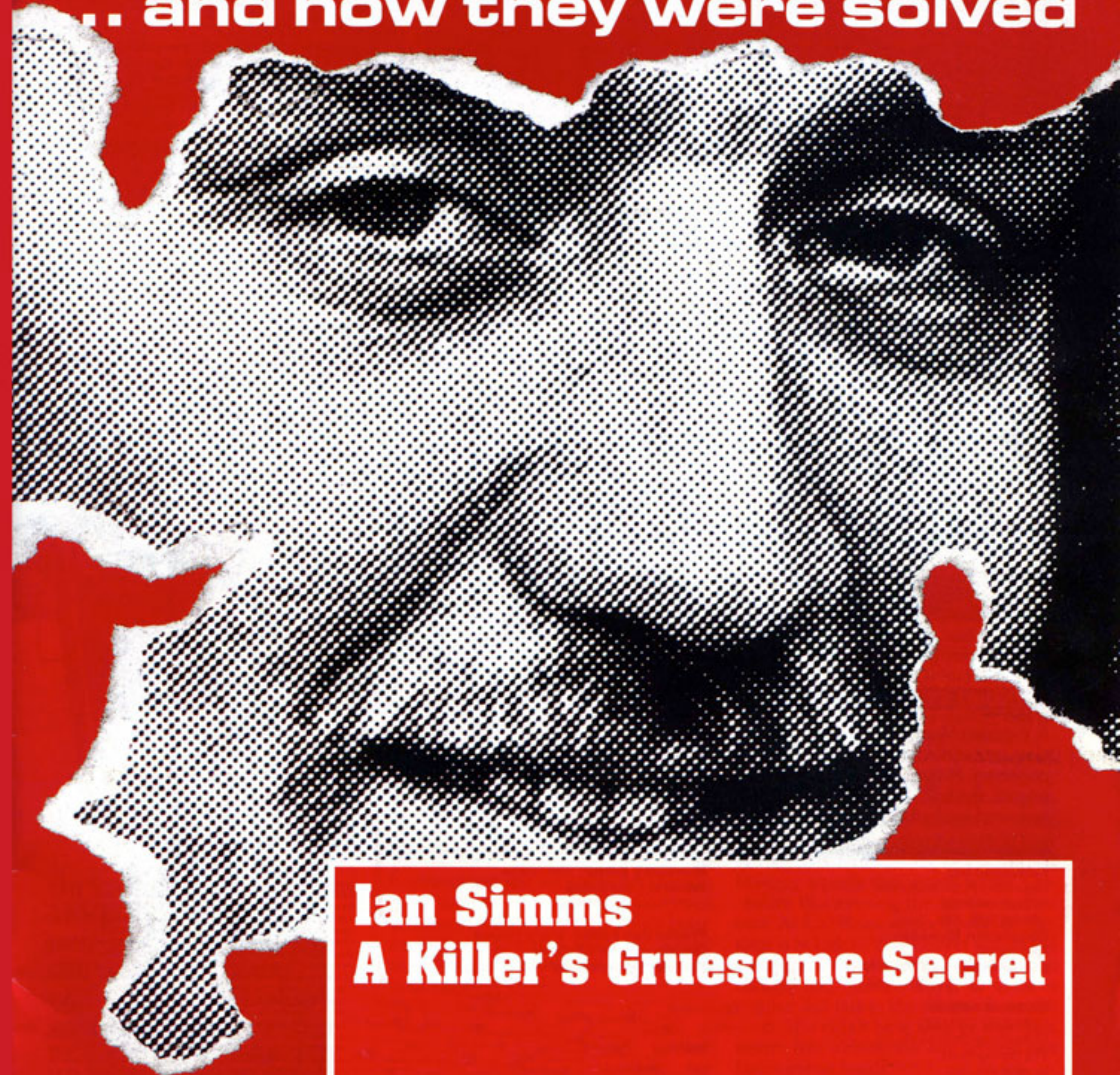


Real-Life

92

CRIMES

... and how they were solved



Ian Simms
A Killer's Gruesome Secret

ETUDES AND REALISATIONS

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Real-Life CRIMES

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Contents

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A Killer's Gruesome Secret

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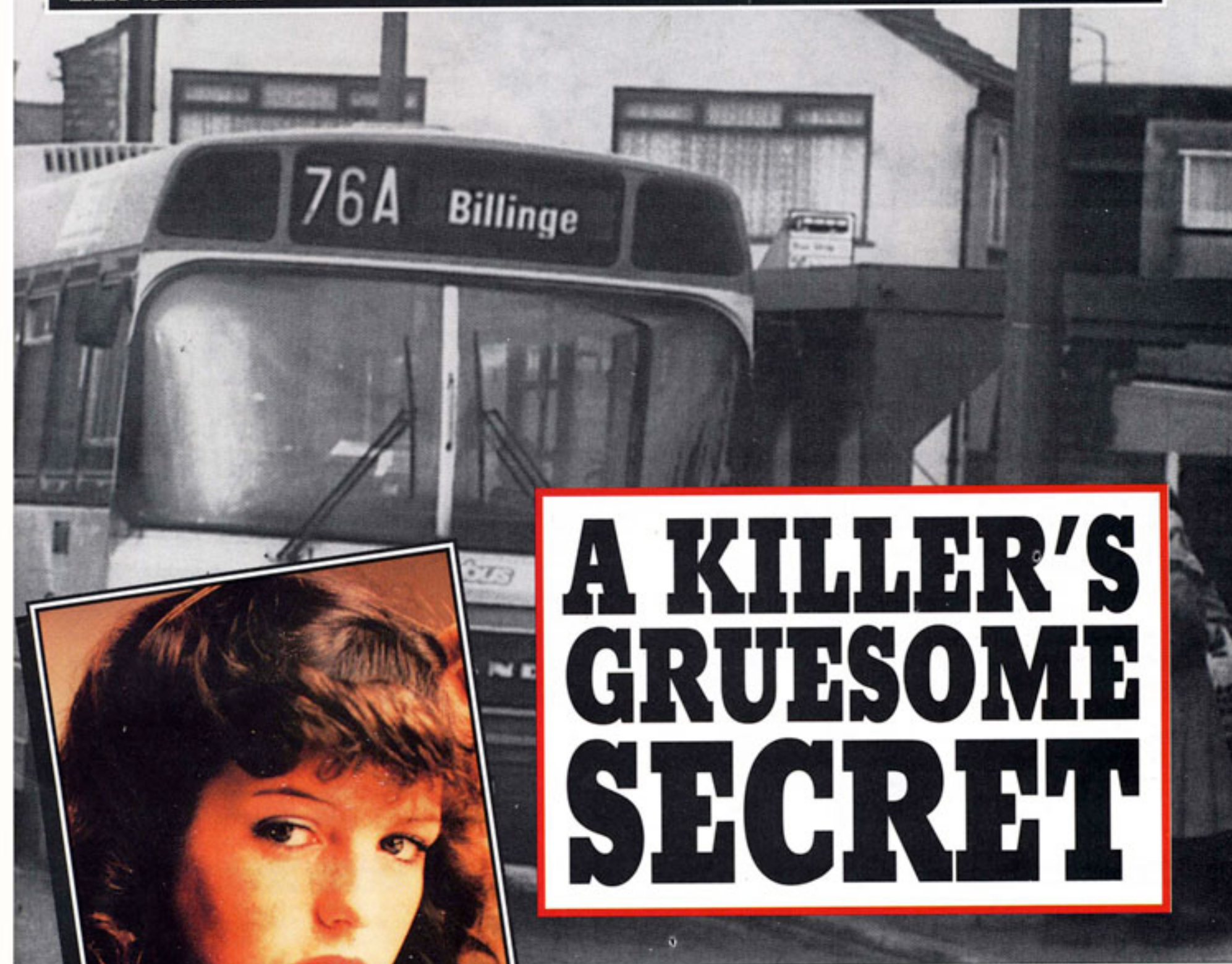
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A KILLER'S GRUESOME SECRET

Helen McCourt (left) was last seen getting off the bus at Billinge, near St Helens, at about 5.40 p.m. on Tuesday 9 February 1988. She had left her office in Liverpool at four o'clock that afternoon.

On a wintry afternoon in 1988 Helen McCourt rang her mother to say she would be home early. But on the short walk from the bus stop to her house, the pretty 22-year-old vanished into thin air.

Helen McCourt was in a hurry. The attractive 22-year-old had been invited out on a date by a new boyfriend and she wanted to get home in good time to get ready. She had even arranged with her boss at the Royal Insurance office in Liverpool, where she worked as a clerk, to be allowed to leave work an hour early.

