

My fight for **Helen**

David Sudworth meets the Billinge mother who, almost 30 years on, refuses to give up searching for her daughter

In the churchyard at St Mary's in Billinge, a beautiful stone bench bearing the inscription 'Loved Every Minute, Missed Every Day' stands in memory of Helen McCourt.

Helen would have been 50 this year. Although it's almost three decades since the ex-St John Rigby student was murdered by Ian Simms, the landlord of her local pub, her body has never been found.

"That man has deprived us of the chance to grieve properly," says mum, Marie.

"I remember when he was being sentenced, Mr Justice Caulfield said: 'You have taken the life of a young and happy girl. You cast her garments to the rats and denied her parents the right to respect her corpse.'"

Back in 1988, Simms was the boss of the old George & Dragon pub on Main Street. He had a reputation locally, and it's said he tried to make advances towards Helen, which she rejected.

"There are many stories about Simms. It's known he had a gun and we were told that on one occasion, he put a wad of cash on the bar and challenged one of the regulars to put the gun in his mouth and pull the trigger. If he did it, he could keep the money. The man refused so Simms took the gun, pointed it towards the wall and fired. The bullet was later dug out of the side of the doorframe by forensics."



On Tuesday, February 9, 1988, a severe storm was sweeping the area. Helen, 22 at the time, was working at Royal Insurance in Liverpool and rang her mum that afternoon.

"She said she'd be home early as she was going out with her boyfriend, and asked me to have her tea ready. We'd heard that some trains were delayed, but Helen's was unaffected. As time went on, I started to worry. Helen was always very punctual and if there had been a problem, she would have rang. I was worried that she'd been hit by a piece of masonry and lying somewhere unconscious.

"We went to Lime Street Police Station and when we told them that she hadn't returned, they said she'd probably gone for a few drinks after work. I knew Helen wouldn't do that without telling me, so they filed a report and told me to come back to Billinge in case Helen returned. It's strange but in situations like that, you revert to being like a child, so, almost asking permission, I said: 'Can I ring you?'"

"He heard Helen's last scream"

The police officer said yes, and when I asked how often, he said 'every hour' so I did."

By next morning, and still no sign of Helen, more police were drafted in: "I remember seeing through the blinds some brake lights and two policemen getting out. I was at the door before they could knock, expecting that they had found Helen and she was with them, but of course she wasn't."

It's known Helen got her usual train and bus back to Billinge. Getting off in Main Street, she then started heading up the hill towards the family home in Standish Avenue. As she was about to turn into Garswood Road from Main Street, it's believed Simms saw her from the window of his flat above the pub, and called her over: "A witness told police that he'd heard a scream which stopped all of a sudden, like when someone puts their hand over another person's mouth. He heard Helen's last scream. She was never seen again."



Within 48 hours, police had traced everyone on the bus, and even knew which seat she had been sitting in. Door-to-door enquiries focused on properties between the bus stop and Helen's home, with particular emphasis on those occupied by lone men. That's when Simms first came on to the police's radar.

"I believe at first he was cool and calm but then started getting agitated at their questioning, particularly when they asked to see upstairs."

When detectives arrived, they found Helen's blood on the walls, with Simms' fingerprint in it. Meanwhile, near Warrington, a place Simms used to go fishing, a dog walker discovered blood-stained clothing dumped by a canal.

When his car was impounded, they discovered fibres from Helen's clothing and one of her earrings in the boot.

Even though the evidence was starting to mount up, Simms, a former shop steward at Pilkington's, refused to admit any involvement - a stance he maintained throughout the two

week trial at Liverpool Crown Court. The jury returned a guilty verdict - one of the first times a defendant was convicted through DNA evidence without the presence of a body.





Born on July 29, 1965, Helen grew up in Bryn and Billinge. She went to Our Lady's Primary on Downall Green Road before going on to St Edmund Arrowsmith in Ashton. Marie had only moved to the area from Huyton a few weeks before

Helen was born. They lived in a bungalow in The Paddock, Bryn, before moving to Standish Avenue in 1978.

"When Helen was born she had a shock of black hair and I said it's no wonder I had heartburn while I was carrying her!" smiles Marie.

"Because I'd only just moved up here, Helen was born at a care home in Balliol Road, Bootle, and the staff there completely adored her. She was lovely; always really friendly and outgoing right from being a baby to a young woman. She loved her brother Michael and when she died, it really affected him."



After leaving St John Rigby, she worked at the DHSS offices in Brocol House, King Street, Wigan, before landing a nursing job in London.

"She didn't like it down there; Helen was a home bird really and she used to ring me in floods of tears saying she wanted to come home. She was only down there for about six months and when she came back, she started selling Avon products and doing some babysitting."

Following this, she had stints working behind the bar at The George & Dragon, before Simms started there, and also at the old Conservative Club, which is now Squires Bar. She eventually went to Royal Insurance, based in Old Hall Street, Liverpool.

"I won't let her be forgotten"

"She was really happy. She had a boyfriend, her friend was getting married and she had a good job. Simms had no right to take any of that away from her. Before he stood trial, Canon Ripley from St Oswald's Church in Ashton, where we went every Tuesday, wrote to Simms on our behalf to ask where he'd buried Helen, and he refused to say. I wrote to Simms as well in 1992, but the reply I got back was horrible. He talked about 'you and your Christian family' and said 'I read the Bible and I believe in a tooth for a tooth - I will have justice'.

"He's a control freak - you can't reason with him."

It's now 27 years since Helen disappeared. Understandably, much has changed since 1988. Marie is now 72 years old and a grandmother. She's since married her partner, John, and they dedicate a lot of time to keeping Helen's memory alive and working with Support After Murder and Manslaughter (SAMM). Helen's brother, Michael, now works for the police. However, some things remain the same. Marie and John still live in the same house; Helen's bedroom is still there and photos of her - frozen in time - adorn the walls. Meanwhile, Simms, now in his late 50s, remains

in prison; still refusing to reveal where he hid her body.

Marie is now pushing for a change in the law: "Simms has appealed his sentence many times but I don't think any murderer should be released unless they disclose where their victim is buried."

Despite living just yards from where her daughter died, Marie has stayed put: "I did put the house up for sale shortly after the trial but the estate agents didn't even get the chance to market it before I took it off again. I couldn't go through with it.

"I know the pub is only around the corner and I do my best to avoid going past it, even walking on the other side of the road.

"Before all this, I wasn't the sort of person to speak to the media, but I do it to keep Helen's name out there. I think if I hadn't done that, Simms would have been quietly released by now, as the minimum tariff for his sentence was 16 years.

"Even when I married John, I wanted to keep the name McCourt. Some people call me Helen

by mistake, and are then really apologetic, but I don't mind because it shows that she's not been forgotten. I won't let that happen."

Help from SAMM

The local Support After Murder & Manslaughter branch was set up in 1994. Marie and her husband John has been involved for 20 of those years.

"It is a difficult time straight after losing someone on those circumstances," says Marie.

"You just want your family but you don't get that because you have all the media contacting you, and in some cases you are faced with banks of TV cameras. We advise families to speak to the media because that ensures that the facts are circulated, and not gossip. We also help families prepare for court cases - back in 1989 we didn't get any help and it is an ordeal in itself."

For more information on SAMM, call 0151 207 67 67 or visit www.samm-merseyside.org.uk

