

ARTICLE

# Mapping Susannah Darwin: Practice and Process

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## Abstract

This article reflects on the 2024 public humanities project “Susannah Darwin at The Mount: Hidden Maternal Histories,” held at Charles Darwin’s family home in Shrewsbury, England. Focusing on Katy Alston’s *Mapping Susannah Darwin*, a co-produced creative map stemming from the project that shows The Mount from the perspective of Darwin’s mother, Susannah, I reframe the fixed project “output” as the product of much more fluid sets of relationships and circumstances. This article blends personal reflection with insights from critical cartography, concepts of the object “life cycle,” and my underpinning research on the Darwin family and home. I aim to provide an accessible but critically informed account of the practices, relationships, serendipities, and setbacks that can characterise the humanities in action.

**Keywords:** collaborative practice; creative mapmaking; Darwin family; heritage; women’s history

## 1. Introduction

In the hallway of Charles Darwin’s birthplace at The Mount in Shrewsbury, England, hangs a new exhibit about his mother, Susannah. Ostensibly a map of Susannah’s home and garden commissioned from artist Katy Alston as part of my February 2024 public humanities project “Susannah Darwin at The Mount: Hidden Maternal Histories,” *Mapping Susannah Darwin* is one of the most surprising – and best-looking – developments to stem from my book *The Ghost in the Garden: In Search of Darwin’s Lost Garden* (Figure 1). Studded with details representing Susannah’s forgotten life – from discarded white gloves to crocus bulbs and snatches of conversation – Katy’s map refuses the unified viewpoint and fixed timeframe associated with conventional cartography. It is as unlike the charts of the South American coast that developed in tandem with Charles Darwin’s species theory on the *Beagle* as Susannah’s life was unlike her son’s.

“Map-making” can be meaningfully distinguished from “cartography” in its concern with more inclusive ways of knowing and seeing the world than those typically associated with ship captains and scientists.<sup>1</sup> Maps in this sense can have a radical edge, representing marginalised perspectives that are not part of the model cartographer’s vision – whether it

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen and Duggan 2021, xxv.



**Figure 1.** Katy Alston. *Mapping Susannah Darwin*. Ink and Gouache, 2024. Darwin House, Shrewsbury © Katy Alston, reproduced with permission.

be the uncharted views of *o’run-del’lico*, one of the Fuegians transported to England on the *Beagle*, or the experiences of a Regency woman whose maternal influence scarcely figures in the Darwin family tree.<sup>2</sup>

*Mapping Susannah Darwin* situates individual lives in the wider collective frameworks that I explored in *The Ghost in the Garden*, an approach that chimes with Charles Darwin’s own reliance on informal modes of research collaboration, including with members of his household.<sup>3</sup> The map can equally be viewed as the product of the much broader constellation of relationships, perspectives, setbacks, and serendipities shaping our collaborative project: the first of its kind to be held at Darwin’s birthplace as it began to open to the public in promising starts – and what have since proved to be unwelcome stops. Anthropologists have long suggested that objects, just like people, have complex and evolving biographies, including lengthy stages of “production,” busy and often multitasking middle-years in “use,” and unpredictable “afterlives” in new situations.<sup>4</sup> Applying this concept of the object “life cycle” to the apparently fixed project output often privileged by UK universities uncovers contexts and processes that are usually left out of the procedural and individualistic accounts required by funding bodies and institutions.<sup>5</sup> The link between practice and output is brought into clearer focus, and a truer map of the project comes into view.

<sup>2</sup> Piesse 2021, 31.

<sup>3</sup> For details of Darwin’s collaborative garden experiments and wider collaborative research practices, at Down and the Mount, respectively, see Costa 2017 and Piesse 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Harrison and Richards 2014, 45–6; see also Kopytoff 1986, 66.

<sup>5</sup> Harrison and Richards 2014, 45.

## 2. Production

*Mapping Susannah Darwin* has its roots both in research that informed *The Ghost in the Garden* and in the relationships with other people that the book engendered.

