

Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 7: Wallace, Bates and John Plant—The Leicester Connection



Charles H. Smith¹ and Jennifer Walklate²

Main address: Western Kentucky University, 1906 College Heights Blvd.,
Bowling Green, KY 42101

e¹: charles.smith@wku.edu | e²: jenny.walklate@gmail.com

For the other notes in this series please visit: <http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/index1.htm>
and click on *Writings on ARW*

Among the many minor puzzles surrounding the life and career of Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) is how he and Henry Walter Bates (1825–92) first met. The only direct evidence on this matter appears to be two passages from Wallace's autobiography *My Life*, one being: "How I was first introduced to Henry Walter Bates I do not exactly remember, but I rather think I heard him mentioned as an enthusiastic entomologist, and met him at the library" (Wallace 1905, 1: 237). A few pages earlier he had noted:

There was in Leicester a very good town library, to which I had access on paying a small subscription, and as I had time for several hours' reading daily, I took full advantage of it. Among the works I read here, which influenced my future, were Humboldt's "Personal Narrative of Travels in South America," which was, I think, the first book that gave me a desire to visit the tropics. I also read here Prescott's "History of the Conquests of Mexico and Peru," Robertson's "History of Charles V." and his "History of America," and a number of other standard works. But perhaps the most important book I read was Malthus's "Principles of Population," which I greatly admired for its masterly summary of facts and logical induction to conclusions. (Wallace 1905, 1: 232)

Here we would like to set out the relevant facts as we have investigated them, and present what appear to be the most likely scenarios that will harmonise them (to apply a term that Wallace himself often used).

The Setting

Mid-19th century Leicester was a rapidly growing industrial and commercial centre with a population of nearly 50,000 residents when Wallace arrived around Christmas-time 1843. He had been working as an apprentice surveyor for his older brother

William in South Wales, but a decrease in work had forced 20-year-old Alfred out. It took Wallace only a few weeks to land a teaching position as a junior master at the Collegiate School in Leicester, and he began his duties (mostly teaching elementary subjects) there in early 1844.

Apart from the memories reported in his autobiography, little is known about Wallace's activities in Leicester over the 15-month period he was there. He left at Easter 1845 to organise his brother's affairs in Wales when William died unexpectedly. Moreover, some of his recollections as reported in *My Life* are not quite correct, at least as to date (e.g. in *My Life* he reports having seen the phrenologist-mesmerist Spencer T. Hall in 1844, but this almost certainly took place in early 1845: see Smith in press). Nevertheless, there seems little reason to question the remarks made in the two passages quoted on the previous page.

Bates, meanwhile, was a Leicester native (Fig 1). He and his siblings were the children of "Honest Henry" Bates and his wife Sarah. The older Bates ran a hosiery business and although this eventually became moderately successful, Henry's childhood years were, like Wallace's, rather lean. In his mid-teens, however, Bates began to take interest in several intellectual pursuits, including collecting insects. Sometime after 1839, when he was forced to leave school to go to work, he began to take courses at the local Mechanics' Institute. It could have been there that he first met John Plant.



Fig 1 Henry Walter Bates

John Plant

John Plant (1819–94), who originated from Leicester and was the largely forgotten first Curator and Chief Librarian of the Royal Museum and Public Library, Peel Park, Salford (now known as the Salford Museum and Art Gallery), is perhaps the unsung catalyst of the Wallace-Bates relationship. After serving in the military and in a short apprenticeship as a surgeon, he too was forced to join the local workforce: Plant's father was a stationer, and bound the books for the libraries of many of the institutions with which his son was involved (*Minutes of the Leicester Mechanics Institute* [MLMI], 2D39/2; *Minutes of the Leicester Permanent Library* [MLPL], 18D35/2). Plant became heavily involved with the renowned Leicester Mechanics' Institute (LMI), taking classes at first and then becoming an instructor himself. Drawing and ornamental design were among the courses he taught (*Leicester Chronicle*, 14 January 1843); he may

well have first met Bates in the drawing class, as Bates is known to have taken it (Crawforth 2009). Plant's brothers James and Nathaniel also became friendly with Bates, as did James Harley, an amateur ornithologist. By the early 1840s the group, along with Bates's brothers, were making regular excursions to the surrounding forests in search of insect specimens, with the result that a considerable number of their findings were published as notes in the first volumes of the new journal *The Zoologist*, edited by Edward Newman.

“By the early 1840s the group were making regular excursions to the surrounding forests in search of insect specimens.”

Although Plant continued his natural history investigations, especially in geology, for most of the rest of his life, his interest in curatorial and library work began to dominate his attention. In the mid-1840s he became a senior official in several different Leicester institutions (see below), eventually using his range of experience to secure the plum position at Peel Park, Salford, in 1849. He rose to elite status among the nation's museum curators and librarians (but that is another story).

The Institutions

In considering the circumstances under which Bates and Wallace might have met, we should first identify the several institutions with which they were, or might have been, associated. Much of the material here comes from research performed at the Leicestershire and Rutland Records Office in Wigston, and the Special Collections of the University of Leicester.

