

# REDHEAD

TO FIND A REDHEAD, JUST HEAD OFF TO CHROMOSOME 16. ONCE THERE, LOOK FOR THE MELANOCORTIN 1 RECEPTOR GENE (OR MCR1), WHICH DEALS IN MELANOCYTES OR PIGMENT CELLS IN THE SKIN. IF YOU FIND A VARIANT ON THE MCR1, THEN THE RECEPTOR MIGHT BE TURNED OFF AND INSTEAD OF PRODUCING EUMALANIN (FOR BROWN HAIR) YOU PRODUCE PHEOMELANIN... AND YOU'RE A REDHEAD. SIMPLE. SORT OF.



As professor Jonathan Rees discovered in 1995 at Edinburgh University, all redheads are variant MCR1. Scotland is probably the best place to study redheads (it has the highest proportion of them in the world at 13% of the population) but if you're thinking of dedicating your life to studying them, please hurry up: they're an endangered species with only 3% of the world's population sporting red hair.

If you grew up with Pippi Longstocking, Harry Potter's friend Ron or Molly Ringwald in *The Breakfast Club*, you can't help but think that redheads have more fun, possess more courage and have exciting adventures. Which is apparently true. Genetics have proven that there is a link between pigmentation and the temperament of a person. Red-haired people are said to be more temperamental and independent than others. Sadly, the poor things are more pain sensitive too: research carried out in the United States suggests they need 20% more anaesthetic during operations, and produce fewer anti-stress hormones.

This might be a reaction to the amount of abuse they've got over the centuries. Just look at history. The ancient Egyptians are said to have either killed redheads at birth or burned them alive as sacrifices (take your pick). It doesn't get much better in the Bible. Abel-murdering Cain is traditionally given red hair (even though it's never said whether he did or not), Judas was a redhead, and if some conspiracy to be believed, then Mary Magdalene was a redhead and after her "affair with Jesus", gave the church excuse to kill all the redheads it could find. More mundanely (but just as importantly if you were a farmer's daughter), farmers in Cornwall never let redheads make butter. They made it go off apparently. In Ireland, despite the place being another world redhead centre, they weren't allowed to be the first to it's not surprising with all that prejudice that today redheads are fighting back. The Internet is full of sites with names like Redheads United and redandproud.com that proclaim the glories of ginger hair (and also claim pretty much everyone who's ever talked to a redhead as one of their own; Woody Allen, anyone?)

I've never been one of those people who teased redheads when I was at school. I love redheads. I've always been too envious of them. They never had to dress up, they simply let their hair down. Sometimes I even dream of having red-haired children, before remembering that they'd probably wear glasses too. Even today with redheads out loud and proud, ginger and glasses would probably make the school playground a really horrible place to be.

FAMOUS REDHEADS: VINCENT VAN GOGH, PRINCE HARRY, HENRI MATISSE, MICK HUCKNALL, JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, RITA HAYWORTH, PHILIP SEYMOUR HOFFMAN, BORIS BECKER, TILDA SWINTON SARAH FERGUSON, JESUS, JUDAS, CLEOPATRA, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE M LASSIC (ALTHOUGH HE'S REALLY A REDBODY).