

History has got hip!

History has got hip. And genealogy is getting radical. Popular history's poster boy, Tony Robinson, explains why the past means so much to the present. And how a "turnip-loving moron" came to his rescue.

Radical genealogy. They're not words that usually go together. But Tony Robinson isn't the usual kind of history presenter. He's not so much the history man as the history bloke.

Forget the dusty archives and fake-heraldry of family trees, Robinson speaks with passion about how family history can change the way people see themselves and the world around them.

"How do you know who you are unless you know where you came from?"

Robinson, presenter of the Time Team archaeology programme and formerly Baldrick from Blackadder, says that putting genealogical information online, such as the 1841 census, will have far-reaching implications.

Beaten up

"Up until now, it has been the preserve of aristocrats and kings and queens. But suddenly, for the first time, everyone has got the possibility of owning, not just their own semi like Mrs Thatcher wanted, but also owning their own history."

Jewish, I'm not Jewish'

My dad fell to the ground saying 'I'm not

"None of us know how it will affect the zeitgeist once it is out there. But inevitably it will mean changes. It's more important than people have clocked onto yet."

"In my own case, people have always said that I looked Jewish, and my dad was beaten up by the Fascists in the East End in 1938 for being Jewish - and he fell to the ground saying 'I'm not Jewish, I'm not Jewish.'

"But now, when I look back in my genealogy, I see that my great great great grandmother is Julia Levy - and suddenly there's a new perception on who I am."

If they'd had ancestry websites in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, he says "it wouldn't half have been difficult to find an Aryan race".

Robinson, an engaging, spiky 59 year old, says that "ancestry is archaeology without the muddy hands".

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