

Cirencester Science and Technology Society

The Society's January lecture was given by Professor Bryan Sykes, Professor of Human Genetics at the University of Oxford on "The Blood of the Isles". He has recently published a popular book with the same title, which explores the genetic roots of the tribal history of Great Britain and Ireland and summarises research carried out over more than 20 years. He is also the author of 2 other outstanding best sellers, *Adam's Curse* and *The Seven Daughters of Eve*.

Professor Sykes first reviewed the history of Britain as islands off continental Europe. The earliest human remains in Britain have been dated as being 8000 years old, found in the Cheddar Gorge. Three thousand years later, the population was little more than 2000 but impressive stone circles were being built, e.g. at Stonehenge. In 55 BC the Romans arrived in Kent and subjugated England and Wales. The Saxons invaded England in the 6th and 7th centuries and around 800AD the Vikings established settlements in the North-East, e.g. Lindesfarne and on some Scottish islands. The last major tribal flow occurred in 1066 with the Norman Conquest.

Professor Sykes and his team started their research programme by extracting DNA from dated ancient human bones to establish base information on the genetic make-up of the Isles. This was followed by extensive sampling of the blood of people living throughout Great Britain and Ireland and more recently by taking mouth swabs.



From their analysis of the results, the speaker's team found that Celtic genes predominated in all the areas studied. However, such genes were more common in Scotland, Wales and Ireland than England. There was no area where Saxon genes exceeded 20 %. Surprisingly, the Romans and Normans have had little effect on the genetic make-up of the people of our Isles but Viking genes are significant in the North East and Shetlands Isles. Professor Sykes argued that we all descended from the same origins, but this is not obvious when emotions are high at major sporting fixtures.

By applying similar genetics techniques to the present day population of the Tahiti Islands, the speaker has been able to prove that inward migration came from South East Asia, rather than from South America as argued by Thor Heyerdahl of Kon Tiki fame.