I included Susannah's story in my book's creative-critical reflections on Darwin's childhood garden: the formerly 7-acre site attached to The Mount house that shaped Darwin's life and work, which I used as a springboard for exploring the formative influence of Darwin's family and wider household on the development of his ideas. Though Susannah died when Darwin was just eight years old and is left out of many Darwin biographies, she was both an interesting woman in her own right and a possible influence on her son's research practices. Her surviving letters and the tantalisingly sparse details provided by nineteenth-century biographers reveal her to have been, at varying times, a clever schoolgirl, an informal translator serving the business interests of her famous potter father, Josiah Wedgwood, unofficial secretary to her doctor husband, Robert Waring Darwin, and a mother of six.

I also found evidence that Susannah was a keen gardener, said to have co-designed the Mount garden's layout with Robert and planted crocuses that became The Mount's signature flowers.<sup>6</sup> Such interests, though under-documented, are not surprising, given that Susannah grew up surrounded by horticultural enthusiasts, including her parents, in the elaborate park and garden of Etruria Hall in Staffordshire. Susannah also maintained a close relationship with her brother, John Wedgwood, who co-founded the forerunner of the Royal Horticultural Society in 1804. Susannah is known to have bred doves at The Mount, which were revered for their "beauty, variety, and tameness."<sup>7</sup> This is suggestive and intriguing, given that Charles Darwin bred pigeons at his subsequent home at Down House in Kent and that he used domestic pigeon-breeding in the first chapter of *On the Origin of Species* (1859) to explain the complex workings of inheritance and variation that informed his whole species theory. Though dove-breeding was a common practice in wealthy households of the period, and we cannot definitively claim that Charles's research was shaped by his mother's hobby, doves and pigeons began to accrue a symbolic as well as literal significance in my imagination, becoming emblems of maternal influences that have always escaped and exceeded documentation.

These issues spoke to me both intellectually and personally. As a scholar with an interest in women's history and history from below, I was keen to add to research that situates Charles Darwin's life and work in more inclusive contexts, acknowledging the importance of family influences and informal collaborations.<sup>8</sup> But the garden's stories also had an emotional pull that related to my own life and domestic situation. From 2015, for a year and a half, I lived next door to the Mount garden's overgrown remains: a dispersed puzzle of riverbank foliage, crumbling masonry, and trees once climbed by the Darwin siblings that, for all its fragmentation, struck me as a bona fide secret garden of both substantial historical significance and nearly boundless imaginative appeal. What is more, I was a mother of young children preoccupied with maternal influence and the power of formative childhood places, concerns that wind their way into my book's chapter on Susannah and its broader memoir strand. The style of my book became part of what I wanted to say through it, resulting in a hybrid of biographical, autobiographical, and creative forms that complemented my exploration of

<sup>6</sup> Wedgwood and Wedgwood 1980, 68–9.

<sup>7</sup> Meteyard 1871, 261.

<sup>8</sup> See Harvey 2009 and Evans 2017 for details of Darwin's correspondence with women. See Keynes 2001 on the importance of family contexts and domestic spaces to Darwin's research practices.

the branching, interpenetrating relationships known to gardeners, families, and evolutionists alike.

Despite this, Susannah's life was never my primary focus, and *Mapping Susannah Darwin* owes its conception as much to three overlapping relationships that developed because of my book as it does to my own underpinning research and approaches. The organic development of these relationships is indicative of the unusually strong purchase that I have found Darwin has with both the general public and scholars and practitioners from a wide range of disciplines. Darwin's significance straddles the usual divides between arts, humanities, and science subjects and provides rich opportunities for public engagement and interdisciplinary collaboration. In turn, this broad appeal provides a platform for more diverse and inclusive public humanities projects – in the case of *Mapping Susannah*, centring on forgotten women's history, histories of motherhood, and women's unacknowledged contributions to the history of science.

