

How gardaí solved a three decade-long mystery

Updated / Wednesday, 23 Nov 2022 12:47

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It took just 20 minutes for an inquest to solve a three decade-long mystery.

From April 1991 until this week, the body of a man has rested unidentified in St Mary's Cemetery in Navan, Co Meath.

The man was found dead on 18 April 1991 at Bracetown, near Dunboyne. He had no identification on him, and foul play was not suspected in his death.

The body was found within a day or two of his death and this meant that gardaí were able to take photographs of the man's facial features.

It would take 30 years for this to bear fruit, however.

Paul McGinty was from Mountcharles in Co Donegal. He was 51 years old. He had no links to Co Meath and we may never know whatever brought him to the locality in the week before he was found dead.

We do know that he was sleeping rough during his brief time alive in Co Meath. He socialised in a pub in Ratoath and went to a GAA match in Dunboyne.

One witness who had spoken with Mr McGinty in the pub would later tell gardaí that the unidentified man might have been from Scotland, or perhaps Liverpool. The accent was hard to place.

In fact, Paul McGinty was one of a family of nine from Co Donegal.

This week, his only surviving sibling, Eileen, now in her 80s, travelled to the Meath Coroner's Court to hear how her brother had finally been found, more than 30 years after he had vanished in England.

Detective Sergeant Lee Gavin outlined to the coroner how Paul McGinty had left Donegal as a young man and had spent most of his life in England, firstly in London and later in Coventry.

Like so many Irishmen who went to Britain, Mr McGinty worked on building sites, but by April 1991, aged just 51 years old, he was out of work. A friend would later describe how he looked disheveled.

It was from Coventry that Paul abruptly disappeared on 8 April 1991. He left all his belongings in a house where he lodged.



Paul McGinty was wearing a grey Herringbone tweed jacket when he died

Perhaps poignantly, given what he would later endure in an unmarked grave, Mr McGinty made sure to pay the rent due before he walked away from his life in Coventry, never to be seen again.

We now know that before that month would pass, Paul McGinty would be dead in Co Meath, with no one there knowing who he was, and his family in Co Donegal having no idea he had returned to Ireland.

When the unidentified body was found at Bracetown, the remains were taken to Our Lady's Hospital, Navan where a post-mortem examination was carried out.

From those initial inquiries, gardaí knew the man was between 45 and 55 years old, and was about 1.65m (5'5") in height. He had light brown hair and his dental chart was taken.

The man was wearing a grey Herringbone tweed jacket and he carried a St Christopher's medal. Detectives took photos of all the man's belongings.

But, eventually, the 1991 investigation went nowhere. This week's inquest heard that Paul McGinty's friends tried to raise the alarm in Coventry in 1991, but the police were not very interested.

Gardaí back then had no idea that an Irish man was missing from England. An original inquest was held in Co Meath in November 1991.

It heard that all efforts over the previous seven months to identify the man were to no avail. A small stone marked the unidentified man's grave in Navan for the next 30 years.

In 2021, a cold case review was carried out on the case. The unidentified body was exhumed so a DNA sample might be obtained.

But detectives would later be informed by Forensic Science Ireland that this was one of those rare cases where a DNA sample could not be obtained.

This can sometimes happen if bones are degraded to a certain extent, or depending on other factors relating to the exhumation.

A DNA sample could not be obtained from Paul McGinty's body

Gardaí conducting the cold case review, many of whom would have been children when the man's body was found in 1991, were disappointed.

But then they tried another line of inquiry. They had those very good photographs from the time of the discovery of the man's body.

Detectives spoke with a forensic artist and asked her to reconstruct an image of how the man might have looked in life.

In most unidentified cases, such forensic imagery is not possible because most unidentified bodies are not discovered until quite some time after the unfortunate person's death.

But the Bracetown case held out a possibility that if the DNA hadn't solved the case, perhaps a visual appeal might work. And that's exactly what cracked a 30-year-old mystery.

Michael Leonard was watching television in Co Donegal in November last year. An appeal was shown on RTÉ's Crimecall relating to an unidentified body.

The artist's impression was shown on the programme, and Michael Leonard knew immediately who it was. Michael's brother John and Paul McGinty had spent many years working in Coventry.

They were part of the big Irish community in that part of England and John Leonard could remember seeing his friend the day before he had vanished in April 1991.

After seeing the fresh appeal on television, Michael Leonard went to visit Mr McGinty's sister Eileen. He showed her the image from Crimecall.

Ms McGinty knew immediately that the image was of her brother.

At the inquest in Trim this week, Eileen spoke about how her brother Paul had been living in England for decades.

He had returned to Donegal for their brother's funeral in 1987. She would keep in touch with him at Easter and Christmas, but when she rang the house where he lodged in 1991 the landlord told her Paul had vanished.



The reconstructed image of the man was broadcast on RTÉ's Crimecall in November 2021

For the next 30 years she wouldn't know where her brother was. This week, Ms McGinty was finally given an answer about her younger brother.

She also met retired garda sergeant Alan Dowley, who originally investigated the case, and who had been instrumental in ensuring photographs of the unidentified man had been kept as part of the investigation file.

Mr Dowley himself knows all about unidentified bodies.

His own father Brendan lay unidentified in a cemetery in Wales for 33 years, having been last seen getting on a bus in Kilkenny.

On Wednesday, Eileen McGinty thanked Alan Dowley for his original work on her brother's case.

Up until yesterday, the official figures for unidentified bodies as released by the Department of Justice showed 27 unidentified cases.

Now there are 26. Prime Time research has established that there are actually many more, but the true figures have not yet been properly compiled.

On Thursday, the Department of Justice told Prime Time of the counties in which it is officially recorded that unidentified bodies are located: Clare, Cork, Dublin, Donegal, Kerry, Mayo, Sligo, Wexford, Wicklow and Leitrim.

The Department acknowledged that the true figure of unidentified bodies is higher than the 26 recorded by coroners, with more unidentified remains located since then as part of an ongoing nationwide trawl of records.

The next set of official national figures are expected to be issued by the Department in 2023.

In any case, there is now one less case to be solved, now that Paul McGinty has been given back his name.

Paul McGinty

Born: 17 June 1940

Died: April 1991

Identified: November 2022

If you have any information about other unidentified bodies in Ireland, please email barry.cummins@rte.ie