

Unraveling the Mystery of Alfred Russel Wallace's siblings
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When my wife Angela and I decided to visit the Monmouthshire village of Llanbadoc I admit it was for purely selfish reasons. Llanbadoc is none other than the birthplace of my long-standing hero Alfred Russel Wallace. You will of course know that he was that great British naturalist and co-author, alongside Charles Darwin, of that universally equally well-known work, the theory of evolution by natural selection. For those unfamiliar with the topography of the United Kingdom, Monmouthshire is a county in Wales. It has not always been thus. Let me explain. In 1535 the Laws in Wales Act created the county of Monmouthshire and all was well until 1542 when the amended Laws in Wales Act listed the counties in Wales. For some inexplicable reason it omitted Monmouthshire and thus, if on administrative paper only this beautiful area reverted back to England. Despite many attempts to “give it back” it was only with the introduction of The Local Government Act in 1972 that Monmouthshire returned to its natural roots. Of course one would have the right to ask why does it matter and equally have the right to receive an answer.

Let me explain. In the world of evolutionary science there are the Darwinians who, of course, follow Darwin and the Wallacites who follow Wallace. Any evolutionary adept worth his salt will also know that one of the biggest debates that remains a bone of contention is exactly, out of the two, who passed the post first with the actual theory. A smaller and seemingly much less significant side argument that has long raged is was Wallace, Welsh or English? The Welsh claim him as their own pointing out that in their eyes Usk has always been Welsh but the English, as always, armed with dates and bureaucracy claim him as theirs. Given the rivalry between both the Wallacites and Darwinians and indeed the Welsh and the English you will see that it rather does matter.

Darwin is rightly an icon of evolutionary science as indeed is Wallace. In addition as the founder of the science of Zoogeography, Wallace is deserving of all his many accolades including of course the prestigious Order of Merit but when it comes to who actually arrived at the idea of Natural Selection first, then the battle rages on. Darwinians will tell you that it was “their man” having worked on his Magnus opus for many years previously whilst the Wallacites are adamant that it was “our man” who whilst recovering from a fever arrived at the idea and scribbled his thoughts down before sending it to Darwin for his opinion.

In a hastily penned letter to his confidant Charles Lyell Darwin declared in despair...

“If Wallace had my sketch written out in 1842 he could not have made a better short abstract! Even his terms now stand as Heads of my Chapters”

After seeking advice from his closest allies Darwin agreed that a joint paper should be read to the Linnaean Society. Neither Darwin nor Wallace were to be present at the meeting. Darwin was mourning the recent loss of a child and Wallace was in a remote part of Indonesia. The paper was placed before these learned men on July 1st 1858 and the rest is history. Such friendly rivalry between both men's supporters continues to this day and whilst the debate goes on it is now accepted that without the input of both men our understanding of the modern natural world would be far less.

Today the idyllic landscape of Llanbadoc sits, as indeed, in reality it always has, nestled on the Welsh side of the border of Wales and England. Its people are proud and welcoming but make no mistake, for if you do, they will have no hesitation in “politely” informing you that they are Welsh and not English. This tiny village is a delightfully typical Welsh rural hamlet. It sits peacefully on the river Usk where an ancient arched stone bridge marks the entrance to its larger neighbour, the town of Usk. The rural town of Usk has the obligatory now ruined castle overlooking the surrounding hills from whence ruling barons once surveyed their lands. Llanbadoc is small and if you are not paying attention you will have left it almost as soon as you have entered.