The first of the new relationships underpinning *Mapping Susannah* was with Gaynor Llewellyn-Jenkins, a mature student at the University of Chester with a background in healthcare and maternity services. Gaynor, who at the time was researching Susannah for her master's dissertation, had heard me give a public talk at University Centre Shrewsbury, a now-defunct Chester campus, in May 2019. She subsequently became my first doctoral student at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), working on transcribing and interpreting Susannah's unpublished letters. Gaynor was also connected with John Hughes, who I met following my keynote lecture at the Shrewsbury Darwin Festival in February 2023. As well as running the festival, John was then leading plans to develop for Shropshire Museum Service an on-site visitor centre known as Darwin House, following the long-anticipated sale of The Mount house to a private buyer in 2021 that ended the building's decades as neglected local government offices. The third relationship informing the project was with Katy Alston, who first contacted me via Twitter (now X) in 2022 about her artwork "Botanising at The Mount," which draws on Katy's independent research, my book, and other sources to creatively map Darwin's garden.<sup>9</sup>

These three relationships – spanning individual backgrounds in heritage, visual art, and healthcare, and forged through public speaking, social media, and enabling practical developments at Darwin House – aligned in May 2023, when I learnt about small grants available from the British Academy (BA) SHAPE Involve and Engage Public Engagement Programme designed to catalyse collaborations between university researchers and cultural partners. John confirmed his interest in applying for funding via this scheme to co-deliver a public event that could test ways of incorporating wider family stories into themes being considered for inclusion at Darwin House, supporting the museum service's ongoing public consultation process for the development. As our focus on Susannah solidified, we decided that Gaynor would act as a project co-organiser and that I would ask Katy to produce a new map of Susannah's life as a legacy output for display in the room where Darwin was born – thus reconfiguring the significance of the standard heritage birth room in accordance with more feminist principles.

Our motives for taking part understandably differed. The nature and emotional intensity of individual interests in Susannah as an emblem of motherhood varied, while my collaborators almost certainly had less interest than I did in finding ways to evidence the map's

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<sup>9</sup> Alston 2022.

impact on audiences for a potential “impact case study” about Darwin’s childhood garden I had been asked to develop by LJMU colleagues ahead of the 2029 Research Excellence Framework assessment of research quality in UK universities.<sup>10</sup> However, we all shared a common interest in developing more inclusive narratives about Darwin House with a view to engaging wider public audiences, especially Shropshire women, who initial survey results had indicated were often more interested in local Darwin family history than traditional histories of science.<sup>11</sup>

Our proposed programme incorporated talks from myself, Gaynor, and historian of pregnancy and childbirth, Jess Cox, a lunchtime heritage tasting experience of maternity-related foods provided by Shrewsbury cook Mel Hirst, and site tours with John. Katy’s mapmaking workshop would then invite participants to draw on their experiences of these talks and activities to suggest which elements of Susannah’s story should be represented in the map; the emphasis on co-production responded directly to the BA’s funding criteria but also complemented our collaborative approaches. The event would conclude with evaluation activities capturing both participants’ feedback and ideas for future heritage provision at Darwin House.

I submitted our application in June 2023, along with a similar insurance application to LJMU’s internal Communities and Impact Quality Research grant route. Though the external application was unsuccessful, the internal application succeeded in securing £6,417. This was a larger sum than the anticipated BA budget, and it came with new specifications: involving five LJMU masters students as workshop participants, employing two paid postgraduate research assistants, Gaynor, and recent LJMU graduate, Gary Lester, creating a pop-up poster exhibition on Susannah’s life, and producing extra copies of the map for wider dissemination. The element of co-production on the map was no longer required, but we decided to retain it: a hangover from a context that had ceased to be relevant, but which usefully shaped our ideas. The event – in a form both enhanced and modified from the one originally intended, and limited, due to capacity, to 50 participants, including speakers, organisers, and linked students – was arranged for delivery on 10 February 2024 as part of the same DarwIN Festival at which John and I met.

*Mapping Susannah Darwin* in its production stages, much like the life story it depicts, was therefore determined by the complex range of relationships, timings, motivations, economics, setbacks, and successes that shaped the related “Susannah Darwin at The Mount” project. To varying extents, these factors had a significant impact on the map that emerged as the project’s primary output.

### 3. Uses

The map’s first practical use was as the focal point of Katy’s workshop, concluding our event. Katy invited participants to draw on their experiences of the day to produce rough sketches and accompanying notes depicting aspects of Susannah’s life at The Mount for possible inclusion in her commissioned artwork. “How,” I wrote in a linked social media post, “would

<sup>10</sup> The most recent Research Excellence Framework criteria, including information about evidencing research via impact case studies, is at “Research Excellence Framework,” 11 July 2024. <https://www.ref.ac.uk/>.

