

The Blue Plaque

Ada Lovelace

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One of the more exotic figures in the history of computing, Ada Lovelace was the daughter of the romantic poet Lord Byron through his brief and disastrous marriage to Annabella Milbanke.

Her parents separated only a month after her birth and Byron never saw his daughter again. Brought up by her mother who was a gifted mathematician herself, Ada showed a strong interest in mathematical studies from an early age. At the time it was impossible for a woman to study mathematics in anything other than an amateur way but Ada Lovelace was lucky. She was introduced to Charles Babbage, who was working on the ideas for his calculating machine, the Analytical Engine, now recognised as a forerunner of the modern computer.

Ada engaged in a long correspondence with him in which she was able to exercise her mathematical gifts properly. She was asked to translate an article that an Italian scientist had written about Babbage's ideas and, when she showed it to Babbage, he suggested that she should add her own notes. By the time she had finished, Ada's notes were three times as long as the original article.

In many ways Ada saw the potential of Babbage's machine more clearly than its originator. She described the steps by which the Analytical Engine could work out the answers to mathematical problems, creating what were, in effect, the first ever computer programmes, and she speculated on its future ability to create graphics and complex music. Such speculations seemed wild at the time, even to Babbage, but time has proved her correct. The computing language ADA acknowledges her prescience and is named in her honour.

Married to the Earl of Lovelace, Ada died aged only thirty-six, the same age at which her father died. Although she had not known him, she requested that she should be buried next to her father and they lie side by side in the family vault in St. Mary Magdalene Church, Hucknall in Nottinghamshire.

The plaque to Ada Lovelace is in the heart of Mayfair, at 12 St James's Square.



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