

in brief

ARE REDHEADS A DYING BREED?

Red hair is having quite a moment right now. Look at the undisputed darling of the small screen. Remember how Christina Hendricks, all milk-pale curves and ruby waves, dazzled us all on the FAIRLADY cover in January? Or copper-topped model Julia Johansen, whose look inspired Mulberry to send every model in their Spring/Summer 2011 show down the catwalk in a blunt red wig. Or flame-haired chanteuse Florence Welch, who stole the show at a rather staid Oscars. Small wonder that brunettes like Cheryl Cole, Jessica Alba and Rihanna are all reaching for the red hair dye. But why has red hair gained such cachet – could it be that rarity value is driving demand?

Red or dead?

A few years back *National Geographic* ran a story suggesting that redheads would be all but extinct by 2060. Their reasoning? Less than 2% of the world's population has natural red hair. And though the chances of producing a redhead baby are greatly increased if both parents have red hair, global travel and racial intermingling mean the likelihood of two redheads meeting and mating is looking increasingly slim.

It's a story that's persisted, but like many rumours, it's only half true. Zane Lombard, a genetics researcher at Wits University, says that while redheads are on the 'endangered list' they're not exactly speeding towards extinction.

'The gene is not going to die out for at least the next hundred years. There's enough variation in the population that there'll be plenty of redhead people around for some time.'

As US geneticist Dr Barry Starr points out, the gene responsible for red

hair – a mutated MC1R – is recessive. Which means that both parents need to carry it, but they won't necessarily show it. Starr estimates that about 4% of the world's population are MC1R carriers, which translates to about 276 million people – plenty to keep the trait going for now.

Right now, Starr reckons that red hair is at an 'artificially high level' because the ginger gene is still concentrated in Northern Europe and America. When it does eventually leach out of these populations and into the global gene pool, it will be diluted. So redheads will be down, but not out.

It's not easy being red

Recent Facebook campaigns like 'Kick a Ginger Day' have driven ginger-specific bullying in schools. Stories like Kevin and Barbara Chapman's, whose redheaded family were driven out of their UK home by bullies, have prompted some to ask if 'gingerism' was the last acceptable prejudice.

Certainly, redheads have had a hard time throughout history. They were

far out

The highest percentage concentration of redheads can be found in **Scotland (14%)**, **Ireland (10% of the population)**, and **Wales (10%)**.

But red hair sometimes crops up in places like Mongolia and Nepal. Genghis Kahn was said to have red hair and green eyes, while 3000-year-old mummified redheads were found in the Chinese desert of Takla Makan. Brahmins were once banned from marrying redheads (there was a red-haired tribe south of Mumbai).



Flame-haired model **Julia Johansen's** look was copied for the Mulberry Spring/Summer 2011 collection.

associated with vampires in Ancient Greece, sacrificed in Ancient Egypt, and burnt as witches during the Spanish Inquisition. Baddies from religious texts, such as Lilith, Eve, Cain and Judas Iscariot were all depicted as having red hair.

If that weren't enough to contend with, redheads are reportedly more susceptible to skin cancer and more sensitive to cold. A 2002 study found that they're harder to sedate, bleed more in surgery and have lower pain thresholds, requiring up to 20% more anaesthesia (although this stat is still hotly debated).

Red-letter day

Still, they can always take solace in the increasing number of books, blogs and artwork charting the ginger experience. There's Jenny Wicks's *Root Ginger*, a beautiful collection of photographs inspired by Pre-Raphaelite redheads and Victorian sampling; Nicole Giladi's cute-as-pie chronicle *Little Redheads Across America* (littleredheadsacrossamerica.com); Keiron Waites's side-long look at pigment prejudice (www.gingerism.com) and Anthea Pokroy's ongoing art project www.icollectgingers.com. Scarlet fever, indeed. ♣