

Who was Alfred Russel Wallace?

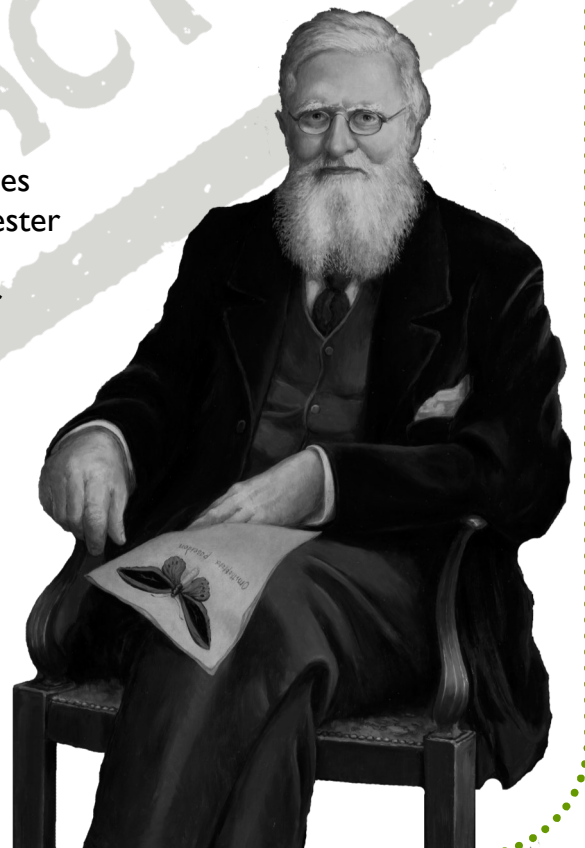
Alfred Russel Wallace was a British naturalist and explorer. He carried out extensive fieldwork during his career, first in the Amazon, then later in the Malay Archipelago. Here he identified the Wallace line, which divides the Indonesian archipelago into two distinct parts. On one side of the line are animals of an Australian descent, and on the other side of the line are animals of an Asian origin. Wallace is known as the father of biogeography, due to his expertise in the geographical distribution of animal species.

Wallace is most famous for independently developing a theory of evolution by natural selection, prompting Darwin to publish the theory he had been working on for twenty years! A joint paper by the two scientists was read at the Linnean Society in 1858.

Wallace had many financial difficulties during his life. He paid for his expeditions by collecting specimens for the wealthy, and then supported his family through his scientific writing. He was eventually granted a small government pension in 1881. After Wallace's death a group of prominent British scientists campaigned to have a medallion of Wallace placed in Westminster Abbey near to Darwin's resting place. It was unveiled in 1915, and remains there today.

Alfred Russel Wallace: FAST FACTS

- Name:** Alfred Russel Wallace
- Born:** 8 January 1823, Usk, Wales
- Died:** 7 November 1913, Broadstone, Dorset. He is buried in Broadstone Cemetery, in accordance with his last wishes.
- Education:** Hertford Grammar School (1828-1836)
- Married:** Annie Mitten in 1866
- Children:** Herbert, Violet and William
- Jobs:** Land surveyor in West England and Wales
Schoolmaster at Collegiate School, Leicester
Civil Engineer for Vale of Neath Railway
Travelling naturalist and scientific author
- Clubs:** Entomological Society of London (1870)
Linnean Society of London (1872)
Royal Society (1893)
- Awards:** Royal Medal (1868)
Darwin Medal (1890)
Founder's Medal (1892)
Linnean Society Gold Medal (1892)
Copley Medal (1908)
Order of Merit (1908)
Darwin-Wallace Medal (1908)



The Amazon Expedition

In 1848, the **25** year old Wallace persuaded his friend Henry Walter Bates to accompany him on an expedition to the Amazonian rainforests. They were to study the plants and animals there, collecting specimens to sell along the way. Wallace spent **4** years in the Amazon before sailing back to London aboard the *Helen*. After just **26** days at sea, the *Helen* caught fire and sank. All of Wallace's specimens from the final year of his trip were lost in the shipwreck.



Earliest known photograph of Wallace aged 24



An illustration from Wallace's paper on the Papilionidae butterflies of the Malay

Life in London

Upon his return from the Amazon, Wallace spent **18** months in London, living on the insurance pay-out from his lost specimens. He spent this time writing **2** books and **6** scientific papers. He also spent a lot of time visiting the natural history collections which were held at the British Museum. It was during one visit there that Wallace first met Charles Darwin. They began a correspondence that would go on to change the course of natural history forever.

The Malay Archipelago

In 1854 Wallace set off for the Malay Archipelago. He spent **8** years exploring all of the major islands, studying the plants and animals and collecting specimens. It was here that Wallace developed his theory of evolution by natural selection, and theorised about the geographical distribution of animals. During his time in the Malay Archipelago, Wallace collected over **126,000** specimens, including over **80,000** beetles! He later wrote a book about his travels.



A six shafted bird of paradise from 'The Malay Archipelago'



Images © The Linnean Society of London, Wikimedia commons

Broadstone Cemetery

Wallace passed away in **1913** aged **90**. Several prominent scientists of the day thought Wallace should be buried in Westminster Abbey, but his wife refused. He was buried in the local cemetery at Broadstone, in accordance with his own wishes. A piece of ossified tree trunk was chosen as his headstone - it looks rather unusual!

A statue is planned to celebrate the centenary of Wallace's death, and it will be given to the Natural History Museum to stand alongside Darwin, Huxley and Owen.