Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What does a DNA sample involve?
A. A simple saliva swab.

Q. Which testing company do you use?
A. FTDNA, based in Houston, the world leader in genetic genealogy.

Q. What types of DNA test do FTDNA offer?
A. 1. yDNA STR tests, for surname studies;
2. mt and yDNA SNP tests, for "deep ancestry" studies;
3. autosomal tests, for tracing close cousins.

Q. Can these test results be used for non-genealogical purposes?
A. No.

Q. Are FTDNA tests confidential?
A. Yes, your test result is identified by number, not name, and your name and e-mail address are not released to non-participants without your permission.

Q. Can women join a surname study?
A. Only if a male relative tests for them.

Q. How do I join?
A. Go to www.dnastudy.clanirwin.org > Joining the Study.

Q. What do I get from my test?
A. From FTDNA's website you get a certificate with your DNA signature, and access the world's largest yDNA database.
From your study administrator you receive a table comparing your DNA signature with all the other participants in the Study and assigning you to one of the Study's genetic families. He will also advise you on the significance of your test results, and answer any queries you may have.

Principle findings of Clan Irwin Surname DNA Study

1. Now one of the 60 largest DNA surname projects, our Study continues to expand.
2. 90% of our Study participants live in the New World. Nevertheless our Study has been able to identify the geographic origins of the paternal ancestors of 90% of all its participants.
3. The spelling of our surname, especially in the New World, does not indicate reliably where our ancestors came from.
4. About two-thirds of all Irwin participants, however spelt, form a genetic family from the Borders of Scotland, where today the name is spelt Irving. All these participants are descended from a common ancestor who probably lived in Dumfriesshire in the 13th or 14th century. This family includes the Irvings of Bonshaw, both the line that owned Bonshaw from the earliest records until 1954 and the line living there today. It also includes the Scots-Irish descendants of the many who migrated from the Borders to Ulster in the 17th century and from Ulster to USA in the 18th century.
5. The Borders genetic family is divided into sub-groups, some of whose origins can be located and tentatively dated.
6. The Borders genetic family also includes a small number of participants who retain the DNA signature of this family but whose surname has since changed due to some "non-paternal event".
7. There is also a small number of other participants who retain the Irwin surname but whose DNA signatures match those of other Borders families, implying some "non-paternal event" in their ancestry, probably in the 13th-17th centuries.
8. Small numbers of Irvine participants with ancestries traced back to Aberdeenshire (including the senior line of Drum), to Orkney (including the line of the author Washington Irving), and to Perthshire have been found to have DNA signatures that differ from each other and from the Borders genetic family. This finding contradicts the 17th century tradition that all the Irwins etc. in Scotland shared a common paternal ancestor. It is thus apparent that the surname has plural origins. It is not yet clear which, if any, of the genetic families took their names from the town of Irvine in Ayrshire.
9. In addition to these 21 Scottish genetic families, four other genetic families have been identified, all unrelated. Three of these were originally Irish, the gaelic surnames becoming anglicised to Irwin, and one apparently migrated from the Netherlands or Germany, their surname of Arwine now sometimes being spelt Erwin. We also have one Irving from Africa, descended from a slave who probably took his name from his master.
10. Of the remaining 9% of participants not yet been assigned to a genetic family, some have not had their tests analysed with sufficient resolution, others have not yet been found a matching participant.
11. To date few genealogical relationships between participants have been identified. This is partly because so far only about 0.3% of all adult male Irwins have been DNA tested, though this ratio is improving.
12. The origins of the Irwin name will become more clear as further participants join.