

Library acquires important collection of Wallaceana

By Janet Beccaloni

ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE – naturalist, explorer, collector, humanitarian, spiritualist and co-author with Charles Darwin of the ground-breaking 1858 paper on evolution by natural selection – was one of the most famous scientists of his era. But after his death in 1913 he was largely forgotten, in contrast to Darwin who many regard as being the sole originator of the theory of natural selection. Recently, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in Wallace.

Several newly published biographies, such as Peter Raby's *Alfred Russel Wallace: A Life*, and John Wilson's *The Forgotten Naturalist: In Search of Alfred Russel Wallace*, seek to remedy the modern-day ignorance about Wallace and attempt to restore his name to its rightful place in history.

The latest episode in this Wallace renaissance is the recent purchase by the Library of a very important collection of his manuscripts, books and butterfly specimens, which had been handed down through his family. Chris Mills (Head of Collections and Readers' Services) recently described it as 'the most important acquisition for the Library in the past forty years'. The chain of events which led to this acquisition started in 1998 with George Beccaloni's (Entomology Department) project to preserve Wallace's grave in Broadstone, Dorset. I interviewed George to find out more about his involvement.

What is the link between your project to preserve Wallace's grave and this acquisition?

As a result of the project I got to know Wallace's two grandsons and discovered they had a treasure-trove of material that had

belonged to their grandfather. When they told me the family was thinking about selling it to an institution, I immediately suggested that the NHM might be interested. I arranged a meeting with Chris Mills to ask whether the Library might consider trying to buy it. The author Peter Raby kindly agreed to come along to stress how important the collection is to historians of science. Fortunately, Chris quickly realised this was an opportunity not to be missed and, thanks to the hard work of Chris and his team, the collection now belongs to the Museum and will no doubt be a key resource for future Wallace scholars.

As a lepidopterist, would you explain why the butterflies in this collection are so important?

They are scientifically valuable for several reasons. The collection consists of 24 drawers containing about 500 butterflies plus some moths, and includes type specimens of several butterflies named by Wallace. The collection is also obviously important from a historical point of view, and I particularly like two drawers that Wallace arranged to illustrate sexual dimorphism – where males and females of a species differ in colour pattern – and mimicry in butterflies, two areas of research

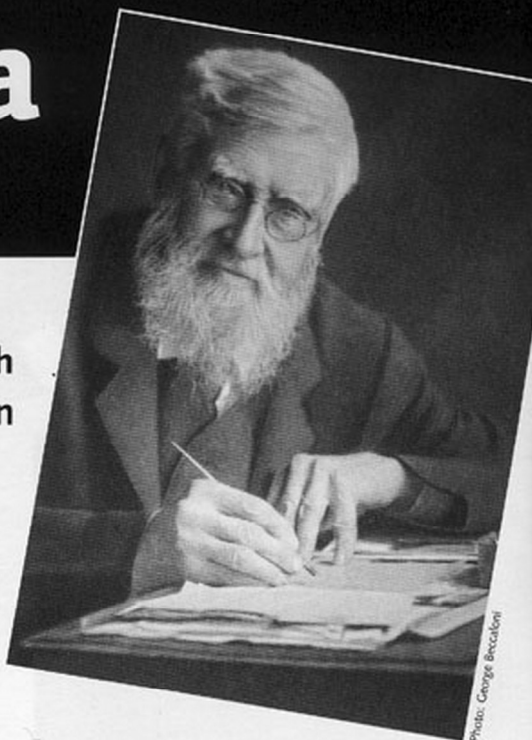


Photo: George Beccaloni

to which Wallace made major contributions. I can imagine that these unique displays might feature in future public exhibitions.

Next I interviewed Chris Mills to find out more about the importance of the collection and also how the funds were raised.

How important is this acquisition for the NHM?

It's very important because Wallace is a key figure for this institution, and it is the last major group of items relating

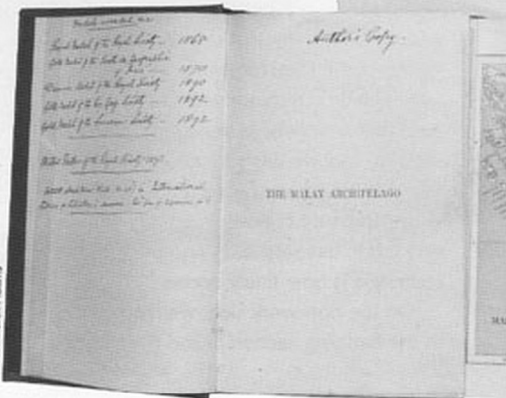


Photo: Derek Adams



Photo: Ann Beccaloni

to him which were still in private hands. It is certainly one of the most expensive collections acquired in my time – they don't often go into six-figure sums! To put it into context, the last equivalent acquisition was the Raper collection in 1963.

How did you raise the funds?

Firstly, we discussed what the NHM could afford with the Director of Science and were promised £20,000 from the Museum Enhancement Grant. The Heritage Lottery Fund gave us their maximum amount of £99,000, which made matching funding easier to gain. With £43,000 left to raise, with the assistance from the Development team, we approached several trusts plus some individuals, including NHM supporters. Four main trusts and seven individuals finally contributed. We have certainly found it to be a very useful experience in fundraising.

What are the most important manuscripts and books in the collection?

That is very difficult to answer, as there are so many little gems in there! However, the highlights must be Wallace's own copy of the 1858 paper, letters between Wallace and Bates, and a copy of *Origin of Species* given to Wallace by Darwin with a letter from Darwin in the front. Also of great importance is the large amount of family correspondence,

which shows a private side of Wallace not usually seen. Raby's recent biography indicates the importance of this material, as the Wallace Family Archive is referred to an enormous number of times.

Having heard staff views, I also wanted to know how the Wallace family felt, so I talked to Richard Wallace (the youngest of Wallace's grandsons), who kept the collection in his house for many years.

Why did you sell the collection?

It has become apparent with the increase in people visiting us over the years, that Wallace's 'star' has been rising. We therefore felt that the collection should no longer be in a private house, but in an institution where it would be cared for properly. Also, looking after my grandfather's collection was a great responsibility. This realisation was borne out by the attempted burglary we had last November, which made us realise we were definitely doing the right thing by selling it!

Were you sad to see the collection go?

Although we have slightly mixed feelings, the overall feeling was one of relief!

Far left: Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913). Left: Part of the collection. Above: George Beccaloni transfers the butterfly specimens into new drawers in order to take them to the NHM.

