

Centre For Life Undertakes DNA Testing To Trace Reiver Clan Members

By Caroline Lewis

20/11/2006

The Centre for Life in Newcastle is looking for men whose surname is Robson for a study into whether they have their origins in the Scottish border clan of the same name.

From about the 13th century to the mid-17th century, the lands on the border of England and Scotland were ruled by lawless tribes continually at war with each other, known as the Border Reivers. Reiver surnames like Robson, Armstrong, Elliot and Burn remain with us now the area is at peace, however, and the investigation will look into whether modern Robsons can be genetically traced to the clan of the Robsons of Tynedale.

The research will go towards a new exhibit at the Centre for Life called the Robson Encyclopaedia, examining genetic inheritance. Scientists at the Centre are now looking for 100 male volunteers called Robson to give a DNA sample, which will be analysed to see if it is similar to that of the clan, described as 'a one-time leading family, and highly troublesome', in George MacDonald Fraser's book *The Steel Bonnets*. The samples will be taken by a simple mouth swab.

"The Border Reivers are part of our folklore," said Linda Conlon, Director of the Centre for Life. "The idea behind the Robson Encyclopaedia is to take a topic we're familiar with and use it to help explain a complex issue such as genetic inheritance."

Once the Robson DNA samples have been collected, the Y-chromosomes will be compared. Twelve markers – stretches of DNA from different parts of the chromosome where variations from person to person are known to occur – will be compared to see how many volunteers, if any, share the same variations.

Examining these variations in genetic coding is a reliable way of identifying whether people share a common ancestry – if one person shares the same variations as another then they have inherited these variations from the same ancestor.

"We are investigating whether the modern Robsons have a genetic root that leads them back to one original family," explained Dr Alix Groom, who is leading the analysis. "Just like a surname, the Y-chromosome is passed down from father to son."

Organisers are hoping to attract one adult male from any interested Robson family to supply a mouth swab at the Centre for Life on November 25 2006. Scientists will take samples from 10.30am until 12.30pm in the Centre's Conference and Banqueting Suite.

The results of the DNA testing will be announced in the new year and participants will be invited to see the exhibition at its official opening in March 2007. (The results will be for the group, not individuals.)

"The Centre is in the middle of a £4.5million redevelopment programme – when finished next spring, it will house a new permanent exhibition called *Human Life*. The Robson Encyclopaedia will be part of it," said Ms Conlon. "We hope that by engaging local people in the development of the new exhibition it will encourage better understanding of what the Centre is all about."

For further information, or if anyone wants to take part but is unavailable on the date stated, call Dr Alix Groom on (0191) 241 8837.

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