Description

Cheddar Man is Britain's oldest near-complete human skeleton, discovered in 1903 in Gough's Cave within the Cheddar Gorge, Somerset. He lived approximately 10,000 years ago, during the Mesolithic period, when the first permanent settlers were arriving in Britain from continental Europe via the now-submerged landmass of Doggerland. His remains suggest he was in relatively good health, with good teeth. For over a century, traditional reconstructions depicted him with pale skin and light hair — assumptions rooted in prevailing ideas about early European populations. A 2018 genomic analysis overturned all of that.

As a member of the Western Hunter-Gatherer (WHG) population, Cheddar Man belonged to a group that ranged across Europe from Spain to Hungary. He was lactose intolerant — as were virtually all pre-agricultural people — and lived a nomadic lifestyle entirely dependent on the forests and coasts of Mesolithic Britain. His people had been in Britain for generations before farming arrived from the Near East and transformed the continent's demographics.

Cheddar Man skeleton on display at the Natural History Museum, London.

Image by Natural History Museum, London

The DNA extracted from the petrous bone of his skull revealed that Cheddar Man had dark to black skin, dark curly hair, and blue eyes — a combination with no close parallel in any modern population. This striking phenotype demonstrates that the pale skin so characteristic of Britain today did not originate with the island's earliest inhabitants. It arrived and spread with Neolithic farmers roughly 6,000 years ago. Despite that later demographic transformation, approximately 10% of the ancestry of modern white British individuals still traces back to Cheddar Man's Western Hunter-Gatherer population, making him a significant biological reference point for understanding the deep ancestral layers of the British population.

Modern population	Distance
Latvian	21.290
Estonian	21.507
Lithuanian (North Zemaitija)	21.558
Lithuanian (West Zemaitija)	21.577
Lithuanian (South Zemaitija)	21.599
Finnish (Southeast)	21.845
Finnish (Central)	21.903
Lithuanian (East Aukstaitija)	21.906
Finnish	21.955
Finnish (Southwest)	21.968

Source

Date: 789–546 BCE

Y-DNA: I-S2497

mtDNA: U5b1

Location: United Kingdom

Research: Ancient genomes indicate population replacement in Early Neolithic Britain

Sample(s): I6767.AG.SG