

Did legendary blond indigenous people stem from shipwrecks on the Mid-West coastline?

# Gene tests seek Dutch links to WA Aboriginals

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Leaving port in The Netherlands with crews of hundreds, the United East Indies Company's ships would set sail for Batavia, the centre for Dutch trade, on ambitious expeditions to buy spices to sell on European markets.

Along the way they would sail past the WA coast and several ships came to grief on its treacherous reefs.

But more than 300 years after those ships left port in the 17th and 18th centuries questions have remained over whether any crew survived and if they did, whether they intermarried with aboriginal people and settled in WA.

Stories of blonde-haired children and European farming practices have been classed as anecdotal. But confirmation of a genetic link has the potential to re-write WA history.

The Perth-based VOC Historical Society is leading the race to find the truth behind this part of Australian history with confirmation that DNA testing is about to begin between members of the Mid-West Nanda aboriginal community and ancestors of a Dutch crewman on one of the wrecked ships.

The remarkable step has come after almost a decade of research and is being carried out at a Dutch medical centre.

VOC president Thomas Vanderveldt told *The West Australian* this week that the tests would focus on the rare Porphyria Variegata (PV) gene, which originated in Holland and was also prevalent in South Africa as part of the so-called "founder effect".

It was said to be carried by Hendrick Biebauw – a believed survivor if the ship *Zuytdorp*, which was lost without trace in 1712 and discovered last century wrecked off Shark Bay.

A Nanda family from that region is seen as the most likely to have any

genetic links.

"I think it's a milestone for sure and I think it's going to be the beginning of something," Mr Vanderveldt said.

"We're helping them to establish their ancestral identity and it's a good thing. It's always been in their psyche, they've always known it but again it was anecdotal, there was nothing written."

Mr Vanderveldt said the medical centre had an extensive database and after testing for the PV gene they would match results to previous studies done with a group of people living in and around Biebauw's home town of Deventer.

He said the research should not be underestimated with proof that such a link exists not only settling speculation about what might have happened to the survivors but also confirming that Europeans settled in Australia long before British colonisation.

"The thing that we hope to achieve is that the truth comes out," he said. "These people are entitled to know what happened."

The society was formed in 2000 to collect information about the survivors of Dutch shipwrecks.

It claims that about 100 years before the Swan River Settlement was established two mutineers from the shipwrecked *Batavia* were put ashore on the Murchison River as punishment. Up to 1727 about 300 other shipwreck survivors were also marooned on the WA coast.

Mr Vanderveldt said it was completely plausible that they went on to marry aboriginal people.

Facing a band of critics and scepticism from academics and historians, Mr Vanderveldt acknowledged that although the end result may be controversial he was determined to set the historical record straight.

Early this year Curtin University researchers announced they planned to carry out similar testing with a view of examining the



Research: John Alexander, crouching, and Tom Vanderveldt. Picture: Kerry E

Dutch-aboriginal links through a rare genetic condition known as Ellis van-Creveld Syndrome, which causes six fingers or toes on a person.

However it is unclear whether that research is going ahead.

Mr Vanderveldt said he believed that testing for the PV gene would offer a better chance of results.

Helping with the research is society vice-president John Alexander, a Noongar elder, who said the historical ties between WA Aboriginal communities and the Dutch were commonly discussed among aboriginal groups. He said while he was "50-50" on what the tests may uncover he believed much of the link was acknowledged through oral stories passed down through

generations.

"When I meet some of the elders from the Tuart mob they tell me openly that they've got Dutch ancestry and it's something that academic Australia has overlooked," he said.

"On the South Coast with our mob we have clear examples of two dark coloured people with white children with blonde hair and blue eyes."

Mr Alexander, who is married to a Dutch woman, said while the testing would not be welcome by all sections of the indigenous community he believed it was important. "It's only the tip of the iceberg for all parties, I think there's something very special in the whole thing," he said.