

Unveiling of Wallace Sculpture in Usk, 6th November 2021

Speech given at the ceremony by Dr George Beccaloni (Director of the Wallace Correspondence Project)

Although Wallace is not exactly a household name these days, he was actually one of the most famous people in the world when he died in 1913 aged 90. During his long life he wrote more than 1000 articles and 22 books on a wide variety of subjects, and in these he made numerous important contributions to many fields of science including biology, geography, geology, anthropology and even astrobiology – the study of life on other planets. His work on animal distribution resulted in the creation of a whole new field, evolutionary biogeography, and his work on evolution led to his independent discovery of evolution by natural selection, a theory he published jointly with Charles Darwin in 1858.

Wallace was born in Kensington Cottage (now Kensington House) in Llanbadoc on the other side of the river to Usk town, on the 8th of January 1823. His parents were Thomas Vere and Mary Ann Wallace, a downwardly mobile middle-class English couple who had moved there from London a few years earlier in order to reduce their living costs. Wallace's father was a qualified solicitor, but he had never practised and had been living off inherited wealth which dwindled as his family grew. His father was of Scottish descent (reputedly, of a line leading back to the famous William Wallace); whilst his great grandfather on his mother's side was twice Mayor of Hertford.

Wallace was the eighth of nine children, three of whom did not survive to adulthood. Two of his sisters who died in infancy are buried in Llanbadoc Churchyard.

Wallace lived in Llanbadoc until he was 5 and his later memories of the area were unsurprisingly fragmentary. He remembered fishermen in coracles on the Usk, and him scooping up small lampreys from the

river in basins or old saucepans which were cooked for supper. Other memories include roasting potatoes on a fire which his older brother made in the woods, and playing in the ruins of Usk castle.

In 1828 Wallace and his family left Usk and moved to Hertford north of London, and it was there, at Hale's Grammar School, that he received his only formal education. In about 1835 Wallace's father was swindled out of his remaining assets and the family fell on very hard times. Wallace was forced to leave school in March 1837 aged only 14, because his family could no longer afford the modest school fees, and shortly afterwards he went to work for his brother William as an apprentice land-surveyor.

Wallace and his brother would do such work for the next six and a half years, roaming all over the countryside of southern England and Wales. In the autumn of 1841 the Wallace brothers moved to the Neath area and it was there that Alfred's interest in natural history really began. It started because he wanted to be able to identify the plants he saw in the countryside while out surveying. He bought his first books on how to identify them and also began to collect them, forming a collection of pressed specimens.

A slump in the surveying business in 1843 led him to take a teaching job in Leicester, where he met another budding naturalist, Henry Walter Bates, who soon got Wallace passionate about collecting and studying insects.

In 1845 Wallace moved back to Neath and it was there that he first read Robert Chambers' controversial anonymously published book *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, which argued that species had transmutate (evolved) from earlier forms. The book was dismissed by the naturalists of the day as pure speculation, but Wallace became fascinated in the subject. In late 1847/early 1848 Wallace suggested to Bates that they travel to Brazil to collect specimens of insects, birds and other animals, both for their private collections and to sell to collectors and museums in Europe. The main aim of the expedition was to seek evidence for evolution and attempt

to discover its mechanism. Bates liked the idea and the two young men (at the time Wallace was 25 and Bates 23) set off by ship from Liverpool to Pará (Belém) on the 26th April 1848, arriving a month later.

At first they worked as a team, but after a few months they had a disagreement, and split up to collect in different areas. Wallace centred his activities in the middle Amazon and Rio Negro, drafting a map of this mighty river using the skills he had learnt as a land surveyor. Some years later this was published by the Royal Geographical Society in London and it proved accurate enough to become the standard map of the region for many years.

In 1852 Wallace was in poor health and decided to return to Britain. However, twenty-six days into the voyage disaster struck: the ship he was on caught fire and sank in the middle of the Atlantic, taking with it his irreplaceable notes and all the specimens he had collected during the previous two (and most interesting) years. Wallace and the crew struggled to survive in a pair of badly leaking lifeboats, but fortunately after 10 days drifting in the open sea they were picked up by a passing cargo ship making its way back to England. Luckily, Wallace's agent in London had had the good sense to insure his collections, but sadly for less than they were worth.

A few days after getting back to England Wallace vowed to never travel by sea again, but good resolutions soon fade, and two years later he was in South-East Asia, at the start of an eight-year 14,000 mile journey of collecting and exploration that would yield an extraordinary 126,000 biological specimens, including more than five thousand species new to science. It was during this trip that Wallace made his greatest scientific discovery. In February 1858 while suffering from an attack of fever on the island of Halmahera in what is now Indonesia, the idea of natural selection as the mechanism of evolutionary change suddenly occurred to him. As soon as he was able to he wrote a detailed essay explaining his idea and sent it off to Charles Darwin, who he knew was interested in “species transmutation”. Unknown to Wallace, Darwin had in fact discovered

natural selection about 20 years before, but had been procrastinating about publishing the idea. Darwin was therefore horrified when he received Wallace's letter and essay, and appealed to his friends the geologist Charles Lyell and the botanist Joseph Hooker for advice on what to do. To cut a long story short, Lyell and Hooker, decided to present Wallace's essay (without asking his permission!), along with some unpublished fragments from Darwin's writings on the subject, to a meeting of the Linnean Society of London on 1 July 1858. These documents were published a month later in the Society's Journal as a co-authored academic paper – with Darwin listed as the first author! Even though Darwin's book the *Origin of Species* was published more than a year after this article, most people today mistakenly believe that the theory was first proposed by Darwin in his book.

Wallace returned to England in 1862 and spent the rest of his long life explaining, developing and defending the theory of natural selection, as well as working on a very wide variety of other (sometimes controversial!) subjects. He was awarded numerous prestigious medals plus the Order of Merit (the greatest honour that can be given to a civilian by the ruling British monarch), for his independent discovery of natural selection and by the end of his life, he was world famous. He died in Broadstone, Dorset on 7 November 1913 and was buried there at the request of his family. In 1915 a marble portrait medallion of him was installed in Westminster Abbey next to the memorial to Darwin. Sadly, after his death Wallace slipped into relative obscurity and few today remember that natural selection isn't just Darwin's theory, but Wallace's as well!

The sculpture which Bill will unveil today will serve as a reminder that this is Wallace's birthplace. Tomorrow sees the 108th anniversary of Wallace's death, so the timing of the unveiling is very appropriate. Although there are hundreds of public sculptures of Darwin around the world, there are very few of Wallace. The only ones in the UK are a bust in the National Botanic Garden of Wales, a sculpture in Hertford, the medallion in Westminster Abbey, and a life-sized bronze statue in London's Natural History Museum, which my Wallace Memorial Fund raised the money for and which was unveiled

by Bill Bailey and David Attenborough in 2013. There are also life-sized statues of Wallace and his loyal assistant Ali in Singapore, and a gigantic bust of Wallace in Tangkoko Nature Reserve on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi.

The Usk Civic Society has been working on this project since 2014, when Tony Kear then Chairman, spoke of his dream to see a memorial to Wallace in Twyn Square. Successive Chairmen, Martyn Evans and Shan Henshall continued the work energetically. During the past seven years many people have helped - too many to mention individually. It's fitting that Tony is once again Chairman to see the project through. I would now like to hand over to Bill Bailey. He really needs no introduction, but I will mention that he is a passionate advocate for Wallace and his 2 part BBC Series Jungle Hero, which is currently on BBC iPlayer, has probably done more than anything else to make people around the world aware of Wallace.