At 4 p.m. on Tuesday 9 February 1988 dark-haired Helen put on her coat, said goodnight to her office friends, and walked quickly to Lime Street station to catch her train. The journey to her home in the village of Billinge, near St Helens, involved

a train and then a bus. On a good day, if everything ran on time, it took her about one hour and 15 minutes to get back to the house she shared with her mother and 19-year-old brother in Standish Avenue.

On time and on board

At 4.20 p.m. the commuter train rumbled out of the station for the half-hour journey to St Helens. Despite the rain and blustery squalls that swept across Lancashire that evening the service was on time. At 4.50 Helen stepped onto the platform at St Helens' Shaw Street station and crossed over the main road to a bus stop outside the Theatre Royal to catch a number 362 bus to the village where she lived. She didn't have long to wait. Just before five o'clock the bus arrived and Helen got on board.

The five-mile journey usually took about half an hour at this time of day. She

Kidnap alert as girl, 22 vanishes

By FRANK WELSBY

POLICE were last night searching for a pretty young insurance clerk who vanished after catching train home from work to meet her boyfriend. The detectives said they were sure she had been abducted by a man who was very angry. Her mother pleaded: "If anyone has seen her, then please God let her go." Helen McCourt, 22, was alone reading the paper when she was last seen.

Above: As news of Helen's disappearance broke, police were combing woodland near her home and making enquiries among train and bus commuters.

glanced at her watch; she was making good time. On the bus Helen spotted an old friend, Yvonne Keeley, who lived in the same village. They sat together and the two young women chatted during the journey.

Waved friend goodbye

At about 5.40 the bus drew up at the stop in the village opposite the Spar supermarket and Helen waved her friend goodbye and got off; Yvonne was going one stop further. From here Helen only had to walk about 500 yards to her front door. The walk took her past the local newsagent, where she usually bought an evening paper, and the local pub, the George and Dragon.

It was a foul night, the temperature was near freezing with fierce gusts of wind and lashing rain showers. Helen turned up the collar of her coat and began to walk.

By 6.20 Helen's mother was getting

worried; something must be wrong. Just before leaving her office in Liverpool Helen had telephoned to remind Marie McCourt she was coming home early because she was going out. Mrs McCourt had promised to cook her meal. Now it was all ready and waiting and there was no sign of Helen. It didn't add up.

Marie McCourt rang British Rail and the bus company to check whether there had been any delays. But the news only served to increase her fears; the trains and buses were all running to schedule.

Now Helen's date would have been stood up too. Marie McCourt knew her daughter wouldn't do that; she was kind and considerate. Marie telephoned all Helen's friends that she could think of, but none of them had seen her.

As it approached 10 p.m. Marie McCourt telephoned the police. They were reassuring and said Helen would probably turn up. But as midnight came and went she became frantic and called

Right: This is the view of Billinge that greeted Helen every evening as she walked home from the bus stop. The walk took her past the local pub, the George and Dragon, which can be seen on the right.

Above: Helen's mother, Marie McCourt, had last spoken to her daughter when she rang to say she was on her way home and that she would be going out with a new boyfriend after her evening meal.



the police again. An officer went round to her house and listened to the distraught woman's story.

The following day, when Helen failed to arrive at work, the CID were informed. Detectives visited Mrs McCourt and also went to Helen's office. The impression they got from everyone was of a happy, well-balanced young woman. Helen enjoyed her job, got on with her colleagues, had lots of friends and a good relationship with her mum. She was responsible and thoughtful, and not the sort to cause her mother so much anxiety, or fail to turn up at work without phoning.

Mrs McCourt, a 44-year-old divorcee, gave the police photographs of Helen and a full description of her clothes, handbag and jewellery, right down to the sapphire and opal earrings, she had worn that day to work.

Sensible and responsible

Detective Superintendent Tom Davies, head of St Helens' CID, weighed up all the information he had obtained about Helen, and was also worried. Her disappearance was very out of character with the girl everyone had described as sensible and responsible. Davies' boss, Chief Superintendent Eddie Alldred, head of Merseyside CID, thought so too, and enquiries were stepped up.

Helen had recently split up with a long-term boyfriend. He was traced, but knew nothing about what could have happened to Helen. He could account for exactly where he was on the night she vanished, and there were no suspicions about him. Likewise, the young man she had recently started seeing could offer no clues. He had been very disappointed that Helen had



broken their date and detectives were satisfied he had no involvement in her sudden disappearance.

