



Bengo Trails 15: Hartham Common and surrounds - The Alfred Russel Wallace connection

Naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace wrote with fondness of playing in Hartham Common and the surrounding area during his childhood years in Hertford.

This trail takes in the rivers and woodlands around Hartham Common and St. Leonard's Church that feature in Wallace's autobiography: ['My Life, A Record of Events and Opinions'](#).

It starts at the 'Evolution' sculpture, inspired by Alfred Russel Wallace. The sculpture was installed in 2013, the centenary of Wallace's death.

This trail was produced by the [Love Bengo Community Group](#).

Starts: The [Evolution](#) sculpture, Hartham Lane, SG14 1RD

Ends: Hartham Leisure Centre, Hartham Common, SG14 1QR

Distance: 2.2m/3.6km

Conditions: Footpaths and unmade paths. Steep uphill and downhill sections

The 'Evolution' sculpture is on a grass mound off Hartham Lane, between Hartham Common skate park and Sainsbury's. The sculpture information board is just in front of Thornton Street.

The sculpture, created by Karen Murphy and Leiselle Bristow, was inspired by naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, who independently proposed the theory of evolution by natural selection.

From around the age of 6, for eight or nine years, Wallace lived in 5 homes in Hertford, including houses in St. Andrew Street and Old Cross.

From the sculpture information board, walk straight ahead, past the Thornton Street weir, into Folly Island's Thornton Street.



Folly Island became an island when a millstream (now the Lee Navigation) was dug through in the 11th century. Before its Victorian houses were built, Folly Island was Hertford's first industrial area.



Turn right into The Folly and, at The Old Barge, turn left onto the Lee Navigation towpath (Public Footpath 27), passing the lovely benches at the end of Thornton Street and Frampton Street, refurbished as part of the [Hertford to Ware riverside art trail](#).

Alfred Russel Wallace would probably have approved of the decorative bench illustrations of flora and fauna.

Continue past the Folly Island allotments on the left then across the long bridge (opened in 1988 by then MP Bowen Wells) over the Hertford Basin weir, part of the [Lee Navigation](#) system.

Wallace said of the Navigation -

'The river flowed on among houses and workshops and was again dammed up to supply another mill about half a mile away, and to form the river Lea navigation.'

From the bridge, turn left, down the steps then right onto the Hartham Common perimeter path, with the River Lea on the right.



Continue along the perimeter path until you reach another bridge where the River Lea cascades over the weir on the right, and the confluence of the Lea and River Beane (a rare chalk stream) is on the left. Wallace described the Beane, in Hartham, as *'our favourite bathing place'*, though he also described *'very nearly being drowned.....at a place called Willowhole.'*



From the bridge, retrace your steps and take the first right, following the path around the perimeter of Hartham Common, with the River Beane on the right. Of Hartham Common, Wallace said-

'Few small towns have a more agreeable public playground than the fine open space called Hartham.'

From the perimeter path, turn onto the first bridge on the right, over the River Beane.

Just after the Hartham Common interpretation panel, and before The Warren footpath, turn right onto the unmade but well-trodden path.



On the left of this lovely path, with its wooden railing, are the Hartham Common grazing meadows, referred to in the [Bengeo Neighbourhood Area Plan](#) as 'St. Leonard's Meadows'.

The Hartham Common interpretation panel says –
'Grazing throughout the summer months encourages flowering plants to thrive, providing a valuable nectar source for insects.'

Dogs are required to be on lead when cattle are on site.

Continue following the path (ignoring the path you pass on the left). Go uphill at the end. The top of St. Leonard's Church can be seen just ahead.

Turn right out of the metal gate then right again through the gate into the grounds of the Grade I Listed [St. Leonard's Church](#), which was built around 1120. In his description of this area, Alfred Russel Wallace said –

'Just across the River Beane was a steep slope covered with scattered fir trees, and called The Warren, at the foot of which was a footpath leading to the picturesque little village and old church of Bengeo.'



Follow the path around the church and turn left out of the gate. [St. Leonard's Garden](#), a lovely community garden, with places to sit and look at the view over St. Leonard's Church, is on the right.

With the church on the left, follow the road round then bear right, and join The Warren footpath, signposted '*Footpath 86: Port Hill ½ mile*'.

About a third of the way along Footpath 86, turn right up the steep steps to The Warren Woodland. There are steep up and downhill sections throughout the woodland.

Of The Warren, Wallace said –

'This path along The Warren was a favourite walk of mine either alone or with a playmate, where we could scramble up the bank, climb some of the old trees, or sit comfortably upon one or two old stumpy yews which had such twisted branches and stiff spreading foliage as to form delightful seats.'



The woodland now has a mix of oak, sycamore, and hazel, with a few Scots pine. [The Hartham Common Greenspace Action Plan](#) includes an action to selectively fell compartments of The Warren Woodland and replant with an appropriate native tree mix.

Follow the path through the woodland until it descends to Footpath 86. Turn left at the bottom and after the tennis courts on your right, turn right across the footbridge over the River Beane. Walk across Hartham Common to Hartham Leisure Centre, where this trail ends, close to the 'Evolution' sculpture.

The Old Barge, Folly Island allotments, Hartham Leisure Centre, St. Leonard's Garden, and the view of St. Leonard's Church from the garden, as well as views across Hartham Common towards The Warren, St. Leonard's Church and 'St. Leonard's Meadows' have additional protection through the [Bengeo Neighbourhood Area Plan](#). St. Andrew Street and Old Cross, roads lived in by [Alfred Russel Wallace](#), are in what's now the Bengeo Neighbourhood Plan Area.

Route Map: Bengeo Trails 15 – Hartham Common and surrounds – the Alfred Russel Wallace connection
Map produced using openstreetmap.org

