“The Eugenic Darwins”
Professor Jim Moore
The Open University

Professor Moore’s talk only occasionally examined the link between Eugenics and Darwin’s ideas but instead dealt mainly with Darwin’s own life history and that of his family and how his observations and conclusions about breeding systems related to his own family genetics.

There was a detailed look at Darwin’s own ‘genetic fitness’ given that within his own family there were 4 generations descended from 1st cousin marriages, including that to his own cousin Emma Wedgwood, a marriage that produced several children many of whom suffered infirmities when young. Moreover it is now well established that there was ‘unexplained infertility’ in the Darwin-Emma Wedgwood offspring and that the line eventually died out in the 1970’s, albeit only after the setting up of the auspicious Cambridge Scientific Instrument Company in the early 20th Century by Darwin’s youngest son Horace. Although Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton was a pioneer in the study of Eugenics, links with Darwin’s own ideas are tenuous at best.

The question is whether Darwin himself was suspicious that his own familial shortcomings were down to in-breeding or not after a lifetime studying the basis for evolution. We know he had his own anxieties about this especially after observing the effects of self fertilisation in a number of plant species (1857-1876) and in pigeons (1855-1858). Professor Moore wondered if Darwin himself was obsessed with the ‘dangers of consanguineous marriages’. Indeed we now know that Darwin was right to be so given that the genetic causes of ‘in-breeding depression’ are well established.

Professor Moore concluded by saying that ‘Don’t look at Eugenics through nazi-tinted speculation but more as an outcome of the study of plant and animal breeding.’ This would certainly concur with the view of the vast majority of scientists and I suspect of those in the audience that turned up in large numbers to listen.

Given on Wednesday 12th September 2012 at the Ashcroft Centre