<sup>11</sup> Early results from Shropshire Museum Service’s consultation survey for Darwin House revealed that 68% of respondents identified as female, 69% noted an interest in Darwin’s family, as opposed to Darwin alone, and 60% were Shropshire residents. John Hughes, “Survey Results” document emailed to the author, 31 May 2023.



you map a woman's life story?"<sup>12</sup> Responses to this prompt were enthusiastic and imaginative, despite the lack of artistic experience shared by most. This reflects both Katy's inspiring approaches and the success of the event in engaging a target audience with strong interests in the family history of a site only just becoming publicly accessible.<sup>13</sup>

In keeping with all maps, the finished image Katy produced 6 weeks later offers a spatial representation of a particular place. However, it eschews the bird's eye, unifying perspective of traditional cartography for a far more textured and layered vision, peppered with details drawn from many sources, as well as Katy's independent research. The centrality of the birthing room, brilliantly foregrounded by Jess Cox's talk, was mentioned by many workshop participants and became a strong feature in Katy's design. Doves proved equally impactful and became one of the map's most striking images. Their looping flight paths are indicative of both Katy's departure from standard cartographic practice and the tension between wider horizons and domestic confines that is echoed in the riverside barges at the mapped garden's edge.

Several participants thought that Susannah, a Unitarian, should be shown walking to the chapel with her family, and this is also included towards the bottom right. A motif of banana leaves (bottom right, above the ink bottle) was drawn from Katy's observations of decorative features around the dining room fireplace while on John's tour.<sup>14</sup> The quotations stem from a range of texts, including Susannah's correspondence and my book: "hands stained banana green" is probably identifiable only to me as words I wrote as part of a loose biographical sequence.<sup>15</sup> Ideas seeded by Gaynor about the importance of correspondence in Susannah's life, meanwhile, are represented in the map's preoccupation with letters and wax seals. As such, *Mapping Susannah* bears the traces of both the collaborative processes and the multiple individual research efforts that underpinned it, just as it inclusively maps Susannah's life as a series of overlapping identities and experiences, spanning the perspectives of the girl "Sukey" through to the wife and mother she became.

I collected the framed map and additional prints from Katy at an ad hoc drop-off arranged for mutual convenience outside my sister's Shrewsbury flat during a weekend visit in May 2024. Parking was unavailable, so the exchange was brief, though pleasant. We discussed the possibility of an article such as this, as well as separate arrangements made for John to collect the map from my sister a few days later, in a further example of flexible and evolving practical processes. I thought, again, of the inseparability of the personal and the intellectual, of how family and domestic relationships shape and support individual pathways even as they simultaneously limit them. Even at this point, I was not entirely sure that the map would find the display space we had hoped for. Darwin House, was, after all, still more likely to echo with the sound of drills than cooing doves, and there are presumably many considerations to bear in mind when deciding where and when an artwork might be exhibited in such a protean setting.

Two weeks later, I received a photograph from John of the image in situ at Darwin House along with an accompanying caption card explaining the project context. The map was not,

<sup>12</sup> Piesse, 11 February 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Of the 22 workshop participants who supplied anonymised personal details on feedback forms, 81% were women and 68% were from Shropshire. Piesse, "Susannah Darwin at the Mount" evaluation forms, 10 February 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Katy Alston, email to the author, 26 June 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Piesse 2021, 58.

at least at this stage, to be hung in the birth room, as originally planned, but instead in the hallway: an encouragingly central, if unanticipated, location that afforded Susannah increasing visibility in the house she once ran.

#### 4. Afterlife

*Mapping Susannah Darwin* may now be framed and finished, but it begins to have an extended life beyond its primary functions. When John and I were invited to contribute to an episode of BBC Radio 4's *Open Country* about Darwin's house and garden, broadcast in May 2024, we both unconsciously gravitated towards telling Susannah's story – showing a familiarity with details that owes a clear debt to the legacy of the map.<sup>16</sup> Three months later, I joined two LJMU postgraduate students to co-deliver a paper showcasing the map and related film and poetry they have created at the British Association for Victorian Studies conference at the Gladstone's Library, Hawarden hub, contributing to a panel about the event alongside Gaynor and myself. We speak of our hopes that the map will contribute to a larger thematic concern with women's history at Darwin House, generating new ways of thinking about family influences on Darwin that will offer valuable correctives to assumptions about lone male genius. In 2025, prints of the map are set to be displayed in two parallel heritage settings on the basis of both established ties and new connections directly forged through our project.