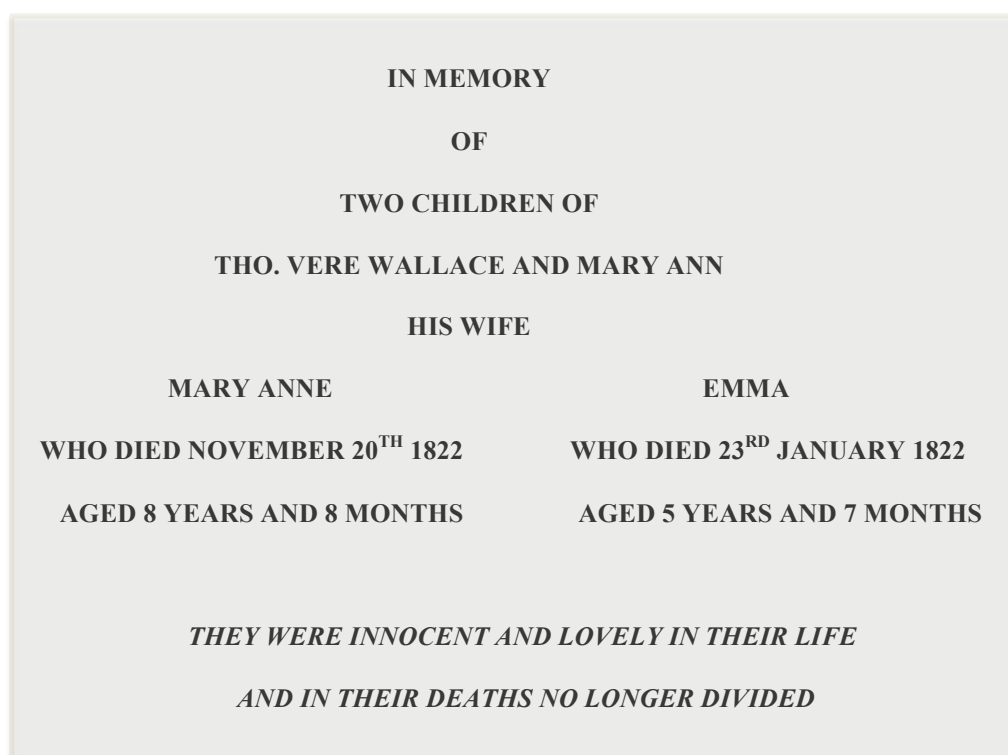
I had promised myself for many years that I would one day visit Llanbadoc and in turn Kensington Cottage the actual birthplace of Wallace and wallow in the atmosphere of this small but beautiful place. Over many years I have studied, written and lectured about this great man but to finally visit the place where it all began was a dream come true. It was therefore on a cold and rainy September night I discussed the possibility of visiting Usk with a dear friend. I find myself with more time on my hands since retiring from the shackles of daily work and having promised to spend more time together we formulated a road trip for our wives and ourselves. We are indeed fortunate as we are all nature lovers and whilst my colleague is an ardent Darwin supporter I, of course, follow Wallace. So it was with great excitement and much verbal jousting and debate that we set out to make the 200 km drive to Usk.

On arrival our first port of call was the house where Wallace had been born, the now renamed Kensington House. It is located on A472 south of Usk. As you leave Usk across the old stone bridge a sharp left takes you along the river. The house can be found on the right hand side sitting back from the road. These days the house is privately owned and much extended from when Wallace as a five year old ran carefree around the spacious grounds. Although the original house remains it is much developed and one wonders what the young Wallace would make of it all today. A high conifer hedge surrounds the property. In Wallace’s day the house would have been more visible and before the arrival of a busy road and the flood bank the river would have been easily accessible to the “Little Saxon” as the locals called the young fair-haired boy.

Continuing along the A472 following the contour of the river we soon found our second destination on the left. The Church of St Madoc is a beautiful place of worship that originated in the 14th Century. (*Figure 1*) Much renovated, little of that period remains but it has undergone recent sympathetic restoration to an excellent standard. It was here that Wallace was baptized in 1823 and his sisters Mary Anne and Emma are buried. Sadly both Emma and her sister passed away at very young ages and their final resting place can now be found on the left fork in the path as you walk from the metal gate towards the river Usk. A large inscribed slab of local stone lies peacefully, slowly decaying in the shade of the large trees. (*Figure 2*) Now half covered with creeping ivy and the fallen blossom from the cherry trees the once carefully honed words will inevitably and silently disappear. Soon all that remains will be the small staked sign that sits at the head of the grave explaining that here lies the two sisters of Alfred Russel Wallace.

I pondered for a moment on just how many people had passed this grave and had not even noticed the sign much less realised whom or what it commemorated. But today I was not here to remember Alfred. I was here to pay my respects to two young children tragically struck down in infancy and now buried side by side for eternity. How sad it is that in days gone by the death of one's child was so commonplace and so often expected. It did of course not make the pain of their passing easier and I felt a deep sadness as I stared at the stone slab. Here lay not one but two children taken in quick succession from an already grieving family.

