrived.— I set out for Cambridge tomorrow morning, to see Professor Henslow: & from thence will proceed immediately to London.—



I remain Sir

Your humble & obedient servant

Chas. Darwin



Charles Darwin

Letter 115 Charles Darwin to Susan E Darwin, 4 Sept 1831

4 Sept 1831

Cambridge
Sunday Morning

My dear Susan

...The whole of yesterday I spent with Henslow, thinking of what is to be done.—& that I find is great deal. By great good luck, I know a man of the name of Wood, nephew of Lord Londonderry; he is a great friend of C. Fitzroy & has written to him about me— I heard a part of C. Fs letter, dated sometime ago, in which he says "I have a right good set of officers & most of my men have been there before." it seems that he has been there for the last few years; he was then second in command, with the same vessel that he has now chosen.— He is only 23 years old; but seen a deal of service, & won the gold medal at Portsmouth. The admiralty say his maps are most perfect.— He had choice of two vessels, & he chose the smallest.—

Henslow will given me letters to all travellers in town whom he thinks may assist me...

I should be obliged if my Father would place to my account here 100£ if at present convenient ditto at London.— what bank?

I am afraid there will be a good deal of expence at first.— Henslow is much against taking many things; it is mistake all young travellers fall into.— I write as if it was settled: but Henslow tells me, by no means, to make up my mind till I have had long conversations with C. Beaufort, & Fitzroy:

Good bye. You will hear from me constantly. direct 17 Spring Gardens Tell nobody in Shropshire yet.—Be sure not: C. Darwin

Love to my Father.

The reason I dont want people told in Shrops: in case I should not go, it will make it more flat.



Letter 118 Charles Darwin to John Stevens Henslow, 5 Sept 1831

5 Sept 1831

17 Spring Gardens London
Monday

My dear Sir

Gloria in excelsis is the most moderate beginning I can think of.— Things are more prosperous than I should have thought possible.— Cap. Fitzroy is every thing that is delightful, if I was to praise half so much as I feel inclined, you would say it was absurd, only once seeing him.— I think he really wishes to have me.— He offers me to mess with him & he will take care I have such room as is possible.— ...



Cap Fitzroy has good stock of books, many of which were in my list, & rifles &c So that the outfit will be much less expensive than I supposed.— The vessel will be out 3 years I do not object, so that my Father does not.— On Wednesday I have another interview with Cap. Beaufort, & on Sunday most likely go with Cap. Fitzroy to Plymouth...

What changes I have had: till one to day I was building castles in the air about hunting Foxes in Shropshire, now Lamas in S America.— There is indeed a tide in the affairs of men.— If you see Mr Wood, remember me most kindly to him.—

Good bye, my dear Henslow

Yours most sincere friend

Chas Darwin

Excuse this letter in such a hurry.



Offer of a lifetime

Who's who?

George Peacock

George Peacock (1791-1858) was a mathematician and tutor in mathematics at Trinity College, Cambridge from 1823–39. He was Lowndean Professor of Astronomy and Geometry at Cambridge between 1837 and 1858, and Dean of Ely, from 1839 to 1858. He asked John Stevens Henslow to suggest a suitable naturalist to accompany Captain FitzRoy on the *Beagle* voyage.



John Stevens Henslow

John Stevens Henslow (1796–1861) was a clergyman, botanist and mineralogist. He was Charles Darwin's teacher and friend. He was Professor of Mineralogy at Cambridge University from 1822 to 1827 and Professor of Botany from 1825 to 1861. He also extended and remodelled the Cambridge Botanic Garden as well as being firstly curate of Little St Mary's Church in Cambridge, then vicar of Cholsey-cum-Moulsford, Berkshire, and finally rector of Hitcham, Suffolk. Henslow recommended Darwin as an ideal candidate for the *Beagle* voyage.



Image of John Stevens Henslow courtesy of the National Library of Medicine

Charles Darwin

Charles Darwin (1809-1882) was a naturalist who established natural selection as the mechanism for the process of evolution. He joined the voyage of HMS *Beagle* when he was 22, a journey he described as the 'most fortunate circumstance in my life'. He wrote to around 2000 correspondents all over the world as a means to inform his research. Most famously he published *On the Origin of Species*, in 1859 but he researched and wrote extensively on natural history throughout his life.



Offer of a lifetime: Who's who?

Francis Beaufort

Francis Beaufort (1774-1857) was a naval officer and hydrographer (he prepared accurate charts of the seas of the world) to the navy from 1829 to 1855. He retired as rear-admiral in 1846 and was the originator of the Beaufort scale for wind force.

Image of Francis Beaufort ©National Portrait Gallery, London. NPG 918. CC BY-NC-ND 3.0



Josiah Wedgwood II

Josiah Wedgwood (1769-1843) was Charles Darwin's uncle. He was a master potter in Staffordshire and became a Whig MP for Stoke-on-Trent (1832-4). He was the father of Emma Wedgwood (who became Darwin's wife). Darwin asked his uncle his advice regarding the *Beagle* voyage. The reply influenced Darwin's father's decision, resulting in him giving his consent for Darwin to go.



Robert FitzRoy

Robert FitzRoy (1805-65) was Vice-Admiral to the Navy, a pioneering meteorologist and hydrographer. He was made the commander of HMS *Beagle* at the age of 23. He was appointed Governor of New Zealand in 1843. He is credited with inventing several barometers and devising sea charts to forecast the weather. Despite FitzRoy's explosive temper, he and Darwin were close friends during the voyage and he supported Darwin's work. FitzRoy subsequently distanced himself from Darwin's ideas and turned increasingly to religion.

Image of Robert FitzRoy: ©National Portrait Gallery, London. NPG x128426. CC BY-NC-ND 3.0



Offer of a lifetime: Who's who?

Robert Waring Darwin

Robert Waring Darwin (1766-1848) was Charles Darwin's father and a physician. He had a large practice in Shrewsbury and resided at The Mount. He was the son of Dr Erasmus Darwin who took a great interest in botany. Robert Waring Darwin married Susannah, daughter of Josiah Wedgwood I.



Image of Robert Waring Darwin ©Shrewsbury Museums Service (SHYMS: FA/1991/033/2)

Susan Darwin

Susan Darwin (1803-66) was Darwin's sister. They wrote regularly to each other during the *Beagle* voyage. She conveyed much family news to him and referred to herself as 'Granny' in her letters as she was always giving him advice. She also corrected his grammar and spelling.