Police then made enquiries at the local pub. Helen had been a regular at the George and Dragon and had even worked there as a part-time barmaid in the evenings a few weeks before. Perhaps some of the regular customers or the landlord and his

This poster was displayed in the bus on which Helen was last seen. Marie McCourt also made an emotional appeal: "If anyone has got her, then please God let her go."

wife might be able to throw some light on the mystery that was becoming more worrying with every hour that passed.

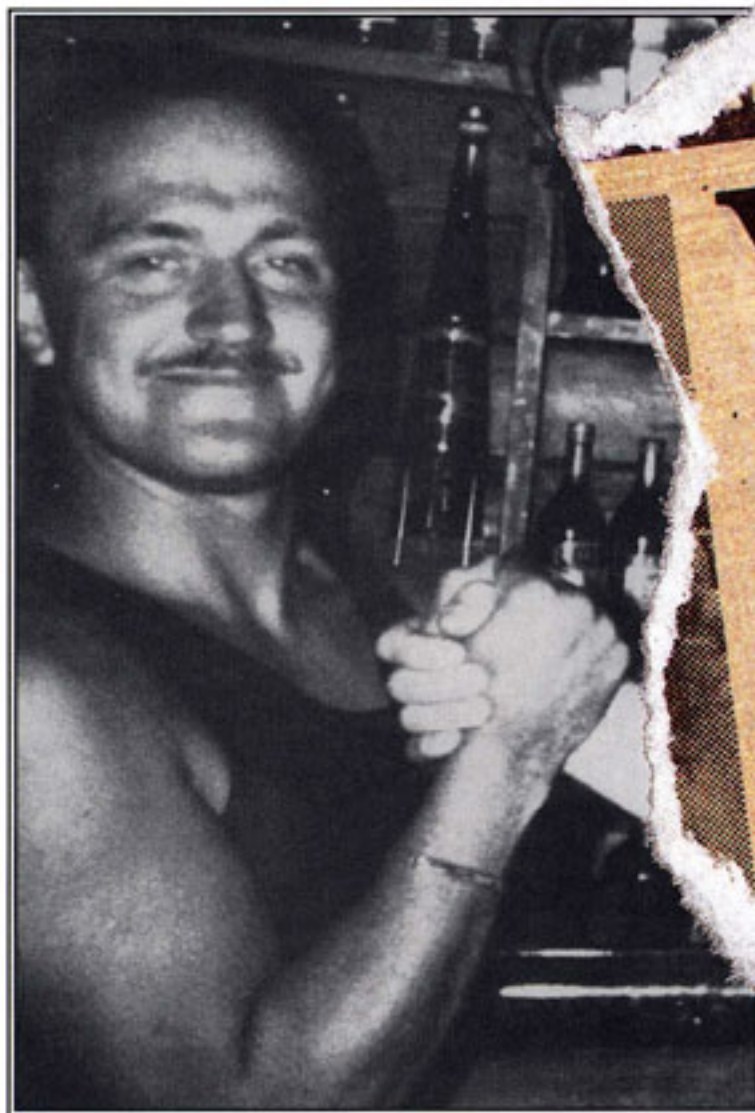
Police discovered that Helen had been in the pub two nights before she vanished, on Sunday 7 February. While she was there, a girl with whom Helen had been friends was involved in a heated row with publican Ian Simms. The argument had ended with the girl being ordered out of the pub and banned from returning. Helen had joined in on her friend's side and had also argued with the licensee.

Landlord quizzed

Detectives asked landlord Ian Simms to tell them his version of what had happened that evening. It was clear from the start that he did not like answering questions about any part of the affair. He sweated, stammered and visibly shook when the interview team asked him when he had last seen Helen McCourt. Simms was acting like a man with something to hide, but said that he had not seen Helen since Sunday night.

The officers noticed two fresh marks on the publican's throat. They looked suspi-



Daily Mail
13 February 1988

Above: Publican Ian Simms fell under suspicion the moment police interviewed him. He was jittery, and detectives noticed red scratch marks on his neck.

...iously like they had been made by a woman's long fingernails. When police asked Simms where the marks had come from, he said his wife Nadine had done the damage. Fidgeting and sweating, he explained he had been having an affair, and that he had been with his mistress, 19-year-old Tracy Hornby, on the evening Helen vanished. Unfortunately, his wife had found out about the relationship and attacked him; it was all rather embarrassing, complicated and personal.

