

Has Ancestry.co.uk been nobbled?

In recent years, there has been a significant upsurge in genealogical research. Programmes like Who do you think you are? have inspired many people to find out who their ancestors were and the internet has greatly facilitated such a task.

One website which anyone can use for research (on payment of a subscription) is ancestry.co.uk and, until recently, I personally had a very favourable impression of it after a very interesting time last year using its facilities to discover a great deal about my origins, going right back to the 17th Century. I'm sure that readers won't be remotely interested in the history of the Petley family past and present, but what may well be of interest is the pro-EU bias which has crept into this website.

The website's home page informs us that *"the average British person's DNA is only 36% British"* but a little footnote adds *"Based on AncestryDNA customers born in the UK to Nov 2017"* – in other words, a limited sample size. Is this accurate? Ed West, in his superb book *The Diversity Illusion*, states that as far as DNA is concerned, the English of 1927 were more than 90% the descendants of the English of 927. Even allowing for the scale of immigration since the end of the Second World War, it is hard to believe that our DNA make-up has changed so drastically in less than 100 years.

Not content with using its website to make us feel less English or British, Ancestry.co.uk has produced a series of videos and even TV adverts pumping out a pro-EU message. A comment below the first video from "Ancestryuk" says "The average Briton's DNA is 60% European." No source is quoted for this statistic and no definition of "European" is offered either.

The adverts have produced both anger and derision among genealogists. Why should genealogy be politicised in such a blatant manner? Most other leisure interests are not. What is more, the pro-EU slant is very misleading and selective.

Firstly, having “European” DNA is no surprise. We know little about the origins of the ancient Britons who lived in these islands for centuries before Julius Caesar paid us a visit, but virtually everyone who followed in his footsteps in the next two thousand years, including those who decide to stay for somewhat longer and interbreed with the natives, came from the continent of Europe – Romans, Saxons, Vikings, Normans, Flemish weavers, French Huguenots and so on.

If you go back 12 generations, in other words, to the beginning of the 18th century, every person will have a maximum of 8,190 ancestors in total, the precise number depending on whether or not any given ancestor is common to two or more branches of your family tree (e.g., cousins marrying cousins). Even if, like my forebears, yours were rather stick-in-the-mud types that didn’t move very far, within such a large total, it is highly probable that you will find the odd foreign-born ancestor in that total. If the Irish are included in Ancestry.co.uk’s definition of “European”, that certainly skews the pitch, especially as they were in political union with us for many centuries before 1922 and migrated over here in great numbers in the 19th century.

Secondly, having ancestors from another European country does not necessarily create any sense of belonging, even partially, to that country. OK, I promised not to bore you with details of my ancestors but it may be appropriate to mention briefly that I have both Irish and French (Huguenot) blood. I’ve been to Ireland and France. I enjoyed visiting both countries and it was interesting to think that I have forebears who originated from them, but I can’t say I feel the slightest bit French or Irish – even though I would probably meet the eligibility criteria for a St Patrick’s Day parade if I lived

in the USA!

Thirdly, Ancestry.co.uk is guilty – at least by implication – of the same mortal sin as the remain campaign two years ago – conflating “Europe” with the EU. The You Tube clip mentioned above doesn’t mention the EU once, but this one mentions us “leaving” while this one takes a dig at Nigel Farage. It also features a person discovering they have Norwegian ancestry. Well, maybe it has escaped the notice of Ancestry.co.uk, but Norway isn’t in the EU.

Finally, many people from mainland Europe who have arrived here since the Middle Ages chose this country either to escape from tyranny at home or to make the most of the entrepreneurial culture which was a feature of the UK, particularly in the 19th Century. To be a descendant of such people is a testimony of the success of our own country over the years and does not in the slightest imply that we should therefore stay in the EU.

One question which inevitably springs to mind given the appearance of high profile people like Alastair Campbell in one of the videos is where has all the money to produce these videos come from? Has ancestry.co.uk been nobbled? If so, judging from the reaction of genealogists, it has done this thoroughly fascinating subject no favours at all.

Photo by annapmagistra 