A portrait of a Victorian vicar hangs in the surprisingly sparse interior of cathedral-like All Saints Church in Hitcham.

Although not an unusual occurrence for a place of worship, the man it pays homage to, John Stevens Henslow, was definitely not an average cleric. He was responsible not only for establishing Cambridge University’s world-famous botanic garden, but also taught and inspired one of Britain’s greatest scientists, Charles Darwin.

So how did such a high-achieving academic end up as a priest of the Church of England in a remote parish which he described as “woefully neglected” and where the locals were “far below the average scale of the peasant class in England”? As has been commented before, it is hard to imagine what a contrast quiet Hitcham must have been to cosmopolitan Cambridge.

Henslow, born the son of a Kent solicitor in 1796, was a precocious child who was encouraged to take an interest...
in natural history. His knowledge became so great that the British Museum asked him to help catalogue their natural history collections while he was still at school. He won a place at Cambridge in 1814 and was appointed chair of mineralogy at the age of 26. Then in 1827, he was made Regius Professor of botany.

As part of his remit, he was given control of a small tract of land known as the physick garden, where medicinal herbs were cultivated. However, Henslow deemed this woefully inadequate and after much wrangling, persuaded the university to purchase 40 acres of farmland to grow and study all kinds of plants for scientific research. Today Cambridge University Botanic Garden, in Brookside, has a collection of more than 8,000 species from across the globe to facilitate research and teaching.

As its website boasts, it is also a beautiful visitor attraction with a series of ‘Grade 2-star’ listed heritage landscapes through which you can discover the drama of nature. In celebration of its founder, CUBG launched an exclusive patrons’ group called the Henslow Circle in 2018. It offers members unique access and invitations to tours and lectures. The man himself would appreciate how apposite that old saying is: from little acorns, mighty oaks grow.

This momentous achievement would normally be enough to make Henslow a shining star in the firmament of science, however what came next made him a true great. In 1828 he befriended a young undergraduate called Charles Darwin. At that time, Darwin was experiencing “second-year doldrums” in his arts degree and, coming from a wealthy family, thought he was set to live down to his father’s prediction that he would become an “idle sporting man”. Darwin’s elder brother Erasmus persuaded him to attend one of Henslow’s forums. In no time at all, he was a regular visitor at the professor’s home, rubbing shoulders with senior figures in the university’s scientific community.

Henslow’s teaching techniques relied heavily on field trips which encouraged students to make observations of their own. Darwin was soon such a regular companion of the professor that he became known as “the man who walks with Henslow”.

In 1831, Henslow turned down an invitation that was to prove Darwin’s big break – a two-year survey trip to South America on board HMS Beagle. Henslow’s wife and the fact that he had by then been ordained as a priest, dissuaded him from accepting, but he saw it as the perfect trip for his protégé. The voyage turned into a circumnavigation of the world lasting almost five years, with Darwin sending Henslow a huge collection of plants, animals, rocks and fossils. Henslow
University’s multi-purpose city garden

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ensured they were passed on for analysis and also had his letters published. By the time Darwin returned home, his scientific credentials were assured.

Darwin, of course, went on to write the groundbreaking *On the Origin of Species*. And although it horrified many churchmen as they viewed it as an attack on the belief of God as creator of all life, Henslow’s friendship with him endured.

In 1837, Henslow secured the rectorship of Hitcham, where we was to remain for the rest of his life. As his first congregation was not big enough to fill a single pew, he decided to win his parishioners’ hearts and minds through the appliance of science to their farming methods, encouraging them to experiment into crop diseases and fertiliser. His findings even prompted two Suffolk farmers to set up Fisons, now an international chemical company.

Henslow also founded a village school and led many of the lessons himself. Astonishingly, he was travelling to London to tutor Queen Victoria’s offspring at the same time. He switched traditional church handouts to the poor from money to coal and clothing, thus preventing the heads of families from squandering it at the local pub.

Allotments were provided as well, so people could grow their own food.

The expansion of the railways to Suffolk saw Henslow organise excursions to London, Cambridge and Norwich, so his parishioners could expand their horizons. Furthermore he helped to establish Ipswich Museum.

Developing a heart condition, Henslow eventually died from an attack of bronchitis aged 65. Darwin offered a fitting epitaph for the pioneer who won friends in all echelons of society: “I believe a better man never walked this earth.”

Henslow is buried in a simple grave at All Saints and last autumn its Friends group won £100,000 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to promote his legacy. It is being used to restore bells – including two that Henslow commissioned – and to create a permanent exhibition about him. A similar showcase is also running at the Museum of East Anglian Life in Stowmarket. So if you were not familiar with him before, 2020 is predicted to be his year.

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Cambridge University Botanic Garden is a 40 acre, Grade II* listed heritage garden in the centre of Cambridge. It is the most visited university botanic garden in the UK, welcoming over 300,000 visitors annually. The Garden supports University teaching and research while also being a place of enjoyment and inspiration to visitors of all ages.

The garden maintains the University’s collection of over 8,000 plant species from all around the world, including one of the region’s finest collections of trees, all set across beautifully designed and landscaped gardens and glasshouses. Highlights include striking seasonal colour in the Winter and Autumn Gardens; the richly fragranced Scented Garden; colourful Bee Borders; the Woodland Garden and Lake; and the new Rising Path offering a fresh perspective on the garden’s historic Systematic Beds. Alpine and tropical plants in the Glasshouse Range are perfect for a cold day’s visit with something in flower throughout the year.

The Garden offers year-round inspiration for gardeners and is an exciting introduction to the natural world for families. Activities and events run throughout the year and include:

- free drop-in family events on the first Saturday of each month, 10am -1pm
- free seasonal trails offer an introduction to the natural world for families
- free Young Explorer backpacks available for children to borrow
- expert Garden Guides offer free Garden ‘highlight’ tours 2.30pm every Sunday May-September; 2pm on the first Sunday of the month October – April (excluding January)
- courses, workshops and annual events including evening summer music concerts

The Garden Cafe and Terrace welcomes visitors, serving a selection of home-made hot food, tea, coffee, cake and refreshing drinks and visitors are also invited to enjoy the Botanic Garden Shop.

See www.botanic.cam.ac.uk for more details.