The detectives made no further comment, but they did not believe Simms' story. He was hiding something, and was a definite suspect. They left, but knew they would be seeing more of him.

Wife denies attack

The CID team interviewed Simms' wife Nadine. She denied attacking her husband; she knew nothing about the affair which her husband claimed was the cause of the assault.

Ian Simms could not properly account for where he was or what he was doing on the night Helen went missing. By now Detec-

Right: Friends and relatives of the McCourt family turned out to help search fields, woods, canal banks and old quarries surrounding Billinge.

Village joins search for lost girl's body

POLICE were searching for the body of missing insurance clerk Helen McCourt yesterday as murder

By STEPHEN OLDFIELD

Despite widespread news coverage of Helen's disappearance, no new leads were forthcoming.

part-time barmaid for two months, two years ago.

The pub was first shut on Thursday night. The staff about Helen

Helen could have been driven mile away.

Mr Alldred said: "There the gravest con- been murder- den. I ha that wo-

and appeals on TV and in the press; the second was looking for more weak spots in Simms' already tissue-thin story.

On Thursday 11 February Marie McCourt made an emotional public appeal for help to find Helen; she was still clinging to the hope her daughter would be found alive. Helen's father Billy rushed from London to support his former wife. Mrs McCourt asked the whole country to help in the search. She pleaded: "If there is anyone who has any information about



Helen, no matter how small, please tell the police."

Chief Superintendent Alldred was guarded about his suspicions and told a press conference that the case remained a missing person enquiry. He did not want to reveal his beliefs at this stage, but told reporters: "It is a major investigation because of the sinister nature of her disappearance. As time goes on the more worried we get."

Police breakthrough

Back at the George and Dragon a team of detectives and forensic officers were combing every room of Ian Simms' private living quarters. But it was what they found in the boot of his car, a blue Volkswagen Passat, that told the squad they were on the right track. There was a spade with fresh mud on, small stains that looked like blood on the carpet, and a bloodstained and broken sapphire and opal earring.

Simms was arrested on suspicion of murder. He denied any knowledge of how

Above: Thousands of villagers and local people gathered in the centre of Billinge to help in the search for Helen.

Right: Two days after Helen disappeared, Billy McCourt rushed to his former wife's side as she prepared to make an emotional public appeal for any information about her daughter.



A Killer's Gruesome Secret

the damaged earring had got into the boot of his car, and said he had not seen Helen on the night she vanished.

Alldred and Davies reviewed the other evidence they had. The recently-used spade strongly indicated that Simms had buried Helen somewhere. They knew from Helen's friend Yvonne on the bus that the missing girl had got off at her usual stop in the village. This meant she had to walk past the George and Dragon, and the assumption was that she had gone into the pub. The detectives had no idea for what reason, but were sure Simms had killed her there. It was unlikely that he had carried out much pre-planning; the case had all the hallmarks of a spur-of-the-moment job.

It looked as though Simms had bundled Helen's body, unseen, into the boot of his car and driven to a quiet spot to dispose of the remains.

Search extended

Every garden and square foot of open space in the vicinity of Billinge had been checked for a body or signs of digging, but nothing had been found. The area of the search was extended to cover thousands of acres of farmland. It was a big undertaking, and Merseyside police contacted the RAF to see if a heat-seeking device attached to a helicopter would be of any help. At the nearby Manchester Ship Canal police divers started an inch-by-inch search of the muddy depths at the points closest to Billinge.

The police were struggling; they were 100 per cent sure they had the right man, but the only evidence they had so far was



Police frogmen searched flooded pits around Billinge and those parts of the Manchester Ship Canal closest to the village. But it was not until the search moved further afield that vital evidence was found.

almost entirely circumstantial. Meanwhile, Simms was still refusing to admit that he had played any part in Helen's disappearance.

Under the rules of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, Simms could be held in police custody without charge for only 36 hours. The detectives went to local magistrates for a special extension to the time period; they were granted a further 36 hours.

Time running out

At the pub the painstaking search for more clues was continuing. The detectives knew that without some positive proof they would soon be forced to release their prime suspect. Slowly but surely the forensic team started to find the evidence they needed. The clip belonging to the damaged earring found in the car was discovered nestling in the carpet pile in Simms' bedroom. This was evidence that Helen had probably been there, although a defence counsel would argue it could have got there some other way.