I stood back and slowly read the wooden sign that stood at the head of the grave slab. (*Figure 3*) As a student of Wallace I was immediately struck by a number of errors on the wooden sign. At first I questioned my own knowledge but having spent a great deal of time studying the Wallace family tree I couldn't believe I was wrong. I looked closely at the large flat gravestone and attempted to decipher the now almost invisible inscription in order to compare it with the wooden plaque. This proved almost impossible. The ravages of time were clearly visible. We managed to transcribe some words and dates but the two-line verse at the foot of the slab would prove more difficult. We took a number of photographs with various camera settings and angles and decided that on our return home we would blow the image up. On our return we projected the photo on to a large screen and with the help of a photo enhancing computer program and with Angela's keen eye for calligraphic script we managed to decipher the eroded words. We can now say with confidence that the inscription on the stone reads:



Turning my attention to the fixed wooden sign we noted that it stated that Alfred Wallace's mother was called "*Maryan*" whereas it was actually Mary Ann (with no e). It further states that his sister was called "*Marianne*" but her name was Mary Anne (with an "e"). I realise of course that at this

time the spelling of words was ambiguous and it really depended on the scribes abilities rather than the actual written word.

Perhaps more importantly the plaque stated that Emma had been buried on 30th January **1823** when in fact she died on 23rd January 1822 and had been buried on 30th January **1822**. Had the 1823 date been correct it would mean that Alfred would have been 15 days old at the time of her death when in fact he had not yet been born. (Alfred Russel Wallace was born on 8th January 1823). I realise that some might ask does it really matter and am I just being pedantic. After all the children were very young when they died and it was long time ago? Well to be honest I believe it does matter. Time is precious to us all and as we all turn to dust eventually the records of a persons passing be they rich and famous or in this case two young girls of little consequence is important. They say that we pass this way but once and whilst it one thing to be remembered in life it is important that we also be remembered in death.

My thoughts returned to the wooden sign. Had the task of translating the stone been assigned to someone with little knowledge of Wallace and his family or was it simply a case of someone misinterpreting the words. Indeed it begged the question from where had the information on the wooden sign actually been drawn from originally as the words on the slab were although difficult to read inscribed correctly. It therefore must have come from elsewhere. Had then the manufacturer of the plaque made an error during manufacture? It was unlikely that the actual gravestone would have the wrong information etched into its surface as it would have been made by a stone mason who I suspect would have taken his instruction from the Wallace family and it was unlikely they would make a mistake. I concluded that the wooden plaque had been transcribed from another source. But what?

Whatever the reason for the errors I felt that as time waits for no man and the ravishes of that time could clearly be seen in the fading script then whilst it was important that this grave be marked I also felt that it was important for future generations of researchers that the information displayed should be correct.

I had hoped that there may be someone on hand to assist but sadly the church was locked. An indication of the times in which we live and with no one around we wandered around the churchyard in search of the monument erected in 2006 as a tribute to Wallace. We found it outside the church wall and rested a while to take in this wonderfully peaceful place. We discussed our next step. Birth and death certificates did not come into use until 1837 and prior to this date the only information kept would be either the baptism and burial records of an individual. I knew that Alfred had been baptised at the Church of St Madoc and as his sisters lay in the churchyard they would also appear in the records. This would give us hopefully more information as to the dates of the children's deaths. I knew that both children had been born and baptised outside of this parish but it should show how the names were recorded at the time of their death and by whom. With no further progress to be made on this day and with time not on our side and we reluctantly had to bid farewell to this idyllic place and continue on our journey but I pledged that I would on my return home contact the Usk Civic Society to see if I could arrange a further visit in the future.

I contacted the Reverend of St Madocs and received a wonderful email from a lady called Rosemary Evans who very kindly offered to meet us at the church and make the Baptism and Burial records available for me to study. Two months later we were once again standing at the gate and were met by Rosemary, Professor David Collard and his wife Stella. David is a Wallace authority, member of the Usk Civic Society and author of the excellent book. "A Companion to Alfred Russel Wallace". As promised Rosemary had kindly accessed the records and there laid out in the church were two very official looking books.

