

Thurrock Museum Fact File

The Wallace Project - Grays

Alfred Russel Wallace built and lived at The Dell, (one of the earliest examples of a concrete house) in Grays for a number of years; he is chiefly remembered for his association with Charles Darwin in jointly publishing the theory of the evolution of species by natural selection.

Wallace was born on the 8th January 1823 in Usk, Monmouthshire, the eighth of nine children, four boys and five girls. The family moved to Hertford when he was five and he received his only formal education in the town, leaving school when he was fourteen. In 1837 he was apprenticed as a land surveyor and worked for over six years on surveys for the Tithe Awards and the new railways. Any spare time was spent in training himself as a naturalist by reading and correspondence, by attending lectures at "Mechanics Institutes" (the Workers Educational Association of the time) and by observation and collecting in the field.

At the age of twenty-five and with £100 saved from earnings as a surveyor he set off for South America with a like-minded friend, Henry Walter Bates. They were to collect insect and bird specimens for sale to museums and private collectors. He returned home after four years with a growing reputation. After a year or so he set out again, this time to the Malay Archipelago arriving in Singapore in April 1854. For eight years he travelled through the islands collecting and identifying countless species previously unknown to the scientists of Europe.



Early in 1858 he wrote to Charles Darwin from a small island in what was then the Dutch East Indies, enclosing a paper entitled "On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type". The similarities with Darwin's own, as yet unpublished, ideas were startling. Darwin wrote to a friend "Your words have come true with a vengeance that I should be forestalled". After much anguish on Darwin's part it was decided by Darwin's two closest friends that the paper by Wallace and two pieces by Darwin which had been written for publication should be read at a meeting of the Linnean Society on 1st July 1858. It is difficult today to imagine the impact on a general public that was barely accepting the idea that every species had not literally been created during a single week in 4004 BC.

Wallace, still in the East, only learned of the meeting after the event. His reaction as a comparatively young man of 35 with only distant acquaintance with the scientific establishment, can perhaps be judged from a letter to his mother. He reported that he had received letters from -

"...two of the greatest most eminent Naturalists in England which has highly gratified me. I sent Mr Darwin an essay on a subject in which he is now writing a great work. He showed it to Dr Hooker & Mr Darwin Sir Charles Lyell, who thought so highly of it that they immediately read it before the "Linnean Society". This insures me the acquaintance and assistance of these eminent men on my return home."

It was 1862 before Wallace was back in England. For the next few years Wallace was busy writing, lecturing and attending meetings, much of his time being spent in support of the "Darwinian" theory of evolution. In 1866 he met and married Annie Mitten.

For some years the couple lived mainly at Annie's parents' house in Hurstpierpoint, Sussex. During this time a son, Herbert Spencer, was born in June 1867, and a daughter, Violet, in January 1869. Two months later his account of his journeys in the East, The Malay Archipelago was published, considerably enhancing his reputation.

The possibility of securing the directorship of a proposed museum to be built at Bethnal Green caused him to look for a house in Essex. He moved temporarily to Holly Lodge in Barking - "a miserable kind of village, surrounded by marshes and ugly factories". His second son, William, was born there in December 1871.

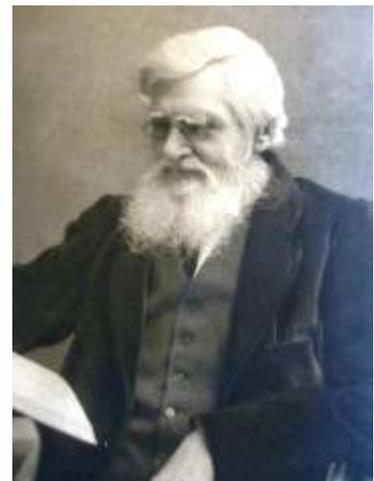


During the stay at Holly Lodge he had secured the lease of 4 acres of land at Grays, which included an old chalk pit, on which to build a house to his own instructions. He decided to build in concrete because there was a nearby cement works and a supply of gravel on the site.

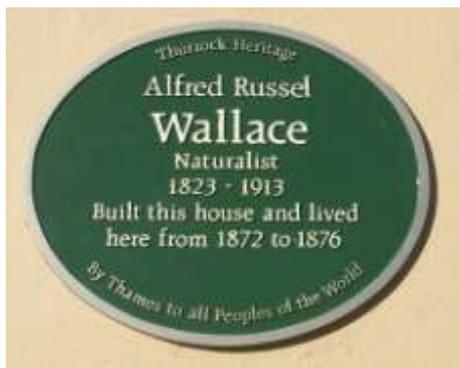
He employed as his architect Thomas Wonnacott of Farnham who appears to have had experience in this new building material. Wallace himself laid out the grounds, including the serpentine drive from the road now known as Dell Road, (College Avenue did not exist when the house was built). He described the grounds as "a bit of a wilderness that can be made into a splendid imitation of a Welsh valley". The house was completed in 1872.

He settled into what he anticipated to be his home for the rest of his life, writing and publishing many articles, papers and especially the two volumes of *The Geographical Distribution of Animals*. He also began to take a more public interest in social reform and spiritualism but continued to be friends with the mainstream of the scientific establishment including Darwin, Huxley & Lyell.

The proposed museum faltered and this, together with the death of his eldest son, and a need to reduce expenses, appear to have led to a decision to leave Grays. He gave other reasons - the difficulty of attending meetings in London and of traveling to his in-laws at Hurstpierpoint, and damage to his plant collection by the cold north winds. The family left The Dell in July 1876, moving to Surrey.



Wallace continued to write, attend meetings and lecture, including a lecture tour in the U.S.A. but remained unsatisfied in finding a permanent home. Eventually he moved to Dorset in the summer of 1889 and lived there with only one local move until his death on 7th November 1913. The suggestion of burial in Westminster Abbey was not accepted by the family and he was buried in Broadstone cemetery in Dorset, after a service by the Bishop of Salisbury. His grave has recently been restored by the A. R. Wallace Memorial Fund, which also funded a commemorative Thurrock Heritage



Plaque placed on The Dell in 2002, the only house of three built by Wallace which still survives.

A scheme organised by Thurrock Museum Service produced a Thurrock Heritage Plaque which was unveiled in 2002 on the house.

The house is now privately owned and visitors are requested to view the property from the road.

It has been suggested that the house if in public ownership could become a centre of environmental study with a strong reflection on Wallace's ideas, travels and experiences.

Further reading: *My Life* by A.W. Wallace, Thurrock Local History Society publications and web site. The Wallace Memorial Fund website (<http://wallacefund.info/>).

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