Time was running out. On Monday 15 February Alldred and Davies were faced with a huge decision: to let Simms go free, or charge him with murder despite the scant evidence but hope that more would be forthcoming. After consultations with Crown lawyers, Simms was charged.

By Thursday 18 February the forensic team could think of no more ways of teasing out further scientific evidence from the pub. Then there was a stroke of luck. As one of

the officers stood on the landing reflecting what to do next, a shaft of sunlight lanced through a window onto the doorframe of Simms' bedroom. There, on the woodwork, was a smear of blood, with a smudged fingerprint in it. The print belonged to Simms; but was the blood Helen's?

More circumstantial evidence was now coming to light. A witness reported hearing a woman's scream coming from the pub at about the time Helen vanished. Another person told police that Simms had been seen scrubbing a carpet in his flat the morning after she had last been seen; Simms said that his dog had made a mess on the floor. These were all useful pointers to the publican's guilt but, frustratingly, the murder team still did not have a watertight case.

It was nearly a month before a police search party discovered another major clue. On 9 March officers who had been checking a vast waste tip at an old mining slag heap near Warrington found some bin liners. Inside was a pair of bloodstained men's jeans and a blood-smeared sweatshirt. In the undergrowth nearby was a heavily bloodstained face flannel.

Helen's clothing discovered

Five miles away, at Hollins Green, Irlam, detectives made another significant discovery: more bin liners and more bloodstained clothing. They included a cream-coloured blouse, brown trousers and a handbag. They were all positively identified as belonging to Helen.

But the most vital find was a knotted piece of electrical flex. Caught in it were strands of long brown hair, identical to Helen's colour and length. There was little doubt that the flex had been used to strangle her.



Above: Police also questioned commuters on the 4.16 p.m. train from Liverpool Lime Street station. They hoped that someone would come forward with vital information which would help trace Helen.



Right: A week after Helen vanished, police decided to stage a reconstruction. Eighteen-year-old model Lisa Sheil, dressed in clothing identical to that worn by Helen, retraced the missing girl's journey home from work.

At the police laboratories, police examining material vacuumed from inside Simms' car and from his flat discovered more clues. With the aid of a microscope, blood was found in the fibres of the carpet taken from the boot of the Volkswagen. More blood spots and hair, believed to be from Helen, were teased out from the material from his bedroom. The police now had an array of bloodstain samples to present in a trial, but it was imperative that they could prove beyond all reasonable



doubt that the blood came from the missing girl.

Just one year earlier, the revolutionary DNA profiling technique, pioneered at Leicester University by Professor Alec Jeffreys, had helped convict Colin Pitchfork of killing schoolgirls Lynda Mann and Dawn Ashworth.

Chief Superintendent Alldred recognised that if a sample of Helen's blood could be cross-matched with the stains from Simms' flat, the patches of blood found on his sweatshirt, her blouse and in

the boot of his car, it would be devastating evidence against the publican. But how could they obtain a sample of Helen's blood if they had no idea where her body was?

Merseyside police decided to consult Dr Jeffreys, who was by now acknowledged worldwide as the leading authority on the DNA technique. He assured them that they could still prove a near infallible link even without a sample from Helen. He told them that if blood specimens were provided by her parents the genetic pattern would give the prosecution the next best thing to a sample from Helen herself. The Crown Prosecution Service told the Merseyside police that Professor Jeffreys' proposition would be acceptable as evidence.

Parents provide blood samples

Helen's grieving parents were only too willing to provide blood samples to help convict their daughter's killer.

Professor Jeffreys oversaw the DNA analysis of the specimens himself. When Helen's parents' blood samples were compared with blood taken from Simms' sweatshirt found at the Warrington rubbish tip, there were a host of scientific similarities.

Professor Jeffreys said that the blood from Simms' clothing was 126,000 times more likely to have come from Helen than from any other human being. Coupled with the rest of the dossier on the case the police could produce in court, it was a

While villagers and police scoured ditches, quarries and wasteland around Billinge, other officers made a detailed search of the George and Dragon pub.

A black and white photograph showing a large, dense crowd of people gathered outdoors. Many individuals are holding cameras, suggesting a media event or a protest. In the foreground, a police van is visible, with the text "1015 ALV" on its side. The crowd is composed of people of various ages and is gathered in front of a brick building and bare trees. The overall atmosphere appears to be one of a significant public gathering.

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