The first was the record for the Burials of both Emma and her sister Mary Anne. (*Figure 4*) It showed that Emma had indeed passed on 23rd January 1822 had been buried some six days later and that Mary Anne her older sister had passed on 20th November 1822 and had been buried on 26th November. The importance of this was that it meant that the younger Emma had died some 11 months before Mary Anne and not after her as the sign stated. To lose one child so young must have been heartbreaking but then to lose an older one so soon must have devastated their parents. Closer inspection of the records show that the older Mary Anne is actually recorded in the book as "*Marianne*" which meant that the inscription on the sign must have come from the register originally and the error had been made at the time of entry in 1822. The date error was simply an oversight by the transcriber of the plaque from the records. Rosemary confirmed this, as she had been the original interpreter of the document.

The mystery had been solved and it was agreed that the plaque should be amended to show the correct spelling of the names and the correct dates. The second book displayed the Baptism of Alfred on February 16th 1823 at Llanbadoc Church. (*Figure 5*) Interestingly the record shows his fathers profession as "Gentleman" and the entry reads "Alfred Russell Wallace (with two ll's)". The spelling of Russel has been the subject of much debate over the years. Was the spelling intentional or again an error made by Alfred's father when he wrote it in the family prayer book? Close analysis of the prayer book shows that the name is spelt Russel but it also shows that originally it may well have been written as Russell with an attempt to erase the second "l" either at the time of writing or even later by Alfred himself. (*Figure 6*) Never the less Alfred himself wrote his name with a single "l" and it is therefore the correct spelling in his eyes.

In February 2020 I was contacted by Rosemary and informed that the plaque had been corrected and re-erected. (*Figure 7*) I am grateful for the efforts made by both Rosemary and the Usk Civic Society in rectifying the error. I am now content that future historians will pass through this leafy churchyard for decades to come and pay their respects to these two inconsequential little girls that died so long ago in such tragic circumstances and that those who do rest for a moment at the grave and read the inscription may be safe in the knowledge that they have been remembered correctly.



Figure 1: The Church of St Madoc, Llanbadoc



Figure 2: The Gravestone of the two sisters



Figure 3: The original sign with transcription errors

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BURIALS in the Parish of *Lambrook*
in the County of *Hampshire* in the Year 1822.

Name.	Abode.	When buried.	Age.	By whom the Ceremony was performed.
<i>Emma Wallace</i> No. 89.	<i>Lambrook</i>	<i>Jan^y 30th</i>	<i>5 years</i>	<i>Rev. Geo. Stedman</i> <i>Minister of Lambrook</i>
<i>John Thomas</i> No. 90.	<i>Ushi</i>	<i>March 20th</i>	<i>1 day</i>	<i>Rev. Charles Dighton</i>
<i>Marianne Wallace</i> No. 91.	<i>Lambrook</i>	<i>Nov^r 26th</i>	<i>8 years</i>	<i>Rev. James Barnard Davies</i>
<i>William Thomas</i> No. 92.	<i>Lambrook</i>	<i>Dec^r 19th</i>	<i>3 years</i>	<i>Rev. Wm. Drew Bishop</i>

Figure 4: The Burial Record of Emma and Mary Anne showing original error in the spelling of the latters name

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BAPTISMS solemnized in the Parish of Lambrook
in the County of Warrington in the Year 1822.

When Baptized.	Child's Christian Name.	Parents Name.		Abode.	Quality, Trade, or Profession.	By whom the Ceremony was performed.
		Christian.	Surname.			
1823. Feb 24 No. 113.	Mary Charles Daughter and of Mary	Charles	Wallace	Lambrook	Servant	Rev. Tho. Robinson Millington
Feb 24 No. 114.	Thomas Vere and of Mary	Thomas Vere and Mary	Wallace	Lambrook	Gentleman	Rev. Tho. Robinson Millington
Feb 24 No. 115.	Richard Moses Daughter and of Anne	Richard Moses	Wallace	Lambrook	Servant	Rev. Tho. Robinson Millington

Figure 5: The Baptism Record of Alfred Russel Wallace. Note the spelling of "Russell" with two L's

Alfred Russel Son
of Tho. Vere Wallace Born
Jan 8th 1823. half baptiz

Figure 6: The Wallace Family Prayer Book showing the attempt to erase the second "L" by persons unknown, although probably Wallace himself. (Photo Copy write G. Becalloni)



Figure 7: The revised sign that now adorns the sister's grave.

