



News Release

Eddie Izzard tracks his genetic past on new BBC documentary

Eddie Izzard may be known for his talents in many fields – comedy, acting, sports and fundraising – but science has not typically been one of them. Until now.

A new BBC documentary – Meet the Izzards – will reveal Eddie’s genetic past, tracking his ancestors from across the globe.

Working with scientists at the University of Edinburgh and BritainsDNA, Eddie used a simple saliva test to trace his origins back to Africa – over 200,000 years ago.

And that’s where Eddie’s journey begins. Eddie Izzard said:

I was very keen to film a documentary following my own DNA because it not only tells me who the hell I am, but also, as we go back thousands of years, who everyone else is.

Some time after 70,000BC a small group of people detached themselves from the Central African communities of hunter-gatherers and began to walk northwards. When they reached the Red Sea, perhaps near modern Djibouti, they crossed. And once they gained the farther shore, this tiny group populated the whole of the rest of the world. All non-Africans are their descendants. This epic story is told by Eddie through his own DNA, a hidden history we all carry inside our bodies. Dr Jim Wilson found the making of this unique film very moving:

Meet the Izzards is a wonderful exposition of how the science of genetic genealogy can trace our ancestral journeys across the globe as Eddie retraces the footsteps of his and our ancestors all the way from Africa to England.

The basic scientific concepts behind the series appealed strongly to Eddie's own sentiments:

It takes us back 200,000 years, with our genetics, and as you go further back, it's not my genetics, it's not the family genetics, it's all of our genetics. And we all come out of Africa, and we come from the same people. So we were a small group of 10,000 people and then we've turned into seven billion people on the planet.

How is it possible to do this, to retrace the steps of our ancestors by analysing the DNA of living people? Inheritance is the key. Each of us inherits about six billion letters of DNA from our parents, three billion from each. Made up from four biochemicals; adenine, cytosine, guanine and thymine, our genes are read by scientists like very long strings of letters, sequences of A, C, G and T.

Occasionally tiny errors of copying are made in reproduction and it is these minute changes that are called markers. They arise in particular places at particular times, and skilled geneticists can locate a marker's origin and date its creation. By looking at its frequency in modern populations, they can also track the movement of a marker across the face of the Earth.

There are two special sorts of DNA that are very useful for informing our history. Here is Dr Jim Wilson again:

While Eddie clearly has many ancestors, if we want to trace a family line back through the generations, there are two ancestral lineages that we can learn much more about than the others, that of the father's father's father and the mother's mother's mother and so on back in time.

The fatherline is traced using the Y chromosome, a block of DNA a bit like a surname or a family crest that is handed down from father to son, and the motherline is tracked using a piece of DNA which is passed from a mother to her children, and it is known as mtDNA. Eddie retraces his motherline in the first episode and his fatherline in the second.

The DNA analysis for the films was carried out by Dr Jim Wilson, Chief Scientist at BritainsDNA, and for those who want more information, the website address is www.britainsdna.com

** Meet the Izzards airs on BBC One on Wednesday 20th and Thursday 21st February. **

Britains DNA

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Notes to Editor:

Launched in April 2012, BritainsDNA immediately set out to innovate. By combining historical analysis with the genetic information that can be gleaned from testing for ancestral DNA, we aimed to achieve a new understanding of Britain's history – a people's history.

A commercial company closely involved in scientific research, BritainsDNA offers a unique package of information featuring thorough historical analyses of results currently unmatched by any other European DNA ancestry testing company.