1) THE LEICESTER MECHANICS' INSTITUTE

The LMI was founded on 30 December 1833 (MLMI, 2D39/1). Its purpose, like that of the many other such institutions that were springing up at that time, was to provide instruction and education to the working man. It offered lectures, and had a Library and Reading Room. Before free public libraries, Mechanics' Institutes were one of the few places working people could borrow books cheaply, and indeed at all. It ceased to function on Lady Day, 25 March 1870, the same year that a Public Library was founded in the city.

Both Bates and Plant certainly were members of the LMI. In 1842, Bates gave a lecture there on the insects of Charnwood Forest, and John Plant taught Drawing and Ornamental Design on Wednesdays and Thursdays, as mentioned above (MLMI, 2D39/2, 122). Bates also donated books and supervised the junior French class (MLMI, 2D39/2, 60), but by 2 August had resigned his committee membership. He continued to be involved in the LMI, however, partially through an investigation into the Institute's financial state.

The LMI was perhaps the most affordable of the institutions discussed here, costing members 2 shillings a quarter for the use of the Library, and attendance at lectures and

classes. Initially, it seems the most likely meeting spot for Bates and Wallace, given their status in society at the time. But there is no evidence it contained the books which Wallace mentions in the paragraph quoted earlier, though the catalogue of its holdings appears to be lost. It is also known that Plant gave gifts to the library at the LMI, and that it contained a good



Fig 2 In 1838 the Permanent Library was moved to the same location as Leicester's General News Room, on the corner of Belvoir and Granby Street

stock of books—many of them concerning natural history (MLMI, 2D39/2; Lee 1982, 114). It therefore remains a possibility as the venue for their first encounter.

2) THE PERMANENT LIBRARY

The Permanent Library (PL) was founded on 31 July 1789 (Herne 1885). Though the library situation in Leicester is confusing due to the plethora of subscription libraries, commercial and otherwise, which flourished during the 19th century, the Permanent Library remained the main subscription library in the city until its closure in 1935 (Lee 1982). It required both a subscription fee, and payment for loans. During this period, becoming a shareholder cost 6 guineas—a huge sum at the time—plus an extra subscription fee of 1 guinea per year (MLPL, 18D35/2, 2). One could, however, gift or bequeath memberships. From 1838 the Library was removed to the same venue as the General News Room, to whom it paid rent.

There is very little evidence left as to who subscribed to the PL (though some think it catered to a largely upper class clientele: Linnell 1983, p. 123). We could find no evidence of Bates or Wallace ever being a member of this institution, though Plant did take up the post of Librarian there in January 1845, and may well have had links to it earlier. This was just before Wallace left Leicester at Easter 1845, but also after he and Bates are supposed to have met in 1844. Interestingly, however, all the books which Wallace mentions in *My Life* were present in its catalogue by 1844 (Herne 1885). As there is no evidence for a listing of these books in the remaining catalogues of any of the other institutions mentioned here, it seems quite possible that Bates and Wallace did meet there.

3) THE GENERAL NEWS ROOM

Opened in 1838, the General Newsroom attracted a mostly middle and upper class clientele (Linnell 1983). It rented some of its venue on Granby Street to the Permanent Library, and it appears that the relationship between the two institutions was somewhat complex.

4) THE LEICESTER LITERARY AND PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

The Literary and Philosophical Society (LLPS), known locally as the ‘Lit and Phil’, was founded in Leicester in 1835. Discussions to form a Museum appear in the records in 1840 (*Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society Transactions*, June 1835–June 1879, Periodical SR2), and an initial display opened in 1841. During the 1840s the Museum experienced immense growth, including John Plant’s appointment as curator on 20 February 1843. Plant left at the end of 1844 to work for the Permanent Library, though he continued to provide assistance to the LLPS. Both the Lit and Phil and the Museum, now known as New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, continue to the present day.

While we are certain of Plant’s involvement, there is no evidence from the *Subscription Book* (14D55/50) that either Bates or Wallace were members for the period 1841–47. Perhaps this was because the annual membership fee was a rather steep £1, 1s.

The Wallace-Bates-Plant Relationship

We can identify the roles that Plant served in the preceding institutions, and their chronology. This has been achieved largely through examination of the electronic archives of three local newspapers from the 1840s period, the *Leicester Journal* (LJ), the *Leicester Chronicle* (LC), and the *Leicestershire Mercury* (LM), and work conducted at the Leicestershire and Rutland Records Office. Bates is also mentioned a few times in these sources as having taken part in Mechanics’ Institute meetings, musical productions (Bates was a chorister and played the guitar), and lectures.

Plant is known to have given classes at the LMI at least as early as 1842 (LC, 8 January). On 20 February 1843 he was made curator of the new LLPS museum (LJ, 24 February 1843); as of 27 January 1844 he was still curator (LM), but he apparently vacated the position sometime in December 1844 (LC, 4 January 1845). About 28 December 1844 he was appointed Secretary/Librarian of the Leicester General News Room and Library (LC, 4 January 1845), and various news items and advertisements show that he was still in this position as of 26 September 1845 and, apparently 2 January 1847, 20 January 1849, and 12 May 1849. The last dates notwithstanding, in very early 1845 he was also appointed Secretary and Librarian of the Permanent (‘Public’) Library of Leicester (MLPL). On 17 October 1849 he resigned his positions to take over the Peel Park facility (LM, 22 September 1849).

