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## The amazing tale of John Edmonstone: the freed slave who taught Charles Darwin in Edinburgh

As part of Black History Month, we take a look at a truly inspirational Edinburgh man who Darwin hired to teach him taxidermy

By [Hilary Mitchell](#) Editor

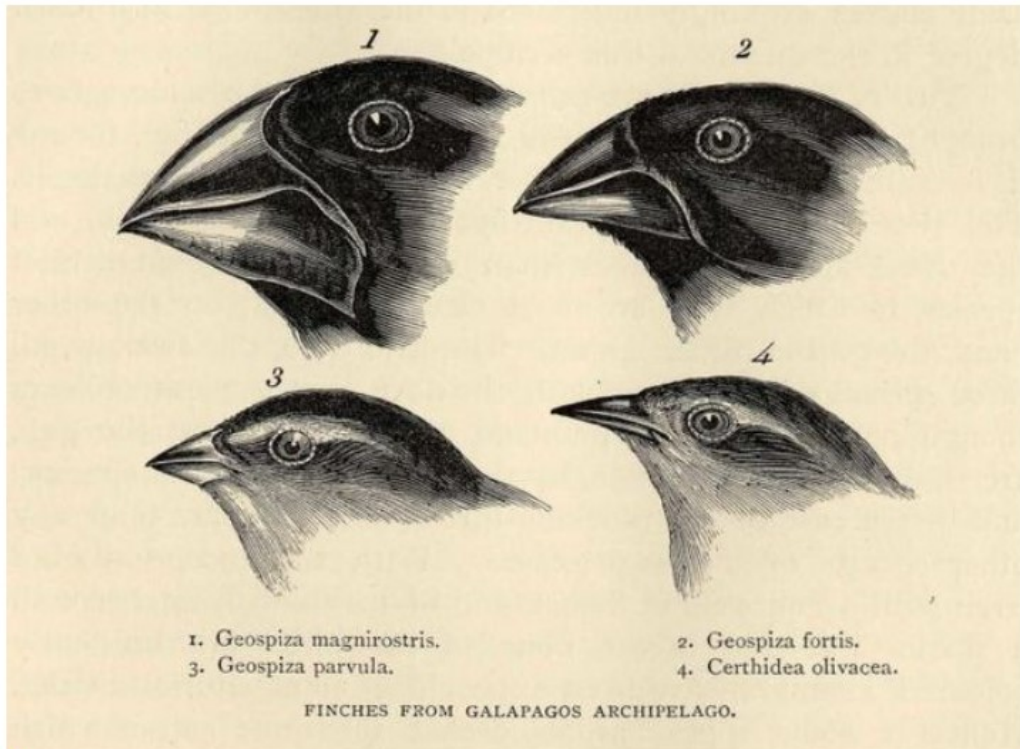
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As many people know, in 1825, a 16-year-old Charles Darwin came to [Edinburgh University](#) to study medicine, and to learn skills that would lead him to his incredible discoveries and theories later in life.

However, fewer people know that one of Darwin's teachers in [Edinburgh](#) was John Edmonstone, a freed slave from a plantation in what is now Guyana. Darwin paid John to give him lessons about taxidermy, as well as the flora and fauna of South America, to help him prepare for his voyage south on the HMS Beagle.

Darwin used the techniques he had learned from John Edmonstone to preserve the [finches](#) he caught on the groundbreaking expedition, which in turn led him to develop his earth-shattering Theory of Evolution.



**Darwin's Galapagos finches - the diversity of their beak forms helped Darwin to form his theory of evolution**  
(Image: Wikimedia Commons)

In his memoirs, Darwin spoke warmly of John, saying:

"He gave me lessons for [payment](#), and I used often to sit with him, for he was a very pleasant and intelligent man."

Edmonstone learnt taxidermy while he was still enslaved at the plantation in Warrows Place, Mibirri Creek near Demerara in Guyana (then British Guiana) in South America.

The British naturalist Charles Waterton visited the owner of the plantation, Charles Edmonstone - and he took John Edmonstone with him on his bird collecting trips. John would have to quickly stuff and preserve the birds shortly after they were caught to avoid having them spoil in the hot climate.

We all know what became of Charles Darwin, but much less is known about his teacher - his later years, date of death and place of burial are a mystery. If Darwin hadn't mentioned him, we might not know about this vital [historical](#) figure today.

It's believed that he stayed in Edinburgh, moving to South St David's Street in the 1830s. In 2009, a plaque in his memory was unveiled on Lothian Street, an important reminder of an incredible Edinburgh resident whose teachings helped to shape the world.

Unfortunately, it has since disappeared. If anyone can help track it down, [Historic Scotland are very keen to hear from you.](#)

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