Then, in September 2024, I receive an unexpected email that changes the mood, headed "Darwin House – Update."<sup>17</sup> John Hughes's two-year contract at Darwin House has come to an end. Plans for the visitor centre are stalled and uncertain, with commercial businesses set to move into portions of the building. Renovations continue apace.

On the map and off again.

It is confusing, frustrating, downright disappointing, and not the ending to the story that any of us wanted.

A flurry of mixed messages ensues. Julia Buckley, the new Labour MP for Shrewsbury, endorses and welcomes The Mount's new "international visitor attraction" in her maiden speech at the House of Commons.<sup>18</sup> The DarwIN Festival lives to fight another day. The house remains open to occasional visitors and our map on the wall – but queries go unanswered. It is a baffling silence, indicative of the delicate interpersonal relationships, local politics, and discretions that can blindside even the best-conceived collaborative public engagement projects, and for which no room is ever allowed in the neat boxes of official reports and applications.

As autumn turns to winter, I think back to The Mount as it was when I first visited nearly a decade ago. Shored up on a muddy bank, cracking with the pressure of two hundred years of subsidence, and left shabby and obscure after its decades-long shift as a tax office. As tantalisingly inaccessible as a fairytale castle – for those of us with romantic leanings – and with a string of hazy names to match. The Mount, Mount House, Darwin Place, Darwin House: all variously applied to both house and garden and sometimes to neighbouring plots as well. Murmuring with the sounds of tired computer fans and after-lunch chat, The Mount

<sup>16</sup> Lomas and Blunt 2024.

<sup>17</sup> John Hughes, email to the author, 18 September 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Buckley 2024.

had seemed as stubbornly impervious to interpretation and amplification as the lives it had once contained. Why, I wondered, was nobody telling its stories, or preserving the space where the stories began? Why was no one out pruning The Mount's overgrown trees or cleaning the windows that Darwin once looked through? Yet this odd neglect was part of the place. It was part of local histories less stable than "heritage" and a thread running through The Mount's charms.

Now, as I try to decipher continuing developments and look ahead to new dissemination plans, it is with the feeling that we did well to salvage something while we could – that I have always been trying to salvage something from this place and its people. Feeling. Memory. Ongoing histories. Susannah's story, at least set in motion: Katy's map facing out like a river barge's sail.

This article, itself one of the several unexpected developments stemming from *Mapping Susannah Darwin*, has offered an exploratory – and inevitably partial – personal reflection on the practical processes and wider collaborative contexts that are often forgotten once a project is apparently complete. From the perspective of future visitors to The Mount and other settings who will see the map on the wall and perhaps not read the accompanying label too closely, the image will predominantly figure as a compelling artwork that tells Susannah's story and expresses Katy's vision and talent. In the more sterile and procedural parlance of the British university system, it will be assessed as an "output" with the potential to have a measurable "impact" on wider public audiences. But from my personal perspective on the inside of the project, *Mapping Susannah* feels most akin to a memento. It evokes the full range of overlapping practices, relationships, fudges, and failures that must always characterise the humanities in action – and which made up this project's terrain.

**Jude Piesse** is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature, working within the Research Institute for Literature and Cultural History at Liverpool John Moores University. Her book, *The Ghost in the Garden: In Search of Darwin's Lost Garden* (Scribe, 2021) blends biography, memoir, and nature writing to tell the story of Darwin's childhood garden at The Mount in Shrewsbury. She is also the author of *British Settler Emigration in Print, 1832–1877* (Oxford University Press, 2016), and a range of chapters, articles and creative pieces. She has run many collaborative public engagement projects, including 'Susannah Darwin at The Mount: Hidden Maternal Histories' (2024) with Shropshire Museum Service. This project was funded by a Liverpool John Moores University Communities and Impact QR grant.

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