It is evident from this chronology that Plant was intimately connected with all the institutions through which Wallace and Bates might have met, and in one fashion or another undoubtedly facilitated, or otherwise affected, their relationship. There is no clear picture at present of the exact chain of events, but several considerations seem relevant:

1) Wallace’s words “town library” in *My Life*. The Town Library proper was founded in 1587 (Linnell 1983), but mostly contained theological books, so it is unlikely he meant this particular institution. There were many commercial libraries in the city by this point, but the main subscription libraries seem to have been the LMI and the PL. Note

however that in the first quoted passage from *My Life* given above, Wallace merely writes “at the library”; as no other libraries are mentioned in the text between pages 232 and 237, this implies that on the later page he was referring to this same “very good town library” to which he paid “a small subscription”.

2) The particular books Wallace mentions in *My Life* appear only in records we have for the PL, the catalogue of the LMI’s library being lost.

3) Fees for usage: Although we have no related evidence, perhaps less expensive arrangements for use were also in effect at some of these institutions (e.g. for reading in place, as opposed to loans), or perhaps rights to use had been gifted to the young men.

4) All of the institutions involved are within easy walking distance of one another (including the Collegiate School, where Wallace worked, and the Bates residence on Queen Street).

5) Plant’s involvement in all these institutions—and, indeed, that of his father the stationer—might potentially have enabled him to facilitate entrance to the more expensive institutions. But again, this is an unknown factor.

Conclusions

Although the fee question is still unresolved, the other evidence points to a likelihood that Wallace met Bates at the PL or the LMI. How, exactly, might this have happened?

It is always possible that the two men met at the Library through happenstance, but we must remember Wallace’s words that he had “heard him mentioned as an enthusiastic entomologist”. By whom? Wallace already had links with mechanics institutes, so he may simply have visited the LMI one day, introduced himself, and heard Bates’s name mentioned. As Wallace taught drawing at the Collegiate School, he may also have heard that Plant taught the subject over at the LMI, gone to visit him for advice, and heard mention of Bates.

Alternately, and remembering Wallace’s own curatorial and library work at the Kington and Neath Mechanics’ Institutes (Wallace 1845; Hughes 1989), perhaps early on he had sought out Plant in connection with the latter’s curatorial work for the LLPS, and then heard of Bates there. As Wallace did have a history of attending the meetings of professional societies back in Wales (Hughes 1989), he might have attended a lecture at which he ran into Plant by accident.

Barring the emergence of unforeseen evidence, we will probably never know the full details. John Plant, as Bates’s friend and mentor, must certainly have figured in the equation in one way or another. They must have been close as it is interesting to note that one of the very last things Wallace and Bates did before leaving England for South America was to attend Plant’s wedding in a small town near Leicester on 18 April 1848 (LJ, 21 April 1848).

REFERENCES

- Crawforth A. 2009. *The butterfly hunter: Henry Walter Bates, FRS, 1825–1892*. UK: University of Buckingham Press.
- Herne FS. 1885. *Catalogue of the Leicester Permanent Library, (est. July 31st, 1789), compiled by Frank S. Herne, Librarian*. Leicester.
- Hughes RE. 1989. Alfred Russel Wallace; some notes on the Welsh connection. *British Journal for the History of Science* 22: 401–418.
- Lee J. 1982. *History and development of libraries in Leicester before 1871*. Thesis submitted for an MA in Library Studies, MS L027, Leicestershire and Rutland Records Office, Wigston, Leicester.
- Linnell A. 1983. *The history of the library and reading room of Leicester Mechanics' Institute, 1833–1870*. Thesis submitted for the Fellowship of the Library Association, Polytechnic of North London.
- Smith CH. In press. Wallace and the “pre-ter-normal”. In: Smith CH, Costa JT & Collard D (eds). *An Alfred Russel Wallace companion*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Wallace AR. 1845. An essay, on the best method of conducting the Kington Mechanic's Institution. In: Parry R (ed). *The history of Kington*. Kington. Pp. 66–70.
- Wallace AR. 1905. *My life*. 2 vols. London: Chapman & Hall.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

- Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society Transactions, June 1835–June 1879*. Bound Volume, Periodical SR2. Leicestershire and Rutland Records Office, Wigston, Leicester.
- Subscription Book (LLPS)*. MS. 14D55/50, dates run from 1841–47. Leicestershire and Rutland Records Office, Wigston, Leicester.
- Minute Books of the Leicester Mechanics Institute*. MS. 2D39/1–4. Leicestershire and Rutland Records Office, Wigston, Leicester.
- Minutes of the Leicester Permanent Library, 1838–1870*. MS. 18D35/2. Leicestershire and Rutland Records Office, Wigston, Leicester.

